

The Tribune and the Sun-Times Reaching out to Chicagoans: A Seismic Shift from Mistrust to Trust?

by Steve Sewall, Ph.D.

22 March 2014

799 words

To thrive in this century and beyond, [Chicago] must harness the greatest of its greatest resources: The innovative ideas, and fierce loyalty, of its citizens.

- Chicago Tribune, 10/6/13

Historically, Chicago's daily newspapers haven't made citizen input crucial to Chicago's future. Suddenly, and commendably, that's changing:

- Last October the **Chicago Tribune** solicited reader input for its Daniel Burnham-inspired New Plan of Chicago: "In coming months, you, and we, will explore how this metropolis can better survive and thrive. Together, our mission echoes Burnham's: Make no little plans."
- Recently the **Chicago Sun-Times** partnered with the Chicago Community Trust's "OnTheTable" project to invite 10,000 Chicagoans to "pull up a chair and shape our community's future" over dinners hosted by Chicagoans on May 12.

What gives? Chicago's struggling newspapers are belatedly responding to widespread concerns about Chicago's future and pent-up demand for responsive city government.

To meet this demand, they're learning to gather, process, disseminate and utilize valuable ideas coming from all sources: bottom-up, top-down and in-between.

With other media, they're beginning to strengthen Chicago neighborhoods and nurture the region-wide community spirit that's critical to Chicago's future.

Case in point: last June, Chicago's media brought two million Chicagolanders to Grant Park to celebrate the Blackhawk's Stanley Cup triumph. This glorious, region-wide community moment contrasts, however, with the lack of community spirit in Chicago's disadvantaged (and media-deprived) neighborhoods.

So what roles will Chicago's powerful media play in shaping the future of these neighborhoods and this

region?

Chicago has four plans for its future on the table. The first two, published in 2006 by Metropolis Strategies and 2010 by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), don't mention media. The last two, launched in 2013 by the Tribune and 2014 by the Sun-Times, are *new kinds of plans created by and in media*.

This shift is seismic. Chicago's media – two of them – have leapfrogged from neglect by planners to being plan *innovators*. Their success will attract imitators.

Might there be a cascade of media-driven plans for Chicago's future? Perhaps. But a word of caution: Chicagoans will yawn to see media battling like feudal warlords for planning dominance. Eyes will open wide, however, when Chicagoans see media *teaming up* to help Chicagoans shape Chicago's future.

Why? It's all about trust. Bottom line, it's mistrust - of politics, of media, of the way things are – that most threatens Chicago's (and America's) future.

For instance: I asked twenty Tribune subscribers about its "all-encompassing" New Plan. None saw it this way. "It's a drop in bucket," said one. "A publicity scheme," said another. "Too little, too late," said a third. None were following it. Most said they don't read the editorial page.

To this add the fact other Chicago media are ignoring the Tribune's New Plan, including the recent news that readers have submitted over 800 proposals.

The antidote for mistrust? It's teamwork. So let's visualize a team effort that energizes Chicago and honors Burnham's injunction to "make no little plans".

Good things will happen when Chicagoans see the Sun-Times and Tribune working *jointly* in the public interest. This synergy – itself a historic development – will astonish other media.

Look first for public radio and TV to take note, then talk and news radio, community newspapers, and social media users. Both newspapers will then partner with veteran Chicago bloggers and citizen-participatory groups like [E-Democracy](#), [OpenGov Chicago\(-land\)](#), the [Smart Chicago Collaborative](#) and [Everyblock](#).

These sparks will catch fire as TV newscasts report on and participate in Chicago's planning efforts.

Mayor Emanuel will (belatedly) champion citizen input, hailing the rebirth of Chicago's indomitable "I Will" spirit in its inclusive, forward-looking "We Will" spirit.

Newspapers will carry civic sections like sports sections. And radio and TV stations will air prime time, internet-enhanced civic programming.

Chicagoland's media-driven **People System** of connected citizens - young and old, city and suburban, rich and poor, citizens and governments – will one day complement and interact with its existing **Star System** of media personalities and city leaders.

Looking back, the all-male, limited-access planning process that began in the 19th century medium of a single splendid book – in Burnham's 1909 *Plan of Chicago* – will have evolved into an ongoing, public-access process conducted in 21st century electronic media.

And most important, Chicago will have shown the world how to put to *productive* use the most powerful tools for social and economic development ever devised by human beings: the interactive media that comprise the public communications systems of any developed city.

Media will ask: How will a *trustworthy* public communications system profit the media that assemble it?

Follow the money. Today, media deliver large markets of connected sports fans to eager advertisers. Tomorrow, they'll deliver entire communities of engaged citizens to advertisers eager to target the **Market of the Whole** of all members of any community, large or small.

Steve Sewall, Ph.D., a longtime Chicago educator, designs civic media formats and writes about links between education, youth violence and media. His running commentary on the Tribune's New Plan and other civic media developments is at chicagocivicmedia.com. So is an expanded 4,000-word version of the present piece.