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PERSPECTIVE



A NEW PLAN OF CHICAGO

How to craft a new Chicago Plan

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Ever since Daniel Burnham challenged Chicago in 1909 to “Make no little plans,” Chicagoans have tended to think of planning in terms of monumental projects, such as creating the lakefront (as Burnham proposed) or Millennium Park.

But comprehensive planning rises above individual projects. It sets out a broad vision for a better quality of life for all residents. It provides a blueprint, a set of policies and shared goals, a counterweight to the kind of ad hoc, idea-of-the-moment thinking that has dominated the city for too long. With a set of unified goals, a comprehensive plan can restore confidence in the city’s direction, which is essential for attracting private and public investment.

The Comprehensive Plan of 1966 — Chicago’s last such plan — did just that. A model in its day, the 1966 plan set goals for housing, park space, community colleges,

new library branches, industrial parks, roadways, transit expansions and a system of health clinics. Many of the goals were met over the next two decades. Follow-on efforts protected the lakefront and regulated the river. The 1966 plan sparked the central area’s office and residential revival by creating the framework for developments like Illinois Center, Dearborn Park and Central Station that helped Chicago weather deindustrialization better than other Midwestern cities.

The basic goals of a new Chicago Plan are not hard to envision: stronger neighborhoods; a growing employment base; an industrial policy for 21st century jobs; prioritized investments to serve transit riders, motorists, pedestrians and bicyclists; a central area that continues to be the economic engine for the region. Finding ways to grow our population should be

an overarching goal — migration brings new energy, ideas and investment.

How should we start such a complex task? First, we should systematically review the major recommendations of the downtown, neighborhood, industrial, cultural and transportation plans that we have. Key information for all the city submarkets and neighborhoods should be updated to prioritize these major recommendations and to create an organized interim planning strategy for the next two to three years.

Second and concurrently, we should launch a citywide comprehensive planning effort with the goal of adopting a long-term plan by 2016, the 50th anniversary of the 1966 plan. This plan would provide a vision and set of growth goals extending to 2033 to celebrate the bicentennial of the incorporation of the town in 1833 and the centennial of the Century of Progress Exposition of 1933. It would create coordinated

plans for transportation, education, health, public safety, recreation and the use of our land. It would enhance neighborhood quality of life and link to a citywide vision.

Neighborhoods, community groups, small businesses, foundations and universities can provide support to a transparent, city-led process. Mayor Rahm Emanuel can educate the city about the plan’s goals and vision, just as leaders like Walter Moody and Charles Wacker campaigned for the 1909 Plan of Chicago.

Planning provides a guide and vision for the city. It is what strong organizations — and healthy cities — do. Where is Chicago’s guide for its 21st century? We have produced such visions in the past. We need to do so again today.

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