

Barb Chidley, City of Rockford: Part 1

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Haley: Hello, my name is Haley Dahl and welcome to another episode of the *Green Exploration: Rockford* podcast. And today I will be meeting with Barb Chidley, the neighborhood specialist for the City of Rockford, discussing sustainability and environmental justice in Rockford through the context of neighborhood development, and overall well being. ***Intro Music*** Thank you so much for joining me this morning to talk about these environmental issues in Rockford and what solutions have been implemented, what can be done better, how Inclusive Infrastructure Solutions can help solve these issues. So thank you, I really appreciate your time joining me and green explanation Rockford. So that being said, the first thing I would like is, you know, for you to briefly introduce yourself.

Barb: I'm Barb Chidley. I'm the neighborhood specialist for the City of Rockford, which means that I work with residents, neighborhoods, neighborhood associations, to help people connect with each other, connect with resources, improve quality of life, and their neighborhoods take on any projects that they would like to take on. And I work with a lot of community partners to make sure that we support neighborhoods and residents in the best way we can.

Haley: Thank you, thank you. What sparked that interest in getting involved in that way.

Barb: So I used to teach, and I actually came to Rockford as a teacher at Auburn High School, and I taught English. In the classroom, we explored topics that were relevant to the students and their lives. So we did a lot of exploration of issues impacting residents of Rockford. At the time, I never would have imagined that this is what I would be doing. But because there, I mean, there are so many, so many things that impact the lives of students, their families, the community, it was kind of a natural progression. So I ended up leaving education, and when I found this, you know, the job description for this position, I realized this is exactly what everything was leading to. So my students had taught me to care very deeply about those things that impact them in their lives, particularly on the west side of Rockford, which tends to be fairly disenfranchised. So doing neighborhood work just expands on the

things that we were exploring in the classroom, and now hopefully being able to actually tackle some of those issues.

Haley: Yeah, yeah, for sure. I really like that insight and that drive, cuz I feel very similarly I remember taking my environmental science course and being like, oh my gosh, all this stuff really affects us. And it's like, how can I actually get out there and actively try to make things better?

Barb: Right, right.

Haley: So I really appreciate that. Have you been involved in any environmental issues, as you've been doing that work? And if so, like, what kind of projects are you currently working on? And even unrelated to specific environmental problems would you mind highlighting some projects?

Barb: So certainly in regard to neighborhoods and residents, when we talk about environment, we're not just talking about the natural environment, we're talking about the built environment, we're talking about issues from everything from housing quality, to green space, to you know, tree canopy, all these all these different aspects. So first of all, I think the most important thing that we can do when it comes to addressing issues that directly impact our residents is get the residents directly involved. However, the people who are marginalized in terms of, you know, that kind of direct involvement, it's not just a matter of inviting them to the table to have discussions or to give input, it's a matter of building trust and relationships.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: So that they actually believe somebody is going to listen to us for once. And so it's really hard to get folks, who are most directly impacted, involved in the activity, because those are also the folks who are living in survival mode day to day because life is constantly changing. So it's not at the top of their mind to think about, you know, the future, sustainability. You know, in terms of their own built environment, so many of them are struggling with being able to support housing rehab, much less, you know, those who are in a rental situation that have absentee landlords who are not keeping up their properties at all. And, you know, when you're struggling to put food on the table, find, keep a job, all of these things may mean that people are not, not able to give that kind of thought to anything. I mean, there in the moment. So, you know, we, I think take for granted some of the little things that I think are some of the most minor things you do such as, you know, just recycling or, you know, conservation of certain resources. That can't be top of mind for folks who are just worrying about the here and the now think there's so many complicated issues. I would say that my direct involvement right now is so much more at that basic level of connecting with our residents, trying to build relationships, trying to build that trust. I think that's foundational to everything else that we want to achieve. So whether that, you know, basic beautification projects in the neighborhood are really looking at sustainability and improved housing and all these other things. If we're going to get residents involved in those aspects, then we need to start at this very foundational level of getting people connected to their, you know, the bare necessities, getting people connected, building that social capital, bonding, and bridging, making sure that people know who to turn to when they have a need, so we can start really making people feel

