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Creating a Just, Peaceful, and Sustainable Society: Pilsen, Chicago

This paper will discuss the research of sustainable initiatives in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois, completed by Oklahoma City University students Shantel Wagner and Katherine Benton. This project was done on behalf of the Institute of Cultural Affairs in the USA, located in Uptown, Chicago. In the summer of 2012, the ICA will host a Share Fair in partnership with Transitions Chicago to help Chicagoans see and exchange ideas about what initiatives are being taken in their neighborhoods to move Chicago towards a more environmentally sustainable city. We will explore our asset map containing existing institutions and organizations in Pilsen, and provide background information on the groups we interviewed. With this information at hand, the community can then make an informed decision on who will represent them at the 2012 Share Fair. Also, other students can derive an appropriate method of tackling this project and helping it move forward.

First, we will explore the asset map that consists of organizations, businesses, and government-funded properties in the Pilsen neighborhood and how these assets, as well as the neighborhood demographics, can help Pilsen shift towards becoming environmentally sustainable. Pilsen is bounded by the Chicago River to the south, I90/94 to the east, Western Avenue to the west, and 16th Street to the north. The neighborhood is characterized by its large residential areas, which consist mainly of older, multi-dwelling homes. However, 18th Street and 21st Street are the main commercial avenues, since both intersect with the 'L'. In

the early 19th century, the neighborhood was composed mainly of Czech immigrants; this Eastern European influence remains in the construction of various church buildings and their tall spires. Pilsen's population now sits at around 44,000 people and is 87 percent Latino, 10 percent White, 2 percent Black, and 1 percent other. Due to the demographic distribution, many of the businesses are local restaurants that feature authentic Mexican cuisine and choose to decorate their space with cultural artwork. Due to gentrification, East Pilsen is less of a residential community and more of an upper-class commercial district, though many of these spaces are waiting to be leased out. Some members of western Pilsen believe the downturn of the economy saved their half of the neighborhood from gentrification and hope that people in the community will remain.

While we have spoken highly of Pilsen thus far, no neighborhood is complete without its difficulties. The two largest blights to this vibrant community are the Fisk Generating Station, in the southeast corner near Halsted and Cermak, and the H. Kramer and Company brass smelter facility on the south side of Cermak near Racine. Both release unruly amounts of lead, mercury, soot and other dangerous pollutants into the air. Copious amounts of hazardous materials from the facilities negatively affect the residents of Pilsen and nearby neighborhoods, which are also immigrant communities. These pollutants are linked to brain damage and asthma. There are even around 40 deaths per year related to the emissions of these devastating plants. That's not even the worst of it, eleven and a half thousand people live within a half-mile of the H. Kramer facility. Local schools such as Benito Juarez high school sit only a few blocks away from it with hundreds of students, teachers, and staff filing in and out of the building on a daily basis. Even though residents are so near these facilities, the companies still get away with their emissions since they are covered by a grandfather clause in the Clean Air Act of 1970.

Despite being polluted and disadvantaged by large companies, Pilsen responds with its own vitality. The strength of the neighborhood is in its shared culture. As we combed through Pilsen, we found many individual initiatives varying in size and purpose. Throughout the year, the community comes together to celebrate their native culture in many different ways. The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council (PNCC) hosts Fiesta del Sol annually, and Casa Aztlan hosts such festivals as the Viva Aztlan Festival, Candlelight Dinner, and Christmas Posada. Fiesta del Sol is a great way to help the community start to move towards environmental sustainability. At the fiesta, booth holders are prohibited from using foam products within their booths. All of the T-shirts and advertising products are printed locally keeping money within the community. The Pilsen Neighbors Community Council also cuts down on excess paper usage during the fiesta by promoting the event mainly through television, radio, and social network ads. The PNCC also cuts waste in their office by using post-consumer recycled paper. During the festival, there are recycle bins available for public use helping cut down on the waste from the fiesta. Before and after fiesta weekend, local high school students are hired as clean-up crew members to clean not only the festival grounds but also the surrounding residential area. This allows a flow of money back into the local families and in turn the economy.

As we travelled around Pilsen, we also found restaurants and retailers that are taking conscious steps to move towards a greener, more sustainable environment. Fiesta del Sol, a restaurant at the intersection of Wood and Blue Island Avenue, uses energy-saving light bulbs, also known as compact fluorescent light bulbs or CFLs. The servers take orders on the backs of old receipts, cutting down paper waste. The owners also take an initiative to recycle plastic, cans, and glass within the restaurant and encourage their employees to use these bins. The owners are even promoting living a more sustainable life outside of their business by driving

Honda Civics, energy-efficient cars that cut down on gas consumption. Fiesta del Sol is also a healthier choice among local restaurants because they do not use lard and therefore reduce the fat content in their food dramatically. Simone's, a local bar and grill, is even in on greening the area and decorated their renovated space with used recycled materials. The decor and rooftop solar panels helped this restaurant earn the title of "Certified Green Restaurant" by the Green Restaurant Association. Also, Nightwood, a restaurant located on Halsted to the south of 21st Place, buys local and seasonal produce sometimes from vendors local to the Pilsen community. Simply Wood Rings, which displays wood jewelry created by Pilsen native Gustav Reyes, is a solar-powered business on the southwest corner of Cermak and Halsted. Reyes uses fallen trees to create wearable works of art that nod to the environment. The wood Reyes uses in his works of art come from all over the world including New Zealand, Africa, and the United States. His collections include more than rings and jewelry and are on display throughout the United States. Reyes goes to show that art can be formed from many different types of materials--including ones that are safe for the environment.

