Planning, Citizens and Chicago

by Jon DeVries, Roosevelt University, and Brad Hunt, Newberry Library

PLANNING AT ITS CORE

Although I am now a certified planner with a master’s degree and years of working experience, I began my involvement in planning as a citizen with no formal training. My downtown neighborhood in a southern city was threatened by plans for demolition to remove “blight” and expand the business district. Learning that the city council was holding a hearing on using community development funds in this way, I visited with neighbors who agreed that saving the neighborhood for housing—rather than expanding businesses—would be better. We organized a walking tour “survey” of the housing in the area and put dots on a map to illustrate the condition of the homes. We developed a list of homeowners and long-term renters to illustrate the size and character of the population. After appearing at city council meetings, we obtained the support of our alderman to have the city make money available to residents for rehabilitation instead of demolition.

Once the strategy was adopted, the city planning staff prepared detailed implementation plans including needed infrastructure, budgets and drawings. Over the next three years we achieved majority owner occupancy for the neighborhood, attracted a developer to build new senior housing, and moved multiple homes facing demolition in adjacent areas onto vacant lots to repopulate the area. All this was done for far less money than the demolition strategy. The neighborhood remains strong and growing to this day.

In this case citizens were able to mobilize, gather data on the neighborhood and then advocate for changes in the public strategy. To help carry out the plan, a citizen committee was formed to meet regularly with the city’s professional planning staff. One key lesson we learned was that neighborhood citizens and planning professionals are both important for creating and implementing a successful neighborhood plan. Lessons, like this one, that the citizens and planners learned together were subsequently adopted in several other neighborhoods and cities.

Planning is at its core a three-step process. First, identifying problems and issues in the community and needs for open space, housing, transportation and public facilities. Second, assembling information, data, and community input to document these needs and current conditions and set long-term goals. Third, proposing program ideas and investments to achieve these goals and laying out coherent and efficient steps to accomplish them. This process is regularly done by public planning agencies but can also be initiated and assisted by citizens.

PLANNING AND CHICAGO

Chicago is known as the city of “make no little plans,” an association that dates from the creation of the 1909 Plan for Chicago—one of the earliest city-wide masterplans anywhere. The 1909 Plan was a privately funded effort undertaken by the Commercial Club to address the problems of a rapidly growing metropolitan area. The effort, led by Daniel Burnham and his firm, had little
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The 1909 Plan contributed many of the major features of the city which are still important today including the lakefront trails and parks, neighborhood parks with community facilities, and the landscaped boulevard system. The plan also led to the creation of the Chicago Plan Commission (CPC) to bring order to housing, sanitation, zoning, and transportation in the growing, chaotic city. Once the plan was adopted, however, a companion publication was created—Wacker's Manual—to educate and gain support from the citizenry. The Manual was taught in the public schools for decades as a textbook calling for young readers to work together to steward the city to its envisioned “greatness.”

Before the field of professional planning emerged zoning codes, housing condition surveys, regional economic development efforts, and various war-related initiatives had covered aspects of what became city planning. Private efforts such as the Burnham 1909 Plan of Chicago were led by business and civic groups, driven by architectural and design leaders and championed by reformers.

After dedicating its resources to winning World War II, America emerged with a national housing shortage, decaying city centers, and a worn-out infrastructure. In response, the federal government initiated grand programs to provide home mortgages, fund urban renewal, and build the interstate highway system. To compete for and administer these programs, cities and states created “planning departments.” To educate persons to fill these positions, universities and colleges started offering planning courses and academic degrees. The University of Illinois—Champaign-Urbana was among the first schools to grant an academic degree in planning.

Mayor Richard J. Daley created Chicago’s first planning department in 1956. The new department had significant powers to review and prioritize projects from other departments as well as identify projects of its own. The department issued the 1958 Central Area Plan followed by a city-wide comprehensive plan in 1966. Under the 1966 plan the city produced 16 area plans from 1966–1973 encompassing the entire city. These plans resulted in many contributions to the city still evident today including a residential “New Town” in the South Loop starting with Dearborn Village; expansion of the city’s community college system, libraries and parks for neighborhoods; and new roadways and transit lines. The department has continued under various titles and is currently known as the Department of Planning and Development (DPD).

