

A new Plan of Chicago: 12 ways to heal a city

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Ask Chicagoans how to fix their city and you'll hear powerful ideas to rescue flailing schools, cut violent crime, create attractive jobs and help families thrive. We know this. We asked. Last October, we launched our Plan of Chicago project to fill in blanks left by famed civic architect Daniel Burnham's 1909 plan. His blueprint to build Chicago set in motion a century of astonishing growth and prosperity. But he didn't deliver his follow-up plan to fix this city's grave social problems.

Today: Twelve proposals we've culled from thousands.

Earlier in this series, we chronicled the pernicious and intertwined crises Chicago confronts in its schools, streets, businesses and homes. Let's underline that word: intertwined. These problems snake through nearly every aspect of life in Chicago, whether you're a Gold Coast entrepreneur or a struggling single mom in Austin. The quality of life in Chicago — its future — depends on innovative, cost-effective solutions to tenacious problems plaguing too many neighborhoods.

We asked readers to think big but also small, because narrow-scope remedies can chip away at monumental challenges. Chicago cannot thrive unless its citizens wage battles on every block. Unless everyone with a desire to raise a family, start a business, snag a great job, make Chicago *home*, can find a glide path to success lit by ... everyone else in Chicago.

We've worked through thousands of ideas suggested by readers and by Chicago-area residents who attended the Chicago Community Trust's "On the Table" event in May. We heard some themes repeatedly, suggesting that these ideas have powerful constituencies. Many people suggested the same ways to funnel more money to fix the public schools, for instance. Or to give entrepreneurs tax breaks to start businesses and hire local workers in low-income neighborhoods. Or to offer mentoring to help parents raise children. Or to convert empty lots and abandoned homes into urban farms.

We've heard Big Ideas that would require large infusions of cash that the precarious finances of the city, the state and [Chicago Public Schools](#) won't allow. But we also know that a potent idea finds its own champions. This city boasts a legion of corporate and philanthropic leaders, academic powerhouses and ordinary citizens with extraordinary ideas, all sharing the drive to fix Chicago. Can't be done in an age of constrained budgets and downsized ambitions? Think again.

Here are 12 proposals we've culled from thousands. We think they can work. So today we launch the next phase of our new Plan of Chicago: A call to action.

Schools as tools

Challenge: Help kids learn, parents cope, people find jobs.

Proposal: Revive recently closed public schools as community centers. These nearly 50 schools could be retrofitted to offer after-school and weekend programs including tutoring to kids, mentoring to parents, skills training to struggling job-seekers. We support this idea because these buildings already exist and have been community magnets. A city advisory committee concluded this year that "these buildings and their land have the

potential to make a significant contribution to residents' quality of life, community vitality, city competitiveness, and the regional economy." Rather than dump dead schools onto the real estate market, where they'll likely languish, transform them — and the lives of Chicagoans.

Who can lead: [City Hall](#) and CPS have to signal their openness to this. Foundations and corporations could pitch in to convert these schools, maintain them and fill them with educational and recreational programs that will help kids — and their parents — learn, succeed and stay safe. Imagine employees of one company resurrecting one building, much as, say, members of a far-flung church congregation invest time and resources to sustain a grade school. Each community center's programs would be tailored to the needs of surrounding blocks and could draw on neighbor volunteers, including retirees, to help staff programs. We envision sports, after-school tutoring, GED classes, job skills training and more. For direction and accountability, each school would require a lead sponsor.

GED Chicago

Problem: Helping adults get a better education, luring employers to those increasingly skilled and literate workers.

Solution: GED Chicago, free Illinois High School Equivalency testing for all Chicagoans willing to put in the time and effort to study. An astonishing 1.3 million Illinois adults lack high school diplomas. Earning a GED certificate is a step out of poverty, toward a fulfilling career and a happy life. But many people can't afford the \$120 testing fee. We'd like to see corporate Chicago follow McDonald's lead. In January, McDonald's President and CEO [Don Thompson](#) wrote about his company's powerful program to help employees "working to advance their education — whether through a GED certificate, associate's degree or bachelor's degree — by providing scholarships and access to advising services. Nearly 3,000 Chicagoland McDonald's workers are enrolled in classes that teach restaurant management and interpersonal skills, in English and Spanish. These accredited classes count toward college degrees." There's immense demand: Every year some 30,000 Illinoisans take the GED. If the test were free, that number would grow.

