



Wednesday, February 20, 2008

## Living with industry

*Manufacturing alive and well in North Branch Corridor*

By **TIMOTHY INKLEBARGER**, Editor

<http://chicagojournal.com/main.asp?SectionID=25&SubSectionID=55&ArticleID=4112&TM=60913.2>



Photo by Josh Hawkins

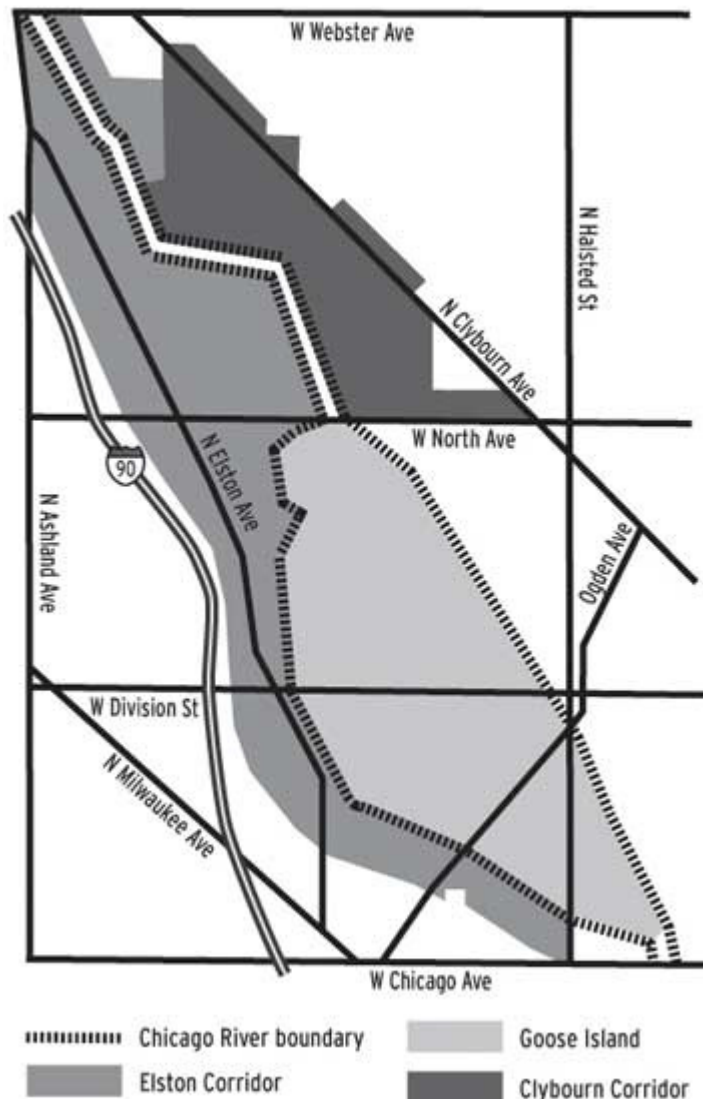
Michael Holzer, LEED Council economic director, says residential development threatened the industrial corridor in the 1980s, prompting businesses to establish planned manufacturing districts.

Wednesday, February 20, 2008

Every day, just blocks from the trendy shops and luxury condos of Lincoln Park, hundreds of industrial plants pump out everything from salt to recycled scrap metal to the leather used for NFL footballs.

For more than 100 years, the area now known as the North Branch Industrial Corridor has served as a home to such factories, employing as many as 40,000 workers in its heyday.

But in the late 1980s housing development began encroaching on a section of the industrial zone along Clybourn Avenue from North to Webster. This October marks the 20th anniversary of the creation of a landmark zoning ordinance known as Planned Manufacturing Districts that helped prevent displacement of factories in the area.



At the office headquarters of the Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED) Council in Lincoln Park, Michael Holzer, the group's economic development director, looks out the window to a multi-story condo building at the corner of Racine and Armitage. Several units in the building have a direct view of the scrap metal yard at General Iron Industries, 1942 N. Clifton.

"We never should have allowed it to be developed so high," Holzer said.

Holzer and the LEED Council have worked for the last 25 years to protect the industrial corridor and provide job training for its workers. Holzer said residents inevitably complain about the noise and other problems factories can create.

"If you put your residential house here next to General Iron, you actually put them out of compliance on a whole bunch of environmental and noise issues," he said.

