

## Directories map business reality, potential

ED FINKEL | AUGUST 17, 2006

The South and West sides of Chicago might be stereotyped as commercial wastelands, but three NCP lead agencies have found hundreds of businesses in their communities.

Lead agencies in the Quad Communities, North Lawndale, and East Garfield Park have or are about to release business directories that provide mental maps of what goods and services they have available -- and where the geographic and categorical gaps exist that could lead to new business development.

The Quad Communities Development Corp. in September 2005 released a categorized directory of nearly 800 businesses in the greater Quad Communities area, from 26th Street to 51st Street and the Dan Ryan Expressway to Lake Michigan. Of those, 140 were within QCDC's immediate service area, from 35th Street to either 47th or 51st, and from Lake Shore Drive to approximately Vincennes Avenue.

The vast majority of the 796 total businesses were in either Grand Boulevard or Hyde Park, says Chinwe Onyeagoro, a consultant to QCDC who helped lead the effort. "This notion of there not being a critical mass of products and services to serve local residents and the daytime population is absolutely clear," she says.

At least half of businesses were concentrated in seven categories, Onyeagoro adds. The top category was medical facilities (15 percent), followed by restaurants (12 percent), vacant business site (10 percent), and beauty/barber/nail shop (9 percent). But 80 percent of restaurants were further categorized as fast food, and zero full-service restaurants exist outside of Hyde Park, she says.

"We wanted to get a true sense of what types of businesses were actually in the community," says Bernita Johnson-Gabriel, NCP Director for QCDC. "It also gave us an opportunity to zoom



PHOTO: COURTESY QCDC

The Quad Communities business inventory turned up several hundred establishments, but most were outside QCDC's core service area.

in on those businesses who are in our service area, so that we could start to provide resources and technical assistance. We're in the process of doing that."

Among the first results of that effort has been the consistent feedback about litter-related issues that led to a partnership with CleanSlate to clean up Cottage Grove Avenue in the heart of the community. "We were able to see where the litter was," she says.

QCDC also has partnered with the Women's Business Development Center, a small business technical assistance group, to provide case management for small businesses in areas like financing, loan packaging and small business supports. "Had we not done the inventory and the surveys, it would have been difficult to have a handle on what the needs are and who we should target," Onyeagoro says.

### **Dollars come and leave**

Lawndale Christian Development Corp. produced the North Lawndale Business Directory, which contains a categorized listing of about 1,200 businesses (and a small number of social service agencies) as well as a map and short history of the community, says Tiffany Childress, former NCP Organizer, who will be a science teacher at North Lawndale College Prep High School starting in September.

"As we were talking about how to develop and support existing business and to nurture commercial development, we felt like we needed to somehow start or increase networking amongst businesses," Childress says. "One of the biggest problems we had in this community, unlike our neighbor to the south, Little Village, [was that] we felt like a dollar has one cycle in this community: It comes in, and it leaves. We wanted to increase the awareness of who was here, who we could patronize."

Most of the businesses listed are locally owned, although some are franchises, says Renee Gates, a former business manager at the North Lawndale Community News, who served as a consultant to LCDC during the process.

"We touched on the idea of, if there was a guide, or if there was something for the residents to know what businesses were actually here, it would help support [the businesses and] urge community residents to support them," she says.

In East Garfield, the soon-to-be-released directory will list more than 300 businesses in an area that spans from Western Avenue to Hamlin Street and Franklin Street to I-290, says Mike Tomas, NCP Director for the Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance. Most are commercial spaces although a handful are home-based, he says, and they'll be categorized both by type of business and by street.

"If you're a potential business owner or developer, and you're interested in a street, you'll be

able to do that, as well,” he says. “You look at the neighborhood, you see a lot of vacant lots, businesses here or there. Hopefully, having a booklet you can access will give some more weight to the businesses here and raise their profile.”

Given that about 50 cents on every dollar are spent outside the neighborhood, Tomas says, the alliance wants to do “anything we can do to keep our money locally. We also just wanted to gather this information. We knew there were a lot of businesses out there, but not until we started pulling this together did we realize how many.”

### **Differing methodologies**

The three groups have collected their data in different ways, generally starting with one or more primary sources and then verifying the information found either by phone or on foot. QCDC received a grant from the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission (NIPC) that provided GIS mapping tools for 10 college and graduate interns to use.

