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AN ADVOCATE'S GUIDE TO LAND USE DECISIONS ALONG THE CALUMET RIVER

TAKEAWAYS FROM THE SOUTHEAST SIDE'S INDUSTRIAL HISTORY & EFFORTS FOR HARM REDUCTION

Today's environment and public health concerns in Chicago's Southeast side are a result of deliberate urban planning and policy decisions made since the early 20th century.

Shedding light on these decisions brings context to the land use, industrial, and environmental differences that exist today between Chicago's segregated North and Southeast sides. Seeing how these past decisions impact present-day circumstances can support the organizing efforts of community-based organizations and advocates, while inspiring policies at both state and local levels that prioritize people over profit.

INFORMATION GATHERING

To understand historical land use changes along the Calumet River, the Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT) reviewed relevant archival documents authored between 1964 and 2019. These archives include development and land use plans, planning frameworks, market and strategy analyses, and feasibility studies.



Shown here are the bodies of water that cut throughout Chicago's SE side. These waterways are instrumental to the development of industry & the restoration of natural assets in this area.



HISTORICAL FINDINGS

WHY IS THERE SO MUCH INDUSTRY ON THE SOUTHEAST SIDE?

Early to mid-20th century manufacturing in Chicago catalyzed its economy. For decades, Chicago's Southeast side, sometimes referred to as the Calumet Region, was a prime area for the settlement of raw material conversion and other industries, including iron and steel factories and paints, chemicals, and cement manufacturing— all of which came with environmental and public health costs.¹ The reasons for concentrated industrial development in the Calumet Region included availability of land, transportation systems, and a workforce. From the late 1800s through the mid-20th century, Chicago experienced 'citywide' population growth and residential development, which limited the availability of land for industrial development. While Chicago's Southeast side was not immune to this population growth, it retained swaths of available vacant

“ There are a lot of warehouses out in the suburbs, but they're not around the community. They have their own area to be in ... there's enough of a distance from the community, which we don't have.

- Anna Johnson,
Southeast side resident

land for development. The vacant land and its proximity to rail and waterway transportation corridors prized by industrial and manufacturing companies made it attractive. Corporations also saw the area as a strong source of industrial workers compared to the North side partly because Southeast side residents had more barriers to college degrees and many industrial jobs didn't (and still don't) require higher education.² Though no developer admitted to it, targeting the Southeast side for industry may have conveyed race and class biases as the area was and continues to be home to mostly lower-income People of Color. Historical plans and policies suggest that the city government and corporations treated the Southeast side as

Many properties in the area suffer from some level of environmental contamination. Roads are deteriorated and some are inadequate for the weight and frequency of traffic needed for bringing in supplies and removing products from industries

Yet there's also a possibility to shape the property for industry's needs in a way that doesn't exist in other portions of the city. In the 1990s, private and public initiatives for urban industry focused elsewhere: Goose Island on the Chicago River, the Stockyard, and other areas. These areas are dense, and options for large scale industrial development are limited. But the Calumet area has vast acres of open land for industrial development. In fact, it has at least 13 sites totaling 1,000 acres to work with. This is by far the largest amount of vacant industrial land in the city.

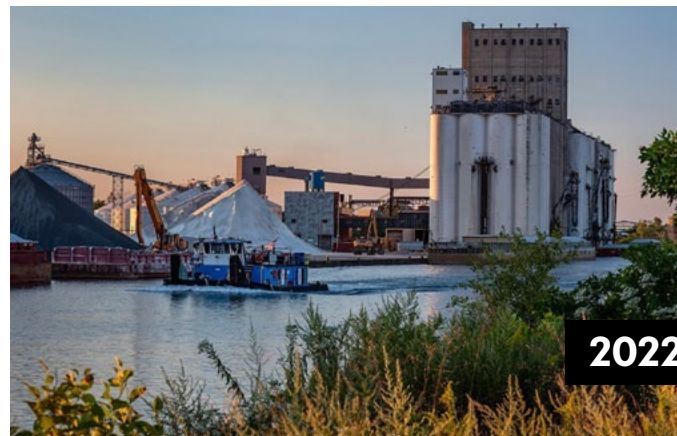
Currently the Calumet area has had less than 20 percent of overall demand for space for industry, but it has almost 60 percent of land available for industrial use in Chicago.