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Along the way groups demanded citizen input and neighborhood-based planning. Mayor Harold Washington1 agreed, famously cancelling plans by the business community for a world’s fair. Instead, he supported “Chicago Works Together,” aimed at neighborhood jobs programs and neighborhood housing initiatives. His administration also started the industrial corridor program which provides city funding to this day for Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED) councils and various community and local business advocacy organizations.

There are many examples of Chicago’s residents successfully identifying and advocating needed actions and investments at the neighborhood level. Little Village residents brought about the closing of two coal-burning power plants; Uptown helped craft a major new mixed use project called Wilson Yards; Englewood sought and obtained a new shopping center anchored by a Whole Foods store; and Atrium Village residents and surrounding churches helped rezone and obtain commitments for a redevelopment to include low-moderate income housing units. Plans for new developments often encounter another type of organized citizens. Sometimes called NIMBY (“Not in my

1Harold Washington was Mayor of the City of Chicago from 1983–1987.
back yard”) efforts, community members can also work to try to block certain types of uses such as affordable housing, social service facilities or industrial use zoning. In an era of declining federal and state funding, citizens can work collectively to bring attention to overlooked problems and contribute ideas that can attract city and private investments, jobs, and quality-of-life improvements on local, neighborhood scale. This is why incorporating planning history and concepts and community information in our schools becomes important and helping young people understand the power they have to participate is so critical and urgent. “Planning” is described as “making informed choices about the future that can create and maintain places where people want to live, work and conduct business. “How can young residents become involved in constructive ways in planning current and future improvements for their communities?

One of the classes at Roosevelt University, the school where I taught for many years, participates each spring in a contest sponsored by the Harold E. Eisenberg Foundation (HEEF). The foundation picks a site in the city and invites the college and university schools in the Midwest to create a feasible development program and plan. Student teams research the communities, interview developers to explore possible uses for the site, meet with City officials, and then create a development program. The students emerge with an understanding of the planning, real estate, and financial steps needed to bring investments to their areas. They learn to appreciate the benefits of planning to residents, workers, and employers in the community as well as to the entire city.

There are many resources teachers can share with students to prepare them to take meaningful roles in planning their communities. Population and household data are available in the U.S. Census and employment data is available in the “Where Workers Work” reports from the State of Illinois. Current city plans for the sixteen planning areas in the city are available from “Neighborhoods Now” from DPD. Photographs of existing conditions and interviews with residents and employers in the neighborhood can also be powerful tools. And finally there are a number of non-profit organizations with planning information including Metropolitan Planning Council (MPC), Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), Local Industrial Retention Corporation (LIRI), the Alderman’s Office, and community organizations in many neighborhoods. Most importantly the teachers and schools can teach the students of today to become the community and planning leaders of tomorrow, perhaps getting some students excited about becoming professional planners.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jon B. DeVries, CRE, AICP, recently completed his tenure as the Founding Director of the Marshall Bennett Institute of Real Estate (2002–2017) at Chicago’s Roosevelt University. He has a Master of Urban Planning and Policy (MUPP) degree from University of Illinois at Chicago; a Master of Divinity (M.Div.) degree from Union Theological in New York, and a B.A. from St. Olaf College. Mr. DeVries co-authored Planning Chicago (APA Planners Press, 2013) with D. Bradford Hunt, a review of city planning in Chicago from the 1950’s to the present.). In 2008 he received the Holleb Community Service Award from Lambda Alpha International (LAI) In 2015 The Harold E. Eisenberg Foundation presented him with its Real Estate Education Faculty Award. Long active with LAI, he is a director and vice president of its Land Economics Foundation. He lives in Chicago with his wife, Christine Williams DeVries.