

CHICAGO, U.S.A.

AUGUST 2001

Community-Managed Open Space

Working with the community, local governments can protect and support open space development and management even when funds and staff are limited. By giving the management of these open spaces to community groups, degraded urban lands can be reclaimed, community involvement fostered, and healthy urban ecosystems maintained.

PROGRAM NAME

NEIGHBORSPACE

NeighborSpace aims to improve access to parkland and involve community groups and citizens in managing and preserving open space throughout the City of Chicago.



North America

ABSTRACT

In 1996, the City of Chicago, working with the Chicago Park District and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, identified the need to establish more open spaces in some of the most densely populated areas of the city. However, there were few remaining areas in which large open spaces could be created. As a result, the city created NeighborSpace, a not-for-profit corporation that acquires small plots of land to be managed and maintained by local community groups, businesses, and organizations.

To date, NeighborSpace holds more than 80 spaces for neighborhood groups. The lots include a garden that donates its produce to homeless and low-income people and educational gardens for children. NeighborSpace provides support in the form of liability insurance and lawn hydrants, and also helps neighborhood groups access design expertise, grants, and plants. The NeighborSpace Stewardship Fund was created to support the long-term sustainability and management of the parks.

MUNICIPAL PROFILE

Population
2.8 million

Land Area
588 km²

Municipal Budget
US\$3.9 billion

IMPORTANCE OF THE ISSUE

Parks in urban areas are increasingly being recognized as meeting a number of social, economic, and environmental needs. Open spaces and greenways help to maintain healthy urban ecosystems by providing places of beauty and recreation for citizens, habitat for wildlife and plants, and other benefits like urban cooling. From an economic standpoint, parks increase tourism and improve local property values.

Involving local residents in the management of open spaces allows communities to make better use of limited parkland. When a community determines not only the location of the open space but also the types of activities that will take place there, they are more likely to use and maintain the space. By allowing community groups to lead the process of creating open spaces, cities may not only improve the quality of life of local residents but also build a long-term commitment towards green spaces within the community.

CASE

Chicago, Illinois, is the third largest city in the United States, and one of the country's leading industrial, commercial, transportation, and financial centers. The city comprises 77 neighborhoods and is divided into three broad sections by the Chicago River. Though highly urbanized, Chicago still has over 500 parks. However few large open spaces remain. In 1993, it was recognized that although there was an average of 4.13 acres of open space per 1,000 persons, the distribution of these spaces resulted in very few communities actually meeting that level of open space. In fact, 38 of Chicago's 77 communities—where 61 percent of the population lives—had less than 2 acres per 1,000 persons.

In order to expand and improve open space in Chicago, a CitySpace Plan was developed that identified a number of initiatives. The program targets open space improvements in neighborhoods with the greatest need. One of

the most successful initiatives of the plan is NeighborSpace, a not-for-profit corporation established in 1996 by the City of Chicago, the Chicago Park District, and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. NeighborSpace acquires and insures small gardens, river edges, greenways, parks, and natural areas within the city. The sites are managed and maintained by local community groups, businesses, and organizations.

Land is chosen based on local community interest by a local entity committed to the day-to-day maintenance of the site. These local groups sign management agreements detailing responsibilities for the location. Responsibilities include landscaping and gardening as agreed to by the community, making all necessary repairs, and maintaining adjoining sidewalks and keeping them clear of snow and ice.

NeighborSpace acquires land through various means including:

- purchasing city-owned vacant lots for US\$1,
- obtaining vacant tax-delinquent lots through the tax deed process,
- purchasing privately owned lots and private donations,
- purchasing lots with demolition liens on which the city has foreclosed.

NeighborSpace is also involved in a number of other important activities in regards to the sites. In particular they provide liability insurance, ensure tax-exempt status, and secure an environmental report before the land is acquired. NeighborSpace assists in fundraising for environmental clean-up if it is required or may arrange for the donation of remediation services to be completed by the City of Chicago. They also install lawn hydrants, free-standing water spigots to which a hose may be attached. Installation costs for the hydrants range from US\$8,000 to \$14,000 plus annual maintenance, depending on the work required to link the hydrant to the main water system.

NeighborSpace also provides opportunities through sister organizations and programs for

the communities to obtain grants, plants, and design expertise. For example, NeighborSpace works with the South Chicago Work Force, an organization of unemployed fathers learning the trade of ironwork. The ironworkers, in collaboration with the community, design unique ornamental wrought iron fences that tell the story of the site where they will be installed. Each site has been developed and designed in a unique way. Please see the greenbox for a summary of some specific examples.

In 1998, NeighborSpace created a Stewardship Fund that is intended to ensure the long-term sustainability of the parks. Every time a site is acquired or leased a contribution of US\$7,500 is made to the fund from the NeighborSpace operating budget. The fund has a current balance of over US\$300,000. As ongoing support for a park is essential to its sustainability, the fund will be used to ensure community involvement over time. In cases where community groups cease to exist or loose interest, the fund can be used to complete a community planning process to find new people to manage the space.

Results

To date, NeighborSpace has undertaken work on 82 sites and has acquired the land for 67 sites for community groups. The remaining



Local residents work together to rejuvenate the South Chicago Peoples Park, turning it into a safe haven for neighborhood gatherings.

Morse School Habitat

Morse Elementary School was located across the street from two vacant lots. NeighborSpace acquired these lots so that they could be returned to parkland and then used to educate and engage the school children. The school is a three-story facility and the project has been broken down into three sections: the first floor classes study the underground aspects of the park, the second floor studies ground-level issues, and the third floor examines above ground matters.

