

The Power of Big Ideas

MAKE NO LITTLE PLANS

Bill Hangley, Jr.

Make no little plans,” said Chicago’s famed architect and planner, Daniel Burnham. “They have no magic to stir men’s blood.”

Leadership Exchange attendees can testify to the staying power of both Burnham’s words and his ideals. No matter what the topic, attendees were as likely as not to hear a reference to the Burnham Plan, now almost 100 years old. As the grand old man of Chicago’s grand plans, the Burnham Plan (also known as the Plan for Chicago) established an ambitious template combining infrastructure blueprints with a vivid vision of civic life. It also established a process in which civic leaders used these larger-than-life visions to prod elected officials and fellow citizens into action.

But beyond this, the Burnham Plan represented an attempt to promote economic growth while simultaneously solving the problems caused by growth, and today this mission is carried on by two modern descendants: Chicago Metropolis 2020, a plan (and now a civic organization) which lays out a coordinated development policy for the six-county Chicago region, and the Central Area Plan (CAP), which reimagines downtown Chicago as an expanded, enlivened regional hub.

All three plans start with the premise that uncontrolled development carries potentially heavy costs, arguing that well-managed growth will result in a healthier, happier population and a more productive and stable regional economy.



Today, Chicagoans can point to any number of plans guiding current development, from public sector products like the Chicago Area Transportation Study’s (CATS) Regional Transportation Plan, to civic efforts like the Open Lands Project’s Regional Greenways Plan. But none have the breadth of vision shared by the Burnham Plan, Metropolis 2020, and the Central Area Plan. All three were cited repeatedly during the Leadership Exchange, and together they provide a window on Chicago’s particular vision of itself and its continuing success.

THE BURNHAM PLAN

Considered by many to be the harbinger of the modern urban plan, the Burnham Plan, unveiled in 1909, laid out a comprehensive program of physical and civic improvements. New roads, bridges, highways, and tunnels would allow for increased trade and traffic, while new museums, plazas, and parks would provide healthy, pleasant public spaces for the city’s booming population.

Daniel Burnham’s Chicago was a teeming industrial hive, sprawling unchecked across the flat plains around Lake Michigan. First incorporated in 1833

as a town of 350 people, Chicago got its name from a Pottawatomie Indian phrase describing the smell of rotting marsh leeks. Just 75 years later, it was the hub of North American trade, with a population of over two million. Earlier plans had shaped Chicago's downtown street grid, stockyards, and railroads, but much of its development was haphazard. As in other American cities of the day, traffic was a chaotic mess, the river and lakefront were grimy dumping-grounds, smog choked the air, and slums dominated the landscape.

Burnham, who designed early skyscrapers and created the layout of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, became convinced that a new plan was needed to put the city in order and allow it to continue growing without destroying itself. "The constant struggle of civilization is to know and to attain the highest good," the Burnham Plan would state, "and the city which brings about the best conditions of life becomes the most prosperous."

He was also convinced that government, happy to reap the rewards of the city's boomtown success, would never get around to the task. In 1904, in a speech to the city's Commercial Club, Burnham told the assembled businessmen that "the public authorities do not do their duty and they must be made to."

Sold on the need for change and the potential benefits, the Commercial Club would use its money to sponsor the Plan, and its power to make implementation possible. With the help of tireless promotion by the Chicago Plan Commission (a mayorally-appointed board of private sector leaders), voters would approve 86 Plan-related bond issues worth \$234 million between 1912 and 1931. Guided by the Burnham Plan, Chicago built or expanded major new parks, roads, and bridges (establishing landmarks like Michigan Avenue, Wacker Drive, and the Magnificent Mile); straightened the Chicago River; rerouted freight lines; and built Union Station and other public buildings.

Perhaps most famously, the Plan helped civic leaders wrest control of the lakefront from shippers and manufacturers and turn it into a public space that, as Burnham put it, "by rights belongs to the people."

The Burnham Plan's position as the city's guiding force didn't end until 1939, when the Chicago Plan Commission was reduced and absorbed into city government. But during its three-decade heyday, the Burnham Plan helped establish both Chicago's physical bones and its national reputation as a forward-thinking, cosmopolitan city — an identity much greater than just "hog butcher to the world."