Text taken from 2001 Calumet Land Use Plan, DPD

a *sacrifice zone*, allowing polluting industries to concentrate there. In some cases, industry relocated from wealthier white neighborhoods on the North side of the city to neighborhoods of color in the Southeast.



Detroit Publishing Co., Illinois Steel Works & harbor entrance, The Newberry Library



Calumet River 2022 - © Matthew Kaplan Photography

OVER 150 YEARS OF INDUSTRY

City officials and staff chose only to imagine one future for the economic success of the Southeast side: an industrial-based economy. While Southeast side industry did initially spur Chicago's economy, the decline of steel manufacturing in the '80s and '90s left behind polluted land still zoned for industrial use. Chicago's North side was also impacted by this, but revitalization efforts in the North and Southeast sides looked quite different. Enhancements in the North offered green space and resident-centric commercial development, and were accompanied by explicit land use policies that prioritized pedestrian and transit-oriented development. However, clean-up efforts in the Calumet Region were marketed to attract new industrial users, rather than focusing on resident-oriented economic development. Transportation investments instead prioritized highway expansions and freight facilities over improvements for pedestrians and public transit.³

In the late '90s and early 2000s, efforts to plan for people and the environment took shape. This includes:

- In 1994, the U.S. Congress endorsed the enhancement of Lake Calumet by preserving important wildlife corridors, opening up funds to support environmental restoration.
- In 2001, the Calumet Open Space Reserve plan sought to interconnect open spaces to improve recreation and allow wildlife to move freely.

During this time, Southeast side neighborhood plans began to include community feedback in its design process with the aim of enhancing quality of life.⁴ For example:

- In 2007, a community-informed quality of life plan for South Chicago developed by Local Initiatives Support

Corporation (LISC) recommended replacing a former steel refinery with residential, retail, and recreational development, improving access to open space and overall quality of life.⁵

Despite these efforts, much of the land in the Calumet Region remained zoned for industrial use (and is currently the largest industrial corridor in Chicago). Resident groups identified improved open space and advancing healthy activities for youth and families as top priorities, and yet the City wielded major financing tools to continue prioritizing industry over residents. One of these tools was Tax Increment Financing (TIF). In 2000, the City approved the Lake Calumet Area Industrial Tax Increment Financing Redevelopment Plan and Project, becoming Chicago's largest TIF district. These funds provided financial incentives for industries to locate in the area.

“ Big Marsh, it's a bike park, but it's impossible to bike there without encountering truck traffic ... it's not safe.

- Luis Cabrales,
Southeast Environmental Organizer

The City of Chicago's use of the Southeast side as a sacrifice zone was further confirmed by a 2022 federal government finding that the City perpetuated “a historical pattern and broader policy of directing heavy industry to Black and Hispanic neighborhoods.” This finding came from a civil rights violation letter to the City, which reasoned that the recent effort on the City's part to relocate General Iron's industrial facility from the Lincoln Park neighborhood

WHAT IS TIF?

Used throughout the United States and extensively in Chicago, **Tax-Incremented Financing (TIF)** is a common state-level finance assistance tool designed to fund district-level infrastructure improvements in designated “blighted” areas. TIF, although arguably well-intentioned, sparks controversy because government use of TIF spending can be unclear and may divert funds away from community needs like schools and affordable housing. In Chicago, TIF has been successful in transforming Ping Tom Memorial Park into an open green space and cultural asset near Chinatown. However, cases like the multi-billion-dollar TIF approved for the affluent Lincoln Yards neighborhood have citizen advocates suing the City for intensifying racial inequity and violating the original “blight” revitalization purpose of TIF.

For more info on TIF 101 and how it works, visit [TIF FAQ's \(Good Jobs First\)](#) or [Chapter 2: TIF \(Chicago Land Use: A Guide for Communities\)](#)

For further information on TIF and next steps to take as an advocate, visit pages 4-5+ of [Democratizing Tax Increment Financing Funds \(UIC\)](#)

on Chicago's North side "to the Southeast Site will bring environmental benefits to [Lincoln Park] that is 80% White and environmental harms to a neighborhood that is 83% Black and Hispanic".

