Will Chicago think big after Daley?

Major projects could stall as cash-strapped city adapts to new leadership

By Blair Kamin

January 2, 2011

The rulers of ancient Rome stamped their presence on the landscape with arches and aqueducts.

In modern-day Chicago, outgoing Mayor Richard M. Daley will leave his own indelible mark: A plenitude of projects that stretches into nearly every corner of the city, from the glistening "Bean" in Millennium Park to the miles of shrub-filled median planters that soften Chicago's harsh streets.

This was a mayor with a passion to build. By combining the roles of chief politician and chief planner, Daley became the ultimate shaper of Chicago's cityscape. There was no denying his authority over the cityscape — just as there is no denying the deep anxiety his departure has spawned among the city's architects and builders.

Chicago, they worry, will go from being a city in overdrive to a city on hold.

By leaving the city treasury in such bad shape, Daley almost guaranteed it would be tough for his successor to build the kind of public works that burnished Chicago's global stature during his reign. The still-struggling economy will make it even tougher to match the glory of Daley's greatest triumph, Millennium Park, which cost about $500 million and replaced a dusty railroad yard with a spectacular collection of contemporary art and architecture.

"I hope the intensity remains," said Chicago developer Dan McCaffery, who wants to turn the vast former U.S. Steel plant on the southeast lakefront into a thriving, mixed-use community. "People in City Hall knew that when the mayor had endorsed something, it was aggressively pursued. You could feel the difference. It was palpable."

"Any new mayor has got to realize that being a green city has become a part of Chicago as much as hot dogs," said Ben Helphand, president of the Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail, which is pushing for an elevated park, nearly three miles long, on a dormant Northwest Side railroad spur.

But as about a dozen candidates vie to succeed Daley, voters could be forgiven for having little idea whether the would-be rulers want to push forward with Daley's drive to make Chicago "the greenest city in America." Only five candidates attended a mayoral forum on the environment in early December, with front-runner Rahm Emanuel noticeable by his absence.

Would the candidates expand Daley's 85-plus miles of median planters or cut back on maintenance because times are tough?

Would they raise standards for green roofs and energy-saving architecture or slow Daley's momentum and try to placate developers who blanch at the higher upfront costs such measures require?
Would the candidates expand Daley's network of bike paths and improve his troubled recycling program?

And how would they address the city's severe shortage of neighborhood parkland, which stands in stark contrast to the verdant image fostered by the city's lakefront parks?

According to a 2010 survey by Trust for Public Land, a San Francisco-based land conservation group, Chicago has just 4.2 acres of parkland for every 1,000 residents. That ranked the city 12th among the nation's most densely populated cities, far behind leaders Oakland and Washington, D.C., which provide 12.9 acres per 1,000 people.

Within large swaths of Chicago, the picture is worse. Fifty-five of the city's 77 community areas don't even have two acres of parkland per 1,000 people, according to Erma Tranter, president of the Friends of the Parks advocacy group.

"We do not have sufficient park space for a healthy community," she said. "It's an absolutely critical issue in neighborhoods where children don't have places to play. That correlates to obesity, health problems and higher costs for future health issues. There are children who are bombarded with all these electronic games. They don't have land anywhere near for them to go to."

Yet it's little wonder that the candidates aren't thinking big on open space. Big plans create big expectations — and fears of big tax increases. Looking ahead to a Jan. 19 mayoral forum on downtown and environmental issues, few expect the candidates to come forth with bold initiatives.

"In the near future, you're not going to see many projects on the scale of a Millennium Park," said Timothy J. Gilfoyle, a history professor at Loyola University and author of "Millennium Park: Creating a Chicago Landmark."

Indeed, as Chicago ponders its future, it may be useful to view Millennium Park not as a triumph to be repeated, but as a shining exception, one that occurred only because the stars aligned and Daley had created order in Chicago's turbulent political universe.

After years of fruitless talk, the story goes, the park got its start in 1997, when the mayor peered down from his dentist's office along Michigan Avenue and decided to turn that dusty railroad yard in Grant Park's northwest corner into an urban showcase.