supported, making them feel heard, now we're building those relationships that will eventually get them into, you know, more of a mindset of "so now, what can we do to move forward?" Right? But it's Maslow's hierarchy situation. And, you know, if we're right there, you know, those foundational needs not yet being met, there's no way we're going to move to that point of really being able to engage people in those conversations or that, you know, active pursuit of building sustainability on any level. So I would say that that's the project I'm involved in now. And so, first, it doesn't necessarily look like we're, you know, oh, this is a sustainability thing. You know, sustainability, environmental sustainability means that we have to have the sustainability of relationships, we have quality of trust, we have to have sustainability of communication. So I'm on that initial foundational end of, you know, that's my major project right now. I've engaged in some conversations around planning for the GreenTown conference. I think it's really important that any efforts that that we make toward environmental issues, environmental sustainability, that any of our messaging, any of our projects, that we're very intentionally identifying audience, we're intentionally identifying purpose, that we're, that we're making sure that we have an intentional plan for engagement, understanding that different people are engaged in very different ways. So a codeable approach, every step of the way, in planning, engagement, outreach, marketing, I think we still have a lot to learn about how to engage people that are not like us. So as I sit here, as a, you know, middle class white woman, my experience is very different from those of, you know, People of Color, people that are living in poverty, people who are struggling. You know, I have an incredibly residential area in which I live, other people are living in areas that are more directly impacted by industrial pollution. We've got several brownfields, you know, here in the City. Their experience is different, you know, my, I feel like the home in which I live is very safe for my children. We don't have respiratory issues, I haven't, you know, even experienced lead poisoning. But there, those are very real environmental concerns for so many of our families. And if we don't understand that there are so many different experiences that people are having, then there is no way that we're going to be able to reach them with the same type of messaging that would reach somebody like us, who doesn't have the same experiences.

Haley: I love how you were talking about the connection, because actually, like, because I'm creating my website right now for this podcast. And like, in the big bold words, the first thing that it says is "Purpose: Creating Connection," because...

Barb: Excellent.

Haley: ...the sustainability is really about connection, you know, connection with not only ourselves, the environment, each other, it just comes down to being present, and then again, when I'm talking about the environment, also to me, because I'm a civil engineering major at UIC. And when I think about the environment, I innately will include urban environments as well, because, you know, it's still an environment, and interacts with us, it interacts with the earth.

Barb: Absolutely.

Haley: And to me, that needs to be more integrated.

Barb: Right.

Haley: Built very gray with our infrastructure currently, and I feel like we need to, again, create connection, kind of break down those walls and integrate more green infrastructure, and things of that sort, to kind of bridge that gap between human environment, and natural environment. Because at the end of the day, we were born here, we're on this planet. It's just, it's honestly fascinating for me to kind of remove myself and be like, "Let's look at how humans live versus how literally every other organism on this planet lives." *laughs*

Barb: Right.

Haley: Obviously, very, very different.

Barb: You're tapping into something really critical there too, because we don't normally think of civil engineering as environmental sustainability, right.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: And so I have a daughter who is, just finished her third year of college. And when she was writing one of her college application essays, one of the prompts was something about, you know, take a subject and change one letter of it, or something like that, to change it into something different. And so she wrote this essay on turning biology into big-ology, meaning. look at the big picture, where just look at this one area, because there are all of these surrounding impacts, and we always have to be asking, you know, "What are the implications of this? How does this connect? What are the relationships between all of these issues?" And so it's funny because I think I was unique as an English teacher, and that I was also a very strong science student, so I brought a whole lot of science and math into the English classroom. And so now it's like, no, there is an intention here, and so you can look at a word and in the context of everything, you know what the connotation is, and you can't say, we'll interpret it this way, because they could mean this, because we have to make inferences based on what we know about the world and the way it works. And so I had this conversation with my daughter who's like, "Well, that's like the whole, you know, scientific process." I said, "I know, exactly, I apply that to analysis of text."

Haley: As you should.