To continue receiving funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the City must create a Voluntary Compliance Agreement (VCA) to improve their zoning, land use, and permitting process. A VCA, in response to the civil rights violation, would require the City to 1) "address existing and potential environmental harms of the relocation" and 2) "adopt an enhanced fair housing planning process that includes a plan for overcoming disparities in environmental impacts."⁶

PASSING ON THE TORCH

FRAMING FOR THE CALUMET CONNECT DATABOOK

These past and recent findings add decision-making context to the research and storytelling presented in the [Calumet Connect Databook](#). The Databook, published by The Alliance for the Great Lakes in 2021, aims to guide future planning and policy efforts in the Southeast side's Calumet Industrial Corridor. The Databook's community needs assessment shares resident concerns and overall hopes for industry to have a positive role in revitalizing the Southeast side. They speak about their experiences with toxic releases from nearby industries and the failures of zoning and land use policies. It also reveals how this region is medically underserved, faces a lack of affordable healthy food, and endures adverse health outcomes.

(For an accompaniment, read MPC's [Lens on the Calumet Corridor](#) blog series highlighting research captured in the [Calumet Connect Databook](#))

QUESTIONS, ANSWERS, AND MORE QUESTIONS

The archives' content shed a dim light on the past, eliciting more questions:

- Is a large and dense inner-city population enough to justify concentrating industrial development around Southeast side communities with more open space?
- Why did Southeast side residents have lower levels of educational attainment (e.g., fewer college degrees) than Northside residents? Why was this a rationale to build an industrial workforce rather than further incentivizing access to colleges and universities?
- What came first to the Southeast side— industrial or residential developments—and how did the pattern of land use change over time?
- Why were revitalization efforts for the Southeast side only focused on industry rather than also providing better open space and diversified economic development infrastructure for communities as on the North side?
- Were there early proposals aimed at Southeast side investment in matters other than industry?

KNOWLEDGE GAPS

HISTORICAL PLANS LACK DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

As with all written documentation, historical and current, authorship is prone to bias. Although the documents CNT reviewed to inform this Guide represent the most comprehensive planning documentation available for their times, the authors are majority white institutions (municipal governments, departments, universities, and civic organizations). CNT did not identify specific biases or bad intentions among these authors, but it should be acknowledged that many of these documents were written during an era of U.S. American history when policies used implicit and explicit tactics to lock Black and Brown families out of economic opportunities and generational wealth-building tools like homeownership.

These reports were written from the perspective of those friendly with industry, not by those harmed by industry. It does not account for generations-long Southeast side community members who are experts on what it means to live with industry in their backyards – and the emotional and physical toll it takes on the body. Much of this lived experience was never documented and instead stays alive through local oral history.

PAST COMMUNITY-CENTERED INITIATIVES

In recent history, resident-driven activism organized by a shared community vision for a healthy and vibrant Southeast side has influenced and changed City policies.

What follows is a look at recent and ongoing community-centered initiatives that have pushed the City and people in power to prioritize people over profit and new industrial permits.

GREEN ECONOMIC INDUSTRIAL CORRIDOR (GEIC) & VETOING LEUCADIA

The [GEIC](#) is a community-driven redevelopment plan with a mission to revitalize the Calumet Region through sustainable developments, job creation, and improved environmental health and safety for its residents. Aligned initiatives included the Sierra Club's Beyond Coal campaign, where they partnered with SETF in the early 2010s to deliver over 11,000 Southeast Side resident petitions against a proposal for a coal gasification plant. This plant, Leucadia, wanted a permit to locate along the Calumet River. The proposal was successfully vetoed by Former Illinois Governor Pat Quinn, aligning with GEIC's mission and residents' hopes for better land use in the area.⁷

BULK STORAGE RULES

Residents and community organizations through the [Southeast Side Coalition to Ban Petcoke](#) successfully organized to rid their neighborhood of fugitive dust from open-air petroleum coke (petcoke) operations, leading the City of Chicago to prescribe practices to minimize petcoke pollution through the 2014 Bulk Storage Rules. Residents later voiced their concerns about local manganese pollution, leading the City to add an [addendum](#) in 2019 to the Bulk Storage Rules prescribing enclosure requirements and good housekeeping practices for manganese operators in the neighborhood.

Today, the Calumet region exists as a unique mosaic of globally rare natural communities and significant historic features in juxtaposition with heavy industry.

