



**Memo to Mayor Lori Lightfoot**

May 20, 2019

**From: Chicago Sustainability Leaders Network (CSLN)**

**Re: Suggestions for Citywide Sustainability Programs, Partnerships, and Policies for Chicago**

---

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

[Chicago Sustainability Leaders Network](#) (CSLN) believes that sustainability is an expansive term that includes the environmental, cultural, and economic aspects necessary for communities to thrive equitably in the long-term. We advocate for actively listening to and partnering with community residents and organizations to develop policies that are consistent with each community's best interests. This memo outlines the five principles with which we approach our recommendations and defines seven priorities we believe should be adopted by the City of Chicago to protect, preserve, and contribute to citywide sustainability. Subsequently we suggest actions for each priority to achieve in the Mayor's first 100 days in office. We welcome feedback and discourse on these ideas, which are provided as a launch point for discussion.

---

## OVERTURE

Chicago Sustainability Leaders Network (CSLN) connects grassroots leaders from communities across Chicago to collaborate, share resources, support each other's work, build a stronger collective voice, and nurture equitable and impactful relationships with policy makers. CSLN envisions inclusive and just communities of civically engaged residents working together to address social disparities and promote environmental health, human well-being, and community vitality for present and future generations.

With the impending threat of climate change, our understanding of sustainability must encompass not only environmental but also cultural and economic aspects necessary for thriving communities. Environmental health means clean air, water, and soil. Cultural health promotes celebration and exchange within and across geographic, ethnic, and generational divides. Economic health creates livelihood for all members of a community. CSLN believes this holistic lens is crucial to building just solutions, as environmental solutions created without context often exacerbate inequity among communities.

Chicago is primed to make great strides toward sustainability, with recent milestones including the signing of the [Chicago Climate Charter](#) at the North [American Climate Summit](#), the [Future Energy Jobs Act](#), growing support for a [Clean Energy Jobs Act](#), the [Resilient Chicago](#) plan, and a commitment to 100% renewable energy by 2035. While these initiatives provide great opportunities, they also require an intentional effort in order to prevent exacerbating the housing crisis, resident population loss, community displacement, and gentrification. We believe a holistic approach to sustainability is critical to caring for both people and our environment.

CSLN believes that the following principles applied to citywide sustainability programs, partnerships, and policies would generate ownership and support of community organizations and residents, resulting in catalytic change that ultimately creates a stronger foundation for stable, thriving communities.

 **PRIORITIZE INCLUSIVE, EQUITABLE, AND PEOPLE-CENTERED COMMUNITIES**  
*Communities with the highest needs must be prioritized for resources and services.*

 **ENSURE MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP**  
*Planning and development must be co-created with impacted communities through diverse and representative leadership and participation.*

 **CONSERVE COMMUNITY HISTORY & CULTURE**  
*Initiatives must respect the history, culture, and current reality of communities.*

 **PROTECT AND ADVOCATE FOR PUBLIC SPACE**  
*Public services, property, and natural areas must be prioritized to strengthen the commons.*

 **PROMOTE CREATIVE COLLABORATION AND CITYWIDE CONNECTION**  
*Partnerships across communities promote mutual learning, resource sharing, and innovation.*

These principles rely on the following terms and values:



**Sustainability:** Inclusive of environmental, cultural, and economic aspects that provide stability to communities and planet, sustainability is a state in which all people are able to participate meaningfully in the civic process and have access to the resources they need to live well.



**Equity:** All people deserve access to the opportunities and resources they need to survive and succeed, yet historic, systemic, and structural barriers limit the participation of many groups. Equitable systems are designed to recognize communities and groups of greatest need and counter the imbalances that restrict their access to, enrichment by, and enjoyment of public services and resources. A racial equity lens in particular sharpens the focus and increases the impact of many of the proposed actions.



