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"Planning Chicago" Sparks Conversations Around Reinvigorating Planning



Since its publication in April 2013, *Planning Chicago* has opened new conversations about reinvigorating planning in this city.

The book argued that Chicago had lost its edge, as the strong commitment to planning under Mayor Richard J. Daley (1955–1976) gave way to one-off projects and ad hoc Tax Increment Financing districts under his son, Mayor Richard M. Daley (1989–2011). By January 2011, as the book noted, Chicago "no longer had a department with the word 'planning' in it."

But the book sparked small fires in several quarters. Positive reviews and newspaper op-eds started a dialogue, and the *Chicago Tribune* launched a "[New Plan of Chicago](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/plan/)" series (<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/plan/>) that invited readers to suggest ideas to revitalize the city, held city-wide forums, and encouraged reinvigorated planning for the city's future.

In January 2014, Mayor Rahm Emanuel (2011–present) quietly reorganized and created a new Department of Planning and Development (DPD). Within a year, the new DPD had partnered with the Chicago Community Trust on [an effort to organize and catalogue numerous existing plans](http://cctfiles.cct.org/content/chicago-neighborhoods-2015-landing-page-info) (<http://cctfiles.cct.org/content/chicago-neighborhoods-2015-landing-page-info>) — small and large — from across the city since 2000, with the goal of making them accessible. Plans were grouped and data updated for 16 planning districts covering the entire city that drew on boundaries from the last comprehensive plan, dating all the way back to 1966.

The results are available on the city's "[Neighborhoods Now](http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dcd/cnn.html)" website (<http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dcd/cnn.html>). A series of meetings identified "action plans" for stand-alone or contiguous areas, though adoption and funding have yet to follow.

Still, the Emanuel administration keeps tight control over large and visible efforts while assigning DPD local-level planning — largely regulatory and zoning matters and aldermanic requests, as Mayor Richard M. Daley had. Mayor Emanuel's initiatives have a "deal and press release" character, with little discernible input from the DPD or reference to relevant long-term city plans. Recent results have been mixed at best:

- **The Lucas Museum of Narrative Art:** An ill-advised choice of a lakefront site (<https://fotp.org/fotp-statement-opposing-lucas-museum-1/>) led to a needless fight and the loss of the museum to another city.
- **Obama Presidential Library:** The two sites still in contention grab park space while other South Side sites with greater community impact such as the former USX site (<http://chicago.curbed.com/2016/3/1/11140996/chicago-lakeside-development-project-abandoned>) and the former Michael Reese Hospital site (purchased for a potential Olympics (<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-olympics-chicago-2016-met-20160715-story.html>)) still lie vacant.
- **Rezmar/Roosevelt Road site:** The largest undeveloped parcel in the central area with 62 acres has languished for four decades (<http://www.chicagobusiness.com/article/20160312/ISSUE01/303129994/giant-chicago-real-estate-development-projects-that-seem-perpetually>) and still does not have an identified development plan, with the site now tied up in litigation (<http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/emanuel-rezko-rezkoville-tif-tax-increment-financing/Content?oid=22679131>), again.
- **Old U.S. Post Office:** This massive empty structure, built in 1922 and straddling the Eisenhower Expressway, is in the hands of yet another developer, but after much rhetoric

about "eminent domain," it remains unclear whether the city will play a meaningful role in its future

(http://www.chicagobusiness.com/realestate/20160720/CRED03/160729998/court-approves-deal-for-old-main-post-office-development#utm_medium=email&utm_).

More optimistically, DPD has a new planning commissioner, David L. Reifman, an experienced zoning attorney with significant knowledge of the city. He arrived with a high degree of respect from the development world and has worked to establish a dialogue with the public, planners, and the academic community. Under his leadership development approvals have been expedited and Neighborhoods Now has advanced. Further, two major public policy initiatives have recently been enacted, neither widely noted in the press.

First, the Neighborhood Opportunity Bonus ordinance (http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dcd/supp_info/realigning-zoning-with-neighborhood-growth.html), passed in May 2016, allows developers to obtain additional density bonuses in exchange for impact fees that will fund improvements and development in underserved communities. According to Reifman, who read *Planning Chicago*, this ordinance owes much to the "equity planning" efforts of the Harold Washington administration (1983–1987).

Second is new state legislation ready for Gov. Bruce Rauner's signature to create transit funding overlay districts (<http://chi.streetsblog.org/2016/06/30/transit-tif-districts-pass-state-house-and-senate-would-fund-major-cta-projects/>) that allows capture of incremental value adjacent to transit stations to underwrite transit oriented development (TOD), upgrade existing stations, and potentially restore stations removed in previous decades.

Both the neighborhood bonus ordinance and the TOD district legislation have the potential of systematically chipping away at Chicago's problem of inequality between the central area and neighborhoods still reeling from disinvestment.

But the undone business called for in *Planning Chicago* — the creation of a new comprehensive plan for the city — is not yet on either the mayor's or DPD's "to do" list. We hope the issuance of the e-book version of *Planning Chicago* will again call attention to this pressing need.

More than 20 major North American cities have completed comprehensive plans since 2000, and most are pressing ahead with aggressive new transit, housing, and infrastructure programs. Chicago should commit now to developing a 20-year comprehensive plan covering the entire city that will lay out our values, vision, and goals and result in a repositioned city by 2037 — the bicentennial of the city's incorporation.

Think CHICAGO 2037. Let's start now.

About the Authors

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Top image: Chicago's long-vacant old U.S. Post Office building. Photo by Flickr user jinjian liang (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0).

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