

A feisty politician brings traffic calming to the north side of Chicago.

By Michael Davidson



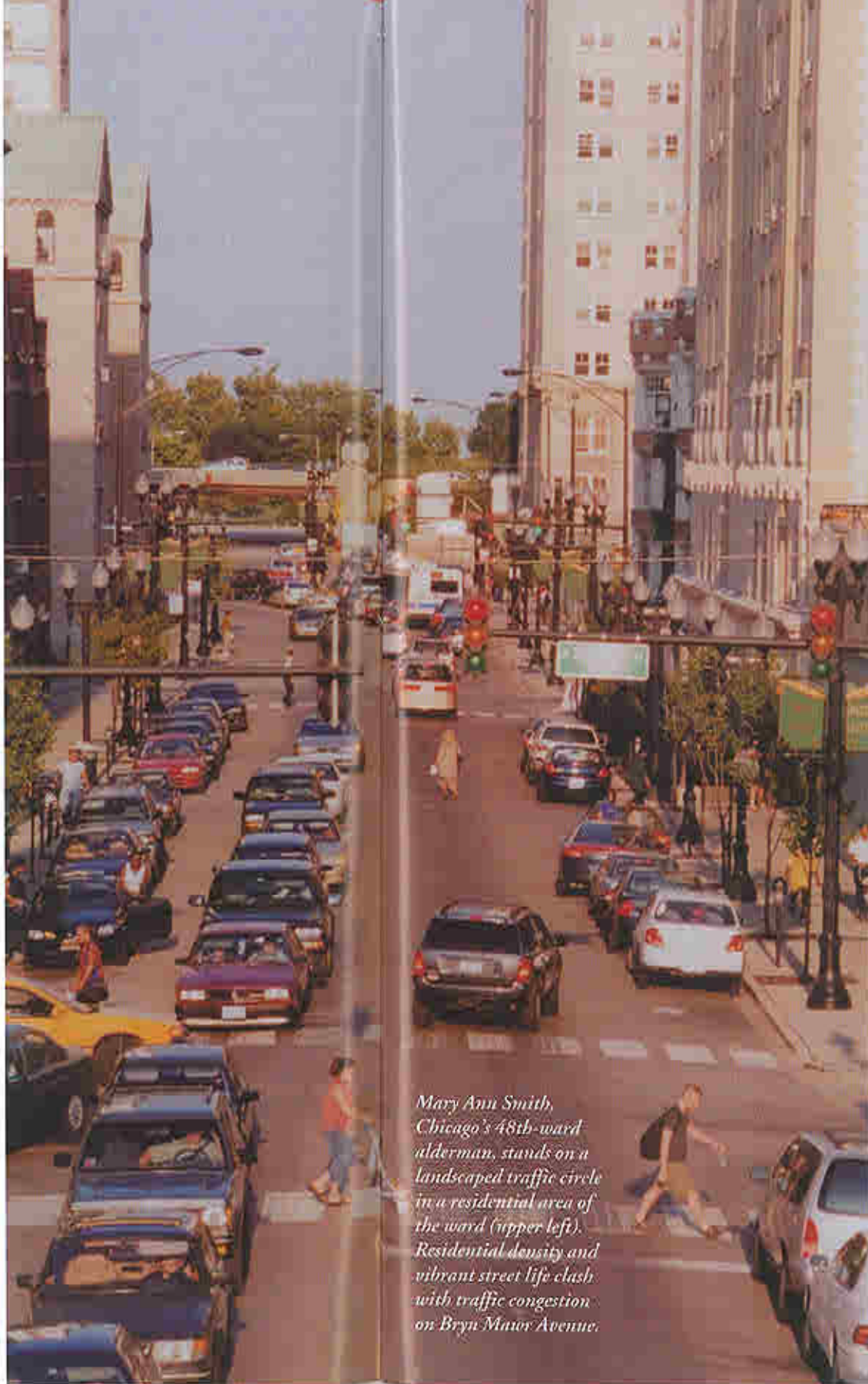
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Chicago is growing greener by the hour—with a mayor planting more than 10,000 trees each year, a new lakefront park, and a green roof demonstration project atop city hall.

