



## 03 OUR PLANNING PROCESS

### THE COMMUNITY AS PLANNER

Residents of the Housing Authority's Sunrise, Mackler and Bergen properties are the core constituency for the Downtown/East Side Choice Neighborhoods Plan. Equally important are the residents of the broader Downtown/East Side Choice Neighborhood. Both resident groups watched as housing deteriorated and vacant units were demolished to mitigate the dilapidation that characterized the area for many years. These residents bear witness to the community that once existed and helped craft the vision for a vital and revitalized neighborhood that they can continue to call home.

One of the initial actions undertaken by the Housing Authority and the project team was to recruit four Resident Ambassadors (two target housing and two neighborhood residents) to provide an ongoing resident perspective

and assist the planning team in a variety of community engagement activities. The Resident Ambassadors and continue to be a crucial link between the project team and the community.

Building community connections involved bringing people together to talk with each other about the opportunities and challenges that they and their neighborhood face, hopes for the future, and strategies for overcoming obstacles. As potential ideas were suggested, considered, modified, accepted or rejected, elements of the plan began to take shape. While financial realities can be expected to impact our ability to accomplish everything that is included in the Plan, having all of the components identified and in place creates a comprehensive roadmap for revitalization that can be used to direct future investments as conditions change and new financial resources become available.



## CAPACITY BUILDING

The overall goal of the capacity-building strategy was to ensure that available resources were aligned and directed toward development of a transformation plan that is holistic and has strong support. Building capacity emphasized listening and communication skills. Everyone's point of view was considered

## PLANNING PARTNERS AND STAKEHOLDERS

The Housing Authority, City and other key organizational partners and community stakeholders committed significant resources to develop the strategies and improvement projects designed to implement the community's vision for the transformation of the Downtown/East Side Choice Neighborhood. These partners will lead Plan implementation in collaboration with the City and Cook County Housing Authority.

### Leadership Team

The City and Housing Authority chose to partner on the successful Choice Neighborhoods planning grant application. Both entities continue to identify and refine elements of the Plan that will help them advance organizational priorities and better meet the needs of their residents and constituents. The objective is to identify win-win opportunities that can be carried out with limited resources.

## Resident Ambassadors

The four Resident Ambassadors played a critical role in the community engagement process. They assisted with some of the initial planning events and survey efforts, but went on to spearhead popular activities including the Sunday Fun Day program and Games in the Park.

Perhaps their most important role was in reviewing the project ideas as they emerged and providing constructive input as to which would lead to the most positive results. The Ambassadors met regularly on their own and with the Housing Authority's Project Manager throughout the process to ensure that the Plan's content and direction truly represented the wants and needs of their neighbors.

## Steering Committee and Working Groups

These groups were comprised primarily of individuals who lead organizations and can bring significant organizational capacity and skills to the discussion. Five working groups met as a joint group for an overview of the planning process and to begin to identify specific conditions that needed to change in order to create a positive image and make the Downtown/East Side Choice Neighborhood a place where people wanted to live and invest. They went on to meet with the Leadership Team to identify implementation strategies and commit resources to undertake specific catalyst improvement projects and programs.



## PARTNER HIGHLIGHT: CITY OF CHICAGO HEIGHTS, MAYOR'S OFFICE OF SPECIAL EVENTS AND RESIDENT SERVICES DEPARTMENT (GETTING THINGS DONE FOR CHICAGO HEIGHTS RESIDENTS)

The Mayor's Office of Special Events acts as a liaison between public and private sectors within the City. The Special Events team maintains the Mayor's Office of Special Events Community Calendar which includes special events hosted by the City of Chicago Heights, special events hosted with other agencies or organizations, and special events and parades hosted by neighborhood organizations or nonprofits. The Mayor's staff also participates in a number of community events as ambassadors for the City.

The Department of Resident Services helps residents with non-emergency City services. Residents simply contact Resident Services to report and inquire about a particular matter, check the status of previous requests or obtain information regarding City programs and events.

# PLANNING PROCESS STRUCTURE

The planning process used to create the Downtown/East Side Choice Neighborhood vision and plan for transformation emphasized several guiding principles:

- » Creating an inclusive, equitable plan
- » Building local capacity for planning, engagement and implementation
- » Rebuilding neighborhood connections – physical, social and economic
- » Consensus-based decision making



## 1 ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES/ LISTENING AND LEARNING

Issues and Opportunities/Listening and Learning was an iterative and ongoing function of the planning process. Beginning with the project kick-off meeting on May 1, 2018, the community was asked to provide input about the issues facing the Downtown/East Side Choice Neighborhood and opportunities for moving forward. The Resident Ambassadors engaged their neighbors in a series of informal conversations to identify topics that should be addressed in the target housing and neighborhood resident needs assessment survey and the Choice Neighborhoods Plan.

The neighborhood resident needs assessment survey included questions covering a broad range of topics including health, education, safety, youth, employment and neighborhood needs. These questions were identical to those included in the target housing resident needs

assessment survey. The target housing resident needs assessment survey (with a 59% resident response rate) also included specific questions related to potential redevelopment of the Sunrise, Mackler, Bergen target housing and the Housing Authority's resident services. The survey results were used by the Working Groups to develop the strategies and project initiatives included in the Neighborhood, Housing and People chapters of our Plan.