What it would cost: At least \$1.4 million a year, a sliver of what better-educated workers would add to Chicago's economic growth and tax revenues.

Next course: McDonald's is on the right track. Now, let's Super Size it.

Sister Neighborhoods

Challenge: Harness the prodigious generosity and brainpower of neighborhoods to help each other.

Concept: Start a Sister Neighborhoods program to connect residents in far-flung parts of the city and suburbs. The premise here is powerful: Many of Chicago's neighborhoods thrive while others languish. Many Chicagoans want to help their fellow residents in violence-torn or job-hungry areas but don't know how. The idea of a Sister Neighborhood program, modeled after the successful Sister Cities program, is irresistible. It already exists, on a smaller scale: Parishes across the Archdiocese of Chicago have adopted "sister parishes," with more affluent congregations raising money and giving time and labor to provide an array of assistance, from school tuition for children to structural repairs. Sister Neighborhoods could include many other neighborhood-first ventures that we've fielded, including the idea of tapping a block representative to gather food donations for pantries. One reader suggested block coordinators who would focus on helping the unemployed find jobs. Another rightly noted that Chicago has plenty of politicians but also should have "democratic neighborhood councils," grass-roots organizations that tackle problems across ward boundaries. Chicago is a city of neighborhoods blessed with an abundance of people who want to help those less fortunate. Why not leverage the expertise of those in Lakeview,

for example, to help Englewood? Or pair Andersonville and Little Village? And why can't a suburb pair with a city neighborhood?

Who leads: With coordination from City Hall or a foundation, churches, synagogues or local civic organizations can arrange the initial logistics.

It Takes a City

Challenge: Provide more support for at-risk children — and at-risk parents.

Proposal: Expand SAFE Children, a Chicago initiative that teaches parents how to get more involved in their children's schools, how to develop consistent discipline and monitoring practices, and how to use other parents and families for information and support. There are innumerable mentoring programs across the city and suburbs for children and adults. Some work, some don't. But SAFE Children impresses us. First-graders whose families started years ago with the program were 50 percent *more* likely than their high school freshman peers to be on track for graduation, and *half* as likely to have been involved in a violent incident in school. The key: A single caseworker, working part time with small groups of families, can intervene in the lives of 25 to 30 families, according to co-founder and [University of Chicago](#) professor Deborah Gorman-Smith. Instead of working with a child in school or at an office, workers go into the community, initially meeting families in their homes. These family outreaches work, she says, "because they change the family structure, not just the behavior of a single at-risk child." The program, run through the Chicago Center for Youth Violence Prevention, also trains other workers in a community to do additional interventions, exponentially expanding its reach. That's a force-multiplier with the potential to improve the lives of thousands of families.

Next steps: This program costs \$1,200 per child annually, funded by a grant from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and serves 150 families. Imagine it on a much larger scale. We do.

Innovation Houses

Challenge: Revitalize struggling neighborhoods.

Proposal: Innovation Houses. The Big Idea here mimics the Hull House model of the 19th century: Convert vacant homes in impoverished neighborhoods into community residences for young people — starting with college grads returning to childhood neighborhoods. These youths would help residents improve their lives and prospects. In a Nov. 20 op-ed, entrepreneurs Jay Readey and Jeff Pinzino sketched a compelling blueprint for action: "What the Innovation Houses seek to provide neighborhoods across Chicago is a catalyst. In most cases, the ingredients of success already exist in our neighborhoods — unemployed adults who want to work, kids who want to go to college, parents who want safer streets. There are churches, schools, health care providers and community centers already doing important work all over the city. Innovation Houses will provide the initiative to knit together these assets, sparking everything from tutoring programs to neighborhood block watches to small-business incubators."

Readey tells us the program has launched on a small scale with a \$15,000 grant from the Field Foundation. It is now looking for its first location, with help from the Cook County Land Bank, a fledgling public agency that takes title to empty, abandoned properties; clears them of liens; and finds owners for them. Readey suggests that entrepreneurs or corporations could sponsor Innovation Houses and provide a name — and resources — to make it the best in the city.

What's needed now: Corporate and civic leadership, on the scale of the Commercial Club of Chicago or the Economic Club of Chicago. Entrepreneurs, corporations, foundations, here's a great but relatively inexpensive

idea. Start this bandwagon.

eBay Chicago

Challenge: Improve Chicago without relying on more state and local dollars that don't exist.

