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Q&A with Jerry Adelman: The past and future of Burnham's green legacy

By Patrick T. Reardon on Tue., 08/25/2009 –8:50 am.

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The excitement and momentum that has developed around the 20 “green legacy” projects isn’t likely to come to a screeching halt at the end of this year.

And that’s good news for the Chicago region’s green infrastructure --- those rivers, trails, parks, lakes and preserves where the concrete-steel world meets the sap-filled realm of Nature.

As I explained in my last posting, environmentalists and conservationists are using this year’s celebration of the 100th anniversary of the publication of the Plan of Chicago to highlight nearly two dozen projects throughout the city and suburbs.

These are initiatives --- some new, some longstanding, many reaching important milestones --- that embody the spirit of Daniel Burnham in treasuring open space and natural areas and recognizing their importance to the well-being of all citizens of the region.

Here’s the conclusion of my interview with Jerry Adelman, the executive director of Openlands, the umbrella organization that is overseeing the green legacy program:

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[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. [\[MORE\]](#)



Question: It seems that the Burnham centennial celebration is helping to give a jolt of energy to regional efforts in particular.

Answer: It's shed light on these projects and created some momentum that just wasn't there before. People are beginning to see the inter-connectedness --- and the power of that.

Certainly, the Burnham message is one that sets the stage for that discussion.

Question: Is more getting done because people are getting caught up in the spirit of the celebration?

Answer: No question about it, seeing how people are talking about it, seeing the kind of energy that's there, the pride that they're now a green legacy project.

It didn't change anything. It didn't bring tons of dollars to the table or bring new leadership. But it got people charged up and motivated, and, once they started buying into it and started seeing their project on the list, they said, "Now we've got to make it happen."

An example is Kankakee Sands (right). The Nature Conservancy has been taking the lead. It's a rare ecosystem over two states. Suddenly, they're so proud of this thing. They had this event and dedicated a new nature preserve and used it symbolically to talk about the whole system and what they're doing.



Suddenly, they're all taking about Burnham and quoting him, and it's created an excitement and an energy and a commitment and a profile for the project that didn't exist a year ago.

For instance, we're there at their event, and so were representatives from the Kankakee River Trail, one of the trails there. In my comments, I mentioned they were there. Afterward, they were just so thankful. "Oh, thanks for including us, and mentioning us, and we are so proud of this!"

Question: Can you tell me about Kankakee Sands?

We had one of the largest wetlands in North America along the Kankakee River, and, when you look at the early maps, it's amazing, the scale of the thing, thousands of acres. People would come from all over the world to hunt there. I'm talking mid-19th century. The Prince of Wales came, for instance.

The skies were dark with waterfowl.

We did a series of maps of early Chicago in Millennium Park several years ago, and showed what the area looked like in 1830 and then 1900 and 1950. Between 1830 and 1900, this huge wetland goes down to nothing. It's all drained.

But the soils are still there, and this is all part of the big inland lake of millions of years ago. Because it's very sandy soil and this interesting topography, it's really a unique natural area in terms of the plant and animal life that's there.

Kankakee Sands contains the largest concentration of high-quality sand savannas in the United States. This is a very rare ecosystem --- these black oaks that are kind of scrubby and red-headed woodpeckers which are very threatened, a large population of them --- interesting plants and animals that are found nowhere else. It's the largest concentration in the United States, if not the world, and yet it wasn't well-known.



They were slowly piecing it together. And this has given new energy to that effort.

Question: The Burnham Greenway Gap is another example, right?

Answer: The gap in the trail system (left) is right outside the city of Chicago.

This is a gap that everybody has pointed to because it just provides such an extraordinary link in the regional system, connecting the City of Chicago with Indiana, connecting the lakefront with the interior trail system, and connecting to something called the Grand Illinois Trail which is a 500-mile loop that goes from Lake Michigan through Northeastern Illinois over to the Mississippi.

In the metropolitan region, it's the most important gap that, if completed, would make all these things possible. It doesn't complete the whole system, but this is the linchpin.

You can see on this map --- this is the gap, a little over two miles. There's the Burnham Greenway, which already exists. There's the Pennsy Trail. The Marquette Trail eventually is going to link in.

The north part of the gap is in the city of Chicago. The south part is in the village of Burnham. Brainard Avenue separates the two jurisdictions.

To close the gap, you have to cross a railroad, and you have to cross the Little Calumet River. It's complicated. You have to build a bridge, a \$2 million construction project, but the impact is so great that that's peanuts when you just think of what it leverages. It's the right-of-way for high power lines controlled by Commonwealth Edison.

Well, John Rowe [chairman and chief executive officer of Exelon Corporation, owner of Commonwealth Edison] is on the Burnham Plan Centennial committee, and, at one of these presentations early when we were talking about green infrastructure and the green legacy, this came up, and he said, "Why can't we do that?"

So he got everybody together, and we've had multiple meetings.

Suddenly, the importance of this was recognized. This anniversary was a catalyst for that. It's gotten to the attention of the highest level of the leadership [of Exelon]. They, of course, don't want to hurt their operations, and they don't want to take on new serious liability for the corporation. It would be irresponsible on their part to do it.

But all these things can be addressed. We're not there yet, but it's moving, happily in the right direction. Our goal in November is to have a closing ceremony, a signing of the lease.

Question: Think you'll be able to do that?

Answer: I really do. This has been talked about for 20 years and more, and finally to achieve that would be really huge. It's a very concrete, very dramatic example of the power of this anniversary. None of that would have happened, ever, but for the Burnham centennial.

It's not as if, in 2009, we're going to get everything done. But we want to reach a level of accomplishment that sets the stage for the next period of time to get it done, whether we're talking a five-year window or a 50-year window, I don't know, with some of these projects.

But this is moving them to a new level of possibility that didn't exist before, creating a constituency, a level of awareness and public appreciation that didn't exist before --- which, in turn, will translate to providing the political will long-term to get it done.

Question: It seems like it may be letting the regional genie out of the bottle. Once people start thinking more regionally this year, they won't suddenly stop next year.

If they see these connections now, that will have a benefit over a long period, right?

I'm convinced of it because you're engaging regional leadership --- the professional community, staffs, academics, scientists, and elected officials. Most of these events have the Mayor or whoever there, the county board officials.

For the Cal-Sag trail event, the organizers did a whole day of stopping in the communities along the 20-mile trail, and [U.S. Rep.] Jesse Jackson Jr. was there and members of the [Illinois] Senate and House, and mayors, and chambers of commerce, and county board representatives --- and they're all proud.

There were a lot of people there, and a lot of media coverage. Those elected officials are going to remember that. This is something people like, and they want. And it's their constituency. So they're engaged.

It elevates significant projects, and the politicians see that, hey, these things have traction.

Question: By creating these trails and other things that cross jurisdictional boundaries, by creating these links, it seems that you're also creating a greater cohesiveness in the region, right?



You are. It's psychological. It's symbolic as much as it is physical. It does create a whole different way of thinking about the region. This on-the-ground connectedness has a lot of metaphorical implications.

Next: The green legacy --- weaving the region into a single fabric