

Boosting local government

A successful approach to building
resources across northeastern Illinois,
one community at a time



THE PROGRAM

Local governments throughout northeastern Illinois face increasingly complex issues and limited resources. The three-year Capacity Building Program offered by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) was a comprehensive pilot program to help local governments address these challenges with training, technical assistance, and on-the-ground support.

THE CHALLENGE

Every community aspires to do short- and long-term planning to enhance the quality of life of its residents, but even the best-laid, most thoughtful plans can end up gathering dust on a shelf.

Local governments can **have obstacles** such as a lack of staff planners, staff members who wear multiple hats, or part-time staff. Some communities have plans that need to be updated, or have updated plans but not enough **manpower or resources** to devote to their execution.

Overall, in pursuing local and regional goals, all communities encounter problems because of **increasing fiscal pressure** and **often insufficient local revenues**.

These obstacles are well-known to CMAP, the region's comprehensive planning organization. CMAP's mission is to help the seven counties and 284 communities of northeastern Illinois implement strategies that address transportation, housing, economic development, open space, the environment, and other quality-of-life issues.

CMAP's core values — serve with passion, pursue equity, foster collaboration, lead with excellence, and drive innovation — are woven into every decision made and initiative undertaken by the agency. As a non-partisan agency, CMAP is a trusted partner for local governments tackling a multitude of challenges related to planning and project implementation.

The agency focuses on ensuring that communities can plan for the future and are prepared to take steps to turn their vision into reality. The ultimate goal is to ensure the economic growth of the region and the well-being of its nearly 8.6 residents.

Previous assistance

CMAP has provided direct assistance to communities since 2011 with its Local Technical Assistance Program, which resulted in more than 200 local projects, including zoning ordinances, corridor and feasibility studies, and a variety of comprehensive, bicycle, pedestrian, retail, transportation, and other plans.

Some communities, however, only have enough bandwidth and resources for day-to-day operations. That was the case in Calumet Park, before the village participated in the Capacity Building Program, Mayor Ronald Denson said.

“I was working under the assumption that we needed to focus on the things that needed to be fixed immediately, but we didn’t really have a plan about how to accomplish things in the future,” Denson said.

CMAP has long been aware that **planning can be daunting** for some communities, said Stephanie Phifer, CMAP’s deputy executive director for planning.

“There’s lots of technical support, there’s lots of funding mechanisms out there, there’s lots of nonprofits that are trying to provide resources to communities — but there’s a hurdle for the communities to take advantage of those opportunities and turn them into quality-of-life improvements,” Phifer said.

That notion was underscored by a paper on municipal capacity co-authored by CMAP and the Metropolitan Planning Council in 2017.

The paper highlighted these key strategies to building capacity:

- enhancing technical assistance offerings and resources
- prioritizing training for municipal officials and staff
- supporting service sharing and consolidation
- ensuring municipalities can effectively maintain and enhance their infrastructure
- addressing fiscal conditions

Not having enough financial resources or knowledgeable staff also can be an obstacle when communities want to take advantage of grant opportunities, said Justin Keller, manager for the Metropolitan Planning Council. That’s because funders might not feel confident that the grants’ objectives will be executed, he said.

“A lot of lower-capacity communities don’t have the capacity to apply,” Keller said. “If they apply, they are less likely to be awarded the grant because funders might think they don’t have ability to maintain it. There’s a lot of red flags for a funder and they don’t get invited to participate in the game.”

CMAP board members said they, too, were acutely aware of the barriers to planning and implementation that some municipalities experience. The resources of the 284 municipalities across northeastern Illinois vary greatly, board member Rita Athas said.

“The Naperville and Schaumburgs of the world don’t need as much assistance — they have the budget and the staff,” she said. “The communities that are that are much smaller, don’t. We noticed that enough to be concerned about it.”

Over the years, staff and board members noticed some communities that received local technical assistance were not able to advance the work, due to lack of time or expertise, said board member Richard Reinbold, village president in Richton Park.

“In some communities, just managing the day-to-day operations is a full-time job that can consume a staff with limited resources,” Reinbold said. “Let alone sitting down and saying, ‘We should do some strategic planning.’ ”

A call to action

Kristi DeLaurentiis, executive director of the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association, first suggested the nascent idea of embedding a staff planner to provide hands-on help to local communities. CMAP staff members set a framework and devised a pilot program, and board members were enthusiastic and supportive from the onset.