South Chicago Peoples Park

A vacant lot overgrown with shrubs and bushes and used as a dumping ground slowly turned into a swamp when a water pump was left running for a decade. The lot became a haven for gangs, drug dealing, and other unwanted activities. Local residents were fearful of the area and even the surrounding sidewalks became unsafe.

A community clean-up day inspired a transformation of the area. NeighborSpace acquired the land, fixed the water problem, and installed a lawn hydrant and wrought iron fence. Local residents and youth became involved in the project, working with local artists to paint murals on the benches and newly installed stage. The area now serves as a venue for community meetings, inter-denominational church services, and neighborhood parties.

Ginkgo Organic Gardens

On a small piece of land between two multi-story apartment buildings, a very successful organic garden has been created. All of the food grown is donated to the Inspiration Café, a free restaurant staffed and dedicated to the homeless, and Groceryland, a free supermarket that serves low-income people with AIDS.



Crystal Peace Park before (left) and after restoration work completed by NeighborSpace and a local community group.

locations are either leased or in the process of being transferred from the city inventory to NeighborSpace. These sites are distributed throughout more than 30 neighborhoods. The intergovernmental agreement, which first led to the development of NeighborSpace, was extended for 20 years in 1998. Furthermore, the NeighborSpace Stewardship Fund was created at that time to ensure the parks' sustainability in the long term.

Local involvement in all aspects of a site, from start to finish, has led to a greater value being placed on the parks. Parks are not only valuable in and of themselves but also lead to many unexpected benefits. Nearby residents take more pride in the appearance of their homes and developers are more likely to invest in renovating homes in the area. Sites have become educational centers for young people learning about their local ecosystems and gardening. Only by bringing so many different people together could this project accomplish as much as it has.

Lessons Learned

By working together, communities can bring positive change to their surroundings. These changes, no matter how small, can be used as a springboard for the long-term transformation of a community. Further, this level of community involvement helps to ensure that open spaces are not threatened by new development.

It is important that the surrounding community identifies the site for each project. Much of NeighborSpace's success is related to local residents having a vested interest in a site. In cases where the role of NeighborSpace was expanded to include site selection and design, the community became less vested meaning that long-term success was less likely.

Participation by the City of Chicago, the Chicago Park District, and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County has been essential to the success of this project. Without the involvement of these three groups, sites would not be affordable or available to the interested communities.

KEY REPLICATION ASPECTS

NeighborSpace is an effective way for local governments to protect and support open spaces. In Chicago, the city alone simply does not have the resources or staff time to manage and maintain every individual park. The community groups participating in NeighborSpace have brought volunteers to the projects who are willing to manage the areas. Further, NeighborSpace has been able to help these local groups fundraise so that they can continue to improve and maintain the parks. Financial support from corporations has been important and NeighborSpace has been able to access funds that might not have been available to the city government.

Staff

NeighborSpace has two full-time staff people. Individual sites are staffed completely by volunteers.

Financing and Budget

NeighborSpace began with an initial investment of US\$93,750 each from the City of Chicago, the Chicago Park District, and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. This intergovernmental agreement was extended in 1998 for an additional 20 years with commitments from each agency of US\$100,000 annually. Funds are also raised to support special events and other activities.



Chicago, Illinois, 60602

U.S.A.

Tel: +1-312/431-9406

Fax: +1-312/427-6251

Email: mdavis@openlands.org

Website: www.neighbor-space.org

Ms. Kathleen Dickhut

Assistant Commissioner

Dept. of Planning and Development

City of Chicago

City Hall, Room 1003

121 N. LaSalle St.

Chicago, IL, 60602

U.S.A.

Tel: +1-312/744-1074

Fax: +1-312/744-6550

Email: Kdickhut@cityofchicago.org

Website: <http://www.ci.chi.il.us/>

KEY CONTACTS

Ms. Marcia Webster-Davis

Executive Director

NeighborSpace

25 E. Washington Street, Suite 1650

References

City of Chicago. 1999. *Application for the Local Initiatives Awards*. LIA Secretariat, Toronto, Canada.

Local Initiatives Awards Secretariat. 2000. *Local Initiatives Awards 2000—Winners and Finalists* (Brochure). Toronto, Canada.

NeighborSpace. 1999. *Annual Report—NeighborSpace*. Chicago, U.S.A.

NeighborSpace. 1998. *Annual Report—NeighborSpace*. Chicago, U.S.A.

NeighborSpace. *Management Agreement*. Chicago, U.S.A.

Acknowledgements

Karen Alebon, Writer; Heather Kepran, Editor; Jennifer Lee, Production Coordinator.

The City of Chicago's NeighborSpace Project received the Local Initiatives Award 2000 for Excellence in Land Resources Management. The awards were established by ICLEI and Saitama Prefecture, Japan, to recognize local governments and their community partners for outstanding achievement in sustainable development and environmental protection.



The International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives is a membership organization of local governments and their associations. The Council's mission is to build and serve a worldwide movement of local governments to achieve tangible improvements in global environmental and sustainable development conditions through cumulative local actions.

16th Floor, West Tower, City Hall, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5H 2N2 Tel: +1-416/392-1462 Fax: +1-416/392-1478 Email: iclei@iclei.org
Website: www.iclei.org

© 2001, ICLEI-Canada. © 2001, ICLEI U.S.A., Inc. All Rights Reserved.



Printed in Canada on recycled paper containing 50 percent post-consumer waste.