Barb: That requires this thinking in so much broader ways. And so I think it's fantastic that this is, this is what you're what you're learning at this point in how you're reaching out. But I think that's one of the reasons that we struggle so much in our quest to relate, you know, various kinds of projects, because on the one end, we have people who are very human focused, and, you know, very understanding of the psychology of human behavior, but they're not necessarily always the same people that are really knowledgeable about process and organization, who are also not necessarily same people who are all about, you know, analyzing on a more, I don't know, I can't say analytical level, oh my gosh *laughs*

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: I did offer eight o'clock in the morning, didn't I?

Haley: *laughs*

Barb: You know, what I mean?

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: It's like we have, we have different ways of looking at things and I think...

Haley: We pigeonhole ourselves, essentially.

Barb: ...what we have to do is put it all together. But, I mean, we're in a social environment anymore that's so divisive. The last thing that a lot of people are doing is hearing other perspectives.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: So to be able to fix those boundaries and into different I mean, it's different disciplines. I mean, people see that as, "That's a separate discipline," but they're not. They're so intertwined.

Haley: That's the key!

Barb: Wish we could apply the psychology and the sociology of it all, but unfortunately, sometimes that's really left out. And, you know, as an educator, I was always frustrated when we'd hear teachers that said, "Well, I taught it, it's not my fault if they didn't learn." But this is what we do in neighborhood work as well, we say, "Well, we invited them to the table."

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: "If they chose not to show up, then they didn't want to give their input." And I say, "We have to understand that it's not that they chose consciously not to show up, it's not that they said, I don't care about this, I'm not going to be there, we have to understand they're challenges that people are experiencing, we have to understand that they might have told somebody their concerns 1000 times already, and their concerns were ignored." So they're thinking it's a waste of my time to show up at that table, "I care very much, but they're not really going to listen to me." And there's so many different things that we have to understand about human nature, if we're really going to make those connections...

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: ...in a meaningful way, and to be able to engage the experts at the table. And I really, truly think that the people that are being most directly impacted are the experts. Their experiences are something that we can't just read about. We have to talk, we have to listen, we have to really be present in that environment in order to truly understand what other people are going through.

Haley: Yeah, no, I 100% agree. I feel like public outreach is such a valuable, valuable way to just address anything, because I feel like at the end of the day, you got to look at the individual communities and ask them, "What do you actually need?" Like, it's not what we think you need, like, what do you actually need, but like you're saying, you know, it's also very important to acknowledge that the system does not serve many people. It doesn't serve the BIPOC communities in Rockford.

Barb: Right, right.

Haley: So that definitely diminishes the trust. And like you were saying how they felt like maybe it's not even worth their time to go express their opinion because they feel as though they're not valued, which is where, you know, we talk about sustainability and the environment and to me like that is all, like you said, like very interconnected, a web comes down to not just environmental issues, but also social issues, economic issues, like all of these need to get, you know, tackled among like the same package, because once you neglect one pillar of sustainability, you know, the other ones will crumble too. And that's why environmental justice is a very, you know, important movement. The environmental justice movement is very important to me because BIPOC communities, low income communities, those are the people that are facing the brunt of these environmental problems, these are the people that do not have the needed infrastructure to allow their communities to thrive. And, you know, I feel like that needs to be addressed, we can't just sit back and just watch these people put these polluting factories in these neighborhoods, and be like "Oh, that's fine." And it just, it comes down to the system. And there's so much that needs to be changed. And I just hope that, you know, talking about it, raises that awareness in the community for people, especially white individuals like, "Hey, our neighbors, actually they live a different life." And, you know, start considering that in their day-to-day actions and their day-to-day lives.

Barb: And stop blaming people and stop thinking that they're in control. You know, there's so many, there's so many myths, in terms of, you know, everything from people should just pull themselves up by the bootstraps, or they need to just go job or, or it's their fault for being, you know, addicted to substances, or they're being lazy. All of these things, not understanding the psychology of experience and existence, are really dehumanizing.

Haley: One hundred percent. ecause there's definitely that mental toll when you're repeatedly dehumanized. And you know that the system in this country just does not serve you. That doesn't make anybody feel good.