“The idea came up of, ‘What if for a period of time we actually take a CMAP staff member and we actually embed them with municipalities so those projects get the right expertise and time?’ ” Athas said. “When people started talking about it, everybody got on board. It was an ‘a-ha’ moment.”

Building capacity for local governments also is a key recommendation of ON TO 2050, a long-range plan created by the agency after three years of extensive research, reports, and engagement with more than 100,000 residents in the seven-county region.

ON TO 2050 helps communities and counties implement strategies that address transportation, housing, economic development, open space, the environment, and more. The Capacity Building Program aligns with ON TO 2050’s overarching principles of inclusive growth, resilience, and prioritized investment.

THE SOLUTION

Based on knowledge accumulated over the years about local government challenges, CMAP devised the Capacity Building Program in 2018. The program was intended as a “next-level” iteration of the agency’s longstanding record of delivering effective programming and assistance to local governments.

The program had a personalized, practical approach to boosting the ability of local communities to engage in planning, leverage resources, and execute projects. This work was made possible

by a \$500,000 grant from the MacArthur Foundation, funding from the Illinois Department of Transportation, and seed money from the Chicago Community Trust.

Local governments worked directly with CMAP planners on priority projects identified by their staff members and elected officials. The program's areas of focus reflect those of the ON TO 2050 plan, with the overarching goal of providing the most effective, concrete assistance possible.

The pilot included two embedded staff planners who worked part-time with two municipalities in Cook County; planning teams that assisted 10 municipalities in Cook County and Lake County; and a planning team that worked collaboratively with a group of about 100 local governments in McHenry County.

The goal was for communities to have a visible impact — cleaned-up properties, shovels in the ground, enhanced public spaces — while advancing their long-term vision.

Participating communities applied for and received **more than \$4 million in grants** from a variety of funding sources, started or advanced **dozens of projects**, launched **four new public outdoor initiatives**, and created a **new county coordinator position** and a **new online portal** for intergovernmental cooperation.

The CMAP planners worked side-by-side with village staff members and applied a “listen first” approach to zero in on each community's needs and goals. “We didn't want it to be our planners going there and deciding how to take action,” Phifer said. Instead, the planners took direction from village staff and elected officials, helping each local community analyze, synthesize, and execute their own plans and vision.

A main objective was to assist local staff in creating and strengthening internal systems and operations, so the gains could be self-sustaining over time.

“All of it is done with an eye toward making structural changes,” Keller said.

Beyond the direct work done with the two individual municipalities, the embedded staff planner program enhanced CMAP's knowledge on how to best provide hands-on assistance to communities in general, Phifer said.

“The intent was to learn where can we best serve the community and really identify where we added value — and taking those lessons to come up with a long-term sustainable approach,” she said.

The work **demystified planning and its implementation** through a variety of methods, from relatively simple tools like using matrix spreadsheets to track grant progress, to more complex

issues like updating comprehensive plans and establishing collaboration with neighboring local governments.

The Capacity Building Program provided **tailor-made assistance** to meet the unique needs of each community. “Each area has separate issues that they deal with — different priorities, different obstacles, different challenges,” board member Reinbold said. “There is no one-size fits all.”

Providing such help is especially meaningful for high-need communities. “If a community is financially challenged and simply doesn’t have the resources, (planning) is a greater challenge. This program is even greater value to a community that might not have the financial wherewithal,” Reinbold said.

THE WORK (PHASE I)

The Capacity Building Program launched in early 2019 with the **embedded staff planner program** in two municipalities, the villages of Calumet Park and Sauk Village, and the **coordinated investment study** in McHenry County.

The Embedded Staff Planner Program

Calumet Park Mayor Ronald Denson initially was unsure about the value the program would bring. As it turns out, the village got more done in the program’s two years than in the previous six, and was so thrilled with the partnership that it gave an honorary municipal key to its CMAP planner, Denson said.

“It has been a blessing,” Denson said. “For the very first time, I think this village really got — I got — the opportunity to realize how we needed to be doing business.”

The village crafted its first comprehensive plan update in more than 30 years under the umbrella of CMAP’s Local Technical Assistance Program. Concurrently, the embedded staff planner assisted the village by functioning as a bridge between village staff and consultants hired to work on the comprehensive plan. That allowed the village to crystallize its major objectives for the near- and long-term future. Most significantly, elected officials and staff members shifted their thinking from focusing on immediate needs to operating with an eye on future goals, Denson said.

