

Green Grassroots Efforts in Chicago:

A Necessary Companion to Much Heralded Mayor Daley

Joshua D. Anderson

It is widely recognized that Mayor Daley of Chicago has been an important advocate for sustainable and green projects in the urban environment. However, the role of the grassroots advocate in championing these ideas has been critical to their initiation and establishing broad support for them locally and regionally. That role has been largely ignored. To shed light on the important role of green grassroots efforts in Chicago the failure of the Blue Bag Program is compared to the case studies of The Southeast Environmental Task Force, Eden Place Nature Center, and the unique case of Chicago Wilderness. In doing so, the importance of grassroots advocates in the environmental progress of Chicago is established.

Chicago is becoming a greener place than it was during the 20th century. It is somehow fitting that the city which environmental commissioner Sadhu Johnston claims will become “the most environmentally friendly city in the US” (Ferkenhoff 2006) is the same city notably celebrated by Carl Sandburg for its gritty, industrial nature in his famous poem, Chicago:

Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action ... shoveling, wrecking, planning, building, breaking, rebuilding, under the smoke, dust all over his mouth, laughing with white teeth, under the terrible burden of destiny ... laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of youth, half-naked, sweating, proud to be Hog Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and Freight Handler to the Nation.

Sandburg captured the spirit of Chicago and gave voice to the pride of a city full of energy and determination. Today the grime of Chicago’s mighty industrial past is slowly being cleared from the center of the city to the near and extended suburbs as she charges ahead into the age of the green metropolis. Mayor Daley has been given almost complete credit for this shift. While he has been a key and vocal supporter of environmental policies, it is important to recognize the leadership provided by many local grassroots activists.

Background: The Urban Environment and the Role of the Mayor

As American cities swelled due to the growth of industry and the railroads in the 19th Century, their rapid expansion and pollution produced reactions among activists and the public. People yearned for a cleaner and more orderly environment, as evidenced by the popularity of the White City and parks movement. Fredrick Law Olmstead supported the adoption of urban green space

to offer relief from the ills of the city that people could not escape, where “every breath was fouled with smoke from burning coal ...” (Lewis 1996, 29). This reaction did not dampen the pride people held for the city or its accomplishments, however, as Sandburg so eloquently captures. The duality of pride in former industrial glory and hope for future environmental remediation is true of many modern cities even now, but Chicago is the symbolic head of the movement. Chicago is evolving into a more beautiful, livable, and environmentally conscious place. In twenty years when people fly over the city they are likely to observe a transformed image. What was once gray will be green due to the wide-scale incorporation of green roofs and green infrastructure. The mood has also changed. Parks were provided so people could escape the city. With better environmental regulation and the removal of many heavy industries from urban centers, the city has become a more fulfilling environment. City and park are now both acting as environmental agents.

It is increasingly true that cities are no longer seen as a villain fomenting the wreckage of our planet. Their density offers a chance for this generation and those that follow to use resources in a more concentrated and measured way. Large cities are actually resource conservative when compared to suburban and rural settlement. As people concentrate into urban areas, they produce less carbon and have less environmental impact per capita on the land they inhabit. This also means that more space is left available for environmental conservation. Cities also now compete on a global scale as places that offer a good quality of life and a clean environment to attract and retain a highly-educated workforce. A part of this competition is the greening of the city.

Mayor Daley has aggressively promoted environmental improvement. He has sought to reinvent the city as an

Chicago Green Roof. Photo: Larissa Larsen



attractive place. Sadhu Johnston puts it best when he says “the mayor realizes that greening strategies are about quality of life and about making cities competitive because they’re great places to live.... In Portland or Seattle you expect it. But you look at Chicago and its industrial past, and it provides a unique model for how big cities can go green” (Ferkenhoff 2006). The cleaning of the lakefront, the planting of over half a million trees, the greening of boulevards, and promotion of green roofs are positive steps to clean the city and lead to decreased energy consumption. However, Mayor Daley did not create environmental awareness. Many of the city’s efforts, though ahead of the curve, are still reactions to broader movements in society. The activists and grassroots players at the forefront of these movements have often been overlooked.