**Diversity & Inclusion:** Institutions must enact structures and support leadership that reflects the cultural diversity of the communities they serve. While particular focus is needed to ensure equity for black and brown communities within underserved areas of Chicago, all people—regardless of their age, cultural heritage, national origin, disability, socio-economic status, gender, race, sexual orientation, religious views, or health status—must be able to participate meaningfully in decision-making and hold leadership positions.



**Community Ownership:** Community stakeholders most affected by environmental and social challenges are those best equipped to create and implement the most effective solutions—and are often already doing so. Effective government programs are based upon community voice and community-driven decision-making rather than on seeking to generate buy-in for top-down policies.

The following are seven practical and tangible ways—and priority 100 day actions—the new administration can implement in order to incorporate our principles and promote community-driven sustainability.

Please note that the principles below are not numbered in order of importance but simply for readability.

1

## COLLABORATE WITH COMMUNITIES TO ENGAGE RESIDENTS AS PARTNERS

A city government that respects and partners with community members and organizations is able to create meaningful and impactful programs that engage residents and create shared ownership. Large-scale citywide programs implemented without authentic local partnerships may undermine community-led work. While the City can leverage resources, expertise, and capital, community organizations offer a nuanced understanding of the needs and assets of individual communities. Working symbiotically, the two can accomplish more than either in isolation.

### Suggested action(s) in the first 100 days:

- **Formalize a community engagement structure** within city government that explicitly states expectations and provides opportunities and resources for resident engagement on City projects. Examples include the Portland [Community Engagement Liaisons Program](#) and the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene [Community Engagement Framework](#).
- **Plan meetings with community organizations and alderman** in each community area to determine localized challenges, needs, assets, and desires.
- **Designate a network of community locations** for feedback and needs to be expressed efficiently.

2

## SYSTEMATIZE SUSTAINABILITY WITHIN AND BETWEEN ALL CITY PLANS

Coordination and prioritization of sustainability across city departments must come from city leadership and help community organizations leverage city resources towards sustainable planning. An established system would provide continuity within and between administrations, enable true longevity planning, and reduce the burden on residents to continually relearn systems in order participate and advocate.

### Suggested action(s) in the first 100 days:

- **Expand and implement the Sustainable Operations Plan (2015)** that guides daily management, operations, and employee actions. Using other plans from successful organizations, businesses, and municipalities, best practices can be replicated. Examples include [Portland](#), [San Francisco](#), and [NYC](#).
- **Organize around a unifying goal** that provides a common standard that all departments measure progress towards. Examples have already been identified by the [Sustain Chicago](#) project.
- **Deliver a summary analysis** of data collected from departments about what they are doing within sustainability currently. This summary can build off of the [Sustain Chicago](#) portal and goals.
- **Conduct a visualization exercise** with all departments in order to design an accessible system.

3

## INTEGRATE SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES & EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

The public education system—including staff, students, and buildings—is key to prioritizing sustainability programming and education that instills values, knowledge, and behaviors that support participation of youth and adults alike in creating a more sustainable city.

### Suggested action(s) in the first 100 days:

- **Develop a sustainability-based instructional model** in partnership with CPS. An example model is the [Teaching and Learning for a Sustainable Future](#) UNESCO programme for the United Nations.
- **Provide support for Build-a-bike programs** in public schools.
- **Have all schools swap end-of-year surplus** and measure and track it as a student activity.

4

## FOSTER COMMUNITY-DRIVEN, COMMONS-BASED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Inequitable economic development has resulted in large disparities in wealth among communities and inadequate measures for protecting the health of residents and the environment. Extensive resident participation and rigorous environmental assessment should not be seen as hindrances but as assets upon which to base a more inclusive, participatory, and sustainable local economy. National models for financially incentivizing sustainability through rebates, tax credits, and other creative programs have been proven to be powerful motivators and to engage business owners and residents who would otherwise not be involved in the sustainability.