As the planning team began to prepare conceptual development options for community consideration, target housing residents were asked to provide input on the features and development types that they preferred through a visual preference survey. Target housing and neighborhood residents were asked to respond to three development concept alternatives that addressed replacement of some or all of the target housing and locations for other key catalyst neighborhood improvement projects.



## 2 VISIONING FOR THE FUTURE

Visioning for the future was a central element of the planning process. Chicago Heights has a strong sense of history and pride. Long-time neighborhood residents are eager to see improvements that benefit current residents and begin to address unfulfilled promises of the past. The end product of the visioning exercise was the development of an overall vision graphic and organizing vision themes for the neighborhood, housing, and people chapters of the Plan.

What the community wants in terms of the vision for neighborhood transformation is clear. How to realize that vision is the job of the Downtown/ East Side Choice Neighborhood implementation strategies.



The word cloud shows the most common responses to the question:

*“What are 3 words that describe the neighborhood you want to live in?”*



## ORGANIZING VISION THEMES

### NEIGHBORHOOD

The Downtown / East Side is a clean, attractive, safe and inviting neighborhood.



### HOUSING

Public Housing is transformed so that it is a community asset.



### PEOPLE

Residents are self-sufficient and have easy access to amenities and services to meet their daily needs.



### 3

## CREATING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Creating community connections involved bringing people together so that they could talk to one another, learn from one another, and share with one another their ideas for neighborhood improvements and programs that will enhance the lives of residents and benefit the community. While some of this work was accomplished through traditional community meetings, most of these connections were created through more informal discussions led by the Resident Ambassadors and members of the Leadership Team. Building and strengthening community connections through a variety of celebration events and community projects was a purposeful element of the planning approach. These engagement activities are described below:

### Grant Award Celebration Picnic (June 2018)

The grant award celebration was designed to begin the Choice Neighborhoods planning process. The event featured hot dogs, pony rides, a giant slide, fire truck tours, music and a variety of planning engagement activities.

### Rebuilding Together (April 2019)

Rebuilding Together is a service-oriented program that brought skilled construction teams and volunteers together for a day of home improvements and rehabilitation for eligible



low-income homeowners throughout Chicago Heights, including several properties in the Downtown/East Side Choice Neighborhood. Based on the initial success of this event, Chicago Heights was invited to participate again in 2020.

### Community Garden (Summer 2019)

A revitalized community garden was prepared for planting in the target housing area. Residents understand the benefits of fresh and affordable herbs and vegetables. By working together, residents created a stronger sense of community while promoting a healthy lifestyle.

### Sunday Fun Day (Summer 2019)

Sunday Fun Day is an initiative developed by Downtown/ East Side Resident Ambassador Cornelius Dawson. The weekly event was held in King Park and brought neighborhood and target housing residents together for family-oriented activities every Sunday afternoon.

### Games in the Park (Summer 2019)

Games in the Park was a target housing resident-led program that brought target housing youth together for old-time games (sack races, etc.) each Saturday at the Housing Authority's open space area adjacent to the Sunrise and Mackler properties.



### Featured Early Action Project Tree Planting (September 2018)

Responding to the identified need for additional street trees and landscape improvements, City staff submitted a successful grant application to the Openlands Project for street trees to be planted by community volunteers. The tree planting event was held on September 29, 2018. Fifteen trees were planted near

Lincoln-Gavin School and AME Payne Church. Sixteen neighborhood resident volunteers worked with the City, School District 170, the Housing Authority and Openlands participants to complete this successful neighborhood improvement project

## 4 OUR PLAN: GOALS, OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

The strategies included in the Downtown/ East Side Choice Neighborhoods Plan address the priority outcomes identified by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for the Choice Neighborhoods Initiative. The specific approaches grew out of the neighborhood issues and needs identified by residents, and improvement recommendations developed and prioritized by the community.

The challenge in creating the neighborhood revitalization plan was connecting specific plan proposals to the community vision in a way that was credible and achievable. Throughout the planning process, skepticism was heard from neighborhood residents expressing concerns about what would really change in the neighborhood through the Choice Neighborhoods process. Neighborhood residents had participated in many planning processes over the years, each one holding out promise for a better neighborhood and a better way of life. These promises, by and large, were not fulfilled and conditions in the neighborhood continued to decline.

A major point of emphasis in the Choice Neighborhoods planning process was that all the hard work put in by residents and stakeholders would not result in an empty plan, one that promises great things that cannot be realized. To ensure that the proposals are achievable they are grounded in what the Housing Authority, the City, and capable partners can reasonably carry out. This is the right approach for this neighborhood. Market demand is weak. Private-sector investment cannot be reasonably expected until public-sector partners succeed in implementing certain catalyst projects that demonstrate that transformation is possible. As community confidence grows, private-sector investment is likely to follow.

As residents and stakeholders understand, the current weakness in real estate market demand is a direct result of the widespread economic distress that has been undermining the fabric of communities in Chicago's south suburban region for decades. This economic distress can be measured by many metrics, but this is not the focus of the Downtown/East Side Choice Neighborhoods Plan. It is clear that public-sector investment must lead the way in changing the local investment climate.

Focusing on investments and improvements that can be carried out by Plan partners represents achievable transformation. This is not a euphemism for "transformation light." The improvement proposals in our Plan represent real change, and residents of the neighborhood will recognize it as such.

