

Transit Oriented Development Revitalizes Chicago Neighborhood

By Marcia Turner

“In development work, there is no such thing as a cookie cutter,” says Trinette Britt-Reid, a consultant at Bethel New Life, a faith-based community development corporation in Garfield Park on Chicago’s West Side. Garfield Park is an older urban community within the Chicago Empowerment Zone, an area torn by riots in the 1960s and weakened by decades of declining population, abandoned properties, poverty, crime, and drugs.

For more than 20 years, Bethel has executed a variety of community development projects in this neighborhood—affordable housing, commercial industrial development, employment services—and also brought in health and human services, including daycare. Since the mid-1990s, acting with several partners in the public and private sectors, Bethel has taken a transit-oriented development approach, building on an unexpected neighborhood asset: an elevated train stop (or “the El,” as Chicagoans call their venerable rail transit system). Bethel wants to make the El station an anchor for area revitalization efforts.

In the early 1990s, the Chicago Transit Authority threatened to close the rail line that linked West Chicago to the Loop. Without the El, Garfield Park residents would have had great difficulty in getting to jobs downtown and throughout the city. So, a group of churches and neighborhood organizations, including Bethel, joined forces to form the Lake Street Coalition, which fought to keep the station at Pulaski and Lake Streets open. In 1995, the Transit Authority committed \$380 million to rebuild both the Lake Street line and the Jackson Street line on the south side. With more than 2,000 people passing through Lake Street each day, Bethel and its coalition partners realized that it is a natural magnet for development, and are drawing on public and private resources to cluster affordable housing, jobs, shops, and support services around the El station.

“It’s a slow process. It’s a long process. But it’s exciting,” says Britt-Reid, who manages all aspects of

the transit-oriented development. “You have to have patience, endurance, faith, and vision. If you can hang on to it, it works. It happens.”

Restoring the “Ruined Houses”

Bethel New Life began in 1979, when Mary Nelson and her brother David, a minister at Bethel Lutheran Church in West Garfield Park, decided to literally interpret a line from the Bible’s Book of Isaiah to address the disinvestment and distress in the neighborhood. The line reads, “You will be known as the people who rebuilt the walls, who restored the ruined houses.”

By raising \$9,600 from the congregation, borrowing on their credit cards, and purchasing a nearby three-unit apartment building that had been foreclosed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Nelsons and their church began the first of many redevelopment projects near the church. Since then, Bethel has built or rehabilitated more than 1,000 housing units and brought more than \$99 million in investment to the neighborhood. Yet, the focus of community development for Bethel is not bricks and mortar but the people of Garfield Park. Over the years, the faith-based community development corporation has graduated 4,250 people from job training programs, placed 1,500 people in jobs, and founded a network of 25 daycare homes. Today, Bethel has an operating income of over \$8 million and employs more than 350 people.

One of Bethel's more ambitious undertakings was the century-old St. Anne's hospital facility, which closed in 1989. Wanting to preserve this neighborhood landmark, Bethel rehabilitated the 9.2 acre campus into the Beth-Anne Community Center in 1999. The center includes 125 one-bedroom apartments for low-income elderly, a child development center, a small business center, a professional center, and other enterprises.

Creating 100 New Jobs

Since 1995, Bethel has been working to assemble and broker land around the El station. Bethel's goal is "to develop at least ten businesses with opportunities for at least ten percent local ownership, to increase ridership on the Green Line, to create more than 100 new jobs in the area, and to contribute to building an attractive commercial area."

In the spring of this year, job trainees at Bethel were responsible for disassembling an old brick building on the northwest corner of Lake and Pulaski, where construction of a state-of-the-art, energy-efficient commercial building is scheduled to begin this fall. It will house a daycare center, a medical clinic, a pharmacy, office space, and an employment and training center. Commuting parents will be able to drop their children off at the daycare center and get on the El by covered walkway.

Designed by Farr and Associates, the building features photovoltaic cells, recycled materials, and a living rooftop garden that will be visible to riders on the El. In this architecture-conscious city, the building is sure to become a landmark. These current efforts will enhance Bethel's other revitalization work on Pulaski Street, which began in 1999 with the rehabilitation of a commercial building, one block

away from the El stop. That building now houses a drug store, a taxi company, and Bethel's employment center.

Rehabilitation Gains a Critical Mass

With the help of the Center for Neighborhood Technology, a national technical assistance organization that had helped organize the Lake Street Coalition, Bethel initiated a neighborhood planning process. The neighborhood vision called for attractive housing within walking distance of the Lake Street station. "You need a critical mass of houses to turn a neighborhood around," says Britt-Reid, "not just a rehabilitated house here and there."

Doug Farr, the architect on the project, attended the community meetings and came up with a plan for 200 energy-efficient, affordable, single-family homes. The housing will be in four clusters, each with a school or active church as a neighborhood anchor. The clusters will include play areas for children, small parks, and traffic-slowing circles. Bethel Lutheran, which anchors one of the clusters, is promoting the new single-family homes to its parishioners.

Working with local alderman Ed Smith, Bethel engaged the help of the city by presenting the new housing as part of Chicago's commitment to rapid transit, and by the end of 2000, 22 homes had been built. The homes were made affordable by Housing and Urban Development Nehemiah Opportunity Grants, the New Homes for Chicago program, subsidies from the Federal Home Loan Bank's Affordable Housing Program, mortgage subsidies from the Neighborhood Lending Program, a revolving fund for upfront costs supported by an Amoco grant, and in some cases, the sweat equity of future owners. ■

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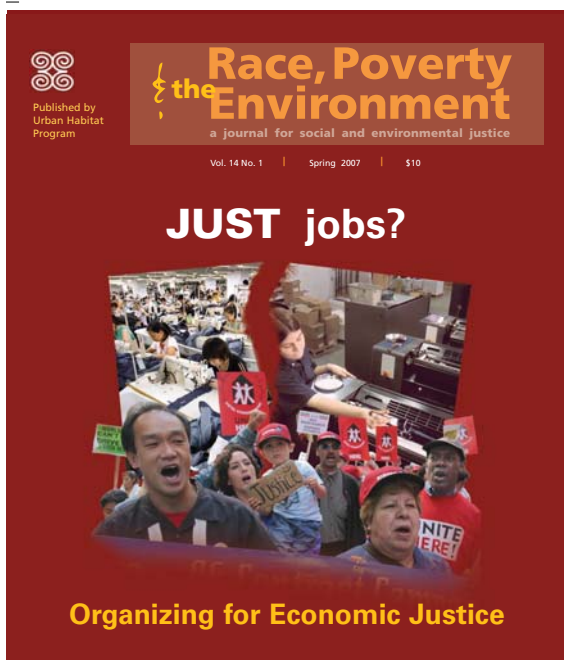
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