Another important art form that aids in moving towards a more sustainable environment is gardening. Gardening is on the rise in Pilsen, from community gardens that are open to the public to private gardens located in backyards and on sidewalks. Some of these gardens mainly hold flowers, but many of them provide a source of food such as herbs and vegetables. Alianza Verde, a coalition of community gardens in the Pilsen area, hosted its 2nd annual tour of neighborhood gardens this year. During the garden walk, many gardens offered presentations and workshops on composting, and various gardening and food preparation techniques. Over 50 private and public gardens were on display for visitors freely walk through during this time. Some of the community schools such as Orozco and Whittier elementaries have gardens to

help teach sustainability to students. Even though other neighborhood organizations do not primarily focus on sustainability, they integrate greening into their individual missions. El Valor, an organization that focuses on serving people with disabilities and low income, offers a unique educational experience to children. El Valor allows their students to attend a summer day camp called STEM, which helps students gain a love for the environment they live in. Another organization has some great upcoming plans for the Pilsen area. El Hogar del Niño, focusing primarily on early childhood education, will be soon break ground on a garden that represents plants native to Illinois. Starting August 20, volunteers from the community will contribute to making the garden that will benefit the children's program. Children will be able to play and interact with the environment, but the garden will also create a space for sharing with the neighborhood and will be a host site for public events. This garden will create an early love for the environment, as well as give children a tangible example of humanity's impact on the earth.

Another important organization located in Pilsen is Street Intervention. Street Intervention is an offshoot of the YMCA that began in the area in 1990 and focuses on the emotional needs of young male and female gang members by providing them with mentors and role models. It is even strategically located across the street from Benito Juarez, the local high school. This organization is a major asset for the community, but lacks the appropriate funding needed to fully help the students from the neighborhood. The staff even comes from neighboring Little Village because there is simply not enough grant money to hire a staff for Pilsen. While Street Intervention may have a small staff, they are able to make a big impact on the students they reach. Street Intervention staff members are allowed parts of the school day to meet with struggling students and listen to their problems. The staff of this organization is mainly focused on "listening" to what students have to say instead of trying to identify with them. This

method allows the students to say what is on their mind without being talked over. With this organization there is definitely room for growth in an environmentally sustainable way. Students are already held responsible for cleaning up the building. For this organization starting small then moving on to bigger things is the key.

One organization in Pilsen focuses primarily on sustainability, but in a big way. The Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization, PERRO, fights environmental and social injustice on a large scale. They are fighting their way through legal battles against Fisk Generating Station and H. Kramer smelter facility to reduce the amount of pollution they are allowed to emit into the air. PERRO holds weekly meetings for their members to focus their efforts, but they also hold monthly meetings where the rest of the community can come and have their opinions heard. Many members of the community feel they have no voice since they may not have proper documentation to be in the United States. However, this is not stopping others in the community for fighting for what is rightfully theirs, clean air. Many residents in Pilsen are affected by the pollution from these facilities on a daily basis and want to help make the air cleaner for themselves and other Chicagoans. However, PERRO does have its troubles receiving outside help for their initiatives. Thousands of residents in the Chicago area do not know these plants exist and are polluting the air they breathe in. Because of this, community members struggle to find support for their issue. One specific community member, Stephanie Dunn, decided there was not enough being done so she went on a five day hunger strike in downtown Chicago to bring awareness to it.

Other organizations in Pilsen also have a mission to promote a healthier environment. However, many of these organizations are not aware of each other. We found that while several of the organizations we contacted could direct us to similar organizations, the communication

network between these neighborhood groups is inconsistent and inefficient. That does not mean Pilsen is without shining examples. Alianza Verde brings community gardens together and offers classes and workshops at places such as the Orozco Elementary School garden and Edible Alchemy Foods. The Pilsen Planning Committee, or PPC, is made up of twenty-one different businesses and organizations. The PPC created the Pilsen Portal, a website dedicated to communicating news and issues relevant to the neighborhood. However, the Pilsen Portal is a very limited outlet, and is managed by members who are also working with The Resurrection Project, or TRP. The PPC is only listed by its member organizations on the TRP website; therefore, the group cannot be contacted as a whole, so the transmission of ideas is somewhat problematic. With a little revamping concentrated on resident access, both of these can be great assets to the community and make finding sustainable initiatives a breeze.