Among the most significant results was receiving more than \$3 million in grants. That included \$1.5 million from the state’s Rebuild Illinois: Shovel Ready Sites program for an innovative proposal to prepare for transit-oriented development on village-owned property near the Metra Electric line station. Rebuild Illinois is the state’s first capital plan in nearly a decade, and its Shovel Ready Sites component allocated \$13 million to 12 projects across the state.

Calumet Park made major advances in attracting a new grocery store after the departure of a previous store created a food desert. Village officials also worked on plans to develop more public recreational space and revitalize a major business corridor. Under a concurrent Local Technical Assistance Program, village officials completed a pavement management study with an assessment of all local roadways.

The village clarified and streamlined its own internal processes for the selection of contractors when using federal grant funds, with the village board formally adopting a new policy to that effect. Village staff developed an evaluation tool for internal team review of submitted proposals, providing greater efficiency to the process.

Some gains were simple but significant. For example, the village learned that it can use the geographic information system (GIS) service provided by the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association. That can help solve questions regarding parcel ownership and street jurisdiction, such as when residents submit reimbursement requests for vehicle damages due to potholes and poor roadway condition.

Calumet Park Parks and Recreation Director Johnathan Shaw said that he developed a passion for grants — seeking opportunities and using funding — thanks to the program. “It’s very intensive work, but you get to see the fruits of your labor,” Shaw said.

With support from village leadership, Shaw took on the role of grant coordinator, the first such position for the village. Another staffer was given a managerial role to relieve Shaw’s workload.

“We never had someone in Calumet Park who used most of their time to work on grants. Most towns can’t afford that,” Denson said.

Thanks to the program, the village obtained \$400,000 in grants to tear down two buildings, with a third one planned for demolition later this year. This will make space for a new village green adjacent to the parks and recreation department building. The plan is to create a “heart center” for Calumet Park, with a community garden, amphitheater, splash pad, and other amenities for the community.

The village also received funding to redesign two top priority industrial and commercial corridors, in the hopes that the work can be done in about five years.

That kind of vision and planning would have not been possible without the help of the embedded staff planner, Shaw said. “The CMAP planner made a transformative approach to thoroughly transform and modernize the village,” he said.

Sauk Village Mayor Derrick Burgess also gave high marks to the assistance the village received from the CMAP planner.

“(The planner) was just phenomenal,” Burgess said. “(The planner) was able to bring a lot of things to the village that we normally wouldn’t have got to, with the short staffing that we have.”

The village received about \$750,000 in grants and moved forward with several projects after identifying priorities in a comprehensive plan from March 2019.

Sauk Village worked on an inventory of vacant properties and received \$250,000 from the Illinois Housing Development Authority’s Abandoned Residential Property Municipality Relief Program to secure, maintain, demolish, or rehabilitate abandoned homes throughout the village. The grant came from a parallel project called HOMES for a Changing Region, after the embedded staff planner helped facilitate the work in collaboration with another internal CMAP team, the Metropolitan Planning Council, and the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus.

The village moved forward with planning for a new “smart neighborhood” development, a 53-home subdivision that will break ground next year on Torrence Avenue. With the help of the Metropolitan Planning Council, the village is completing a water loss audit.

Village staff worked on a pavement management study and a streets infrastructure program. Staff and elected officials made major progress in planning for a multi-use path with regional connectivity with engagement from neighboring communities and the Southwest Suburban Mayors and Managers Association. Mayor Burgess said he is especially excited because that will add recreational opportunities and enhance safety for residents. He liked getting buy-in from residents and elected officials by holding meetings that used appealing devices like storyboards.

The village developed recommendations for updates to its zoning code after interviewing key stakeholders and getting feedback regarding sections in need of improvement.

Village staff and officials were able to move forward with engineering to get several projects shovel-ready, such as intersection improvements and two playgrounds. They also started a collaboration with Habitat for Humanity on neighborhood revitalization projects, such as a “Rock the Block” program that took place in August and featured cleaning up a roadway and adding mulch to a park.

The program also prompted additional planning to improve connectivity from a transportation standpoint, after the village had received mostly grant assistance for improving pedestrian access. From an economic development standpoint, the village continued to work with the county to conduct environmental site assessments for vacant and underutilized parcels, which in turn enhances the parcels’ marketability to developers.

A major, although more intangible, gain for the village was to build knowledge about the different resources that exist within the county and develop relationships with groups like the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association, South Suburban Land Bank and Development Authority, and South Suburban Housing Center.

