

CHICAGO ARCHITECTURE CENTER

EXPLORING THE ISSUE:

# INVEST SOUTH/WEST

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# INTRODUCTION

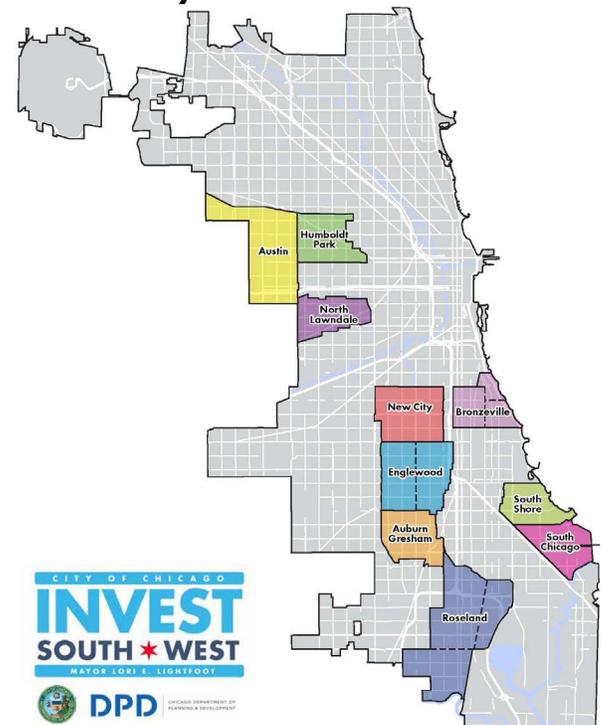
One of Mayor Lightfoot’s signature initiatives commits fresh funding to social and physical infrastructure in underserved neighborhoods. Dubbed [INVEST South/West](#), many see it as an important complement to the Neighborhood Opportunity Fund launched in 2017. That program makes grants to small businesses through a levy on downtown development seeking density bonuses beyond what zoning permits. By focusing on infrastructure, affordable housing, and streetscape improvements along 10 priority commercial corridors in 10 south and west side neighborhoods, INVEST South/West seeks to catalyze and multiply private capital.

INVEST South/West blends the resources of several city departments, community organizations and the private sector to make sustained, meaningful direct investment in neighborhoods far removed from the glittering downtown. Reinvigorating the traditional commercial and cultural hubs in these neighborhoods is the surest way to build up communities and bolster quality of life.

Mayor Lightfoot has pledged \$250 million over three years to this program, in addition to existing infrastructure commitments of about \$500 million over the same period targeting transportation and housing in these neighborhoods. One of the best aspects of this initiative is that the public money already exists: the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) needs only to re-route it from tax increment funds, the Neighborhood Opportunity Fund, and the Small Business Improvement Fund. Big pledges from the private sector include \$10 million each from BMO Harris Bank, JPMorgan Chase, and Starbucks, and a [\\$20 million commitment](#) from Fifth Third Bank.

The City did not arrive at 10 target corridors by accident. A rigorous methodology was applied to hone in on streets with at least one active commercial area and a community plan in effect. Building on existing life on the street is crucial, since clustering economic activity in a walkable, transit-oriented way creates a focal point and lifts up local businesses. And Chicago doesn’t need new plans, it needs coordination of existing plans.

## Community Areas



Courtesy of City of Chicago

# A DEEPER LOOK

Making the actual on-the-ground investments will involve ongoing engagement with residents, community organizations, and local aldermen to prioritize meaningful projects. The City's new planning commissioner Maurice Cox is restructuring the DPD with local advisory panels and [hiring more planners](#) to better align with this new process.

Cox and his staff have been on a listening tour for months presenting INVEST South/West to local stakeholders, the private sector, and the design community but also collecting input from the public. A common refrain from the planning chief has been that Chicago is the only global city in America that is shrinking. Chicago needs innovative tools like this, he argues, to correct the imbalance between the booming downtown and depopulating low-income neighborhoods.

Quick and decisive action along these target corridors, with tangible improvements to public safety and the streetscape, is how the City can show communities it means business; public engagement in selecting worthy projects for a neighborhood that conform to community plans will ensure these are smart investments. Alas, a history of empty promises by policy makers has produced a [healthy skepticism](#) of when it comes to follow-through. But, if all goes according to plan, DPD will assess the program's efficacy at various milestones and ultimately expand to additional corridors in new neighborhoods.

Chicago continues to suffer from a lack of comprehensive planning, but INVEST South/West moves us closer to thinking of neighborhoods as vital organs of the city. Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Detroit, and Seattle are in some ways doing more for equitable investment in their neighborhoods. Those cities are chasing significant gains in quality of life necessities like green space and affordable housing.

The CAC is eager to track the rollout of INVEST South/West and the specific projects it enables.



Vacant building in Auburn Gresham expected to benefit under the program. Photo by Natalie Moore and WBEZ

# KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- The groundwork being laid by INVEST South/West seems formidable, but what will it take to ensure the initiative delivers on its promise and outlives the Lightfoot administration?
- Good design, inclusive of community, will help the program succeed. This is something the mayor and planning commissioner appear to recognize. How will the City engage Chicago's robust design community to create improved streetscapes and inspired places along the target corridors?
- What initiatives or investment tools are in effect in peer cities that might prove instructive for Chicago?
- As Commissioner Cox has candidly stated, decades of discriminatory public policy and disinvestment have produced the extreme inequality we're grappling with in Chicago. Will INVEST South/West be able to chart a new course for the city?
- How much transparency will be baked into the assessment of the program's progress and overall efficacy? Will ordinary citizens be able to find specific information on projects receiving funding and monitor the use of tax dollars?

## Sources:

[INVEST South/West plan sounds good, seeing is believing.](#) Mark Konkol, The Patch, February 3, 2020.

[Fifth Third Bank announces \\$20 million investment in Chicago's south and west sides.](#) Maxwell Evans, Block Club Chicago, January 27, 2020.

[Chicago is hiring seven new city planners. Here's why that matters.](#) Sara Freund, Curbed Chicago, December 13, 2019.

[Seattle to invest a record \\$110M in affordable housing across the city.](#) Sydney Brownstone, Seattle Times, December 9, 2019.

[Investing in equitable urban park systems.](#) City Parks Alliance, July 2019.

[INVEST South/West.](#) City of Chicago.