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# policy profiles

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VOL. 5, No. 1    JANUARY 2005

- *Suburban sprawl is not caused by new roads.*
- *The regional impact of a new expressway will be best controlled by planning that is strong and centralized on a regional basis.*
- *Comprehensive planning for high quality suburban growth must be responsive to democratic principles.*
- *Global economic development patterns require both regional cooperation and planning based on new concepts in land use.*
- *If the Prairie Parkway is to be built, government authorities must develop a regional planning format that is responsive to both citizen input and entrepreneurial investment.*



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## ISSUE: *Growth Management in the Western Suburbs* *Part 1: Planning for the Prairie Parkway*

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**Editor's Introduction:** This is the first in a three part series of *Policy Profiles* dealing with an old but crucial problem facing urban development in the United States: how best to organize planning processes to cope with the seemingly endless pressures for the outward extension of urban boundaries. In this instance, the pressures will be affected by the Prairie Parkway proposed for the Chicago area's western fringe. *Policy Profiles* will devote three issues to an exploration of these urban growth pressures, how they relate to the proposed parkway, and how they can be managed. The first part of the series considers the issues posed by the proposal; the second will set forth principles that should guide the planning and growth management efforts that should be used; and the third will suggest a structural format for the intergovernmental coordination needed to manage such a parkway's impact on the surrounding area.

The series is based upon a study completed by Northern Illinois University's Center for Governmental Studies at the request of, and with funding provided by, the Illinois Department of Transportation.

A Sunday drive through the counties that comprise the Chicago urban region's western fringe clearly shows major changes underway. Land that even a few short years ago was some of the most productive agricultural land in the world is being transformed at a rapidly increasing rate of speed into new subdivisions, shopping centers, and industrial parks.

A new, north-south interstate highway has been proposed as a means of expediting faster and safer traffic movement in the developing area. Such a highway, tentatively labeled "The Prairie Parkway," is being encouraged by the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Dennis Hastert, who represents Chicago's westernmost suburbs in the U.S. Congress. As could be expected, the proposed highway has generated concerns about the effect it would have upon both the rate of growth and the lifestyle quality of the communities through which it might pass.

### What is the Prairie Parkway?

As currently planned, the Prairie Parkway would be a new, north-south, 36-mile interstate highway connecting Interstate 80 near Minooka with Interstate 88 near Elburn. It would travel through land now devoted primarily to agricultural use, but land which currently is experiencing heavy pressures for urban development.

### What policy problems would such a highway present?

At issue is the question of how new highways and other urban infrastructure, such as water systems and sewage plants, affect urban growth and sprawl. At one end of the debate are those who believe that such construction causes inefficient and sprawled patterns of growth. Such people argue that public improvements cause urban sprawl. Simply put, they believe that “if we didn’t build it, they wouldn’t come” and that, without new super highways, suburban sprawl would be halted and urban growth would be redirected into the central city – in this case into Chicago and Cook County.

At the other end of the debate are those who argue that suburban growth is good because it responds to the preferences of people and businesses. Suburban growth, they claim, leads to economic growth, and the construction of new roads and water and sewer systems usually lags behind the start of suburban development. Simply put, “if they didn’t need it, the systems would not be built.”

In other words, would such a highway simply cause more growth, or could a new highway be a tool to fashion the inevitable growth into a more orderly pattern that would enhance the quality of life in the Chicago area’s western region?

### What does Chicago’s growth history suggest?

An analysis of Chicago’s experiences with urban growth since 1880, and a comparison of Chicago’s development patterns with those in other large Midwestern cities, suggests two different lessons that can be learned, lessons dealing with continuity and change. The first suggests that there are several factors about suburban development that persist across time in the Chicago region as well as in other regions. The second points to several new factors likely to affect Chicago’s suburban development, factors that have no precedent in the past.

### What growth factors have been consistent over time?

There are four major growth patterns that have been consistently important over time. Each is likely to remain an important factor when new development occurs.