The Importance of Grassroots Activism and the Failure of the Blue Bag Program

The accomplishments of the grassroots community in sustainable and ecologically remedial projects in the central Chicago region have been overshadowed due to the high-profile nature of the city’s efforts and the Mayor’s celebrity status (Spirou 2006). Most analysis of Chicago’s green movement ignores grassroots efforts to galvanize the local community towards environmental awareness. Chicago has a history of spirited citizens mobilizing various movements that have made a dramatic cultural impact, from the labor unions to Jane Addams’ work with Hull House. Local efforts are often vitally important in establishing broad support for environmental initiatives. Many exciting grassroots projects are being undertaken that engage local communities without the benefit of media promotion that comes with political power.

It is important for the city to support these existing efforts. The city has not always engaged the grassroots community in its environmental programs, often to its own detriment. The story of the Blue Bag Program—an idea aimed at diverting garbage away from landfills—stands as a testament to this. Despite being wildly popular among the environmental community, the program became an issue of public outcry in Chicago. Weinberg, Pellow, and Schnaiburg (2000) offer both a history and critique, noting alternative devices from community-based efforts:

Modern recycling first emerged in the late 1960s. The original programs grew from environmental movements at the time, which created small, local operations.

They recycled waste as a vehicle for addressing equity and environmental concerns From the 1960s through the early 1980s, most post-consumer waste recycling took place within these community-based recycling centers (12-13).

During the 1980s, a time when recycling was growing as a public concern, evidence was uncovered by archeologist William Rathje that garbage in landfills was not biodegrading. Hotdogs and newspapers were unearthed largely intact. This, along with the risk of health problems, led to an anti-landfill stance among environmentalists and the public. This only fueled the sentiment that recycling was necessary to divert waste away from landfills and back into the resource stream.

In Chicago, “recycling appeared ... to be one of those win-win policies for the city. It would solve the landfill problem and please the environmental community. It might even provide jobs in some of the city’s depressed areas” (Weinberg, Pellow, and Schnaiburg 2000, 55). Community-based recyclers already existed in Chicago, but they were small scale. Both the Resource Center and Uptown Recycling, Inc., offered recycling services in 1990 when the city put out an RFP for a city-wide recycling proposal. The existing small players were only equipped to handle the areas they served and were unable to meet the city’s demand that they service the larger Chicago region. Waste Management was ultimately awarded the contract and the Blue Bag program was put in place. Because the company contributes heavily to Mayor Daley’s campaigns, some citizens complained of cronyism. The real issue for them, however, was the lack of effectiveness of the city’s strategy to accomplish a goal. By creating a city-wide recycling program, the local government seemed to provide a needed service. In reality, they were merely responding to

a movement that had already been started—and executed more effectively—by small but active grassroots players.

From the beginning, the city proved ineffective. A series of Chicago Tribune articles culminated in late 2006 with a report by Mihalopoulos and Washburn that the Blue Bag program would be cancelled, and revealed that “[m]ore than half of what the city counted as recycled material was a mix of yard waste and fragments of garbage—including pens, action figures and glass shards.” The point of describing the Blue Bag Program is not to deride the city’s efforts at recycling but rather to offer an example of an early environmental effort which started as a grassroots movement, was taken over by city government, and largely failed as local citizens and grassroots players were ignored and uninvolved in the process. The eventual changing of the failed policy can also be attributed to grassroots pressure to change course for the better.

The importance of community participation is generally accepted and documented in environmental circles. For example, Weber’s Grassroots Ecosystem Management (GREM), is described as an “ongoing, collaborative governance arrangement in which inclusive coalitions of the unlike come together in a deliberative format to resolve policy problems affecting the environment, economy, and community (or communities) of a particular place” (Weber 2003, 3). In describing the Willapa Alliance, a diverse group of business persons and conservationists who seek to ensure the environmental quality of a bay in Washington, Weber (2003) notes an important observation from the group: “A sustainable community needs to be developed by the people who make up the community. It cannot be designed by a consultant. It cannot be implemented by experts hired specifically for the project. It needs to be implemented every day by the people who live and work in the community” (194). Though originating in a study of large, rural ecosystems in the West, the notion that environment, economy, and community can be addressed by a broad group of decentralized and collaborative actors for a holistic purpose is central to grassroots action in urban Chicago. In the following section, two case studies illustrate this idea.

