



Connecting Communities

The Central Neighborhoods of Chicago

October 24, 2001

Heart and Soul of the Region

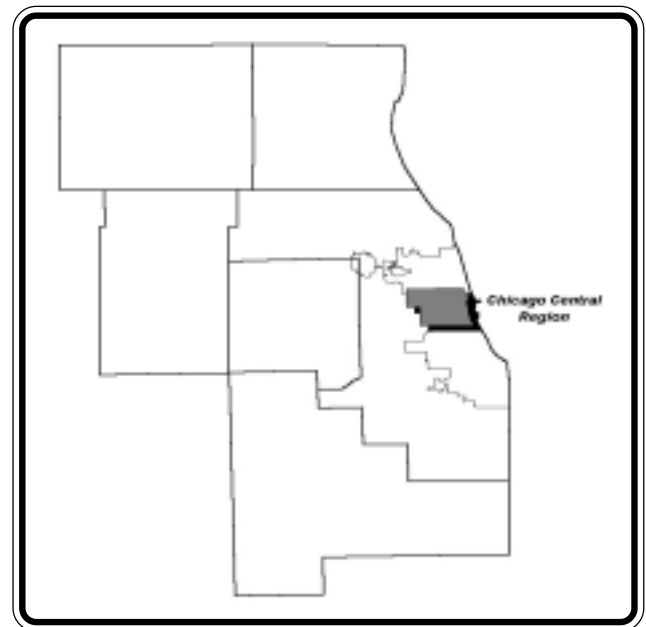
The Central Neighborhoods Connecting Communities summit focused on the area of Chicago bounded by North Avenue, Pershing Road, Lake Michigan and the city limits to the west — the core of the six-county metropolitan region. Virtually no community in Central Neighborhoods is immune from the impacts of daily commuter travel. The people who make their homes within the central area have a much more complex transportation network to contend with than in other areas. Not only must we concern ourselves with our own travel needs, but with the needs of several hundred thousands of people who work in our communities or pass through on their way to the Central Business District. Many of our communities were dismembered to build expressways in the 1950s and 1960s. We benefit from transit but also contend with an abundance of viaducts, rail lines and rail or bus maintenance/storage facilities that pierce our communities.

The Midwest's major business and financial district sits in the Central Neighborhoods region. The labor movement has deep and significant roots in this part of town. Central Neighborhoods were the original ports-of-entry for a myriad of immigrant groups and for blacks migrating from the south. Shopping areas range from the Magnificent Mile, to Maxwell Street, to the mercados of 18th and 26th Streets. Even the community shopping areas generate inbound traffic as third and fourth generation Americans, tourists and urban aficionados travel to neighborhoods like Chinatown, Little Italy or Ukrainian Village to purchase specialty items

Lakefront parks, museums and sports stadia that are actively used by the whole Chicago region can generate crushing amounts of traffic during special events. The major inland parks (many designed by Jens Jensen in the early 20th century) and the boulevard system linking the parks are assets more

commonly used by community members. In addition, the colleges and universities situated in the Central area, most of which are commuter schools, attract a great number of daily travelers.

Housing in Central Neighborhoods ranges from Hancock Center highrise units, to modest Chicago cottages, to Victorian mansions, to multi-unit courtyard buildings. Public housing was once plentiful in the



region. Areas where public housing was once dominant are being redeveloped as mixed income communities; replacement housing for all displaced tenants is as yet a promise, not a reality. Gentrification is putting increased pressure on a tight housing market. The steady stream of upper income homeowners into near-in communities is now radiating out to communities more distant from downtown. Many new residents are attracted to our communities by the walkable neighborhoods, traditional streetscapes and access to local business and services.

