

# The Green Town Project

A private and public sector partnership  
to re-green and revitalize a rustbelt city

“Ray Bradbury was born in Green Town, make that Waukegan, on August 22, 1920, ...the idyllic small American town that is the backdrop for Ray Bradbury’s autobiographical novel called *Dandelion Wine*. ...A fan cannot read an interview with Ray or *Dandelion Wine* and not understand that Ray will always regard Waukegan, Illinois as his hometown and that his Waukegan years as a youth were the best years of his life.”

Mark Rhoads  
*Illinois Hall of Fame*

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## The City of Waukegan, Illinois

Lake County's largest city and county seat, Waukegan became a bustling Lake Michigan port and industrial center due to its convenient harbor midway between Chicago and Milwaukee. But during the 1980's, as the rest of Lake County thrived, Waukegan slowly declined. Manufacturing plants closed down, middle-class flight set in, and the city found itself challenged with high unemployment, fragile neighborhoods, boarded-up buildings and slipping schools. Then into the vacuum came thousands of new immigrants, many undocumented and desperate to find work, swelling the city's population to more than 90,000. The latest "Report Card" for the Waukegan public school system shows that more than 62% of its student body—which as a whole is about 70% Latino, 21% black and 9% white—comes from low-income families.

Recently, however, Waukegan has taken preliminary steps to recapture its prosperity. A classic downtown movie house has been transformed into a Broadway-style theatre, and a Main Street program has facilitated the opening of several new restaurants nearby. A vacant shopping center on the city's west side has been demolished, and some commercial reconstruction has occurred. A master lakefront development plan is beginning to address pollution problems and to attract potential investors. And urban pioneers are purchasing and rehabbing homes of character in Waukegan's older neighborhoods, keeping the average sales price of a home above \$160,000. If ethnic divides can be bridged, if the city's appearance and image can be enhanced, then Waukegan will be poised to catch the wave of redevelopment that has lifted other rustbelt cities.

## Taskforce On Waukegan Neighborhoods

Thirteen years ago, a small group of Waukegan residents met in a downtown church to explore how they might help to meet their city's challenges. The upshot was the formation of a citizens' group called the Taskforce On Waukegan Neighborhoods (TOWN), with a mission to protect neighborhoods and connect neighbors through an aggressive campaign to stop urban decay. Using a law that authorized the private enforcement of municipal building codes, TOWN offered legal counsel to Waukegan residents to empower them to clean up blighted properties. The response was overwhelming, and some 150 cases were successfully litigated to compel the repair or demolition of abandoned buildings, slums, drug houses and other neighborhood nuisances.

Growing to more than 500 members and re-organizing as a 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation, TOWN worked with city government and the local park district to maintain and beautify public areas, brought speakers on urban issues to public meetings, published informative newsletters and investigative reports, registered voters and hosted candidate debates, and created a state-of-the-art website—including a citizens' forum and pod-casted radio shows—that currently draws about 1,000,000 hits per month ([www.waukegan.org](http://www.waukegan.org)). In 1999, TOWN was proud to be among a select group of volunteer organizations to receive a President's Service Award in the nationwide Point of Light competition, a citation signed by President Clinton recognizing TOWN's "exemplary achievements."

# The Green Town Project

**A partnership between The City of Waukegan,  
University of Illinois Extension  
and Taskforce On Waukegan Neighborhoods**

What is happening in Chicago and other cities can happen in Waukegan. A comprehensive, cutting-edge urban gardening project, building upon pioneering programs like *Chicago: Eat Local/Live Healthy* (excerpts attached) can sow seeds of success throughout our city—producing locally-grown food; spinning off related businesses and jobs; dressing up vacant lots and major corridors; protecting and beautifying Waukegan River ravines; promoting environmental, agricultural and nutritional education; and pulling diverse residents together in mutual efforts to improve our city’s appearance and quality of life. **As Waukegan begins its redevelopment, it can become Ray Bradbury’s 21<sup>st</sup> Century Green Town, with community vegetable gardens, flower gardens, rain gardens and their offshoots enhancing health, beauty and prosperity citywide.**

Waukegan’s government is committed to the renewal of our city, bringing vitality back to key areas like the lakefront, the downtown and the former Lakehurst Shopping Center site (Fountain Square). University of Illinois Extension offers the resources and expertise of a major university and many years of experience in urban gardening in Chicago and other communities. TOWN offers the energy and enthusiasm of its members and a long record of accomplishment for our city. We are committed to work as partners, along with others who share the vision, to re-green Waukegan, beginning with a network of urban gardens that will take root, bloom and spread throughout our community. **Nothing could do more at this moment to invigorate Waukegan’s spirit and knit our multi-ethnic residents together, from grade school students to grandparents.**

Phase One of the Green Town Project will include initiatives such as:

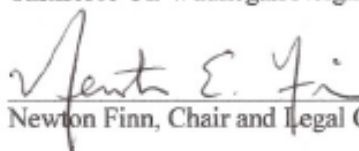
- **The creation of a year-round community vegetable garden and market** on Waukegan's south side to provide healthy home-grown produce in an area with limited access to grocery stores; to offer hands-on education to young people and other residents about the environment, agriculture and nutrition; and to jumpstart spin-off businesses and employment opportunities in local food processing, storage and distribution, composting, etc.
- **The creation of a colorful, attractive urban wildflower and wildlife prairie habitat** in the Commonwealth Edison power line right-of-way on Waukegan's north side that stretches from the lakefront plant to the western border of our city, a project that would draw media attention and ecology-minded visitors as have similar power line restorations that Commonwealth Edison has permitted and encouraged in other communities.
- Working with city departments, the Waukegan Park District, the Citizens' Advisory Group (CAG) and other organizations to **protect and restore our magnificent Waukegan River ravine system**, creating rain gardens and other vegetation buffers along ravine borders and slopes as called for by a CAG action plan designed to control erosion, filter out pollutants and help preserve this priceless asset for present and future generations.
- Working with neighborhoods, schools and churches to **beautify our city's vacant lots**, especially those along highly-traveled corridors, with a variety of visually appealing vegetable and flower gardens, bonding people together in common tasks and putting prominent, often unsightly open spaces to productive use awaiting redevelopment.

Phase Two will continue these initiatives and seek to expand the Green Town Project into additional enterprises such as green roofs, hoop greenhouse farms, honey production, downtown and shopping mall beautification, lakefront bio-cleansing/thermal energy projects, a Waukegan botanical garden, Green Town music and culture fests and a Ray Bradbury Center dedicated to the exploration of emerging green technologies leading to the sustainable city of the future.

We would greatly appreciate your support of this private and public sector partnership to re-green and revitalize a rustbelt city, **a project that will benefit not only Waukegan but all of Lake County, which has long awaited the resurgence of its largest city, its Great Lakes port and county seat.** Will you help our community move beyond its challenges and work together to plant the seeds of a promising future? Will you help us transform Waukegan into Green Town? Please let us know if additional information is desired, and thank you for considering our request.

Respectfully submitted,

Taskforce On Waukegan Neighborhoods by:

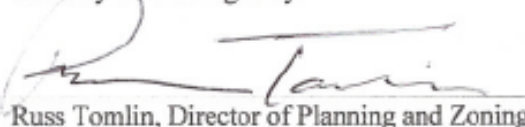
  
Newton Finn, Chair and Legal Counsel

Joining in this request:

University of Illinois Extension by:

  
Kay Doll, Lake County Extension Director

The City of Waukegan by:

  
Russ Tomlin, Director of Planning and Zoning