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### Our green future

By Patrick T. Reardon on Wed., 11/04/2009 –7:58 am.

In the 1909 Plan of Chicago, Daniel Burnham wrote:

“While the keynote of the nineteenth century was expansion, we of the twentieth century find that our dominant idea is conservation....The time to secure the lands necessary for [regional parks] is now, while as yet the prices are moderate and the natural scenery is comparatively unspoiled.”

Well, we of the twenty-first century have our own responsibility to look forward.

We still need to set aside parks and other natural open areas for our rest and recreation. But, even more, we have to recognize that, in our four hundred years of settlement in this region, we’ve battered and beaten the green infrastructure that is essential to all life --- the riverbanks and woods, the savannas and urban trees, the air and water and soil.

Our dominant idea needs to be a green future.



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### ABOUT THIS BLOG

This blog is about history, planning and the future. It’s rooted in the recognition that we live in a world that is created by plans – and by the failure to make plans. [\[MORE\]](#)

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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. [\[MORE\]](#)

The millions of people who live in this region will be healthier if our green infrastructure is healthier. We'll breathe easier if our trees are strong and vigorous. We'll live better if we have meadows to look at and to help us handle heavy rains. If we keep temperatures down, we save energy, and save the environment, and save money.

And, across the region, a wide variety of initiatives --- with clear-cut goals --- are underway to do all that and more:

Chicago Wilderness has developed a Green Infrastructure Vision that aims to protect the natural character and functioning of 1.8 million acres of interconnected lands and waters in the seven-million-acre greater Chicago region by 2060.

This is a region that stretches from southwestern Michigan, across northern Indiana, across 15 Illinois counties and north into Wisconsin as far as Milwaukee.

These natural areas link the communities of our region together and provide esthetic beauty and respite from urban living. They also serve as an economic underpinning for the region by making it an attractive place to live, by cleaning the air and water and by reducing flooding. In addition, healthy natural areas play a significant role in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and mitigating the impacts of climate change in our region.



Within the 1.8 million acres targeted by Chicago Wilderness, many areas are already developed. Protecting the green infrastructure in such places will be as simple as promoting native landscaping, rain gardens and green roofs as well as incorporating conservation principles into municipal land use ordinances.

Elsewhere, it is possible --- and essential --- to set aside open space as nature reserves and steward this landscape to ensure its health and resiliency. For instance, according to one estimate, this region has about 30,000 acres of forests and woodlands. The Vision's goal is to double that total over the next 50 years.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) says it will include the Green Infrastructure Vision in its comprehensive regional plan, GO TO 2040, up for approval in 2010.



CMAP is also working with the conservation group Openlands to knit together the region with an interconnected network of biking and hiking trails. Right now, there are 925 miles of trails throughout the seven-county region. By 2060, CMAP hopes to encourage the development of 2,250 miles.

On another front, top scientists and environmentalists will meet Nov. 6 to find less destructive ways for the people of the Chicago region to live with nature and wildlife.

They're gathering at a summit conference at the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe under the auspices of Mayor Richard M. Daley's Nature & Wildlife Advisory Committee. Their goal: Developing a plan of attack for an all-out research effort to determine the best ways to protect and nurture Chicago's natural world.

A second Daley initiative is the Chicago Climate Action Plan which calls for the city and its citizens to do their part in lowering the temperature of the planet.

To accomplish this, the Climate Action Plan, a model for the rest of the region, looks full-face at the future and lays out specific goals for how the city and its people can begin to face the challenges of higher temperatures. Among them: increase energy efficiency; reduce, reuse and recycle 90 percent of the city's waste; install rooftop gardens on 6,000 buildings; and increase the number of walking and bicycle trips to one million a year.



Daley's Chicago Trees Initiative is based on the recognition that trees reduce heat islands in urban areas. So, by 2020, the initiative is hoping to have 20 percent of the city's land area shaded by its 3.6 million trees. Right now, it's 17.2 percent.



One way to increasing the tree canopy is simply to help those millions of trees grow healthier and stronger. Another: Plant hundreds of thousands of new ones.

Across the region, 101 municipalities and other organizations have agreed to work together to improve energy efficiency in their buildings and to conserve natural resources. The agreement is called the Greenest Region Compact, developed by the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus.

In joining the compact, the communities have signed on to set environmental goals and to implement a variety of strategies, such as promoting residential water conservation, establishing electronic-waste recycling programs, increasing tree plantings and reducing air pollution and energy consumption.

This year, the Caucus distributed 500,000 Compact Florescent Light Bulbs to participating city governments to spur broader use of the energy-efficient bulbs within those communities. In addition, under a \$75,000 grant from the Chicago Community Trust, the Caucus will carry out pilot programs next year in water conservation techniques.



Of course, all of these efforts aren't enough. But they're a start.

We'll decide now what the future will be. We'll decide if this start will gain momentum and grow into a commitment. Or if it will fizzle out, leaving our region's future to chance.

A hundred years ago, Daniel Burnham and the people of his time were in the same position. They made choices that we're still living with.

What choices will we as a region make? How green will our future --- and the future of our children and our children's children --- be?