Our Diverse Communities

Central Neighborhoods include a diverse array of neighborhoods like Pilsen, Streeterville, Austin, Humboldt Park, McKinley Park, South Lawndale and Bridgeport. There are communities with a very distinctive neighborhood character and communities with great diversity. Our summit was equally diverse and included representatives of the disabled community and non-English speakers (translation was provided).* On average, households in the Chicago Central Neighborhoods had less than one car per family. Our three most frequent modes of travel are transit, bicycle and walking (in rank order). Of the completed surveys (see footnote) only four of us indicated children under 14 were in the home; in all households children walked to school all or most of the time (one was driven sometimes). On average, we do five errands a week on foot, in addition to walking to transit stops and stations. Given a range of choices for improving transportation in this part of the region, we would focus on public transportation and bicycle and pedestrian travel.

Challenges and Solutions

Increase Economic Development Through Transportation Investment

In spite of the fact that there about 900,000 jobs in our part of the region, we feel strongly that economic development that benefits our communities has not been maximized. The areas around transit stations could generate additional jobs and economic activity for the neighborhoods, with appropriate planning. The “Main Streets” of our neighborhoods need to be enhanced or resurrected. Infill development would bring new opportunities, both for jobs and residential growth. Incentives that build on existing assets like fully-developed infrastructure should be used to encourage job creation in the city. New development should cater to walkers rather than to cars.

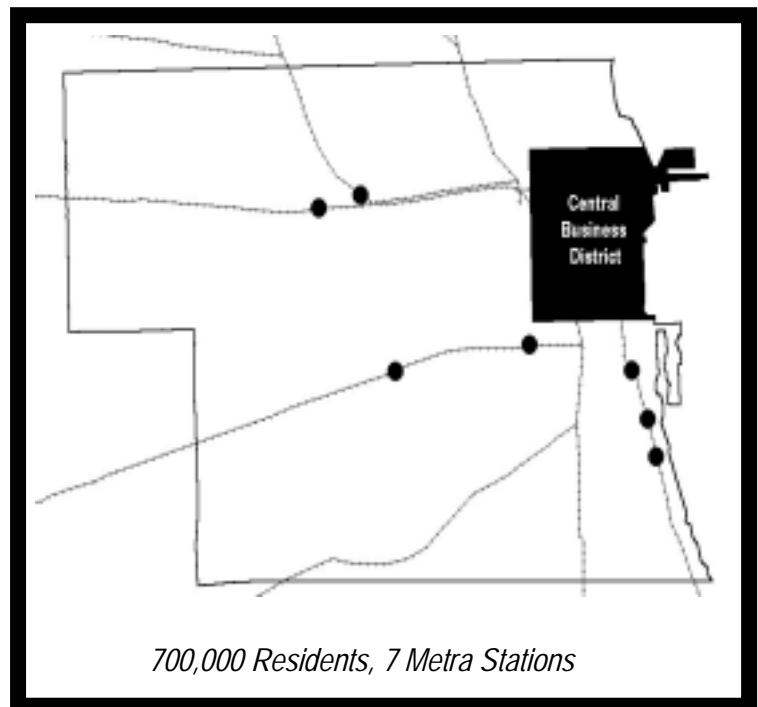
The bias toward accommodating cars in the city’s zoning regulations should give way to a preference for land uses that generate jobs, rather than storing cars. Large parking lots destroy the walkable character of our communities. The real costs of parking should be paid by the users; in other words, free parking should be discouraged in our communities (except for handicapped parking). In cases where car parking lots are necessary, build multi-story, mixed-use structures.

*Because the paper and pencil survey administered was not available in Spanish, the results are somewhat different than verbally reported information. For example, based on written responses, it appears that average household size is only 1.7 persons. The mono-lingual Spanish speakers all described themselves during the summit as having children and may have somewhat larger households than the average calculated here.

Efficient Public Transportation is Key

All major CTA and Metra lines crosscut our neighborhoods, leaving us with the drawbacks of dark viaducts and noisy rail yards. Some of the infrastructure most critical to our communities, like the Blue Line Douglas Branch, has deteriorated to the point where service is seriously impacted. In spite of the fact that almost 700,000 people live in our communities, there are only seven Metra stations outside the central business district; three of those are on the Metra Electric Line, providing access to tourist/conventioner destinations like the Lake and McCormick Place. Access to employment in job-rich suburbs ranges from difficult to impossible. We have a strong perception that working class and minority communities are less well served by transit than more affluent communities.