Now the city's neighborhoods are going green as well—though in a somewhat different way. A handful of visionaries in this noisy, congested city see the correlation between vehicle speed, urban ecological restoration, and social interaction among neighbors—no small task in a city of three million.

In a 2002 presentation to the Greater Vancouver Regional District entitled "Strategic City: Sustaining Local Values in a Global Economy," economist Jeb Brugmann, founding director and secretary-general of the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) from 1990 to 2000, says Chicago is "unlike other North American cities, where the private sector has formed the core of the [urban] regime." If you want to get something done in Chicago, he says, "you

Taming the Beast



Mary Ann Smith, Chicago's 48th-ward alderman, stands on a landscaped traffic circle in a residential area of the ward (upper left). Residential density and vibrant street life clash with traffic congestion on Bryn Mawr Avenue.

have to visit two oracles: city hall and the market."

Brugmann notes that the administration of Mayor Richard M. Daley is establishing a more "transparent system of give and take between neighborhood, the ward alderman, and the mayor's office." That is the intended protocol for traffic-calming initiatives in the city's 48th Ward.

Pedestrians first

"The people who walk the streets own the streets," says Alderman Mary Ann Smith, referring to her pioneering traffic-calming efforts. Smith is the mayor's point person to ICLEI. She serves on the city's advisory council for sustainable development and the planning commission, and has undertaken a number of gutsy projects to, as she says, "reclaim the neighborhood from the automobile and return it to human beings."

Chicago's 48th Ward is comprised mostly of a section called Edgewater, a lakefront neighborhood of two square miles located about six miles north of the Loop. With 30,000 residents per square mile, the neighborhood boasts a population of nearly 61,000, making it the densest in the city. Many of the residents are seniors who live in lakefront rental, condominium, and congregate housing high-rises along Sheridan Road, a 1.5-mile stretch housing about 10,000.

Lake Shore Drive—the main connector between downtown and the northern suburbs—terminates in Edgewater, and traffic volumes in the neighborhood are daunting. Most of the principal arterials carry between 30,000 and 70,000 vehicles a day. Despite Smith's North Side ward being well-served by bus and rail transit, she calls it "ground zero" for traffic congestion and all of the negative impacts that accompany it.

Why is there so much gridlock when 42 percent of transit-friendly Edgewater households do not own a vehicle? Pass-through traffic is the culprit and the reason why the mayor, alderman, and residents want to slow it down and eventually decrease it, and also why Smith and the mayor envision Chicago as a traffic-calming model for large, dense, aging cities. Numerous traffic-calming devices have been installed in the last seven years.

Soon after the first traffic-calming devices were in place in the 48th Ward, other Chicago alderman started to request similar items. To meet this increasing need, the City of Chicago Department of Transportation established a Traffic Calming Division in its Bureau of Traffic. The division quickly established design criteria based on the experiences of the 48th Ward. To date, no official traffic-calming system exists, and implementation is typically done at the request of the individual alderman.

Big picture

Safety, access, and quality of life are major concerns for Smith and the team she assembled to work on traffic calming projects. According to the 2002 Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) study *Balanced Growth Study for Northeast Chicago and the Northeast Suburbs*, high traffic volumes along Edgewater's major arterials have essentially divided the neighborhood into "isolated pockets," cutting off many residents from nearby shopping, transit, and recreation.

Many neighborhood seniors and children fear crossing the streets. Although that keeps them safe from traffic accidents, it also makes some of them virtual prisoners in their homes.

Congested arterials generate a host of problems, including noise, car exhaust, and speeding drivers who use the arterials, side streets, and alleys as shortcuts. A Northwestern University community policing study identified traffic as the No. 2 safety issue in Chicago, and a 1999 random telephone survey by Talmey-Drake, Research & Strategy, Inc., shows that residents in the 48th Ward rank "traffic, parking, and transportation" as the second-greatest problem facing the