Community Development Director Antonio Cooper said his vision for what is possible for Sauk Village has expanded thanks to the program. “When you see bigger projects that can bring more impact to the community, you think bigger,” Cooper said.

The McHenry County Coordinated Investment Study

Rising costs and uncertain revenues pose increasing challenges to local governments as they strive to continue delivering high-quality services.

About **100 local governments in McHenry County**, including municipalities, townships, schools, parks, libraries, and fire protection and other districts, took part in the study, which was aimed at finding innovative and cost-effective ways of sharing services, facilities, and personnel.

The most significant goal accomplished thanks to the study was the creation of a **new county coordinator** position, whose job is to facilitate idea sharing and collaboration regarding cost sharing among local governments.

McHenry County hired Chalen Daigle as its first county coordinator in December 2020. Daigle also serves as executive director of the McHenry County Council of Governments, which jointly funds the county coordinator position with the county.

“The biggest fear in all of this is that it’s a study on a shelf that sits pretty,” said Algonquin village manager Tim Schloneger. “Creating the county coordinator position was a huge win, because we have someone dedicated toward creating those relationships and pushing that agenda toward implementation.”

In the first year of the coordinated investment study, CMAP staff facilitated the creation of an **advisory committee** — with staff from local and countywide governmental entities — that researched shared service precedents and best practices for implementation. The committee also collected and analyzed data collected from 22 government districts regarding their services, assets, and personnel.

They directly engaged officials from all government levels via interviews, focus groups, and five goal-setting workshops, all done to identify challenges and opportunities.

In late 2019, 43 local governments attended five workshops that focused on administration and finance; building and development; transportation and streets; emergency services; and fleet management.

“Everybody was eager to share,” Daigle said.

The coordinated investment study also prompted the creation of a **new shared online portal** for intergovernmental coordination, which streamlines the process of looking for ways to share costs and resources among local governments.

Daigle has taken the lead responsibility for a local joint purchasing group comprising municipal officials who meet every other month. That has yielded cost-sharing through joint bids for snow salt purchasing and sidewalk cutting, and there have been discussions of additional possibilities to share resources, like home inspectors, IT staff, and software platforms.

“We are only six months into it and already there is concrete work,” McHenry County Administrator Peter Austin said.

The county coordinator also plans to look into opportunities related to public safety. These include examining whether the local sheriff’s department could share its social worker with some local municipalities that don’t have one, and discussing with local police chiefs the idea of establishing a joint training facility and shooting range for law enforcement in the southeastern portion of the county.

All of this would benefit smaller departments with limited staff, particularly in light of new law enforcement requirements enacted by the state legislature. “It’s an example of how a lot of these things are going to develop organically,” Austin said.

Another unanticipated, major benefit of having a county coordinator came during the COVID-19 pandemic and the critical need for information sharing and coordination regarding issues like changing public health regulations and use of emergency federal funding.

“All of that was really important work that Chalen was able to do and get in front of,” Austin said.

The study looks at local government through a new lens of creating systems based on service boundaries rather than political boundaries. That might just be the way for local governments to successfully tackle their ever-growing fiscal challenges, Schloneger said.

“We have so many governments across so many jurisdictions playing their same game within their constraints that they are given — based on their political boundaries and their charters — and we have to change that. That’s what this study is doing.”

Notably, the McHenry County Coordinated Investment Study earned a 2021 achievement award for county administration and management from the National Association of Counties.

THE WORK (PHASE II)

CMAP's initial plan was to expand the embedded staff planner program to additional municipalities, but the emergence of the pandemic dictated a shift in 2020.

The new approach took into account the need to quickly and successfully transition to a remote working environment with new internal policies and new technology, and create support systems for staff while being responsive and adaptable to municipalities' changing priorities.

CMAP also did outreach through its newly created Local Government Network, an all-agency effort to better understand and support the region's 284 municipalities and seven counties. In the network, each entity is paired with a CMAP staff liaison to strengthen ongoing communication on local and regional priorities.

The outreach gave CMAP insight into local governments' most pressing needs: ensuring basic essential services, advocating for federal and state aid, and navigating new programs to address the challenges communities faced in the wake of the pandemic.

Based on knowledge gained and feedback received, CMAP created three new programs under the umbrella of the Capacity Building Program:

The NEXT Program, to help communities take the "next" steps in implementing existing plans. The program launched in the villages of **Matteson**, **Robbins** and **Round Lake**, the latter in partnership with the Lake County Land Bank.