Transit use could be greatly increased among our neighbors. Our access to cultural institutions like the Museum Campus is difficult from some locations, particularly from south-central areas. While we would like to see expanded service on the whole system, we were almost twice as likely to identify east-west bus



routes that need increased frequency as north-south routes. Giving buses exclusive use of lanes would make transit more efficient.

We are perturbed by buses that are infrequent or do not run at night and by frequent “bus bunching.” Sometimes bus drivers are disrespectful, shutting their doors on riders or not stopping near the bus stop, especially in winter when travel is more difficult. We notice that the quality and maintenance of transit equipment is substandard. We would like to see the trolley service that is available downtown made available in our communities, as well as expanded shuttle bus service to job centers. Alternative fuel vehicles should replace diesel buses.

The long-neglected Douglas Line rehabilitation has finally begun, but other opportunities to expand rapid transit for the hundreds of thousands who start their journeys in our communities remain on the back burner. The west-side leg of the Green Line has a new station at Garfield Park, but there are still several stretches of one to one-and-a-half miles with no stops. We strongly support a north-south CTA line that would link the Red Line, Green Line, Orange Line and Blue Line without requiring a trip all the way downtown, providing better access to suburban job centers.

Transit is an asset to all of us, but especially to seniors and children. The independence of the oldest and youngest populations makes our communities uniquely and universally navigable, even as the rest of America becomes more and more auto-dependent. Paratransit, hydraulic lifts, closer coordination with schools and other assistance will increase transit access.

Enhance the Walkability of Our Communities

Walkable communities are among our greatest assets. Generous sidewalks are inexpensive investments that promote public health, community cohesion and community economic development. We would maximize these assets by revamping all sidewalks to meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (making walking easier for seniors and parents with strollers too). Benches, tables, bus shelters and other street furniture are essential components of “livable communities” and will encourage walking at very little cost. Children should have safe and comfortable access to schools. The most efficient independent mode of transportation available to children is walking and it should be supported and encouraged. Traffic calming devices that are aesthetically pleasing should be part of the solution to high volume, high speed traffic.

Safe walking requires changes to the roadways too. Improved pedestrian signal timing, better lighting, and pro-active enforcement of pedestrian rights are all

essential to maintaining and increasing walkability in our communities. The city must reverse the practice of businesses and city crews that dump snow on sidewalks when streets are cleared. Sidewalk access to bus stops should be given priority by snow removal crews.

Bikes are Better

Bike use expanded rapidly as the city has provided a lot of bike racks and a relatively small number of designated, safe routes over the last decade. Cycling is probably more prevalent in our area of the region than anywhere else because of the number of destinations under five miles that can be reached by bike. Investment in bicycle infrastructure should be dramatically increased and include many more safe routes, strengthened sanctions against threatening or careless car drivers, expanded bikes on transit (specifically on Metra and on CTA buses), and bikes available for the use of the general public. Right-of-way under elevated CTA lines should be considered for bike routes. Transit centers and other destinations should include secured, sheltered bike storage.

“Car Free Villages”

Some of us recommended expanding on the natural assets of our communities and creating two “Car Free Exemplary Communities.” These would be areas closed to cars but with infrastructure suitable to pedestrian, bicycle, shuttle bus, CTA, and emergency vehicle travel. Temporary parking lots at the outskirts of the “village” would be available. Landscaping improvements and playgrounds would draw people onto pedestrian boulevards (formerly known as streets). A mix of residential and commercial uses would assure the availability of a wide range of local products and services, as well as a healthy market for those businesses.

