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## Growing green healthy neighborhoods

JOHN MCCARRON | SEPTEMBER 29, 2011

When more folks *have* left than *are* left, it's time for a neighborhood to draw up some different kinds of plans.

But whatever those plans call for – be it pocket parks, neighborhood gardens or more generous side-yards – it's crucial the folks who will live-the-plan have a strong hand in the drawing.



PHOTO: JOHN MCCARRON

Woodlawn, Washington Park and Englewood won't regain the population they've lost—but they would like to put the land they've gained to productive use, and urban agriculture seems like a win-win.

College, 63rd and Halsted streets.

The two-year effort is a Local Technical Assistance (LTA) project run by the Chicago region's official planning agency, called CMAP, for Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

Using a \$4.2 million federal grant, regional land planners will work with their local counterparts to help struggling communities – city and suburban – deal with the growing problem of property abandonment and population loss.

In Chicago, CMAP wisely connected with LISC/Chicago's New Communities Program, which has been dealing with the disinvestment problem, especially in three South Side NCP communities: Woodlawn, Washington Park and Englewood.

**63rd St. Corridor**

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“Our neighborhoods are saying, ‘We have a lot of land,’” said Susana Vasquez, LISC/Chicago’s executive director, in kicking off just such a grassroots planning effort. “And it’s not all going to be filled up with new housing and new people in the short term, so let’s come up with some creative uses.”

Vasquez welcomed about 80 neighborhood leaders on Saturday, Sept. 24, to an all-morning “Green Healthy Neighborhoods Kick-off Symposium” held at the new Kennedy-King



PHOTO: JOHN MCCARRON

“We always hoped, some day, that these three communities would get together and talk to each other about how 63rd Street could be mutually redeveloped as a major arterial street – a powerhouse – from east to west,” said Andrew Mooney, Chicago commissioner of housing and economic development and former executive director of LISC/Chicago.

"We always hoped, some day, that these three communities would get together and talk to each other about how 63rd Street could be mutually redeveloped as a major arterial street – a powerhouse – from east to west," said Andrew Mooney, who helped conceive NCP as LISC/Chicago's former executive director and now is Chicago's commissioner of housing and economic development.



PHOTO: JOHN MCCARRON

"This is a way to change official policy and move some of the great ideas from our quality-of-life plans to reality ... and to scale," said LISC/Chicago executive director Susana Vazquez.

Washington Park had over 43,000 but last year's Census found only 11,717. Englewood had over 97,000 but now only 30,654. All three communities have been bleeding housing stock space with population. Many residential blocks have more vacant lots than surviving structures.

### Open spaces

Much of the discussion at the Symposium, therefore, revolved around the need to find other uses for vacant land – uses that meet the real day-to-day needs of folks who are hanging on and keeping faith.

Urban agriculture got a lot of attention. But even those who've been working on community gardens, and larger-scale operations such as West Englewood's Wood Street Farm, conceded that for-profit urban farming is a tough row to hoe. None disputed, however, that urban gardens and farms have a unique power to engage the formerly unemployed in productive, soul-satisfying activity. And that even limited, local distribution of fruits and vegetables has a healthful impact on neighborhoods some call "food deserts" for lack of full-service groceries.

Kathy Dickhut, the city's deputy commissioner for open space and sustainability, noted that shortly after Mooney took over last fall the city amended its zoning ordinance to promote urban agriculture.

And she ticked off other potential forms of "green infrastructure" made possible by the availability of land, ranging from neighborhood mini-parks to rainwater-absorption areas that can cut the load on Chicago's oft-overloaded storm sewer system.

Some major "green" public works already are in the planning stages, such as the New ERA rail-to-trail that would convert for biking and hiking

Mooney stressed that the thinning-out of a neighborhood brings opportunity as well as challenge, opening the door to new kinds of land uses and new ways to reconnect with surrounding economies.

"But we have to work together on a common vision, common strategies and a common lobbying agenda," Mooney said, adding that the steady loss of population "is something we've got to stop."

Despite hard-won successes here and there, a 40-year trend line of decline has worked great hardship on the three neighborhoods. Now the recent epidemic of job layoffs, foreclosures and store closings has urban planners scrambling for a new playbook. There is a growing realization, as LISC's Vazquez noted, that returning to the old high-water marks of population and housing is unrealistic.