By then, Daley had been mayor for eight years and had consolidated his grip on power. Key figures in the park's creation, including major donors like the Pritzker and Crown families, were "in many ways indebted to, dependent upon and allied with the mayor," Gilfoyle said. They wanted to please Daley, he explained, partly because their real estate and other holdings might benefit from future city action.

All roads, in other words, led to Daley. And the economic winds were at his back. The late 1990s dot-com boom gave the park's chief fundraiser, former Sara Lee Corp. CEO John Bryan, enormous wealth to tap. Without it, Gilfoyle said, the 6-year-old park might never have happened.

Today, with such favorable conditions a distant memory, Chicago's builders are scrambling to find new paths to get things done. One is to push projects ahead step by step rather than in a single, expensive rush, as at Millennium Park.
That's the approach being followed by backers of the Bloomingdale Trail, who have taken the first steps toward creating a 2.78-mile-long park on an inactive railroad spur that rises almost 20 feet above the Northwest Side areas of Bucktown, Wicker Park, Logan Square and Humboldt Park.

Inspired by the success of New York City's High Line, a year-old park built on abandoned elevated tracks, trail activists envision a greenway where bikers would commute to work, children would walk to school, and people could jog, cross-country ski or get away from urban bustle. Ground-level parks would provide access to the trail. Helphand, the trail group's leader, compares its various links to a charm bracelet.

Trudging through snow that obscures the spur's tracks, he shows off an under-construction, ground-level park at the corner of Albany and Whipple streets that's due to open this spring. Eventually, it will be outfitted with ramps leading to the trail.

Yet much needs to be done. Engineers still must determine how many of the trail's 37 viaducts need potentially expensive structural repairs. And nearly $60 million must be raised for the park, which is expected to cost at least $65 million. The activists muse that a certain ex-mayor might help them campaign for cash.

"I can't imagine (Daley) is going to disappear from the civic scene in terms of things he cares about," said Beth White, director of the Trust for Public Land's Chicago office, which is coordinating fundraising and civic outreach for the project. Its target completion date is 2016.

Even the big lakefront projects that have grabbed headlines recently are likely to go the piecemeal route.

At the former Meigs Field, which Daley famously shut down in 2003 by ordering city backhoes to gouge giant Xs in the runway, the Chicago Park District will take up to 25 years to complete plans for a park that packs a variety of ecosystems onto Northerly Island. At Navy Pier, the latest renovation plan, floated in November, is less a makeover than a series of nips and tucks, such as a newer and bigger Ferris wheel.

"We're trying to have as much impact as we can in a financially responsible way," said Steve Haemmerle, the pier's executive director of development.

Likewise, the sheer size of South Works — at nearly 580 acres, it is bigger in area than the Loop — mandates that developer McCaffery will have to move deliberately, though he wants to make a splash this summer with a three-day rock festival that would showcase the site's over-the-water views of the city's skyline.

While McCaffery stands to get up to $98 million in city infrastructure funds for his 87-acre first phase, scheduled to open in 2013, he still must find retailers for its planned shopping center. Sealing the deal won't be easy. "Retailers are all hurting and they're not in the mood for expansion," says Gail Lissner, a vice president at Appraisal Research Counselors.

As he drives through the waving prairie grasses on the site, McCaffery voices another concern: A new mayor might go overboard in reforming Chicago's controversial tax-increment financing districts.
Critics have attacked the districts for subsidizing development in affluent areas like the Loop. Yet without city subsidies for roads and alleys, McCaffery would be hard-pressed to develop the rest of South Works. "I get twitchy when I see the TIF discussion become so politicized," he said.

While McCaffery frets that a new leader won't match Daley's pro-development intensity, others view the mayor's forthcoming departure as an opening for a more democratic style of governing than Daley's ruthlessly effective, but often-alienating, approach.

"Daley's done a great job and he led the city very strongly. But if we're going to move where we need to be, we need to engage the community in a different way," said Peter Nicholson, executive director of the Foresight Design Initiative, a nonprofit devoted to sustainability issues. "It can't be command and control."