“What we did was have them hit the street and map each parcel throughout our service area,” Johnson-Gabriel says. “It was quite intense. We were conscious to have them focus on the business corridors, [such as] 53rd, 47th, Cottage Grove.”

The NIPC system already had baseline data for the area, and the group added information from the Yellow Pages before removing non-business entities like faith-based organizations, social service providers and educational institutions, Onyeagoro says. Then, they sent the interns out for 1 1/2 months, five days a week, five or six hours a day, both in cars and on foot. They verified businesses for which they had listings still existed and noted new ones, then categorized them.

The group had a pool of 2,000 businesses but had whittled that down to 796 by the time they were done, she says. “That’s how outdated the Yellow Pages was.” As a final step, the group made phone calls. “We wanted to find out the phone number and call them to make sure you can actually get someone on the phone,” Onyeagoro says. “If there’s a question around what category this business fits into, make a call.”

Garfield Park , which has received funding from the city Department of Planning and Development as well as LaSalle and Fifth Third banks, has compiled its listings by pulling business licenses off the website of the new Department of Business Affairs. Consultant Micah Burrell then double-checks. “You can tell a lot by the license, but you need to make some phone calls,” Tomas says.

In North Lawndale, the weekly newspaper for which Gates once worked proved to be a key partner, Childress says, while LISC and Harris Bank provided funding. “There was a lot of push-back from funders because people felt like there were no businesses in North Lawndale. Who are you going to put in there?” she says.

They found their 1,000-plus listings with help from a task force that consisted of many of the same people who participated on the business development subcommittee that was part of the NCP quality-of-life process, Gates says.

They began with listings of ComEd commercial customers, acquired through a local businessperson who “had a relationship” with the utility; scoured the city Department of Revenue’s listings; and incorporated a list of businesses with revenue of under \$2 million compiled by Chicago Community Ventures.

Then, they cross-referenced those lists, weeded out “undesirable” establishments such as liquor stores, sent a mailing to verify that businesses on the list still existed, and hired two community residents to start going “door-to-door, street-by-street, going through the list and making sure those businesses were actually there, the ones who didn’t respond to the mailing,” she says. Lastly, they confirmed phone numbers.

### **Distributed as newspaper inserts**

The newspaper partnered with LCDC to distribute most of the 20,000 copies by including them as an insert in June and July editions, while each business received copies. LCDC had an “ordeal because the original printing company went bankrupt,” Childress says, but the News again became involved in the person of editorial director Isaac Lewis, who challenged new businesses to step up and replace the money lost.

“He went to them and said, ‘Hey, if you’re going to be in this neighborhood, we want to challenge you to support what’s going on in this neighborhood,’” Childress says.

Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance plans to print about 6,000 copies of its directory, distributing them through the mail, on foot with help from neighborhood youth, and in stacks inside the doors of neighborhood businesses, Tomas says. “We do want to get it out as much as possible,” he says. “We can explore putting it on the web. It would be most useful, in this community, to get this in people’s hands.”

QCDC doesn’t have funding to print or distribute as many copies as it would like, Johnson-Gabriel says. Only about 200 have been handed out, but QCDC has posted the directory on its website, [www.qcdc.org](http://www.qcdc.org) “so people could readily get to it,” she says. “Ten copies in every business? If you can find me the money, we’d love to be able to.”

Quad Communities has mailed letters to people in the community asking them to call if they’d like a copy, Onyeagoro says, adding that the directory has been sent to the local TIF Council, “so they can have an informed discussion about what type of retail should be put in those mixed-use buildings,” she says. “We’re going to be looking for quality retail, and the typical barbershop-beauty salon is not acceptable.”

For those in other NCP communities who might want to start aggregating data on businesses, Onyeagoro has a two-word piece of advice. "Start small," she says. "Focus on one or two variables and collect it for all of the organizations. ... Don't try to collect every variable you can collect. That will come in time."

Further, Onyeagoro says, "Before you collect, understand how you're going to use it. Otherwise, you get lost in the process. Businesses have been very pleased with the follow up we've given them. Analyze the data early and often, and try to respond as quickly as possible to what the businesses are sharing with you."

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