

RE:NEW

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TWO MORE TAX PREPARATION CENTERS WILL HELP CAPTURE FEDERAL DOLLARS

By John McCarron

What's the fastest way to raise the buying power of a working-class neighborhood? That is, short of dumping \$20 bills from a helicopter?

It's getting wage earners to file for the Earned Income Tax Credit, or EITC, one of the most potent—and least understood—federal income support programs in the new era of welfare reform.

Helping working families claim the tax credit will be a key tactic in NCP neighborhoods, with two new tax preparation centers to open soon in Pilsen and Auburn Gresham.

Written into the tax code by Congress in 1975, the EITC now lets wage-earning families claim a tax refund of up to \$4,204—even if they had no withholding by their employers. Refunds vary according to family size and income, but the national average is almost \$2,000.

Trouble is, roughly a quarter of those eligible don't apply. So, even though working families in Illinois receive more than \$1 billion a year from the credit, another quarter billion is left on the table. With 60 percent of the state's eligible residents living in Chicago, blue-collar neighborhoods are missing out on about \$150 million every year.

Little wonder, then, that the New Communities Program has recruited the Center for Economic Progress to help boost the economic literacy, and fortunes, of hard-working families.

The center's Tax Counseling Project is one of the most successful programs of its kind in the nation. In 2003 its free tax prep service helped some 20,000 low- and moderate-income

wage-earners file their returns and claim every deduction and credit due them.

"This year we had 20 tax sites," said David Marzahl, the center's executive director. He said a five-year grant from the MacArthur Foundation will enable it to serve NCP neighborhoods not just with tax preparation, but other financial services often lacking in have-not neighborhoods.

"We're moving to a more integrated approach," said Marzahl, ticking off a menu of transactions the center can enable: opening a savings account; applying for Food Stamps and SSI disability; training home-based childcare providers; counseling against predatory loans. The center also advocates for EITC in Congress and urges its full extension to the Illinois income tax.

Pilsen and Auburn Gresham

Many of the center's financial services will be available at the new NCP-sponsored locations opening in January: one serving Pilsen and Little Village at Instituto del Progreso Latino, 2570 S. Blue Island Ave.; the other in Auburn Gresham at St. Sabina's Employment Resource Center, 7907-11 S. Racine Ave. Each is getting LISC funds to upgrade counseling spaces and computer capacity.

CEP is already working in Logan Square and North Lawndale. And Marzahl said he'll look next at South Chicago.

The power of these centers was much in evidence last April 14 in the student activity room of Truman College in Uptown. Scores of



More tax preparation centers like this one in Uptown will open next year.

PHOTO: ANDREW CAMPBELL

blue- and pink-collar workers had come seeking free help with their 1040 Forms. But the two dozen corporate volunteers and their networked Dell laptops were coming up with a lot more than 11th hour help with confusing paperwork.

A part-time hotel parking attendant named Diallo was all smiles about the \$1,200 refund he'd be getting because volunteer Deborah Edwards, by day a financial analyst with GATX Corp., discovered a few important things about his situation. Besides the EITC, she said, Diallo could claim as a dependent a young nephew for whom he provides sole support.

"Some cry when they see the refund they're due," said Ellen Sheahan, assistant site manager at Truman. "But some of our best work has nothing to do with taxes. This is a great time to see if people qualify for food stamps, or want to open a savings account."

Said Marzahl: "This is about using what neighborhoods already have. It's about boosting incomes, building assets, creating financial stability."

Contact: Mary Ruth Herbers, Center for Economic Progress, 312-252-0280, ext. 281; Byam Alexander, Employment Resource Center (Auburn Gresham), 773-783-3760; or Juan Salgado, Instituto Del Progreso Latino, 773-890-0055.

BICKERDIKE BUILDING 87 UNITS, SEEKS 77 MORE

By Ed Finkel

As the 87-unit, \$17.6 million Harold Washington Unity Cooperative takes shape on and near Huron Street, developer Bickerdike Redevelopment Corp. is waiting to hear about city funding for a 77-unit, mixed-use development centered on Division Street that would be called La Estancia.

The Harold Washington project consists of one- to four-bedroom units at 12 sites bounded by Chicago, Ohio, Kedzie and Albany in Humbolt Park. With approximate monthly fees of \$455 to \$732, the units will be affordable for families earning \$18,000 to \$40,000 per year. Although they will function initially as rental apartments, after 15 years, each member will own a share of the cooperative.

"We're taking blighted, vacant properties that are off the tax rolls and getting them developed," said Dena Al-Khatib, Bickerdike's NCP program manager. The project also provides badly needed affordable housing in a community where rents and property values are rising. Waiting lists will be opened this fall and residents will occupy the first units in spring, said Al-Khatib. The project will be completed by late 2005.