Barb: It's easy for those of us with privilege to...

Haley: Look at it very detached.

Barb: Right.

Haley: That's why I really hope these conversations facilitate people coming back to their humanity, and actually, you know, attempting to empathize with people go through things that maybe others do not. So, that being said, I actually have some questions regarding the brownfield redevelopment.

Barb: Okay.

Haley: So you mentioned there's brownfield issues in Rockford. There was lead poisoning respiratory issues that arise. So my question is, do those negative environmental impacts disproportionately affect the BIPOC communities in Rockford?

Barb: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, if we're looking at what honestly, I think what I can speak to most of all, is just deteriorating housing conditions. Because as a teacher, I knew so many students who had asthma. And if you're living in an older home, that has any kind of crumbling plaster, I mean, just dust and other kinds of things. I mean, we're looking at all kinds of students who had those kinds of issues impacting respiratory health. And then on top of it, when we all, we know this, that, you know, statistically, people of color, people in poverty are not getting the same level of care medically, as others. So then, any health issues that could have been solved, or at least well treated, if they were getting adequate medical care, or just exacerbated by a lack of adequate medical care. So it's interesting to me, one of the things that I've really been focused on a lot in this last year is the concept of accessibility, not just as in physically I can get there.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: But also like mental accessibility, emotional accessibility, if people understand things. There are so many different ways that we make, even, you know, the medical care accessible to people, I just spoke to a mother at great length a couple of weeks ago one of the events at a one of the elementary schools, who had been, who felt really shamed by a medical provider. This mother was trying to do healthy things for her daughter by making her smoothies, fresh fruit, not even extra sweetener in it. And the medical provider told her that her daughter was getting fat, and she needed to cut back even on these healthy smoothies. And I looked at the child and I'm like, "That's your daughter? She looks like a healthy, normal, eight year old." But now, when somebody also is feeling disrespected, and shamed by medical provider, now they can't even trust them. So there's a whole series of, so this is what we were talking about, right? All these different aspects that all are in are interrelated. So if I'm living in a home, that has crumbling, anything that's creating all this extra dust, particularly if there's lead paint, and so that that kind of stuff is impacting, and I'm not even getting adequate medical care, then it's creating these issues. So that, so poverty itself leads people into these situations. And we know that particularly in Rockford, poverty disproportionately impacts, you know, our BIPOC population. And brownfields, we know that properties that are, you know, in the industrial areas, properties that are surrounding abandoned factories, other properties, all these negative environmental areas, that means property values go down around them. And so people that are constrained in terms of their finances and being stuck in those areas, and being much more disproportionately impacted by by such areas,

whereas those that have the means can purchase rent, whatever, in a area that is safer environmentally, as well as, you know, all the other safety concerns.

Haley: Does public outreach actually happen in those neighborhoods?

Barb: No, well, in a very, in a superficial way. So we have this, we have time constraints, and this is understandable. So I really don't want, I don't want to be, I don't want to convey total judgment on... maybe a little bit of judgment.

Barb: I mean, I understand we all have time constraints, right? We have a lot to do, we have a limited time to do it, we don't have enough money to pay for the time, the people, the manpower, everything that it takes, and even the training, because for some people that kind of, you know, direct outreach is very natural. For most of people it is not again, you know, people that look like us often are not just naturally experiencing life in certain neighborhoods. And there are a lot of myths regarding, you know, whether we'd be safe or what might happen to us. So we've got the psychology of this outreach as well. But when we've got capacity issues, we will say, I need to, I need to reach the most people and the quickest, easiest amount of time. So we rely on things that we know are tried and true methods, even though we don't really understand those are not necessarily truly reaching people, whether it's social media, regular media push, you know, those kinds of marketing efforts, or we'll go to neighborhood association meetings. But even in my areas that do have neighborhood associations, which are dominantly, those areas that have more white, middle class or upper class people, or even in those areas that are more diverse and have a neighborhood association and we're still not connecting with People of Color, we're not connecting with people of poverty. So if we go to one of those neighborhood associations, we can say, "Yes, we did all these neighborhood association meetings to get this input there and get feedback." But if there are five people, or even 10, or even 30 people there, that's still a very small proportion. So we need to do, is we need to understand that we can invite people to a meeting, absolutely. But we need to go door to door, we need to actually knock, we need to talk to people, we need to express a desire for their expertise to be at the table. We don't want to just say, "You're welcome to join us," because that's giving permission. Oftentimes, because it's the first time I've ever knocked on your door, you don't know me, you might think a good idea, but for all those other reasons. And so what I need to do is I need to be prepared to ask you a couple of questions right then and there and get some input right then and there. Your contact information if I can. And when you don't show up to the meeting, I need to come back to you and reach out to you directly. So you, I mean, this, that's a lot of time.