Calumet Ecological Park Feasibility Study
National Park Service, 1998



Read "Reclaiming the Sacrifice Zone" by Borderless Magazine [here](#)
Illustration by Mike Centeno

STOP GENERAL IRON & THE CITY'S HEALTH IMPACTS ASSESSMENT

The coalition to [Stop General Iron](#) used many interventions to object the proposed metal scrap recycler: demonstrations, protests, virtual town halls, petitions, social media actions, and hunger strikes. These and other acts of community resistance led the City's Department of Public Health to complete a Health Impact Assessment and deny Genral Iron's final operating permit, concluding that the recycler would aggravate existing health vulnerabilities in the community.

ONGOING EFFORTS

Uncovering documented history is a good way to identify gaps in today's lived experience. Recalling past activist efforts is a reminder that building people power is an effective way to change policy and permitting. The following are initiatives to build out a richer, more inclusive picture of the Southeast side's history and transition its neighborhoods as ones built for people and nature, and not just industry.

GATHERING ORAL HISTORY

Gathering and writing down personal accounts about the impacts of industries in neighborhoods can build a well-rounded collection of truth-telling. Capturing verbal stories from long-time Southeast side residents who only speak Spanish should be prioritized since they have less opportunity to share them in a predominantly English-speaking society.

CITY OF CHICAGO INITIATIVES ★★★★★

Cumulative impact assessments calculate the burdens individuals and communities face from pollutants and environmental challenges in a city (air quality issues, noise pollution, wastewater, and much more). The City has the authority to use such an assessment to inform the approval of industrial permits, but the City has not yet established this as local law (an ordinance). As of early 2023, community groups continue to organize and advocate for this ordinance, as the City's assessment to identify environmental justice communities is underway.

We Will Chicago, a 3-year planning initiative under Mayor Lori Lightfoot, aims to address social and economic inequities and promote community resilience specific to different impacts faced by different neighborhoods. This is the first plan of its kind since Chicago's 1966 Comprehensive Plan, and it will spearhead its public engagement and aldermanic process into 2023. We Will Chicago's **7 pillars** (which align with many Southeast side community needs) are 1: **Arts & Culture**, 2: **Economic Development**, 3: **Environment, Climate, and Energy**, 4: **Housing & Neighborhoods**, 5: **Lifelong Learning**, 6: **Public Health and Safety**, and 7: **Transportation & Infrastructure**. To find out more, visit <https://wewillchicago.com/>. Also, the updated [2022 Climate Action Plan](#) will guide historic investments to expand green space, reduce emissions, and advance environmental justice prioritizing frontline communities like the Southeast side.

CITY OF CHICAGO OPPORTUNITIES ★★★★★

Every year, the City of Chicago's Office of Budget and Management updates its five-year Capital Improvement Program (CIP): a spending and investment plan for constructing and maintaining city-owned public infrastructure like roadways, water mains, etc. The 2021 CIP had plans to reverse decades-long disinvestments throughout Chicago, prioritizing equitable investment in underserved neighborhoods, through efforts like remediating buildings and land affected by toxins. Yearly updates on the CIP moving forward could expand on their recent efforts to give greater opportunity to community-oriented infrastructure improvements on the Southeast side, like enhanced sidewalks.

Many of Chicago's environmental justice communities, through coalitions like the Chicago Environmental Justice Network ([CEJN](#)), and organizations like the Illinois Environmental Council ([IEC](#)) are advocating for a re-establishment of the City of Chicago's Department of the Environment (DOE). The desired new DOE would not be a replica of the former DOE disbanded in 2011 but would replace today's environmental efforts spread throughout city departments and the smaller Office of Sustainability. A reimagined DOE would have a more focused and coordinated approach to managing environmental injustices in areas like the Southeast side.

GET INVOLVED!

Volunteer with the Southeast Environmental Task Force (SETF) to get involved in their environmental justice efforts!

Donate to SETF to further support their mission:

Our mission is to inform and educate all members of the southeast Chicagoland community, including residents, businesses, and leaders, in areas related to the improvement of our neighborhood's environment. We strive for sustainable development of residential facilities, environmentally friendly and green business practices, and preservation of natural areas that improve the quality of life in the Calumet region.



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Photo Credit: Julia Hunter, Calumet Connect, Work2gether4peace

END NOTES

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- 2 Arthur Andersen, City of Chicago Industrial Market & Strategic Analysis, Executive Summary, March 1998.
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