The organization hopes to lock in another batch of affordable units with La Estancia, which would include 77 rental units and 11,900 sq. ft. of commercial space on eight sites. It would be Bickerdike's first mixed-use development.

PLEASE SEE **BICKERDIKE**, PAGE 3



Homes are filling vacant lots and locking in affordability.

PHOTO: ED FINKEL

LOGAN SQUARE SEEKS BALANCE AS ECONOMIC FORCES COLLIDE

By John McCarron



Higher-income residents are bringing change to the densely populated working-class neighborhood of Logan Square.

Every block has a story, but the six-corner meeting of Clybourn, Diversey and Damen Avenues, the gateway to Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood, speaks volumes.

On one corner is a new neighbor, the Golfsmith sporting goods store, where a Cleveland-brand Titanium Launcher Driver with graphite shaft was recently featured for \$199.99.

Across Damen, stretching west along Diversey Avenue to the North Branch of the Chicago River, is the Lathrop Homes public housing project, where a lot of families scrimp along on less than \$199.99 a week. Lathrop is one of the few Chicago Housing Authority family developments with no firm plans for redevelopment into a mixed-income community. It remains an island on the increasingly upscale North Side.

Gentrification is not an abstract social issue in Logan Square. It is a wrenching, here-and-now, up-close-and-personal dilemma. So not surprisingly, it is high on the agenda of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, a charter member of LISC/Chicago's New Communities Program.

Riding the wave

Then again, leaders at LSNA, one of Chicago's oldest and most successful community organizations, are pragmatists who wouldn't trade their gentrification problem for its polar opposite—the scourge of disinvestment.

"We don't say we don't want investment," said Executive Director Nancy Aardema. "We do want it. You see communities at the other end of

the (economic) rope. That's no place to be. But what's going on here, it's a huge challenge to bring people together."

But bring them together they do. More than 300, from all factions and ethnic groups, showed up at Armitage Baptist Church last May for LSNA's 41st Annual Congress. The evening's main event, besides election of officers, was a Mexican *corrido*, a long ballad set to traditional music, that told of Logan Square's past, present and future.

Three aldermen attended, including one in whom LSNA takes special pride—newly elected Ald. Rey Colon (35th), a political independent and former LSNA board president.

It is that dual ability to pull together diverse interests while pushing to action the city's political apparatus that sets LSNA apart.

Take gentrification. It's not hard to fill a church basement with angry, minimum-wage renters who have been, or are about to be, dispossessed by a new landlord who wants to take his hot property "up-market." It's more difficult to fortify that same gathering with affluent Anglos who oppose the same mega-condo because it would ruin the scale and ambiance of their leafy block of graystones. But these are the coalitions LSNA brings together. Puerto Ricans and Mexicans. Black and white. Rich and poor. All program materials, from flyers to annual reports, are printed in English and Spanish. And if outreach and coalition-building fail, few groups can fill a school bus with picketers on shorter notice.

A focus on schools

The New Communities Program promotes a holistic approach to assessing a neighborhood's needs and laying strategic plans. LSNA has been doing exactly that for a decade. The association manages a range of programs, from crime prevention to arts enrichment, from immigration to senior services. But it pays extra attention to local schools, aiming to make each one "a center of community life." With volunteers and paid staff they've set up after-school childcare and parenting centers at Ames, Funston, Brentano, Monroe, Mozart and Schneider public schools.

But even there, gentrification shadows all.

"Wealthier families tend to be smaller families," explained LSNA's Lissette Moreno-Kuri. "Principals come to us in the fall and say, 'We've lost 100 students.' That costs them at least two teachers and disrupts our networks and relationships."

Little wonder LSNA is eyeing NCP funding as an opportunity to work on residential stabilization. Though the group has never engaged directly in housing development, Aardema said it is time to start. One possibility: With partners in the Logan Square Reinvestment Coalition, purchase a distressed apartment building and rehab it into a co-op. Under that format, residents could build equity over time, while the owning coalition would ensure that affordable units stay affordable.

For much of 2003 Aardema was away on a fellowship studying gentrification and housing issues. While Moreno-Kuri ran the day-to-day from LSNA's storefront at 2840 N. Milwaukee Ave., Aardema was reading, interviewing and touring gentrification hotspots such as Boston and San Francisco. A new addition to this brain trust is new NCP director Rebecca Lopez, who worked for LSNA in the '90s before spending two years with the Chicago Department of Housing.

They are bubbling with ideas that might just work in this uniquely challenged community.