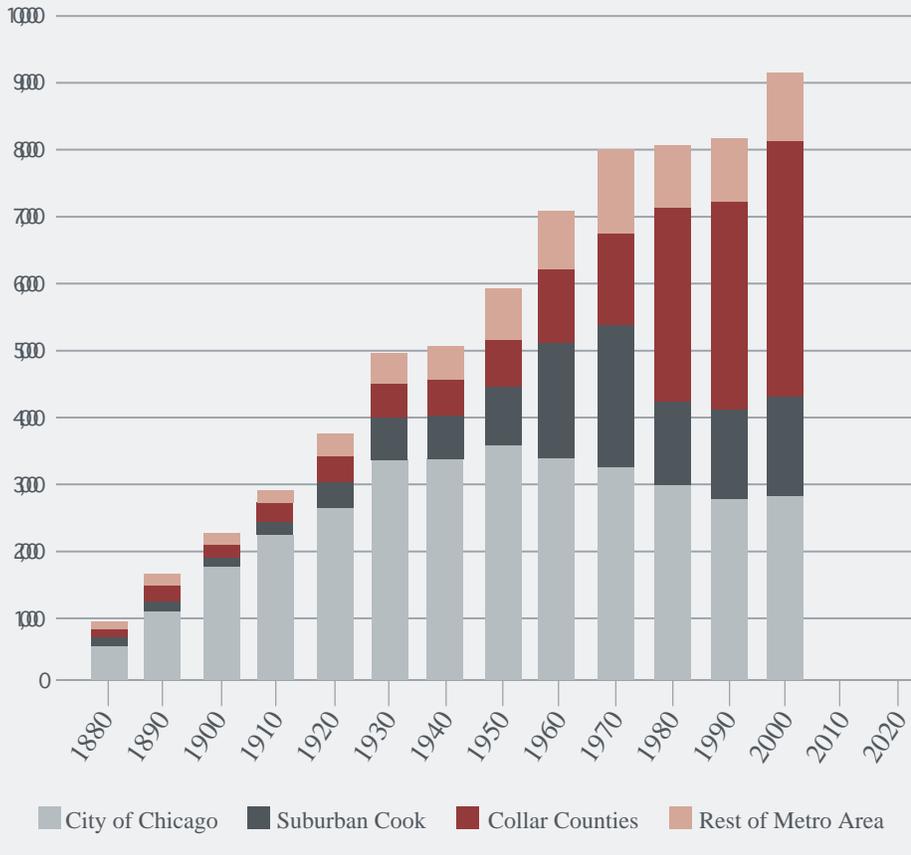
### *1. Suburban decentralization has not been caused by roads.*

People did not move away from the cities because new roads and highways made it possible to do so. The history of residential growth in the suburbs predates modern highway systems and public infrastructure. Indeed, the history of suburban living has been interconnected with American culture, especially middle class culture, for over a century. The goal of owning a home away from the urban core has been an aspiration for American families since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The rate of suburban growth has also been driven by upward mobility as well as by the dynamics of race and class in American society. Figure 1 (right), which shows rates of growth in different parts of the Chicago area since 1880, shows suburban growth occurring back in the horse and buggy era and only its rate of expansion changing when the auto came upon the scene.

#### Forthcoming Issues of Policy Profiles:

*Growth Management in the Western Suburbs: Principles for Parkway Planning*  
*Growth Management in the Western Suburbs: A Structure for Parkway Planning*

figure one Chicago Metro Population by Area (in thousands)



Although the last ten years have seen a resurgence of residential growth within large American cities, there is no evidence that the lure of suburban living has been reversed. Figure 2 (on the next page) reflects this resurgence, in Chicago and other midwest central cities, but it also shows that central cities are still growing more slowly than their suburban neighbors. For Chicago, this means that a substantial portion of projected population growth in the metropolitan region will continue to occur in suburban districts.

