

THE BURNHAM BLOG

Learning to plan – and lead – for the future

By Patrick T. Reardon on Fri., 10/30/2009 –8:27 pm.

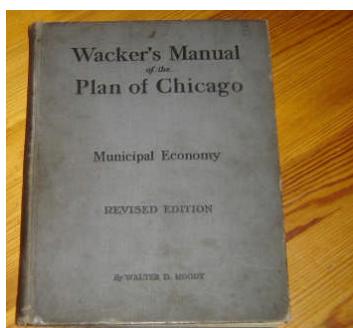
“It feels like Chicago,” Spencer Teiken says.

The 16-year-old from Oswego is rattling along in a city subway car for the first time, and he’s enjoying it. He’s watched this ride depicted on movies, but it’s another thing to actually be on the train.

He’s on another ride as well --- an eight-month journey to learn about the Chicago region and about planning for its future.

Teiken (left) is one of 29 high school students from the metropolitan area’s seven counties who have signed up to take part in the Future Leaders in Planning program of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP). From now until springtime, they’ll learn about the region’s demographics, its multiplicity of governments and its complex mix of transportation, land-use, environmental and social challenges.

A modern version



The program is a modern version of one of the unique elements in the implementation effort behind the Plan of Chicago a century ago.

That Plan was known as the Burnham Plan, after its principal author Daniel Burnham, but Burnham died three years after its publication. So the work to boost public support for its proposals --- and to turn them into realities --- was carried out by an array of his colleagues.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Patrick T. Reardon](#) is a Chicagoan, born and bred. He has been writing about the city, its region and planning issues, mainly in the Chicago Tribune, for nearly 40 years. [MORE]

In a brilliant move, the proponents went into the city's schools to spend many hours of classroom time to explain the idea of city planning and the responsibility of all citizens, even children, to think about the future.

There was even a text that was used as the basis for school civics lessons all the way down to the 1960s --- "Wacker's Manual of the Plan of Chicago." It was written by publicity genius Walter D. Moody and named for Charles Wacker, the chairman of the Chicago Plan Commission, a key result of the Plan.

Not only did those generations of children learn their lessons of good citizenship and the importance of the Plan, but they passed those teachings along to their parents. And, over a two-decade period, the parents and later the grown-up children voted 86 times to approve bond issues --- and to raise taxes --- to pay for Plan-related civic improvements.

Leaders of their own generation

CMAP --- which is in the process of developing the region's first-ever comprehensive plan in which all those issues will be addressed --- recruited teens for the program who are curious, alert and articulate. The goal is to prepare them to be leaders of their own generation and to spread the word about the opportunity and need of all of the region's residents to plan for its future.

On this Saturday, Teiken and the other four members of a group that will focus on human services and education throughout the program are on their way to the Near North Side.

With a couple of CMAP staffers showing the way, they're going to stop at City Farm, a sustainable vegetable farm near the former Cabrini-Green public housing development, and then, a few steps away, visit the Margot and Harold Schiff Residences, an innovatively designed residence in which formerly homeless people have a place to live and services to help them get their lives in order.



"I like helping people"

"I've never gotten into planning before," says Jasmine Omeke. "I really don't know what it takes to plan for the different aspects of the city."



Omeke (left) lives in the Beverly neighborhood on Chicago's Southwest Side, and, unlike Teiken, she's an old hand at taking the subway. It's her main transport every school day to Whitney Young High School.

The 17-year-old learned about the Future Leaders in Planning program from her mentor with the Future Business Leaders of America. She likes the idea of leading, she says, because "I like helping people." As of now, especially so early in the program, she's not sure if, as a career, she wants to go into business, or be an economist, or do something in the field of human services.

Malik Chappell's father is a leader in planning --- he's a CMAP executive. But the 15-year-old Chappell, a Naperville resident, doesn't think he'll follow in his father's footsteps.

"I'm interested in being a leader, but not exactly in planning," says Chappell (right). "Maybe leading a business, managing a business." He likes the program because "I get to meet different people and hear new ideas, and get a different perspective.

"It's the first step"



Unlike Omeke and Chappell, Teiken (below) knows exactly the leadership role he wants to take as an adult -- politician.



“I’m really interested in the functioning of government and its relationship to society,” he explains.

What level of government is he aiming for?

“The Senate or the House.”

The U.S. Senate or the U.S. House of Representatives?

“It’s the first step.”

There’s not much higher than that except the presidency.

“I think big.”