Contact: Rebecca (Becky) Lopez, LSNA, 773-384-4370.



Condominiums with marble baths are going up a half-block east of LSNA's offices on Milwaukee Avenue.



LSNA's Lissette Moreno-Kuri addresses parents at a meeting at Monroe School, 3651 W. Schubert.

Logan Square Community Area

POPULATION		
Population	82,715	Up 0.1 percent since 1990.
Pop. Chg. (1960-2000)	Down 12,000	Peaked in 1930 at 114,174.
Racial/Ethnic Makeup	65% Latino	Also 6% African-American.
HOUSING		
Housing units	31,488	Up 5.7% since 1990.
# of vacant units	2,597	Vacancy rate 8.2%.
Owner-occupied	30.8%	Up 1.3% since 1990.
Change in median value, single-family homes, 1998-2002	107.8%	Sharp spike in values after years of steady gains.
INCOME		
Pop. below poverty level	19.8%	Down from 24% in 1990
Households w/ income more than \$35,000/year	14,934 (52%)	5,018 had income above \$75,000.

Sources: U.S. Census data from www.chicagoreahousing.org and Local Community Fact Book Chicago Metropolitan Area, 1984 and 1995. All figures are for 2000 unless noted. Housing values from Chicago Area Realtors as reported in Chicago Sun-Times, August 2003.



LaDonna Redmond had a successful season at her Organicos produce stand.

GARFIELD MARKET BLOOMS

By Ed Finkel

The Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance (GPCA) took a leap into community-building and economic development this summer by opening a European-style weekend marketplace in converted horse stables just north of the conservatory.

From May through October, the Garfield Market drew shoppers from within the neighborhood and beyond to purchase flowers, organically grown produce, baskets, sculptures and other crafts.

The Chicago Park District estimated that more than 50,000 visitors came to the market, at 300 N. Central Park Ave., generating \$175,000 in sales by the end of September. Anchored by CityEscape Garden Center, the market also included the Organicos produce stand; What the Traveler Saw, which sold imported handicrafts; Hand Works, a purveyor of quilts, wall hangings and ceramics; and DDP Gift Baskets, which sold gardening-related items.

"It's been going well. The foot traffic is picking up," reported

Organico's owner LaDonna Redmond, a member of the GPCA steering committee, at an August meeting. "People are hearing about it and they're coming through and spending money." Redmond sold organic produce including tomatoes, greens and herbs that she grew herself on three "urban farm" sites.

Lisa Roberts, another steering committee member and director of conservatories for the Chicago Park District, said the city and park district promoted the market through ads and signage. "Everybody was concerned that it didn't peak and fizzle," she said. "We're doing anything we can to try to support it."

The city's long-range goal is to develop a "Greentown" of landscaping companies, garden centers and other "green" businesses along Lake Street east of the conservatory. Two businesses including market vendor CityEscape have committed to Lake Street sites. Garfield Market will resume operations in the spring.

Contact: Eunita Rushing, Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance, 773-638-1766, erushing@garfieldpark.org

WANTED: 'EARLY ACTION' PROJECTS—OF A CERTAIN KIND

By Ed Finkel

The 14 lead agencies in the New Communities Program presented ideas for "early action" projects at the NCP retreat on Sept. 18 and 19—but many of the concepts didn't quite fit the definition, said Amanda Carney, LISC senior program officer.

Early action projects must respond to a need the community has identified, she said, and they should be do-able in six to nine months. They also should be something new for the agency and be externally focused rather than internal organizational development. The idea is to build momentum quickly and gain credibility for the NCP group within the community.

"These are all great ideas, but some may not be early action projects," Carney told attendees after their presentations. She added that some of the projects still could receive LISC funding for other reasons.

A couple of the ideas did fit the "early action" definition and are moving forward.

The **Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance** plans to partner with longtime West

Side community builder Bethel New Life, Inc. to establish an employment training center in East Garfield. Eunita Rushing, executive director of the alliance, said the groups are in the process of identifying a site and hope to open it by the first of the new year.

Woodlawn Preservation and Investment Corp. (WPIC) plans to dispense small grants to block clubs and community groups for beautification projects, organizational development or youth leadership, said NCP director Karen King. WPIC received \$15,000 from the University of Chicago and is seeking matching funds from several sources, she said.

Such projects "are quickly do-able and recognizable to the community," Carney said. "You don't need an elaborate plan or proposal because people have been talking about these things for years." The first step in getting an early action project funded, she said, is to talk to your LISC program officer to see if the concept might be supported.

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

RESIDENTS GET CREATIVE FOR 26TH/KOSTNER SITE

By Beatriz Ponce de León

Anyone walking through the St. Agnes church hall at 25th St. and Central Park would have thought it was family fun night.