**2. There is a link between highways and the movement of jobs to the suburbs.**

There is good evidence that the development of transportation routes spurs the expansion of suburban job opportunities. The construction of canals and railroads, for example, clearly led to the growth of satellite industrial cities outside of Chicago's urban center in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The impact of compact factory and residential communities built along rail lines was large enough, even before World

War I, to alter Chicago's growth in favor of the hinterlands over the central city.

The construction of the region's interstate highway system during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century clearly facilitated the shift of many service jobs away from downtowns and into suburban office parks. In the 1920's, automobiles freed middle-class families from dependence on the railroads for daily commuting to work. The result was a free-for-all for developers in suburban Cook County. The resulting pattern was quite different from the compact and orderly development that had occurred when suburbanites were dependent on the railroads.

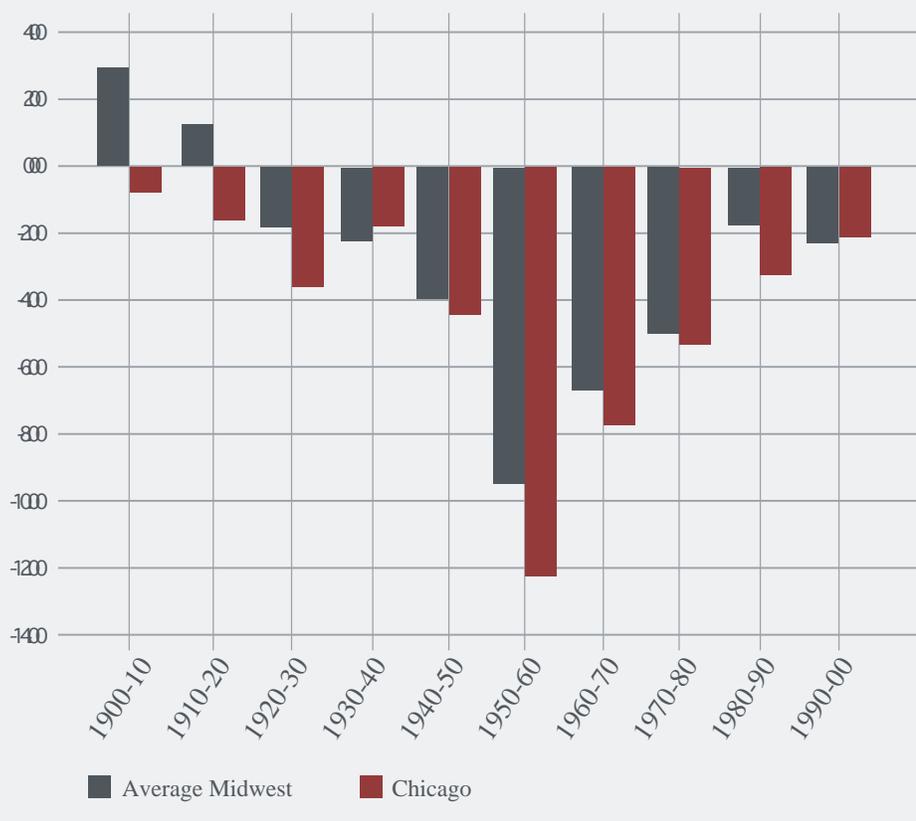
In short, although people are quite willing to live in the suburbs even without highways, there is a tie between highways, the ability of people to work in the suburbs, and suburban development patterns.

**3. The quality of suburbia is dependent on advance planning.**

The over-all quality and efficiency of the urbanized environment in suburban regions is related to the degree of coordinated planning that precedes development. In addition, as indicated below in the discussion of the link between planning and democracy, there seems to be a close relationship between effective planning and the concentration of planning authority. In other words, more concentrated authority over planning yields higher quality urban and suburban neighborhoods.

