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.
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. 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 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. 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 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.

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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.
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.”

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 future planning and policy efforts in the Southeast side’s Calumet Industrial Corridor. The Databook’s community needs assessment shares resident concerns and overall

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 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.

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.
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.

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.

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.

Chicago’s southeast side has a rich cultural and environmental heritage. Going forward, land use practices must shift away from sacrifice zone decision-making & prioritize families who live, work, and play throughout the Calumet Region.

END NOTES
1 Chicago Department of City Planning, Basic Policies for the Comprehensive Plan of Chicago, August 1964.
2 Arthur Andersen, City of Chicago Industrial Market & Strategic Analysis, Executive Summary, March 1998.