CHICAGO METROPOLIS 2020

A number of significant plans for Chicago were released during the 20th century, mostly dealing with downtown and lakefront development. But in 1999, the Commercial Club reasserted a big-picture vision with "Chicago Metropolis 2020: Preparing Metropolitan Chicago for the 21st Century."

Produced with the assistance of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Metropolis 2020 is less about physical changes than policy changes, but it shares with the Burnham Plan a conviction that current growth patterns, left unchecked, could have more cost than benefit.

Metropolis 2020 takes as its starting point the notion that metropolitan Chicago, a six-county region, must improve its ability to compete with other regions for jobs and commerce. Like the Burnham Plan, it calls for improvements to transportation infrastructure, adding a heavy emphasis of education reform to improve the region's workforce. It calls for changes in housing and transit policy to keep the poor and working class from clustering in unsustainable concentrations; changes in zoning policies to eliminate the "perverse incentives" that drive suburbs to restrict themselves to low-density, high-cost housing; and changes in tax policies to, among other things, reduce the region's reliance on cars and improve public transit.

Also like the Burnham Plan, Metropolis 2020 calls for improvements to civic life. "We are more than economic ants working on an ever-growing ant hill," 2020's authors write, before making their case for improved environmental, medical, and social welfare policies.

What sets Metropolis 2020 apart is its attempt to grapple with a modern problem: how can planners and advocates solve problems at a regional scale, when the region is comprised of hundreds of overlapping and competing governing districts?

"For example," the report's authors write, "if one municipality declares its desire to remain exclusively a place for large-lot single-family residences except for a new industrial park intended to improve its tax base, little harm is done." But if every municipality chooses this outwardly attractive option, Metropolis 2020 continues, the overall effect is to weaken the region: open space is devoured, traffic problems increase, low- and middle-income workers are pushed farther away from jobs, and high-value taxpayers (the residents of these new large-lot homes) are drawn away from older suburbs and the city.

"The frequent result is a vicious downward spiral," the report concludes. When communities lose high-

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Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission's 2040 Plan

Local elected officials and planners have an important new set of tools to aid land-use decisions in NIPC's 2040 Regional Framework Plan. The comprehensive Plan is the culmination of an extensive public-involvement process that included 200 workshops where 4,000 participants expressed their vision of how the region should address growth through the year 2040.

NIPC is the official comprehensive planning agency for Cook, DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry, and Will counties which form the greater Chicago metropolitan area. Its official forecasts of population, employment and other socio-economic indicators are key inputs to the region's transportation agencies.

The 2040 Plan defines three basic elements — Centers, Corridors and Green Areas — to establish a framework for the region's communities to plan more effectively to deal with growth that NIPC forecasts will exceed 10 million residents and 5.5 million jobs by 2030.

The 2040 Plan was published on September 28, 2005 with a public celebration at Sears Tower. To request a print copy of the 2040 Plan, email info@nipc.org or phone 312-454-0400.

value residents, their tax base shrinks, forcing them to raise taxes, cut services, and grapple with new problems caused by concentrated poverty. "This, then, encourages even more businesses and residents to consider relocating."

Problems like these, states Metropolis 2020, call for regional mechanisms that can coordinate state, suburban and exurban governments, encouraging, for example, high-density zoning around public transit

routes. The plan rejects the notion of a full-bore "metropolitan government," calling instead for the creation of a Regional Coordinating Council which could use bond issues and incentives to encourage better transit, sewage, housing, and land use policies.

To implement its ideas, the Commercial Club founded a new organization, also called Chicago Metropolis 2020, charged with doing the legwork: organizing task forces, publicizing ideas, pushing for legislation, and advocating for change. Its executive council is heavy with CEOs and businesspeople, along with representatives of the public and nonprofit sectors, and it draws support from a wide range of private and corporate foundations. It was a driving force behind the merger of two regional planning agencies (see pages 14–19), and in recent years it has released a steady string of reports on regional issues such as traffic, freight, housing, and universal preschool.