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**figure two** Change in Percent of Metropolitan Population Residing in the Central City: Chicago vs. Average Midwest Region



#### 4. *There is a link between suburban growth and social structures.*

There are long-standing and complex ties between the character and pattern of residential and employment growth in the suburbs and the evolution of race distinctions, occupational structures, and the organization of work in American culture. These inter-related factors are not well understood, but their continuing influence on future development patterns will be substantial, and

they are likely to affect the style and character of infrastructure requirements in the future. Consequently, they cannot be ignored.

**Doesn't concentrated planning authority threaten democratic principles?**

The trade-offs between democracy and planning when it comes to regulating the processes of urban development have

been much discussed and, indeed, there is a fundamental trade-off between these two concepts. For example, Chicago was surrounded by smaller satellite manufacturing communities in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most of these communities were well planned and operated successfully for many decades. The planning process that created these communities, however, would today be considered thoroughly undemocratic and authoritarian. They were “company towns.” In most cases, their development was controlled privately by the same company that also built and operated the community’s manufacturing plant.

Many well-planned residential suburbs are also the result of less democracy and more centralized planning. As early as 1874, the Chicago metropolitan region had 64 mostly well-planned residential suburbs, including the Village of Riverside which was centrally planned by Frederick Law Olmsted for the community’s sole property owner, the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad. All of the other 63 suburbs were also located directly on railroad lines and were centrally planned, mostly by private owners.

Beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, centralized private planning gave way to less authoritarian approaches to suburban development. Most of the automo-

bile suburbs that grew between 1920 and 1950, and almost all of those that grew since 1950, did not have the kind of concentrated, private land ownership that characterized earlier developmental efforts. In addition, they were served by public roads rather than private railroads. Together these two factors resulted in much less centralized planning. Communities were built one house or one small subdivision at a time. Over-all community planning and the regulation of development rested on elected municipal leaders and county government agencies. The result has ranged from well-planned to poorly planned spaces throughout the suburbs.

Even today, strong, coordinated planning is good politics in some communities and bad politics in others. Because of this difference, some communities benefit from long-term coordination and others cope with conflicting land uses, inefficiencies, and sprawl.

### What does this mean for development today?

The principal challenge facing suburban policy-makers today is to determine how to achieve the long-term durability of communities that started with strong central planning without giving up the benefits of entrepreneurial investment and citizen input. In other words, comprehensive planning needs to facilitate high-quality new development by striking a balance between democracy and control.

### What growth factors will change in the future?

This review of Chicago's development history identified two key issues that do not have clear precedent in the past. These are new issues, each of which is affecting the process of suburban development in ways that have not been anticipated before.

#### *1. The concept of specialization in land use patterns is undergoing fundamental change.*

For most of the last century, effective planning focused on achieving specialization in the use of land space. For example, industrial areas were considered well planned if they created specialized spaces for industrial activity and sheltered those spaces from other activities, such as residential housing, thought to be incompatible with industrial activity. Similarly, residential areas were considered well-planned if they included physical barriers between residential and non-residential land uses.

In the last twenty years, however, each of the midwestern metropolitan regions studied has experienced the rise of a new type of mixed-use suburban space.

Many of the most successful new suburban developments now blend together industrial, residential, commercial, and retail uses into the same space – and often into the same buildings. The most innovative examples are typically the result of private planning.

Such developments often pose large problems for municipal and county planning agencies whose rules are still rooted in the concepts of specialization. But the growing integration of activities in newly developed land spaces mirrors much larger social and economic trends in American society. Consequently, any effort to provide long-term, comprehensive planning for new suburban spaces needs to embrace these new concepts.

#### *2. Future regional economic growth will require city-suburban cooperation.*

Evidence from each of the midwest regions studied reveals that future economic growth is as much tied to the suburbs as it is to the central cities in the United States. Furthermore, the recent revival of cities emphasizes that the relationship between suburban growth and central city growth is no longer a zero-sum game in which success by the city or a suburban community means a loss to the other. In the past, cities competed with their surrounding suburbs for a share of the region's overall economic growth. But recent globalization trends suggest that economic

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developers now view each central city and its suburbs as a single, complex, intertwined region.

