

OPINION

OUR VIEW

Today's city: What would Burnham say?

As the 100th anniversary of Daniel H. Burnham's Plan of Chicago approaches, we need a new commitment to urban planning.

Mr. Burnham is enjoying renewed popularity in some quarters, as *Crain's* reported in the Focus section last week. Perhaps that's because we've strayed so far from his principles and don't like the results.

Despite Mr. Burnham's inspiring words and famed vision for the city, Chicago's approach to planning can best be described as "anything goes." Growth in the city and surrounding region has been haphazard, driven more by financial and political factors than any logical plan for a livable, efficient metropolis.

The result is sprawl and congestion, long commutes and isolated neighborhoods. Freight trains block traffic at road crossings, delaying shipments and making us late for work. A forbidding blandness defines our recent architecture, discouraging the interaction that creates a real community.

Local politicians and developers wield far more clout in shaping our communities than any architect or planner pursuing a Burnhamesque vision. As the *Chicago Tribune* reported last week, city aldermen dish out zoning variances like papal indulgences to builders who in turn fill their campaign coffers. Suburban politicians do the same.

Our lack of planning has brought us to the brink of paralysis. Gridlock and Balkanization are making it too difficult to live and do business here.

Never have we needed a comprehensive plan like Mr. Burnham's more. New neighborhoods are rising near downtown, while suburbs stretch as far as Rockford. With nothing tying it together, the region is breaking down into disconnected parts.

Chicago is planning dozens of events to celebrate the Burnham Plan centenary next year. But if we really want to honor Mr. Burnham, we should follow his example.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning aims to mark the Burnham anniversary with a new land-use and transportation plan for the region. We hope it's a good one. Metropolitan Chicago needs a 21st-century growth plan that's worthy of the Burnham legacy.

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