Case Studies of Successful Grassroots Environmental Actions

The Southeast Environmental Task Force (SETF) is a coalition made up of multiple organizations and citizens devoted to conserving prairie areas in the Calumet region. It began under the name Committee to Protect the

Prairie as an effort to stop the Chicago Transit Authority from building a bus garage on the northern half of Van Vliissingen prairie, under the name Committee to Protect the Prairie. It was spearheaded by local advocate Marian Byrnes.

The SETF has been instrumental in several efforts to protect the grasslands and identity of Calumet, defeating efforts to build a dump, a garbage incinerator, and even the city’s third major airport. “Eventually area residents forced the city to stop thinking of Calumet as a dumping ground” (Wiland, Belle, and D’Agnese 2006, 55-56). They have also worked to create Calumet Ecological Park from a former industrial wasteland (Engel 1998, 26). The success of SETF has led to increased legitimacy and funding from the city, state, and national governments. In 1998, the National Park Service designated Calumet a National Heritage Area. In 2000, Chicago and the State of Illinois both allotted funds to the area for conservation purposes. Three thousand acres of the most pristine land were to be saved as a nature preserve while another 3,000 acres were to be set aside for appropriate industrial use which would not harm the balance of the preserve area. The preserve acreage has since grown to 4,800 acres. Local residents have been amiable to the inclusion of industry in the heritage area, given the history of industry in forming the area, as long as it is done sensitively.

Marian Byrnes, a local citizen, had the initial motivation to save a prairie from a bus terminal, and this led her to help form larger group efforts with SETF to preserve prairie space in the Calumet area. As a proactive resident, she inspired others around her to take a role in preserving parts of their own environment and it was this activity that led to the establishment of local and state funds to provide



Chicago Green Roof. Photo: Larissa Larsen

for the heritage area and a general consensus that new industry to be sensitive to its purposes. It is one example of a grassroots efforts creating broader support for a vitally important and large-scale environmental effort that the entire city can now enjoy as a preserve space.

Another success story is that of Fuller Park neighborhood's Eden Place Nature Center. Fuller Park is located on the south side of Chicago. It is a largely poor, predominantly African-American neighborhood, with a history of drug activity and crime at rates higher than in most Chicago neighborhoods. Eden Place Nature Center is an environmental educational institution for local residents and it is a testament to the ability of an individual local advocate to create broad support for environmental initiatives.

That advocate, Michael Howard, moved with his family to Fuller Park in 1992 and immediately began work to bring about positive change in the neighborhood. He describes his initial work as an uphill battle. In a radio interview with Chicago Public Radio, Howard told the story of local gangs planting a bomb, which luckily was defunct, at his home in response to his efforts to engage youths involved in drug activity in education and training workshops (Eden Place Nature Center 2005). Howard established the South Point Academy, which aimed at teaching working skills to local residents. Eighty percent of his trainees could not read, and ninety-five percent were college drop-outs. It is out of this effort that Howard began to pay attention to reports of high incidents of lead contamination in Fuller Park, since high levels of lead can hinder the development of critical thinking skills. Realizing that lead was a potential contributor to the poor educational standard of his students, he and a group of enlisted volunteers decided to take action.

Howard had the water tested in at several neighborhood sites and the source of the problem was identified as lead water pipes. Some dated back to the time of the great fire in 1871. He led a fund-raising effort and was able to pay for water filters for area residents. He also had a nearby debris-covered abandoned lot tested and the EPA confirmed it was littered with lead and asbestos. "They began to transform this land from a toxic dumpsite into what it is today" (Eden Place Nature Center 2005). The site has slowly evolved into a center with multiple educational functions for area residents and a preserve that is seeing the return of wildlife; as the EPA says, "a doorway for the Southside residents of Chicago to the world of nature."

Turning a once-toxic dump site into a wildlife habitat is a remarkable change. In a description of the impact the project has had on children, Howard noted "When I can

share nature, when I can share all of the science, the beauty, the art, even the reading that you can find in nature with children, I really see a light go on and there's a connection. And for our community I think it's a great healer." (Wiland, Belle, and D'Agnese 2006, 61). Perhaps most significantly, the project helped galvanize support for environmental issues from a previously unconcerned community that felt such issues were mainly a concern of affluent whites.