Grandparents, young adults, schoolkids, teens and parents still in their work clothes were gathered around tables September 30 playing with colorful blocks, cardboard and fuzzy pipe cleaners.

They were enjoying themselves, but also hard at work. The 45 mostly Mexican residents of Little Village were participating in a workshop hosted by the Little Village Community Development Corporation (LVDC) and conducted in Spanish by the Chicago Architects & Planners Association. It was the first hands-on session in a series of meetings to solicit ideas for a 44-acre site at 26th and Kostner.

Underutilized since the 1980s, the former industrial area has been a focus of interest since LVDC was formed 13 years ago—but a previous plan has come to nothing. "Este es el belorio del otro plan (This is the other plan's funeral)," said LVDC executive director Jesus Garcia in his opening remarks. Board president Elena Duran said a new plan will be created based on ideas and desires of community residents.



Family members work out a plan for a large plot on the western edge of Little Village.

The groups used glue, felt and creativity to fashion four different layouts of housing, retail, green space and community services, and conjured up colorful names such as *Villa Hermosa*, *Plaza Alegria* and *Arcos de la Villita*. The designs will be further developed during the NCP planning process in 2004.

Contact: Adriana Lopez, Little Village Community Development Corp., (773) 542-9233, lvcdc@msn.com

PEOPLE & PLACES

NCP staffing news

Lead agencies have continued to staff up in preparation for launching their NCP programs.

Logan Square Neighborhood Association selected **Rebecca Lopez** as NCP director. Lopez has 15 years experience in the public and private sector including nine years at LSNA in the 1990s. She is a registered real estate broker and was an assistant commissioner with the Chicago Department of Housing.



PHOTO: LAVIDA DAVIS

The Woodlawn Preservation and Investment Corp. selected **Karen King** (at left) as its NCP director. The long-time activist most recently served as community affairs

and development secretary for The Woodlawn Organization. King wants to "give residents a sense of empowerment and that they can make a difference."

Willie Cochran is WPIC's new NCP organizer. A Chicago police officer for 26 years, Cochran was part of the pilot CAPS (community policing) program in the 3rd Police District. He owns a Woodlawn laundromat and served

as a WPIC board member for 13 years.

Vincent Gilbert is the NCP director for Teamwork Englewood. Gilbert has an extensive career in state and federal government including 2 five-year terms as Illinois Small Business Utility Advocate.

Greater Southwest Development Corp. hired **David McDowell** as NCP organizer. McDowell has been a community organizer for Southwest Organizing Project and will continue to work for that agency in his NCP position. He has over a decade of organizing experience in Chicago and with a faith-based federation in Kansas City, KS.

St. Edmund's Redevelopment Corp. hired **Tasha Baker** as NCP director. Baker brings an extensive background in property management and community organizing, having worked for Neighborhood Housing Services and Jones Lang LaSalle America, Inc.

The new NCP outreach worker for LVDC, **Rebecca Martinez**, was born and raised in Little Village. She was a member of CityYear and has worked with students at Farragut High School in an after-school leadership development program. She looks forward to finding creative ways of involving youth in the NCP planning process.

BICKERDIKE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Making the new \$21 million project a reality for Bickerdike and its partners, the Near Northwest Neighborhood Network/Humboldt Park Empowerment Partnership (NNNN/HPEP) and Division Street Business Development Assn., will require \$19 million in mostly city funding for the residential piece, Al-Khatib said. The project originated during the empowerment zone planning process more than two years ago. "We worked with the city to get redevelopment area designation and two TIFs (Tax Increment Financing districts) that are community controlled," said Eliud Medina, executive director for NNNN/HPEP.

As in all of Bickerdike's work, the Harold Washington project was developed with input from a community-based steering committee, including the Kedzie-Albany-Franklin-Troy Community Organization, known as K.A.F.T. 4

Unity. Bickerdike subsidiary Humboldt Construction Company is the general contractor and all of its employees are from the neighborhood. Four are from the K.A.F.T. 4 Unity area, Al-Khatib said.

Keith Muhammad, a carpenter on the project and K.A.F.T. 4 Unity president, said steering committee members were "looking for people who were dedicated to a safe neighborhood and bringing affordable housing to people. The main thing was to utilize these vacant lots, which were an eyesore."

Muhammad, 42, has lived in the neighborhood most of his life but had not worked construction before. "I come from primarily a sales background," he said. "So it was an opportunity to learn a trade I have had some interest in for years. It was a matter of finding someone who could give me that opportunity."

