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### Chicago Conservation Corps Puts Citizens in the Lead (<http://sustainablog.org/2008/01/30/chicago-conservation-corps-puts-citizens-in-the-lead/>)



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([http://sustainablog.org/files/2008/01/c3\\_promo.gif](http://sustainablog.org/files/2008/01/c3_promo.gif)) Chicago has made some big strides in recent years toward becoming a greener city. As I've talked about in previous posts, Mayor Richard M. Daley has used his lock on power in the Second City to push an aggressive agenda of environmental initiatives that he hopes will someday soon earn Chicago the title of Greenest City in the Nation.

Realistically, we've got a long way to go before such a claim can be made with a straight face, but progress is being made. Some of the bolder initiatives that City Hall has launched in recent years have worked to expand the use of [green roofs](http://jasonphillip.greenoptions.com/2007/10/15/with-help-from-city-hall-chicago-warms-up-to-cool-roofs/) (<http://jasonphillip.greenoptions.com/2007/10/15/with-help-from-city-hall-chicago-warms-up-to-cool-roofs/>), support [sustainable architecture](http://sustainablog.org/2007/12/03/sustainable-architecture-benefits-chicagos-underprivileged/) (<http://sustainablog.org/2007/12/03/sustainable-architecture-benefits-chicagos-underprivileged/>), and reduce waste from [plastic water bottles](http://sustainablog.org/2008/01/08/groundbreaking-bottled-water-tax-raises-dustup-in-chicago/) (<http://sustainablog.org/2008/01/08/groundbreaking-bottled-water-tax-raises-dustup-in-chicago/>). There are other examples, but suffice to say that the mayor is backing up his

green rhetoric with some real political muscle in a bid to leave a legacy as an early 21st century environmental leader.

But one criticism that can be made about Daley's approach so far to creating a more sustainable city is that it is very top-down. Municipal government can put in place programs to encourage better resource management, but it can't mandate a local green economy into existence. Achieving that goal takes the vision, dedication, and hard work of countless green business entrepreneurs and environmentally conscious consumers. And let's face it, most of us don't really enjoy when the government tells us what to do. Even when City Hall tackles an issue we're passionate about, most of us wonder to ourselves, "Why are they doing it that way? Wouldn't it be more effective to do X with the money?"

If you've ever had such idea, imagine for a moment that you could get help from your local government agencies to help make it a reality. Wouldn't it be great to have such ideas nurtured instead of being left to die on the vine?

Enter the Chicago Conservation Corps.

- » [Read more on Climate change \(http://sustainablog.org/category/climate-change/\)](http://sustainablog.org/category/climate-change/)

Also known as "C3", this initiative of the Chicago Department of Environment aims to "recruit, train and support a network of volunteers who work together to improve the quality of life in our neighborhoods through environmental service projects that protect our water, clean our air, restore our land and save energy."

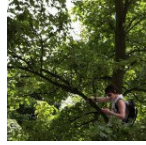
Since 2006 [Chicago Conservation Corps](http://egov.cityofchicago.org/city/webportal/portalEntityHomeAction.do?entityName=Chicago+Conservation+Corps&entityNameEnumValue=174) (<http://egov.cityofchicago.org/city/webportal/portalEntityHomeAction.do?entityName=Chicago+Conservation+Corps&entityNameEnumValue=174>) has been partnering with local nonprofits and other city agencies to provide training, technical assistance and resources to local citizens to get their homegrown service projects off the ground. Participants are dubbed "C3 Leaders" and after attending an orientation session and being accepted into the program, they attend five 3-hour training classes on urban environmental principles and skills.

After completing the training classes, C3 Leaders turn their learning into action by developing and leading an environmental service project in their communities over several months. C3 Leaders receive support in the form of project development guidance, mentoring on community outreach, and up to \$500 worth of materials and supplies for the project.

Examples of projects that have emerged from C3 include neighborhood home energy audits, ride-sharing programs, and community garden development. One woman even organized a Plastic Bottle Awareness Day to coincide with the Chicago Air and Water Show, the city's second most popular outdoor festival and one which draws over 2 million people to the city's lakefront each August. According to the [C3 blog](http://chicagoconservationcorps.org/%22http://www.chicagoconservationcorps.org/blog/index.php/%22) (<http://chicagoconservationcorps.org/%22http://www.chicagoconservationcorps.org/blog/index.php/%22>), M. Grace Sielaff put together a team of volunteers that picked up thousands of littered water bottles that the air show throngs produced and made sure the city recycled them. And they're going to do it again next year.

The Chicago Conservation Corps strikes me as a great way to capture the creativity and passion of an increasingly eco-conscious citizenry. Great ideas for better communities often come from the ground up, and this initiative is helping nurture those ideas with a little bit of funding, a lot of expertise, and plain old networking. C3 is like nutrient-rich compost for the grassroots, and I'm all for it. It's going to take more than top-down solutions from government to transform the infrastructure of this city and the lifestyles of its residents into a shining green example for the rest of the country.

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