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New South Side Plan: From Vacant Land to “Productive Landscapes”

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The Mid-South Side’s abundance of vacant land, considered by some a sign of abandonment and neglect, could be converted to all manner of attractive and productive uses under a concept plan drawn by city and regional planners with help from LISC Chicago and its New Communities Program lead agencies Washington Park Consortium and Teamwork Englewood.

That concept plan - scheduled to be submitted to Chicago’s City Council in early 2013 - calls for a constellation of community gardens of many shapes and sizes, for conversion of an unused railroad embankment into 30-block east-west hiking trail, for an assortment of “pocket” parks and athletic fields as well as rain-absorbing grassy areas to relieve the area’s overloaded sewers.

A working assumption behind the [Green Healthy Neighborhoods Land Use Plan](#) (click to see it) is that population among the eight neighborhoods, down by half over the past four decades, will grow hardly at all over the next 30 years.

“We have a lot of available land in these community areas, and we project only a little bit of population increase by 2040,” explained Kathy Dickhut of the city’s Department of Housing and Economic Development (DHED). She spoke to 50 community residents who gathered on Nov. 10 to give a progress report ... and suggest some changes.

“The implication,” said Dickhut of the no-growth forecast, “is that there is enough available housing stock in the general area, though some of it has to be rehabbed.” About 30 percent of the 12-square-mile area can be converted, she said, to “productive landscapes.” Envisioned is “a new kind of public open space, but space that has a job – generating food.”

Growing Commercial?

A lively discussion ensued over whether some of the larger gardens could become jobs-generating commercial enterprises ... or whether they should be traditional school- and neighborhood-centric gardens. Dickhut suggested the latter, what with all the bureaucratic and logistical difficulties of producing for mass distribution.



A series of renderings has captured the vision of citizens and planners, including such features as community gardens and a 30-block walking trail.



Pocket parks and athletic fields are among the proposals for productive use of vacant land in the eight South Side neighborhoods.

“We don’t see urban ag as an economic driver,” said Dickhut. “It’s more of a community development and job training tool. It’s always going to be cheaper to grow lots of food on farmland.”

This disappointed some gathered in the community room of Coppin A.M.E. Church at 5627 S. Michigan Ave. Several said it was up to government – city, state and federal – to loosen regulations governing production and sale of fresh

food so commercial-scale urban farming could evolve ... with all the employment opportunities that might bring.

But one audience member, Richard Dobbins, a trained horticulturalist who has overseen development of several gardens in the area, supported the plan's premise. "In the inner-city, you're not going to create a wealth of ag-focused employment," he said, although he added that gardens are well worth doing as an educational and job-training tool.

Rail-to-Trail

Another dynamic feature of the draft plan is a refined version of the 30-block-long New Era Trail first proposed by the group Openlands. ([See their version here.](#))

Running just north of 59th Street from the Dan Ryan Expressway westward past Ashland Avenue, the old elevated railroad right-of-way would overlook gardens, wetlands and ball fields.

"It will be like walking through a long forest flanked on both sides by productive landscapes," said Dickhut, adding that it could even evolve into a spine of commercial and residential renewal. It's an example, she said, of the new plan's "building off the ideas that the community has already put out there."



The soon-to-be-finalized plan envisions commercial development concentrated around certain heavy-traffic nodes rather than strung out along marginal spots on arterial streets.

Along with Dickhut's presentation on land use, Eleanor Gorski of DHED described the city's effort to identify and preserve historic structures in the study area, noting that "the greenest building is the one already built." Some of the area's 16,000-plus vacant buildings will have to be demolished, she conceded, but the plan envisions creating "conservation districts" wherein clusters of well-crafted homes add indispensable character to the neighborhood.

DHED's Michael Berkshire showed how low-lying areas could be landscaped into storm-water retention areas and double as visually appealing bird habitats. They could also function as catchment basins for irrigating neighborhood gardens, as could rain barrels fed by downspouts.

Other parts of the plan call for concentrating retail activity around "nodes," especially near transit stops, and for converting to residential use marginal stores now strung out along arterial streets. Manufacturing, meanwhile, would be encouraged near the area's still-mighty collection of intermodal rail yards, such as Norfolk Southern's soon-to-expand facility in Englewood.

Getting Real

The Nov. 10 gathering was the last in a series of public hearings before the plan is finalized and presented at an "open house" event in early 2013, according to Kendra Smith of the [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning \(CMAP\)](#), which is co-authoring the plan with the city. The final version will then be submitted to the City Council, which is expected to incorporate many of its features into the city's official comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance.



The Green Healthy Neighborhoods plan's final draft will be presented in early 2013 and then sent to Chicago's City Council.

helped shepherd public participation in the Green Healthy project. She said the LISC [New Communities Program](#) groups that are active in the plan's preparation – [Teamwork Englewood](#) and the [Washington Park Consortium](#) – had considerable input into the draft.

The months-long series of public hearings, held throughout the South Side, were designed to solicit comments from residents, businesses and others regarding the role of housing, commercial development, manufacturing, transportation, arts and culture, and urban agriculture in the area's future.

"Now it starts getting real," said Sandra Womack, the LISC Chicago senior program officer who, for more than a year, has

The Mid-South neighborhoods embraced by Green Healthy are Englewood, West Englewood, Greater Grand Crossing, Woodlawn, Washington Park and the southern reaches of New City, Fuller Park and Grand Boulevard.