The condo building at Racine and Armitage is too far away to threaten General Iron or any other factory in the corridor, but in the mid-1980s condos started popping up almost adjacent to the steel processing plant.

Marty Oberman, then alderman of the 43rd Ward, supported a zoning change for a shuttered piano factory building at 1872 N. Clybourn in 1986, allowing it to be converted into luxury condos. Holzer said the Piano Lofts development led to disinvestment in the industrial corridor because companies feared they would be pushed out by a coming wave of residents.

"It ends up jeopardizing a tremendous amount of industrial investment in jobs that are in locations that make sense for them," Holzer said. "Oftentimes when you push those businesses out they don't just move down the street where nobody is going to push them out. They close up for good or they move to the suburbs or they move to Arkansas or they move to Mexico."

Soon after that first residential development arrived the LEED Council began working with Oberman to develop a plan to deal with the "hundreds of zoning change requests" he was getting from developers. Ted Wysocki, president and CEO of LEED, said the end result was the creation of the Clybourn Planned Manufacturing District in 1988-the first of its kind in the city. The district acts as a retail buffer between residential development to the east of Clybourn and factories to the west.

In 1991, LEED helped establish the Elston PMD, which runs west of the Chicago River from Webster to Chicago, and the Goose Island PMD. Six years later they established the Chicago-Halsted PMD, which includes the Chicago Tribune Freedom Center printing facility at 777 W. Chicago. There are 15 such districts now citywide and more are being considered.

The North Branch Industrial Corridor is home to about 600 businesses that employ roughly 15,000 to 20,000 workers, according to Holzer.

He argues that the area's location next to the Chicago River and in close proximity to railroads, and highways makes it more energy efficient in terms of transportation. The transportation infrastructure allows products and industrial waste to more easily be barged in and out of the corridor or shipped by train or truck.

"This is keeping businesses in an area that is already accessible by multiple modes of transportation," Holzer said. "If you displace these businesses and they get scattered all over, you create a much more fuel intensive situation."

He noted that about 75 percent of the workforce in the corridor lives in Chicago and about half of those are within three miles of the plant where they work. Moving businesses out to the suburbs would result in either massive layoffs or workers being forced into to hour-long commutes, he said.

In the 1990s, the industrial manufacturing company Republic Windows and Doors was outgrowing its location at Paulina and Diversey and considering moving operations to Schaumburg, according to Holzer. But the establishment of the Goose Island PMD helped keep them in the city, he said.

Back then, much of Goose Island was vacant, with about 25 businesses employing roughly 1,000 workers. But with the establishment of the Wrigley World Innovation Center, a state-of-the-art research facility, and dozens of other businesses, Holzer said the industrial island now employs more than 5,000 workers.

Protecting industry from residential development is only part of the LEED Council's mission, according to Wysocki. The group also trains workers for the various industries for jobs in the corridor.

He said students, many of whom are ex-offenders and low skilled, attend a 10-week, 120-hour program, learning

construction, computers and other skills. He said a full-time education manager works to assess workers' skills and then develops a strategy to increase their education by two grade levels.

"If they're going to choose our industrial skills training, then he's making sure they can read instruction books for power tools," Wysocki said. "If they're going to go into our computer skills training then they are making sure they can read computer manuals."

He said the construction portion of the classes train workers to build a room with functional electricity and plumbing. Students also learn to remove the room after building it, Wysocki said.

"All of the city's recycling requirements are creating a whole deconstruction industry, so people need to know how to deconstruct something for the purposes of salvaging and recycling," he said.

In addition to pushing their sustainable development policies and promoting their education efforts, LEED has worked to strengthen the PMDs through improved transportation infrastructure in the corridor. The organization's infrastructure taskforce meets bi-monthly to assess truck road access, bridge construction and a variety of infrastructure improvements.

Holzer said new streets are built to withstand 80,000-pound truckloads, and bridges are now built with higher clearance spans to accommodate delivery vehicles.

The group also has worked with Wrigley to establish a special bus route to Goose Island to provide access to hundreds of workers who use public transportation. The Wrigley research facility alone employs 350 people, Holzer said.

"[Wrigley is] privately funding this," he said. "They pay about \$320,000 a year to the CTA to run this public-private partnership."