

WORKING CAPITAL

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CITIZENS MAKE PLANS ON THE MID-SOUTH SIDE

Brandon Johnson said it best.

“In an urban context, being in control of how your community is planned is one of the most important exercises you can be involved in.”

The Washington Park neighborhood organizer said this recently to about 80 of his fellow South Siders, many still shaking off the early morning chill with second cups of coffee.



City and regional planners are reaching out to the community in areas like Woodlawn, Englewood and Washington Park to gain input on how to build on their assets, and LISC Chicago and its New Communities Program lead agencies have prominent seats at the table.

“This is the hard work that develops communities in the long run,” he said. “It can be long. It can be tedious. It’s not punching the ballot. It’s not pointing the finger at the alderman or the mayor. It’s what we do, right here in these planning sessions, that will change our communities.”

Johnson is executive director of the Washington Park Consortium, a lead agency of LISC Chicago’s [New Communities Program](#) (NCP). He knows something about community planning, having quarterbacked a process that led to publication in 2009 of [Washington Park’s NCP Quality-of-Life Plan](#).

Only this time the scale—and the stakes—are larger. This time the City of Chicago and CMAP, the metro region’s official planning agency, are laying land-use plans for a broad swath of the mid-South Side, roughly from Lake Michigan to Western Avenue, and from 49th to 75th streets. And these land-use plans have a specific destination. City and CMAP planners have scheduled several more community outreaches and tours ([click here for details](#)), and they hope to present a draft plan to the community by late 2012. A final version will be submitted to the Chicago Plan Commission in early 2013 for incorporation into the city’s official master plan.

NCP squared

Not surprisingly, the city and CMAP have turned to LISC Chicago and NCP lead agencies for help in gathering community input. Three of the five neighborhoods in the expanded zone are NCP affiliates with existing plans: Woodlawn, Englewood and Washington Park. The others in what CMAP calls its Green Healthy Neighborhoods (GHN) effort are West Englewood and parts of New City and Grand Crossing. (For a story about the kickoff meeting of this effort back in September, [please click here](#).) Together, they’re up against some of the most vexing problems found in urban America: a crippled

housing market, sub-par schools, lack of employment opportunities, outsized levels of crime and narco-gang activity. New figures developed by the city show that, over the past 60 years, the population within the five-neighborhood area shrank by more than half, from 375,000 to 147,000.

But Brandon Johnson, like other NCP planning veterans such as Mattie Butler, executive director of Woodlawn East Community and Neighbors, said it's time to start counting assets instead of liabilities. "Stop calling them *vacant* lots," urged Johnson, "and start calling them *available* lots."

Indeed the mid-South Side has several undeniable assets. Some of the Midwest's busiest intermodal freight yards, for instance, suggest opportunities in logistics and light manufacturing. Educational institutions, from the mighty University of Chicago to the city's Kennedy-King College, suggest powerful partnerships that could be built around mixed-use developments.

Plans change

But typical of areas with a history of disinvestment, there's also suspicion.

"How can you assure the residents of our community that your plan will be different from all the other plans?" asked one Washington Park resident.

"It's not *our* plan, it's *your* plan," responded Kathy Dickhut, deputy commissioner of the city's Department of Housing and Development.

"Of course we've been doing planning," seconded Ald. Willie Cochran (20th), who has had a hand in both Woodlawn and Washington Park NCP activity. "But all plans have to be revised." For example, he explained, collapse of the housing market triggered by the 2007-09 Great Recession has forced a general rethinking of the role of new single-family dwellings in the area. Multi-family rentals may make more sense.

Table talk

For much of the three-hour session, held at Woodlawn's AKARAMA Foundation Community Center, residents hunched around tables going over maps of their specific sub-areas and drew up lists of assets and hoped-for improvements.

Ideas emerged for new Metra commuter stations, new charter schools, more neighborhood gardens and spruced-up retail districts beginning with the one at 63rd Street and Cottage Grove Avenue.

"I think this is all good," said Byron Freelon, a young physicist at Argonne National Laboratory who, with his bride Rhoda, recently bought a condo on the 6400-block of South Kimbark Avenue. "The neighborhood has so much going for it—the lake, the parks, the university—it just needs some pulling together."

Beatrice Jasper, an Englewood resident, said she came out of curiosity ... but she ended up being Englewood's "presenter" at the final plenary when each sub-area shared its work with the others.

"You can get involved," Jasper said, "or let someone else plan your future for you."

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 [Green Healthy Neighborhoods upcoming calendar](#)

Overview:

http://www.cmap.illinois.gov/moving-forward-in-detail/-/asset_publisher/Q4En/content/planning-for-green-and-healthy-chicago-neighborhoods?isMovingForward=1