The Resource, Opportunity, Impact (ROI) Program, for municipalities to identify transportation project priorities, apply for funding, build grant management capacity, and move projects forward. The program launched in the city of **Harvey**, and the villages of **University Park** and **Dolton**.

The Collaborative for Public Space Innovations, designed for communities to address the shared challenges around the creative use of public space in response to the pandemic. The program initially was termed Consortium on Public Space Innovations; the name change reflected the clear-cut goal of encouraging and eliciting collaboration among communities that face similar challenges or have matching goals. The program launched in the city of **Harvey** and the villages of **Berkeley**, **Lemont** and **Morton Grove**.

The NEXT Program

The program in **Matteson** launched with a focus on moving forward the streetscape improvement plan recently completed by the village.

As the CMAP planner began to participate in weekly staff meetings and learn about the village's objectives, the program's work grew to include assistance in revising and expanding the village's outdoor dining ordinance, adopting a new ordinance to regulate food trucks, soliciting proposals for new wayfinding and branding signage, and creating design standards for the Market Square Crossing mixed-use development.

"We are already seeing the benefits," said LaVern Murphy, deputy director of economic development and marketing in Matteson.

In particular, the development of Market Square Crossing on the 60-acre site of the former Lincoln Mall is one of the village's critical paths to success. The work done to refine design standards is instrumental, saving the village large amounts of staff time and the cost of hiring a consultant.

The updated outdoor dining ordinance also allowed for a more expedient process for village staff and business applicants. "Before, applicants had to go through the plan commission and it was more of a long, drawn-out process. Now, staff is able to get it done faster," Murphy said.

Some of the granular work included creating a matrix to identify communication gaps in the application process for outdoor dining permits, and streamlining the village's processes for approval, renewal, and review. The village also created a one-page instruction sheet with a document checklist to give to applicants.

Village officials said CMAP approached the work by first building relationships, which gave way to a successful partnership.

"CMAP is a great community partner," Murphy said.

Work began in **Robbins** with the planners working with village staff to analyze how to move forward with goals outlined in the village's transit-oriented development and industrial area plan. The plan had been created by the village as part of a previous Local Technical Assistance Program project.

CMAP staff received initial positive feedback about its recommendations and submitted a draft for review. However, municipal elections in 2021 led to a leadership change and the transition slowed down the program's progress.

Mayor Darren Bryant, newly sworn-in into office May, said he had just begun familiarizing himself with the program. The village hoped to get help in completing the update to its comprehensive plan, which dates back to 2007; adding single-family housing; and inviting new businesses, such as eateries and grocery stores, Bryant said.

The **Lake County Land Bank** received assistance in researching how to establish sustainable funding methods and identifying and tracking blighted, vacant, and abandoned properties locally. This work was the outgrowth of recommendations yielded by a previous CMAP Local Technical Assistance Program project.

The Lake County Land Bank formed in 2018 to work with local governments, developers, community organizations, homeowners, and banks to demolish, redevelop, and repurpose such properties.

Local municipalities can end up spending “tons of money” on vacant and abandoned properties, and land banks can be extremely beneficial by taking on the onus and reducing local costs, Lake County Land Bank attorney Brent Denzin said.

The Lake County Land Bank, which has a lone staff member loaned by the Lake County Municipal League, had developed a blueprint for the work, but hit a major barrier in regards to lack of funding, Denzin said.

CMAP worked on two things: researching land banks in other states such as New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania to generate ideas for revenue sources and establish a sustainable trajectory for the Lake County Land Bank; and a creating a pilot program in **Round Lake** to develop a system to effectively identify abandoned and vacant properties.

Denzin called it “an important decision” for CMAP to get involved in land banking. “Helping revitalize communities through land banking helps take a dollar in philanthropy and make it go a lot farther,” Denzin said.

“I couldn’t feel better about CMAP coming in to help out. They’ve been wonderful,” he said.

The Resource, Opportunity, Impact Program

Municipalities received assistance in connecting their priority transportation and infrastructure projects with diverse funding sources and navigating transportation investment programs. The program was devised with the knowledge that, oftentimes, the communities that can most benefit from obtaining grants to advance transportation projects also can struggle with effectively managing and using the funding, due to lack of staffing, knowledge and overall resources.

