EXPLORING THE ISSUE:

INVEST SOUTH/WEST

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One of Mayor Lori Lightfoot’s signature initiatives commits a large infusion of cash and design resources to underserved neighborhoods in order to shore up local social and physical infrastructure. Dubbed [INVEST South/West](https://www.cityofchicago.org/17635), many see it as an important complement to the Neighborhood Opportunity Fund launched in 2017. That program makes grants to small businesses through a levy on downtown development seeking density bonuses beyond what zoning permits. By focusing on infrastructure, housing, commercial space, and streetscape improvements along 12 key corridors in 10 south and west side neighborhoods, INVEST South/West seeks to catalyze and multiply private capital. The Chicago design community also has unprecedented access and influence through this program.

INVEST South/West blends the resources of several city departments, community organizations, and the private sector to make sustained, meaningful direct investment in neighborhoods far removed from the glittering downtown. Reinvigorating the traditional commercial and cultural hubs in these neighborhoods is the surest way to build up communities and bolster quality of life.

Mayor Lightfoot has pledged $250 million over three years to this program, in addition to previous transportation and housing commitments of about $500 million in these neighborhoods. The first $70 million in targeted public spending yielded $300 million in private investment. One of the best aspects of this initiative is that the public money already exists: the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) needs only to re-route it from tax increment funds, the Neighborhood Opportunity Fund, and the Small Business Improvement Fund. Big pledges from the private sector include $10 million each from BMO Harris Bank, JPMorgan Chase, and Starbucks, and a $20 million commitment from Fifth Third Bank.

The City did not arrive at 12 target corridors by accident. A rigorous methodology was applied to hone in on streets with at least one active commercial area and a community plan in effect. Building on existing life on the street is crucial, since clustering economic activity in a walkable, transit-oriented way creates a focal point and lifts up local businesses. And Chicago doesn’t need new plans, it needs coordination of existing plans.
After a gradual liftoff hindered by global pandemic, on-the-ground investments have been materializing at a steady clip. The City’s RFP process, which strives to partner local architects and builders and extols the virtues of design excellence, is yielding above-average project proposals centered on innovative community spaces, small business incubators, affordable housing, retail, and historic rehabs.

A common refrain from planning commissioner Maurice Cox has been that Chicago is the only global city in America that is shrinking. Chicago needs innovative tools like INVEST South/West, he argues, to correct the imbalance between the thriving center city and depopulating low-income neighborhoods.

Quick and decisive action along these target corridors, with tangible improvements to public safety and the streetscape, is how the City can show communities it means business.

Chicago continues to suffer from a lack of comprehensive planning, but INVEST South/West moves us closer to thinking of neighborhoods as vital organs of the city. Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Detroit, and Seattle are in some ways doing more for equitable investment in neighborhoods. Those cities are chasing significant gains in quality of life necessities like green space and affordable housing.

The CAC will continue to monitor the roll-out of INVEST South/West and the unique opportunities it affords to local designers wishing to make their mark on neighborhoods.
KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- The community investment precedent being laid by INVEST South/West is important, but what is required to ensure the approach outlives the Lightfoot administration?

- Good design, inclusive of community, will help the program succeed. This is something the mayor and planning commissioner recognize, and the designs thus far are encouraging. We hope that these improved corridors and inspired spaces succeed as models for the private sector to follow.

- As Commissioner Cox has candidly stated, decades of discriminatory public policy and disinvestment have produced the extreme inequality we’re grappling with in Chicago. How much will INVEST South/West chart a new course for the city?

- How much transparency will there be in assessing the program’s overall efficacy? Will ordinary citizens be able to dissect individual projects and track the public expenditures?

Sources:
Chicago is hiring seven new city planners. Here’s why that matters. Sara Freund, Curbed Chicago, December 13, 2019.
Seattle to invest a record $110M in affordable housing across the city. Sydney Brownstone, Seattle Times, December 9, 2019.
Investing in equitable urban park systems. City Parks Alliance, July 2019.
INVEST South/West. City of Chicago.