The numbers tell it. Woodlawn counted more than 81,000 residents in 1960 but the 2010 Census found only 23,740.



PHOTO: JOHN MCCARRON

Bernita Johnson-Gabriel (top), executive director of Quad Communities Development Corp., talked about attracting commercial development during tough economic times during the business break-out session.

an east/west railroad spur that runs alongside 59th Street from Halsted Street to Damen Avenue.

Benet Haller, deputy for planning and urban development, suggested new residential and retail development ought to be consolidated around CTA and Metra transportation nodes. And while 63rd Street has never been a heavily industrialized strip, he said the proximity of several major intermodal freight yards suggests that could change.

Whatever is planned over the next 18 months, said Haller to applause: “My vision for your community is whatever you tell me it is.”

### Break-out thinking

After the pro planners outlined the project, the neighborhood leaders broke into smaller groups and got down to specifics. Discussions centered around food, housing, jobs, business, environment, culture and transportation. The break-outs were led jointly by CMAP planners and NCP leaders from [Teamwork Englewood](#), [Washington Park Consortium](#) and [NCP Woodlawn](#).



PHOTO: JOHN MCCARRON

Vickie Eaton Johnson gave the out-of-town perspective, explaining how her Cleveland neighborhood worked to control land and invite powerful institutions.

Terrance Miller, Woodlawn’s NCP organizer, complained that, for all the city’s positive spin, prying vacant land away from city ownership is “such a bureaucratic process, I mean, c’mon. We’ve got to put that vacant land to use. Now every empty lot is a liability – drugs, crime, dumping. We need ownership, responsibility.”

Bernita Johnson-Gabriel, whose [Quad Communities NCP](#) area lies north of the Green Healthy Neighborhood planning

zone, advised the “business” table on what it takes to attract commercial developers in a down market. And Brandon Johnson, executive director of the Washington Park Consortium, talked of the need to get community input before re-purposing vacant land because some uses could prove a bigger nuisance than no use at all.

### Land control

Some of the morning’s best advice, however, came from an out-of-towner. Vickie Eaton Johnson, executive director of Fairfax Renaissance, explained how her Cleveland neighborhood reversed disinvestment by: 1) controlling vacant land; and 2) inviting, rather than blocking, nearby powerful institutions into the neighborhood.

Eaton Johnson explained how Fairfax was stabilized when the Cleveland Clinic and the Cuyahoga County courts were both wooed into building new facilities there ... but on terms negotiated by Renaissance. They insisted, for instance, on owning the medical building’s underlying land and on collecting rent.

“Whoever controls the land controls everything,” Johnson said. “We own the land. Both Fairfax and the Cleveland Clinic own the building. And in 40 years it will be owned by the neighborhood. We didn’t sell out. We controlled the kind of development that was happening.”

Community leaders from Woodlawn – who over the years have had similar discussions with the University of Chicago and its hospitals – were all



ears.

## Going forward

“This is planning from a local perspective,” said CMAP executive director Randy Blankenhorn in an introductory video about the Technical Assistance Project. “It’s about building local capacity.”



PHOTO: JOHN MCCARRON

Terrance Miller of Woodlawn NCP expressed frustration at the difficulty of gaining use of city-owned lots, which he pointed out are a safety hazard.

City Hall obviously plans to take full advantage – both of CMAP’s federal grant and NCP’s grassroots connectivity. When completed in 18 months, the South Side plan will be sent to the Chicago Plan Commission for official endorsement, making it as much a part of the city’s future as its elaborate Central Area Plan for downtown.

With that in mind, Commissioner Mooney urged NCP citizen-planners to leave no stone unturned in their search for creative ideas.

“What are our assets?” Mooney challenged. “What are our opportunities? What are the re-uses that we can have for this land in a responsible way? Whether it’s urban ag, or parkland, or residential or industrial redevelopment. Let’s not focus on the deficits. We all know the deficits. Let’s focus on the opportunities – that we’re so close to a powerful downtown engine, that there’s an excellent transportation system, that we have land available and a cooperative city government.”

All of which, said LISC’s Susana Vasquez, gives new life to the neighborhood plans crafted early on by NCP neighborhoods.

“This is a way to change official policy and move some of the great ideas from our quality-of-life plans to reality ... and to scale.”

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