During its participation in the program, the city of **Harvey** identified seven priority transportation projects among 31 such projects in its pipeline, and obtained funding for three of them. The village also worked on establishing best practices to internally manage and streamline the grant process, including across departments, Deputy City Administrator Robin Streets said.

Among the projects that received funding are a complete streets project for 154th Street and a Dixie Highway cross-jurisdictional improvement project. The latter is “a really important project” for the village because an Amazon facility coming in the fall to neighboring Markham is expected to increase traffic along Dixie Highway, Streets said.

With CMAP’s help, the village also found that it could use a GIS-based tool provided by the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association. “It’s a way we can communicate not only with our residents, but our public in general to let them [know?] the projects we have going,” Streets said.

University Park received invaluable help from the program, said village manager Ernestine Beck-Fulgham.

Major gains included identifying the two village streets most in need of work — for which the village plans to solicit bids soon — and securing funding for a major traffic light project.

University Park also worked on moving forward its transit-oriented plan and identifying additional opportunities for economic development that could be leveraged by an extension of the railroad system in Will County.

The search for funding sources was expanded, and the village submitted three new grant applications, including for engineering and construction of a path along a major parkway.

The village worked on setting up processes and benchmarks for executing projects and also issued a request for proposals for its Metra station reconstruction using its new process to select contractors based on qualifications.

University Park has very limited staffing and “the help from the program has been a godsend,” Beck-Fulgham said.

In **Dolton**, village officials began to discuss their planning priorities and how to move forward projects in the beginning phases. A timeline with possible funding sources was created in order to be less reliant on consultants. CMAP started exploring possibilities for multijurisdictional partnerships with neighboring municipalities. However, the program’s progress slowed down after municipal elections in 2021 led to a leadership change and a focus on the transition.

The Collaborative on Public Space Innovations

The municipalities of Berkeley, Harvey, Lemont, and Morton Grove engaged in collaborative idea sharing that resulted in **four public space projects in summer 2021**. All of the projects are reasonably budgeted, replicable, and sustainable.

Berkeley held a **Berkeley Park StoryWalk** in August consisting of a path marked by 18 stations where people learn about and read from a featured book. The stations feature art and pages, and the books will change quarterly.

Rudy Espiritu, Berkeley's village administrator, said there was "a lot of interest and enthusiasm and political will" for the program within the village, which started off having no idea what to do.

The StoryWalk idea came from the Berkeley Public Library director, and village officials embraced the notion of encouraging people to spend more time on the Illinois Prairie Path, Espiritu said.

"All of this shows the power of the right idea in the right place," he said.

Another CMAP team helped create a corridor plan for the Illinois Prairie Path as a partnership among Berkeley, the Berkeley Park District, and the village of Hillside. Espiritu said he plans to budget expenses to implement the comprehensive plan recommendations, thanks to the momentum and excitement yielded by the StoryWalk project.

The collaborative meetings were attended by community development or planning staff from the other three municipalities. "I have neither in Berkeley, so I was actually able to learn a lot from having people in those positions participate," Espiritu said.

Another plus was hearing from invited speakers such as planning firms and municipalities that had executed a variety of projects, he said.

In addition to participating in the Resource, Opportunity, Impact Program, the city of Harvey also took advantage of the collaborative program. This is an example of how communities with limited resources can leverage multi-faceted assistance from CMAP with buy-in from staff and elected officials.

Harvey planned a **Downtown Fest and Community Bike Ride** for September, with a farmers market, music, street art, participation from nonprofits, and a public health component with COVID-19 vaccines available.

The work started with the creation of a matrix to evaluate potential project ideas with specific criteria and goals. Harvey Mayor Christopher Clark, who was elected in 2019, had an action plan that included ensuring more accessible roads and eliciting more community involvement, Deputy City Administrator Robin Streets said.

“Biking is a passion of his that he expressed to the economic development director, who then was able to express that to the CMAP group as well,” Streets said.

The downtown event was geared toward promoting community cohesiveness and safe streets. The CMAP planner connected with Working Bikes in Chicago, a bike shop that also runs donation and volunteer programs, to learn about how to organize a successful event that could help grow a local bike community in Harvey.

The Downtown Fest and Community Bike Ride fits within the city’s broader goal of revitalizing downtown and making it inviting for residents to spend time there, Streets said.

“This is a way we could get people to come out in a socially distant and responsible manner,” he said.

The collaborative had a fruitful, synergistic environment, thanks to the different perspectives from the participating municipalities, Streets said. “It was nice to brainstorm with other municipalities,” he said.