### Suggested action(s) in the first 100 days:

- **Redirect City investments** toward companies that prioritize environmental responsibility and social justice causes. An example would be to divest from fossil fuels.
- **Create a public repository** for community stakeholders to share documents related to community sustainability, development plans, and planning processes. This database will build transparency and communicate data that paints the big picture and avoids duplication of efforts.

5

## EXPAND EQUITABLE, SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORTATION

The City should invest in infrastructure that facilitates and encourages diverse transportation options—including pedestrian, bike, and public transit—within and among communities. The Divvy for Everyone (D4E) program is an excellent example of the city working with local organizations to create greater opportunity and access for low- to moderate- income communities.

### Suggested action(s) in the first 100 days:

- **Develop a plan for more protected bike lanes** in the South, West, and Northwest.
- **Create incentives** for renewable fueling options. A state-level example is Illinois Finance Authority [Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Project Financing](#) program.
- **Seek city staff volunteers to navigate Chicago in a wheelchair** for a day and a night and report their experience.

6

## CROSS-DEVELOP & PROMOTE SUSTAINABILITY TRAINING PROGRAMS

In order to fully appreciate and participate in sustainability programming, residents and city staff must have a better understanding of the current reality of climate change and ways to participate in mitigating its effects. The City should support public education on climate change and other environmental issues by integrating sustainability training programs into existing trainings and resources offered by departments and delegate agencies.

### Suggested action(s) in the first 100 days:

- **Create a renewable energy provider consortium** to initiate discussions of training, job placement, and incentives, with eventual goal to implement significant community-based job training programs.
- **Require a sustainability training course** for all Chicago Alderman.
- **Conduct an audit of most pressing environmental issue** in each ward to target training programs.

7

## RE-INVEST IN AN ACCOUNTABLE & ACCESSIBLE BODY TO IMPLEMENT SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES

The City should reinstate and expand upon previously existing citywide sustainability programs and establish or partner with existing community-based hubs to ensure that programs are coordinated and made accessible to all.

### Suggested action(s) in the first 100 days:

- **Deliver communication plan** to raise awareness around sustainability initiatives and regularly report progress to educate residents on what is being done at citywide and local levels.
- **Adopt accounting standards for sustainability and social responsibility targets.** Methodology should align to respected principles. An example is the [SASB Sustainability Accounting Standards](#).
- **Appoint a cabinet-level Department of the Environment.**



## CONTINUED COLLABORATION

Since its formation in late 2013, CSLN has worked to cultivate mutually beneficial relationships between community leaders operating from the bottom-up with city policymakers operating from the top-down. This *in-between space* recognizes the unique value each perspective brings and the necessity of collaboration among them to creating stable communities that care for people and the environment.

CSLN has worked with past Chief Sustainability Officers in the Mayor's Office by organizing policy roundtables with network members representing a diversity of communities and approaches. These meetings have allowed for mutually-beneficial sharing, learning, and collaboration between grassroots leaders and government officials on Chicago's recycling programs and the *Resilient Chicago* plan.

Whether the responsibility of the Chief Sustainability Officer or another position within the Mayor's Office, a designated point person(s) is required to implement these principles. A conscientious, competent, and community-minded point person(s) will provide the touchstone for an effective closed-loop community input/engagement/action/ feedback process for all relevant city activities. To maximize effectiveness and minimize duplication of effort, this point person(s) should also coordinate with City Council Committees and/or Cook County resources.

We as representatives of CSLN would like to continue this working relationship with your administration through continuing to organize roundtable meetings with relevant staff and through partnering on the implementation of the actions and milestones we've suggested throughout this memo.

We believe that when city government and community leaders work together, Chicagoans benefit.

//

The Chicago Sustainability Leaders Network is facilitated by the [Institute of Cultural Affairs](#) (ICA-USA).

To learn more about the network or it's members please visit [www.accelerate77.net/csln](http://www.accelerate77.net/csln)

or contact Caitlin at [Csarro@ica-usa.org](mailto:Csarro@ica-usa.org).