Our Vision for Our Communities

In determining what the future holds, we put a very high priority on better access to jobs, especially the jobs that left our communities for the suburbs. We see a strong relationship between preserving our environment, having safe and convenient travel options, and community economic development. We would like to see the public involved more in local and regional planning; the official planning groups would benefit from hearing our strong support for rebuilding our existing, walkable neighborhoods with a local mix of housing, jobs and services near transit.

We want the rest of the region to understand our communities not as places to “get through” as they travel to work in the Loop or to play at the Lakefront, but as historic communities that embody the best features of urban design and community cohesion. Future decisions about open space, housing,

Recommendations

Transit-oriented development promotes economic development and a high quality of life. Encourage more transit-oriented development, especially in disinvested areas. Economic development should promote pedestrian access, as a complement to transit accessibility. Maximize the use of vacant land for purposes that generate healthy tax revenues and create good paying jobs, rather than using land for parking. Create incentives for infill development and re-use existing infrastructure.

Efficient public transportation is essential. Increase transit access from Central Neighborhoods to outlying job centers. Improve the quality of existing transit service to make transit a pleasurable experience. Transit investment like the Douglas rehabilitation program, additional Green Line stations, and the Mid-City Transitway will pay big dividends because of the large number of transit users in our communities. Improve transit maintenance, accessibility, and convenience for all, but especially for seniors, students and the disabled. Bus routes that we would like to see improved include, but are not limited to, Ashland and Chicago Avenues. We suggest a policy goal for the region: meet basic public transit needs before adding any more road vehicle capacity.

Invest in pedestrians. Vigorously promote more pedestrian travel by providing sidewalks that are ample, smooth and ramped at intersections. Create inviting urban spaces by the addition of benches, tables, bus shelters, plazas and pocket parks. Reclaim urban streetscapes for pedestrians by maximizing sidewalk widths and changing roadway construction to slow automotive traffic. Vigorously enforce traffic laws so that pedestrians regain the right-of-way over vehicles that are turning or impeding pedestrian travel. Special consideration should be given to children, especially when they are travelling to school.

Increase bicycling options. We have come a long way in promoting bicycling in Chicago, but our progress is evidence of the potential for even more significant payoffs from relatively modest investments, like increased signage, increased bike parking (especially in car parking areas, rather than interfering with pedestrians). Make sure that all destinations are accessible by bicycle. Completing the link between transit use and biking is essential to provide a full-service biking environment. Car drivers must be compelled to respect the rights of cyclists as well as pedestrians.

A new model for Chicago. Create model “Car-Free Villages” (there is an existing two-block stretch on Sunnyside, between Beacon and Magnolia, which already serves as a local forerunner for this concept). Provide appropriate infrastructure to communities wanting to reclaim their streets for pedestrian or bicycle travel, for recreational uses and for community courtyards. Use the new land once used for parking and automobile infrastructure for increased greenery and playgrounds. Provide frequent shuttle bus service to transit and the “Main Street” of that community. Offer temporary parking on the periphery of the village as people adjust to using other modes.

The Chicago-Central *Connecting Communities* summit participants came as individuals and as members of groups. The people who helped plan the summit came from the following groups:

Bethel New Life

Blue Line Transit Task Force

Westside Health Authority

Westtown Leadership United

Connecting Communities Regional Partners

Business and Professional People for the Public Interest
Chicago Design Consortium
Chicago Metropolis 2020
Chicago Rehab Network
Chicagoland Bicycle Federation
Citizen Action-Illinois
Council for Disability Rights
Environmental Law and Policy Center of the Midwest
Friends of the Chicago River

Independent Voters of Illinois-Independent Precinct Organization
Interreligious Sustainability Project
League of Women Voters of Illinois
Metro Seniors in Action
Metropolitan Planning Council
Mid America Institute on Poverty
Sierra Club
Sustain



The Citizen Transportation Plan is a project of the Chicagoland Transportation and Air Quality Commission, part of the Center for Neighborhood Technology, 2125 W. North Ave., Chicago, IL 60647, 773-278-4800, ext. 2030. Visit us on the web at www.cnt.org/2030.