“We benefited tremendously from their program. I think it was a help and I think other communities in the future could benefit as well. I think it’s a wonderful program.”

Morton Grove held an educational **Tree Walk** in July, the first of its kind for the village.

CMAP planners were “flexible, creative and thoughtful” in helping the village formulate the project, village planner Zoe Heidorn said.

“They really delve deep — researching, getting to know the community, and helping us form a project that really fits our needs,” she said. “But for that guidance and that follow-up every week, we would have never done something like this.”

The Tree Walk was a one-mile, family-friendly walk for residents to learn about the village’s tree canopy. It was attended by up to 25 people, surprisingly high for a hot and muggy Saturday morning. The village arborist served as the guide through a village park and along residential blocks, with different stops to learn about species of trees and guidelines for care and planting. All the participants received a little sapling.

Next, the village might reach out to partner organizations — such as the Morton Arboretum, Openlands TreeKeepers, or the Cook County Forest Preserve District — to see if they are interested in hosting tree walks, perhaps in the fall and spring.

The collaborative project also included the creation of a tree strategy for the village, which considers trees “incredibly important” to its identity, Heidorn said. The village’s newly established environmental and natural resources commission put together a sustainability plan with a focus on maintaining and growing the tree canopy.

“It’s been completely wonderful working with CMAP,” Heidorn said.

Lemont **upgraded its public space with plans for a future park downtown.**

Lemont Economic and Community Development Director Jason Berry said the pandemic prompted the village to quickly embrace outdoor dining and other social uses of public space, all of which gave its downtown vibrancy during a difficult time. The collaborative helped the village brainstorm about how to achieve permanent, creative uses of public space.

The village identified a privately owned vacant lot downtown whose owner wanted to donate it to become a public park. In the first phase, the village spruced up the area to make it more inviting to the community. It all started with simple encouragement from the planner, who suggested adding benches to the area, Berry said.

From there, the village installed picnic tables borrowed from the park district, added bean bag games, and installed solar-powered lights on trees. The village then hired a consultant to help design the park, which will become a great addition to its downtown, Berry said.

“We went from nothing to something that is going to be permanent. CMAP has made a permanent difference in our downtown,” Berry said.

The program also energized him to tackle the work of codifying the village’s **outdoor dining guidelines**, Berry said. That included working on a matrix of existing approvals, creating an explanatory brochure for business owners, and holding discussions about regulating — without discouraging — private use of public space.

“It made a real difference in Lemont,” Berry said.

INSIGHTS GAINED

Local government staff members and elected officials in the communities that took part in the Capacity Building Program found the assistance they received **highly beneficial**.

“It was super valuable to participate in networking and get recommendations from CMAP,” Sauk Village Community Development Director Antonio Cooper said.

Positive feedback centered around **a few major themes** with benefits from:

- developing and beginning to implement grant toolkits that facilitate internal and cross-departmental tracking of grant applications and progress
- devising criteria to prioritize projects, both short term and long term, to improve quality of life for residents
- establishing relationships and fruitful communication with neighboring local governments, local and regional agencies, and nonprofit partners

McHenry County is a testament to the efficiency and effectiveness of designating **someone in charge** of exploring and coordinating ways to share costs among local governments.

Communities like having a “go-to” person who can share information and ensure different entities don’t repeat research and investigation done by their counterparts.

In times of crisis such as during the pandemic, local mayors noted the coordinator can **quickly disperse urgent announcements**, Daigle said.

“They appreciated getting the information directly from me rather than reading it in the newspaper three days later or seeing it on social media,” Daigle said.

Participating in the study prompted more awareness about the possibilities that exist in **collaborating with neighboring communities**, Algonquin’s Schlonger said.

For example, Algonquin began discussing with its local library district the possibility of sharing a facility that would include a library and recreation center, lowering building and operational costs for both local governments, Schloneger said.

“I would say that’s part of the mental work and the buy-in from the broader elected officials and the conversations that were had, thanks to the coordinated investment study,” he said.

The municipalities were delighted about public space uses that invite **community participation and partnerships**, like the local public library in Berkeley. They also relished finding out that simple touches can transform an unused space and get an immediate positive reaction from residents.

“I don’t know how people that got fancy degrees feel about talking picnic tables and twinkle light,” Lemont’s Berry said. “I hope they don’t think it’s beneath them, because it makes a real difference.”