Secondly, we would like to help aid the community in making a well-informed decision on who should represent them at the 2012 Share Fair. A single comment directed at us during a meeting embodied the importance of self-selection for the communities. We had gone through the circle of attendees where we introduced ourselves and our project. A woman, who was new to the community as well, clearly stated that she resented outside organizations coming in and conducting research without taking the time to help out within the neighborhood. Though it was disheartening to hear, we agree: the work of making Pilsen more sustainable belongs to Pilsen alone, and if they are not the origin of the decisions, then the process will belong to someone else entirely, taking away the value of community that already exists. We want Pilsen to be represented by its best and brightest green initiatives, according to the values *Pilsen* wants to uphold. Through our research, we hope that Pilsen will be able to make a well informed decision on who should represent their neighborhood at the 2012 Share Fair in Uptown.

We do think there will be some challenges that will hinder the community's selection process. The most formidable challenge will be connecting the various organizations and residents within Pilsen. The connections are there--each organization could potentially find out about a sister program through an acquaintance--but they are more like the yarn of a badly knitted cap than like the interwoven silk of a spider's web. The first step is to make sure that residents are aware of all of the different businesses, organizations, and people that are taking a green initiative. Also, it is important to make sure the community understands what possible initiatives are that can be taken to move towards an environmentally sustainable community. We found that many places told us they were not doing anything, only to later hear from someone else that they actually were. We think this is simply from lack of education about what things are considered green initiatives.

With the research we have done, we do have several ideas the community could use in order to choose their Share Fair representative. This could potentially be a project of the Pilsen Planning Committee since they created the Pilsen Portal with the intent of informing citizens about events within the neighborhood. The variety of businesses and organizations in the PPC make the group very well-rounded in its opinions and approaches. However, since the members are only listed individually, it is inaccessible to the community at large. But, it does allow a starting place for the community to turn to when searching for environmental sustainability initiatives. In fact, since the PPC works closely with The Resurrection Project, The Resurrection Project could be the center of Pilsen's communication. TRP's initiatives are expansive, but sustainability is an absent component where it should be integrated into a part of every project. We think TRP could be a powerful ally in spreading the message of sustainability throughout Pilsen; The Resurrection Project has a very strong, real presence in the community,

and that interconnectedness with the neighborhood can make integrating sustainability into regular life very simple.

An important recommendation we would make for the community is to implement the use of social media resources within the neighborhood. Social media is very popular in our society and should be used to its full capacity. Many community organizations already have pages on Facebook and Twitter. Some, similar to Alianza Verde, have blogs to add to or replace social media profiles. Within these social media sources, a person may also become connected to other organizations since the designer's pages contains "likes" and have "followers". The Resurrection Project has its own website as well as Twitter and Facebook pages. From these vantage points, TRP could expand its initiatives to include sustainability efforts and enter into mutually beneficial relationships with specialized organizations throughout Pilsen with the use of social media. The most difficulty we had was trying to communicate that sustainability and social justice were intertwined. This means that organizations such as Street Intervention can be just as crucial in sustainability efforts as PERRO. As this is an immigrant community, it is highly focused on minimizing the issues that immediately affect the families within it, and it is difficult for most to see *survival's* immediate connection to *sustainability*; their strong connection must be presented very clearly and emphatically if the community is to embrace sustainability and resiliency efforts as their own, especially since Pilsen has so many other concerns.

Lastly, we have some advice for future university students that may follow our research into Pilsen, Chicago, in preparation for the ICA's fair in 2012. Many organizations did not have websites or other online communication resources, so sometimes our only option was to call or visit. Since we did not have many phone calls or emails returned, we found that walking into

organizations was very successful. They could not turn us away since we were already there, even if they could not give us very explicit information. However, you cannot expect the head of an organization to be able to meet with you right on the spot, so be open to scheduling other meeting times, even though your group has taken the time out of your own day to talk. A project like this requires planning and structure but also requires incredible flexibility, as well as a knowledgeable balance between the two. Preconceived notions could negatively affect interaction with the community and your group will want to be sure to be as amiable as possible in order to gain the knowledge you need for the project.

If given the chance to redo our research and project, given what we know now, we would do a few things differently. First, we feel that we could have mapped out our trek a little better. We did not do enough research before going out since we were unsure of what to expect. A couple of days after being in the field, we realized that having additional information would have helped us sort our targets for each day. After we realized our mistake, we took one day to be inside and strictly focus our time on searching for green initiatives and sent out emails and made phone calls. Second, we did all of our traveling around the neighborhood on foot. Our strongest suggestion to students who may also work on this project is to rent a bicycle instead of walking. With a bike, you are able to move quickly and efficiently. Pilsen is a very large area to cover on foot and the buses run inconsistently, so many times we were stuck waiting for long periods of time or walking. Cutting down travel time will also open up the day for more visits. Also, be prepared to be sent from one location to another. If one organization could not help us out, they were kind enough to send us on to another place they thought may be helpful for us. We found out about many other environmental initiatives through referrals, as well as developed a sense of the connections within the community.

Overall we had a great experience working collectively with the Institute of Cultural Affairs and the neighborhood of Pilsen, Chicago. We hope that many more green initiatives are recognized throughout the community and that they help move towards a more sustainable city.

References

(Back of the Yards)

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