THE CENTRAL AREA PLAN

If Metropolis 2020 deals with sprawl and the problems caused by the depopulation of the urban core, the Central Area Plan (CAP) serves as a vision of how to draw people back to that core. At its most basic, CAP is about expanding downtown Chicago's population of workers and residents. But in the context of regionalism, CAP wants to reestablish downtown as a hub for all of what is often referred to as "Chicagoland."

Unlike Metropolis 2020, CAP is a product of municipal government, in this case the city's Department of Planning and Development (DPD). But like Metropolis 2020, CAP can draw a direct lineage to the Burnham Plan, as the DPD evolved from the original Chicago Plan Commission. And it conspicuously echoes Burnham in its introduction: "This is no little plan. This is a plan for urban greatness."

Once again, Burnham's vision is recalled in the shape of major renovations to roads, bridges, tunnels, and transit centers, along with parks, open spaces, and civic gathering places. CAP envisions a grid of greenways that includes riverside walks, landscaped boulevards, new squares over highways, and expanded lakefront parks. It calls for infrastructure and transit improvements that will allow the city's office district to expand into the West Loop, and it works in tandem with a municipal zoning reform effort that would help create a series of new residential and mixed-use districts while preserving older "character" neighborhoods.

Burnham's vision is also recalled in CAP's colorful and inspiring graphics that present detailed visions of parks, multi-leveled transit centers, dramatically expanded office districts, and pedestrian-friendly boulevards.

But CAP also brings a specific set of economic targets to the table. All of its developments are designed to effectively increase downtown's population. Its goals include:

- **Add 180,000 jobs**, the equivalent of eight Sears Towers;
- **Add 140,000 residents** — a 69 percent increase — in 36,000 new dwellings;
- **Add 3 million square feet of education space** (classrooms, dormitories, etc.), enough for 95,000 students;
- **Attract 35 million tourists and visitors annually**; and,
- **Add 7 million square feet of retail space.**

Hitting these targets requires improvements not only to downtown itself, but also to the entire regional transit network. CAP calls for development along existing transit corridors, improving regional rail service, and developing a high-speed train network that would tie the region's cities together. A central CAP strategy is to reduce car traffic, so it focuses heavily on strategies for luring residents, workers, and visitors onto public transportation.

The entire project is laid out over a timeframe stretching to 2021, calling for billions in investments and promising billions in returns. It seeks to guide the city's priorities in many areas, including zoning, transit investments, bond issues, parks, and environmental policies.

OTHER PLANS

Metropolis 2020 and the Central Area Plan think big in the tradition of the Burnham Plan, but they are hardly the only plans and agendas on the table. CAP is inextricably linked with Mayor Richard M. Daley's zoning reform and "green Chicago" plan. It also claims to work in harmony with the Open Lands Project's Regional Greenways Plan (developed in partnership with the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission, or NIPC), Metropolis 2020 itself, and a dozen existing or developing district-level plans for specific areas like the East Loop, Cabrini North, Michigan Avenue, and the Chicago River.

Furthermore, at the public level major plans include NIPC's 2040 Regional Framework Plan, the CATS Regional Transportation Plan, the Illinois Department of Transportation's State Transportation Plan, the Regional Transit Authority's strategic plan, and a number of other plans from regional municipalities and government agencies. Among Metropolis 2020's major recommendations, now enacted, was the creation of a Regional Planning Board that merges CATS and NIPC; advocates are now calling on that board to help untangle this snarl of plans.

The potential for conflict over specific recommendations, to say nothing of their expense or difficulty even under the best of conditions, makes it unlikely that either Metropolis 2020 or CAP will ever achieve full implementation. But then again, only parts of the Burnham Plan ever reached fruition. Much of what did become reality was adjusted to suit changing conditions. But through its combination of visionary language and practical goals, the Burnham Plan provided a template for civic organization and boosterism that has lasted almost a century.

"The Plan long ago ceased to be a collection of proposals and Burnham a mere architect and urban designer," wrote the authors of the *Encyclopedia of Chicago*. "They have become landmarks in the cityscape, as palpable a presence for any planner or civic leader as the Sears Tower or the Outer Drive." By conspicuously invoking Burnham's legacy, the authors of Metropolis 2020 and the Central Area Plan both clearly indicate that they're trying to do more than provide laundry lists of projects and policy proposals. They are trying to provide that magic which might "stir men's blood."

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