Contact: Dena Al-Khatib, (773) 278-5669, dal-khatib@bickerdike.org

NCP neighborhoods and lead agencies

The New Communities Program serves 16 Chicago communities through these 14 lead agencies:

Auburn Gresham

Greater Auburn Gresham Community Development Corp.

Chicago Lawn

Greater Southwest Development Corp.

Douglas, Grand Boulevard and North Kenwood-Oakland

Quad Communities Development Corp.

East Garfield Park

Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance

Englewood

Teamwork Englewood

Humboldt Park

Bickerdike Redevelopment Corp.

Little Village (South Lawndale)

Little Village Community Development Corp.

Logan Square

Logan Square Neighborhood Assn.

North Lawndale

Lawndale Christian Development Corp.

Pilsen (Lower West Side)

The Resurrection Project

South Chicago

Southeast Chicago Development Commission

Washington Park

St. Edmund's Redevelopment Corp.

West Haven (Near West Side)

Near West Side Community Development Corp.

Woodlawn

Woodlawn Preservation and Investment Corp.

PLANNING RETREAT TURNS INTO FORWARD CHARGE

By John McCarron

Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition, offers this definition of *retreat*: "a going back or backward; withdrawal in the face of opposition."

But nobody was going backward or ducking opponents in the ballroom of the Medical District Marriott Hotel on Sept. 18 and 19, when the New Communities Program held a planning retreat. To the contrary, the room vibrated with plans for the future and fresh approaches to familiar problems.

Retreat? Some 50 leaders representing 14 groups turned the confab into a frontal assault on business as usual. They traded organizing secrets, exchanged contact information, recommended changes and, best of all, got to know one another a little better.

They also, many of them, got a first glimpse at the overall impact their collective efforts could have on Chicago.

"This is the biggest neighborhood planning activity the city has ever seen," announced Les Pollock, principal consultant with Camiros, Ltd. His planning firm will provide technical assistance to NCP community groups in the months ahead. All will craft a "quality of life" plan that lays out the neighborhood's assets and challenges, proposes long-term strategies and launches specific, do-able projects.

"Quality-of-life planning is different," Pollock told the assembly. "It's bottom-up, not top-down. It's right now and immediate, not pie in the sky. But it's comprehensive. Not just land use and economic development, but social services, crime prevention and all the rest."

A main purpose of the retreat was to set parameters of this planning phase: finish within 32 weeks; limit physical planning to a core area of 20 or so blocks; get maximum public input, but limit authorship to a core task force of 20 to 30 neighborhood stakeholders.



Retreat participants heard many ideas for their communities including development of public art and open space. A panel of experts noted that exposure to green space has been shown to reduce aggression and violence, boost self-discipline in girls and foster strong social ties among neighbors. On a previous project (above), students at Visitation Elementary School worked with lead artist Phil Schuster to build six planters with concrete relief elements along Garfield Boulevard. Contact Jon Pounds, Chicago Public Art Group, 312/427-2724, jonpounds@cpag.net, or Christine Slattery, The Trust for Public Land, (312) 427-1979, chris.slattery@tpl.org

Leaders from three groups that completed planning during NCP's pilot phase shared several do's and don'ts.

"Be prepared to deal with turnover on your task force," said Raul Raymundo, executive director of The Resurrection Project in Pilsen. "But don't let turnover disrupt continuity."

Pat Dowell, executive director of the Near West Side Community Development Corp., cautioned that

"It's right now and immediate, not pie in the sky." Les Pollock, Camiros, Ltd.

some participants "will have their own agenda that could be disruptive." Still, she said, "they must be heard."

Mary Karen Reynolds, who directs the NCP effort at the Southeast Chicago Development Commission, recommended every plan have a "youth service component," such as a mural or a garden, because teenagers tend to be put off by the dry work of planning.

Groups next floated ideas for "early action projects." It's called

"doing while planning," according to LISC's NCP coordinator, Amanda Carney. The idea is to implement a readily achievable, highly visible project that shows the community NCP means business and merits support. (See story, page three.)

But how to get it all done?

On Day 2, to demonstrate the expertise available to NCP participants, LISC brought in specialists to talk about implementation in the areas of employment and open space.

"We are ready to assist," said Mary Jo Schnell, executive director of NeighborSpace, an organization that helps groups take control of unsightly vacant lots and turn them into community gardens, playgrounds or sculpture parks.

At a final session, local NCP leaders asked LISC to host more get-togethers—perhaps a series of brown-bag lunches—so they can go on swapping ideas... and meeting technicians who know how to turn those ideas into realities.

Retreat? It was a jump-start. Or, as LISC's Carney put it at meeting's end: "We are rollin'!"

LISC

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