Like Calumet's Prairie Preservation, Eden Place Nature Center in Fuller Park was spearheaded by a grassroots advocate determined to make a difference. Both efforts brought together a community by encouraging and relying on broad support for environmental preservation. They are not alone. Many small patches of prairie grasses exist in Chicago from various backyards to embankments along rail lines because of similar initiatives. The Chicago River is being cleaned thanks in part to grassroots advocacy by The Friends of the Chicago River. These local missions are rarely publicized in the general media. Nevertheless, their cumulative effect creates an atmosphere of environmental awareness and stewardship that then fosters support for city-wide and regional sustainability initiatives.

The Prairie and the Unique Case of Chicago Wilderness

Both case studies above involved the creation of an environment that preserves the natural heritage of Chicago, the prairie. The prairie is an important part of Chicago's history and its ability to house wildlife in an urban setting. In light of this heritage, Chicago Wilderness was founded in 1996 numerous governmental and nongovernmental organizations to "protect, restore, and manage natural resources" (Seeger and O'Hara, 2003). Essentially, they are working to create "the world's first urban bioserve" (Greenberg 2002, 466). According to a 2001 article, "at least 150 projects initiated by Chicago Wilderness are complete or under way. They include 18 projects related to ecological restoration, eight concerning planning and policy, 11 information management projects, 21 having to do with ecological inventories and monitoring, and 33 public participation and outreach projects" (Knack 2001, 7).

Their size and impact on conditions in the Chicago region are large, but they are still a grassroots coalition. Though they do not have governmental power or economic motivations, they do include over 200 members of governmental organizations, local business, and community activists. This network of diverse players has been successful at turning grassroots motivation into a powerful movement that effects change at a scale on par with efforts of national environmental groups and city government. Their sheer size and impact have also given

them public exposure that, while it does not rival that of the mayor, sets them apart from other local grassroots entities such as SETF or Eden Place.

While the organization does have widespread support, it has sometimes ignored the role of smaller participants. Just as the city experienced backlash by ignoring the public, so did Chicago Wilderness. In an article giving voice to some of these criticisms, Gobster illuminates many of the tensions that arose from Chicago Wilderness' power granted by the city to their efforts to manage prairie. Interestingly, he notes that "there was a good deal of common ground between those who have been labeled 'opponents' and those who have been labeled 'proponents' of restoration" (Gobster 1997, 32). He found that opponents of restoration efforts were largely critical because an outside entity was imposing something on them with which they did not necessarily agree. This perception of residents that they had no say in their own affairs, and the resulting public outcry, hearkens to the situation faced by the Blue Bag program.

Despite early pitfalls, Chicago Wilderness today maintains broader city-wide support for and has been able to obtain funding for multiple projects conserving the region's remaining prairie lands for the public. They have done a better job at public outreach and education, involving locals in their efforts to a greater degree. Together with SETF and Eden Place, the Chicago Wilderness story shows the benefits of environmental efforts that arise from and involve the community. SETF worked to create a regional conservation network. Eden Place developed a once toxic site into an environmental learning laboratory. Chicago Wilderness has created and manages a large system of prairie reserves in the greater Chicago region, and now does so with essential public support.

By involving other locals and introducing members of the community to environmental issues, all three organizations help to create more widespread support for environmental improvement. This in turn creates a better atmosphere for city-wide and larger-scale efforts to enact environmental programs. As various new actors come into the fold and help conserve new prairie grassland areas or create other green initiatives, the city and other regional groups are likely to involve them in important programs, as they continue to realize the importance of inclusive coalitions and collaborative governance. They mayor's accomplishments and international recognition do well for Chicago, but to be effective they must be tied to a local, environmentally-aware network. City leaders are likely to build these bridges well into the future as the spirit of the grassroots environmental movement grows. As Sandburg described, Chicago citizens had a "can do" attitude during their industrial heyday, and they have that same spirit

now as they move into the greener pastures of the 21st century.

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