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The green line: It's Chicago to San Francisco

By Erik Gleibermann


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When San Francisco adopted Chicago as a mentor of urban green stewardship last year, it confirmed how much these two great American cities had outgrown their traditional images.

How had it transpired that California's environmentalist mecca would solicit Chicago, once such a powerhouse of industry, to guide the way to a green future?

San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, dissatisfied with a lack of homegrown initiatives, visited Chicago to be tutored by Mayor Richard Daley and returned hyping green roofs, landscaped median strips and Millennium Park.

San Francisco, named for the Christian patron saint of the environment, historically prides itself on a visionary spirit of environmental activism. John Muir launched America's conservation movement in the city a century ago when he founded the Sierra Club, which remains headquartered in San Francisco. A generation ago the city became the

birthplace of Earth Day and flower power. Ten years ago the organic food revolution sprouted in San Francisco's back yard.

As a green-loving San Franciscan, I have wondered what environmental lessons Chicago could teach this left coast haven. Like many Californians, I had retained a childhood image of Chicago as a gray metropolis, run on labor and sweat.

So I am impressed to discover that contemporary Chicago, while facing significant problems implementing far-reaching environmental plans, has distinctive wisdom to offer, beginning with its rooftops.

While an aerial survey of the San Francisco skyline reveals primarily tar paper and gray, Chicago turned rooftop gardens into a public initiative beginning in 1999, when Daley piloted a landscaped garden atop City Hall. The garden has reduced storm-water runoff, and during hot weather it cools the roof. Today the city has more than 200 green roofs covering more than 2.5 million square feet and has begun green roof planning for buildings at O'Hare International Airport.

The city also has adopted The Chicago Standard, a green building construction code required of public projects. Developers who adhere to the standard receive speedier permit approval than those who don't.

Following Chicago's model, Newsom has issued a directive for new municipal buildings to meet sustainable development standards and for the city to speed its permit approval process for environmentally friendly building. Newsom also has created a director of city greening in the mayor's office modeled on a similar position in Daley's.

"I was tickled pink to have Mayor Newsom go back and emulate Chicago's greening plan," said Sadhu Johnston, Chicago's commissioner of the Department of Environment. "It's . . . not what people expect."

Political paradox

Newsom's interest in Chicago may be an indicator of the paradoxical nature of San Francisco's progressive politics. Though San Francisco is a hotbed of environmentalist design and activism, the city runs by a consensus-driven, community-based process in which everyone wants a voice and emerging problems do not usually receive quick responses. Chicago's historically more top-down governance may allow a mayor to implement a more decisive--if less democratic--agenda.

San Francisco also tends to hide conservative tendencies behind its hip exterior. In a culture where everyone claims to be a progressive, activism can lose its edge. Pacific Gas and Electric Co. now packages itself as a green leader in San Francisco, and in November it launched a "Let's Green This City" project, inviting pedestrians to have their photos taken while lounging on sod sofas displayed at nine city intersections. Meanwhile, the company continues to generate electricity from nuclear plants and actively campaigns against cost-saving public power initiatives.

Newsom himself embodies the progressive paradox. In his tenure as mayor he has positioned himself as a popular spokesman for urban environmentalism. Yet during his term on the city's Board of Supervisors, the Sierra Club graded his environmental record a D. In the mayoral election, despite having far more campaign resources and the party establishment's support, he only narrowly defeated Green Party candidate Matt Gonzalez.

Much more to do

Newsom has encouraged efforts to use biodiesel-powered and hybrid city vehicles, pushed plans to develop solar and tidal power, and designed a greenhouse gas emission reduction plan that Chicago is studying as a model. Much of the work, though, remains on paper. In December the city released a sustainability plan to develop Treasure Island, a

man-made island that sits halfway between Oakland and San Francisco along the Bay Bridge. The design calls for housing that is fully accessible by public transportation, an organic farm and restored wetlands. But implementation could be years away.

"Many people feel San Francisco is very far from pushing the envelope of what it could be doing environmentally," said Dave Grenell, an aide in Oakland Mayor Jerry Brown's office who has written environmental policy for both Bay Area cities. "Results are the coin of the realm."

Newsom and Daley each have said they aim to lead the greenest city in America. A key question is whether appealing pilot projects and creative proposals can be converted into systemic change. Neither city has yet to harness significant alternative energy sources. Chicago uses almost no energy from sustainable sources in public buildings despite having set a 20 percent goal for 2006. Both cities also have urban forest initiatives but have less tree cover than many other U.S. cities. San Francisco and Chicago have 12 percent and 11 percent respectively. New York has 21 percent and Atlanta has 37 percent.

San Francisco and Chicago's unlikely collaboration can be an outstanding model for other major U.S. cities if Newsom and Daley challenge each other to push beyond visible demonstration projects toward deeper systemic change.

The old image differences between San Francisco and Chicago ultimately have little bearing on the future. At ground level in any city, exhaust fumes and landfill sites look conspicuously unpromising.

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