CMAP acknowledges and appreciates that **small things can make a major impact**. Moreover, the results of the Capacity Building Program underscored that all communities — regardless of their level of resources — can benefit from thinking outside the box and executing uncomplicated projects.

As for improvements, future collaboratives could have more participants to ensure a wider pool of perspectives and insights, the participants suggested.

Many of the participants underlined the fact that, without a CMAP planner, some of the work likely would have never happened due to their staffing and capacity constraints. Most said they keenly felt the loss of their planner when the program ended.

“That’s the dilemma we are in right now. That bandage is coming off,” University Park Village Manager Ernestine Beck-Fulham said. “We need more hands-on assistance and more longer-term help.”

MOVING FORWARD

CMAP continues to engage in capacity building while exploring new ways to provide local governments assistance where, and how, they most need it.

Northeastern Illinois has lost ground and is no longer as economically competitive compared to other metropolitan areas, especially among communities of color and other disadvantaged populations. With that in mind, CMAP worked on enhancing and refining its plan of action under the Capacity Building Program umbrella.

In the second half of 2021, the agency launched **another round of the NEXT program and the Resource, Opportunity, Impact program**, and **new collaboratives** to explore how local communities can collaborate to address regional challenges.

The third round of the program will start as early as spring 2022. A pending call for projects is expected to result in applications from additional communities interested in participating.

Second round of NEXT Program

The communities participating in the NEXT program say they are impressed with the program’s scope and focus, and look forward to collaborating with CMAP. The lineup includes the village of Summit and the city of Chicago Heights.

Andrew Smith, city engineer and planning and zoning administrator for Chicago Heights, said he’s anticipating working on the city’s active transit plan. City officials also would like to get

help implementing the city's 2015 comprehensive plan, which was the result of an earlier Local Technical Assistance Program project.

Second round of Resource, Opportunity, Impact Program

The communities participating in the Resource, Opportunity, Impact Program include the city of Waukegan, the village of Lansing, and the city of Marengo.

Second round of Collaboratives

In September 2020, CMAP published "Improving local development incentives: A guide for local governments in northeastern Illinois." The technical guide provides background information about the use of incentives throughout the region, and identifies principles, strategies, and practices to help local communities determine when they are a good fit. The guide's recommendations were built on interviews and focus groups with over two dozen local planners, developers, and consultants.

A collaborative on incentives that launched in the second half of 2021 is the continuation of that work. Decisions about when and how to give incentives to promote economic growth are inherently competitive for communities. The key is to identify areas of shared agreement and opportunity that open the door for collaboration.

The work of the new collaborative will have a first phase with six to 12 "peer communities" expected to start convening in September.

Peer communities are those that have similar traits and characteristics, but are not geographic neighbors and generally not in competition to attract new business or economic development. The communities will discuss their views on incentive practices and opportunities for collaboration. The work will take place in partnership with organizations like the Urban Land Institute, which will provide guest speakers.

The second phase will take the model created by the peer communities and extend the work to a new group of neighboring communities. The goal will be to build consensus about changes to incentive practices that can be implemented to everyone's benefit.

The new collaborative is an example of collaboration between CMAP's policy and planning teams.

THE OUTLOOK

CMAP has a continued commitment to working in **inclusive ways** with local communities and providing assistance to those with limited resources.

“Our goal is to continue offering this type of value to communities, because it really helps the community to get this extra bit of assistance to continue forward on their own,” Reinbold said.

CMAP’s staff support the agency’s decision to concentrate on **concrete, immediate results** for local communities while building their future capacity. The refined focus yielded gains for the local communities — and professional satisfaction for the CMAP planners.

Phifer said she is committed to staying the course, and is excited about seeing projects come alive and enhance quality of life for communities.

“Driving around the community and physically seeing the improvements is the best form of success,” Phifer said.

Staff members and elected officials from all the participating local governments said they wholeheartedly endorse continuing the Capacity Building Program. They would like it to include more communities, and provide additional rounds of assistance to areas that need it the most.

“Especially for municipalities that don’t have the capacity, having that extra help can be tremendous,” Matteson’s LaVern Murphy said.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) is our region's comprehensive planning organization. The agency and its partners developed and are now implementing ON TO 2050, a long-range plan to help the seven counties and 284 communities of northeastern Illinois pursue strategies that address transportation, housing, economic development, open space, the environment, and other quality-of-life issues.

See cmap.illinois.gov for more information.