



Connecting Communities

Central Neighborhoods Caucus

July 23, 2003

A Chicagoland Transportation and Air Quality Commission project in partnership with: Break the Gridlock • and The Pilsen Alliance



The Central Neighborhoods of Chicago are a dense region composed of diverse and constantly evolving neighborhoods. This area is considered by many to be the “heart” of the six-county region because countless businesses are located in the Loop; all the spokes of the radial transit system meet here as well. Residents of these neighborhoods want transportation that encourages a high quality of life and can reasonably accommodate the volume of people that need to move around the area.

Transit-oriented development¹ (TOD) that promotes neighborhood economic development and efficient public transportation that increases transit access to and from the Central Neighborhoods are high priorities. Residents want accommodations for automobiles to reflect real car ownership in Chicago. According to the 2000 census 72% of Chicago households own one or no car. More energy and awareness should be put into a culture of incentives and infrastructure that would better accommodate Chicagoans who use cars modestly or not at all.

It has been a slow and tedious process to create change. Many who attended the *Connecting Communities* caucus for the Central Neighborhoods of Chicago felt that current progress isn't comprehensive enough. Some felt that elected officials and other decision-makers had not listened to their priorities. They stressed that planners and decision-makers need to follow through with commitments and address issues of equity. A great deal of the TOD occurred in more gentrified neighborhoods. Many improvements that are less costly and easier to do, such as painting for bicycle lanes, are being implemented slowly. These Central Neighborhoods are the core of the transportation system and need crucial improvements and infrastructure to support the rest of region.

Transit-oriented Development Promotes Economic Development and a High Quality of Life

Transit-oriented development (TOD) is vital to the dense neighborhoods of Chicago. There have been several positive examples of TOD in Chicago, including the development at Fullerton and Sheffield,

Connecting Communities caucuses are a public involvement follow-up to the *Connecting Communities* summits that involved over 500 people from throughout northeastern Illinois. The caucuses are designed to take a “snapshot” of a community's views on progress toward their summit recommendations. Some recommendations were major projects that could only be accomplished over a long time period. Others were practical, short term, and inexpensive solutions to community mobility deficits.

Excerpt from Central Neighborhoods of Chicago Connecting Communities, October 24, 2003

“The Central Neighborhoods Connecting Communities summit focuses 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. The Midwest's major business and financial district sits in the Central Neighborhoods region. The labor movement had 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.”

the Howard Red line station, and the Roosevelt Red/Green/Orange station. Participants would like to see similar TOD spread across the Central Neighborhoods. The group cited several “untapped resources” for TOD projects such as the CTA Green Line, areas in the West Loop, and the CTA Douglas Blue Line. Several felt that transit-oriented development should include more community input.

Efficient Public Transportation is Essential

Bus routes and accommodations have improved in some respects, according to participants. One of the biggest improvements to transit in this region is the accommodation of bicycles on CTA buses and trains. One participant noted that “talking buses,” the buses that use a pre-recorded voice to alert passengers of stops on the route, are “nice in theory” but questioned the reliability of the system.

¹ Transit-oriented development (TOD) is economic development clustered around mass transit stations and bus stations.

Despite some successes, many felt that CTA and city planners had not made sound transportation improvements necessary to support new development. Specifically, there is currently no bus service on the rapidly developing Clybourn retail corridor; as a result it is difficult for many potential shoppers to access. There is no commitment by the CTA to provide owl and weekend service for the Douglas Blue Line to serve communities like Pilsen, Little Village, Lawndale, and Cicero.

This group would also like to see more Metra stations within the city limits as well as increased outbound service to aid reverse commuters. The Central Neighborhoods area also includes many of the city's tourist and sport facilities; it was suggested that the free trolley be removed, encouraging tourists to use public transportation.

Invest in Pedestrians

Although there have been many improvements for pedestrians (painted crosswalks, Mayor Daley's support for walking school buses, and sidewalks that have been repaved near transit stations, for example) the caucus felt that more must be done to improve the pedestrian environment in this area of the city.

Participants cited a lack of leadership to ensure sidewalks are included in street repair funding, a lack of law enforcement at crosswalks and red lights, and bicyclists who sometimes ride on sidewalks as reasons why pedestrians are at risk in the Central Neighborhoods. The group echoed what was said in their summit report by suggesting that federal monies be used to extend bike path planning to older tighter streetscapes and to establish meaningful walking and biking routes for the areas around schools. One participant suggested that Chicago should emulate New York City by striving to increase motorist sensitivity to pedestrians. In New York City, during heavy pedestrian travel times, one car lane is blocked and given to pedestrians to accommodate sidewalk overflow.

Increase Bicycling Options

Bicycling in Chicago continues to be increasingly accepted as a viable means of transportation. The *Connecting Communities* summit report noted this progress and said that still more needed to be done. The progress continues; participants felt that there were more routes, more awareness, and more acceptance of bicycles. The CTA has extended times for bicycles on trains and provided free accommodations for bicycles on buses.

Additional work should include motorist education to facilitate a better understanding of bicycle rights and more bicycle-related businesses. Participants hoped that biking would continue to grow as a viable option for travel. They also hoped that more businesses in the Central Business District would provide indoor bike parking and shower rooms for employees. One idea to encourage employers to do this was to provide financial incentives to businesses that promote employee bicycle use.

A New Model for Chicago

The *Connecting Communities* summit report recommended the creation of neighborhood "Car-Free Villages," citing "El Zocalo" an effort by the Resurrection Project to pedestrianize the areas around Paulina and 18th Street. One idea for implementation was to give each alderman the resources for a "Car-Free Village" plan. While participants were excited about this prospect, they recognized several obstacles to be overcome: cars are a priority in our culture, parking is required for all newly constructed buildings, and there is very little information available to people about "Car-Free Villages." One suggestion was to look at failed examples of car elimination, such as the State Street Mall, and strive for a balance between car and car-free environments.

The Central Neighborhoods of Chicago are a part of the region that everyone from northeastern Illinois may visit, work in, or travel through at some point. It is crucial that the people who live here are not overlooked when it comes to making decisions about their neighborhoods and their community. The City of Chicago needs to anticipate the rapid growth of businesses and better coordinate and plan transportation service. Well-connected bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure is an effective way to manage the increasing congestion we see on the streets of Chicago. The city needs to carefully examine how it determines which neighborhoods need increased transit service and new development to make sure that the overall transportation system is efficient and equitable.



The corner of Ogden and Van Buren, just outside of the Medical District.

The Chicagoland Transportation and Air Quality Commission is a coalition of non-profit organizations from this region that bring federal transportation mandates to local actors. CTAQC keeps its constituents and members informed about transportation, land use, environmental justice, and other related issues.

Chicagoland Transportation and Air Quality Commission • 2125 W North Avenue • Chicago, IL 60647 • (773) 278-4800 • www.cnt.org/tsp/