Increasingly, too, competition for growth in the global economy occurs primarily between regions, not within them. As a result, both cities and their suburbs now need to present a coordinated portfolio of spaces, each of which is capable of supporting integrated patterns of residential, industrial, commercial, and retail activities. Some global investors prefer the density of development found in inner city areas. Others prefer the less dense pattern of suburban space. But both the urban and the suburban spaces are expected to offer residents and businesses a fully-integrated mix of uses.

## What does all of this mean?

When viewed from the perspective of global competition for regional growth, the stakes at risk in ensuring high quality comprehensive planning in growing suburbs are much higher today than they have been in the recent past. In order for regions to be competitive, they need to ensure an adequate supply of carefully planned suburban spaces as well as revitalized urban centers. Failure to do so can have negative impacts on growth throughout an entire region.

The lessons about the linkage of urban development and planning highlight the benefits of regional coordination and cooperation in managing the process of future growth in the region. In particular, by pointing out the inevitable continuity of suburban development

patterns, changing cultural perspectives on land use planning, and the linkage between development patterns in the global economy and regional cooperation, they emphasize the need for central city-suburban cooperation. On the other hand, given the difficulties of achieving such cooperation, it will not be easy to achieve these benefits in today's complex and fast changing environment.

Yet, the Chicago region has always functioned as a metropolitan district, each part of which has prospered from its interconnections and interdependence with the others. This metropolitan character has propelled Chicago into the ranks of the world's greatest regions. And it continues to serve as a solid base for global competitiveness. Overcoming the challenges posed by future growth will continue to force the region's leaders to find new and innovative solutions that blend the continuing challenges of the past with the new opportunities of the future.

## How do these insights apply to the Prairie Parkway?

These insights offer several important perspectives to the debate on the discussion of a possible Prairie Parkway development.

First, they demonstrate that suburban development in the region will occur whether or not the parkway is built. Indeed, that development is already firmly and rapidly on-going.

Second, they confirm that there is a linkage between transportation routes, such as the Prairie Parkway, and the development that will surround them. Further, a review of Chicago's development history clearly demonstrates that the impact of such transportation routes will be strongly affected by the quality of the planning undertaken in conjunction with the development of the transportation route and that, furthermore, such planning will be most effective when it is strong and centralized on a regional basis.

Third, past experience attests to an ongoing tension between strong central planning and democratic theory, but it also suggests that strong central planning results in communities much better planned to sustain their quality of urban life over time. Thus, these insights suggest that government authorities must face the challenge of developing a planning format that assures comprehensive regional planning that is sensitive and responsive to the preferences of entrepreneurial investment and citizen input.

Fourth, those planning such a roadway development must seek to understand better and be sensitive to the ties between demographic diversity, occupational structures, and the organization of work in the region to be affected by the road.

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Fifth, it means that governmental leadership must combine roadway development with planning arrangements that will (1) centralize and decentralize the planning process simultaneously while (2) achieving effective coordination between the governments immediately affected by the road and between those governments and the rest of the region.

### So what should happen now?

This study leads to the conclusion that the sooner planning starts, the more effective it is likely to be, both in terms of the road itself and of the quality of life in the adjacent areas.

Further, a reading of the study's results also leads to the conclusion that the Prairie Parkway project would provide an optimal opportunity to pilot a planning project that would be designed to achieve the kinds of goals suggested in the fifth insight listed two paragraphs above.

Toward this latter end, the second *Policy Profile* in this series will offer specific operational principles that should guide the development of such a pilot planning project. The third *Policy Profile* will then suggest a structure through which those principles might be implemented as part of the process of providing strong centralized, democratic planning for a possible Prairie Parkway development effort.

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