Solution: Sell, or donate to nonprofits, every city-owned lot and structure and piece of equipment that isn't fully used today. City government has a vast storehouse of stuff — think Hoarders, City Hall Edition — that may one day be useful. The city keeps an online inventory of empty lots and old buildings, like police and fire stations, that could be served up for cash. Time to clear everything out. Put it on eBay, consign it to auctioneers. Hand over properties to community groups or others who pledge to develop or use them wisely. (One place to start: those Innovation Houses.) That's a smart way to convert an enormous inventory of unused and under-used assets to cash — or, at minimum, to get those assets into neighborhood hands. Mayor Rahm Emanuel, we've asked before: Will you lead a total house-cleaning by selling Chicago's vast stores of land, of buildings, of ... stuff?

City in a Garden

Problem: Empty lots and abandoned homes plague neighborhoods.

Solution: Transform them into urban farms. This could be done near schools to give kids a chance to learn about agriculture and nutrition. Or it could be scaled up to provide fresh produce to area restaurants and grocery stores. This is a frequent readers' suggestion that needs a champion — a big grocery chain, a food company, a gardening conglomerate?

Exploiting Chicago's greatest resource

Opportunity: Create jobs and major economic development by leveraging Chicago's untapped freshwater assets. How? Metropolitan Water Reclamation District Commissioner Debra Shore outlined a smart plan on these pages on Dec. 26: Establish an industrial park surrounding the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District's Calumet treatment plant at 130th Street and Torrence Avenue, where industries could buy treated (but not pure) wastewater cheaper than potable water. The Calumet plant treats some 300 million gallons of wastewater daily, reusing virtually none, she writes. Why not harness that water power to create water-based industrial parks — then scale up the project to MWRD's five other regional plants, which collectively discharge well over a billion gallons of water daily. Martin Felsen, an architect with the design firm UrbanLab, is leading a group of [Illinois Institute of Technology](#) students who will develop a plan to lure "water-intensive" industries to areas near treatment plants. Consider: Could some of that water support large hydroponic farming operations in struggling neighborhoods — farms constructed on property that is now vacant or abandoned or foreclosed? Water experts say yes, easily, and so do we.

Who leads: Universities, manufacturers and industry or other commercial groups should be falling all over themselves to make this happen.

Oases in the jobs desert

Award TIF money, or eliminate property taxes, for small businesses that locate or expand in struggling neighborhoods. Create extra tax incentives for those business owners who hire local workers or mentor other local businesses. Yes, we're suggesting a streamlined, less bureaucratic form of the enterprise zones that never lived up to their billing. We imagine a more local, perhaps ward-by-ward initiative. Worried about surrendering tax revenue? No problem. When new businesses thrive, they'll pay plenty.

Kids and careers

Many children grow up blinkered to the breadth of job opportunities Chicago offers. They don't realize that while a job is valuable, a career is invaluable. Scalable programs organized by the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce and major unions could offer an array of miniature career fairs to bring workers from many fields into schools — weekdays, nights, weekends. Those programs could expand to offer students vital help in learning how to enter whatever industry piques their interest, how to apply and interview for jobs, and how to behave professionally at work. There have been fitful attempts at this before. We're not aware of a well-publicized effort to make career exposure a staple of growing up in Chicago.

Hubs and STEMS

Harness the tech skills of high schoolers across the city to help small businesses. Here's a terrific idea from the Chicago Community Trust's "On the Table" event: Create one or more tech hubs to help small businesses in at-risk neighborhoods create websites and social media campaigns. A hub could draw on the talents of students in high school and college STEM programs across the city. The students would get experience and small stipends, and the businesses would learn to expand their reach and lure new customers, and the city would benefit. Groupon? Yelp? Facebook? Class? Bueller? Are you listening?

Mutual of Chicago

Create a "social investment fund" to bring businesses, light manufacturing plants, incubators and services into jobs-starved neighborhoods. This is a terrific idea from a group of Bank of America employees via "On the Table." Investors would reap benefits — not that anybody gets rich — when the local businesses succeed. Here's a model: The U.S. Rural Infrastructure Opportunity Fund raised \$10 billion from private investors to build rural hospitals, schools, water and energy projects, broadband infrastructure and local and regional food systems. Bank of America, you and your industry colleagues have the smarts to make a miniature of that work. Will you and yours make "Mutual of Chicago" happen?

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