Haley: Yeah. And even asking them, "How come you decided not to show up?"

Barb: Right! Just so we understand the barriers.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: Right. So that's not being done.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: So the one time that there is a lot of, you know, door to door, knocking on doors, getting to know people in the neighborhoods is during elections.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: But it's all very politically motivated. Not all of it, don't get me wrong. I know, we have some people in elected positions that are very passionate, very committed to relationship building with residents, but you can't sustain that type of activity. And so it happens so much more during elections, and not really the rest of the time.

Haley: And even outreach over the internet, whether it be, you know, social media, websites, all of that, even that doesn't reach all populations, because there are people who don't have access to internet. And that's, another barrier when it comes to, that whole overarching sustainability, because it's like, okay, "We don't have enough time to go to everybody's door." But like, also, not everyone has internet, so...

Barb: Well, and even if they do, even if they are subscribed to say, City social media or Nextdoor, that doesn't mean they're checking it, that doesn't mean they're looking at it, right?

Haley: That is true. It is such a multifaceted issue where we just have to change our way of thinking from top to bottom. This is the time where our species sinks or swims. And it's time for us to get our act together and swim and part of getting our act together, you know, is not only taking care of the environment, taking care of our finances, but taking care of each other.

Barb: Right and we're not even scratching the surface of how terrifying our environmental situation is right now.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: I mean, you're at a crucial age right now. Right?

Haley: Yeah. *laughs*

Barb: So the life decisions moving forward are going to have such a significant impact on your generation and the potential children, you know, of your generation and it can really be terrifying. I think that's one of the things too. So if we understand that psychology, so many people are, you know, climate deniers, denying a lot of important things. It's too terrifying to accept the reality because then we feel powerless. And we can't live in that kind of cognitive dissonance. So that's why people, you know, subconsciously or unconsciously choose not to believe certain things because they're protecting themselves from that horror. And I think that happens too when it comes to getting people to see the big picture and realize we need to do things differently because it feels overwhelming.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: I mean, what we're talking about right now is, we need to include every expert in every realm at the table and this is something that if we're starting relationship building, is years and years and years of work. It feels like too much, and so, because we want those, we want that low hanging fruit with those quick wins, we want to see a difference right now. It's too easy just to sink back into the old ways.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: Everything else feels like it's too much. But what we don't realize is, if we all adopted that mentality, that we can make this change, we're rededicated to work together. And I really think it's, you know, it's like that steep learning curve, you know.

Haley: Oh, yeah.

Barb: We can really aim and, and make something happen very quickly, once we get that ball rolling of really coming together. But it does require a whole lot of shifting and thinking, while at the same time supporting and nurturing the fears and that feeling of being overwhelmed and everything and recognizing and validating those concerns, while helping people to still see.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: And work and so, so many aspects to this that are very complex.

Haley: It comes down to coming back to our humanity and just, you know, I'm an optimist at heart, so I'm gonna do everything that I can in my power to try to better our earthly experience for you know, each other, the planet, everything that I can possibly do to make even just a tiny, little positive impact. But I feel like, you know, going back to psychology, I feel like some of that fear, you know, of people who are like, not only just like climate deniers, but, you know, people who refuse to recognize the existence of systematic racism and how misogyny is ingrained in our society, you know, those ugly parts of human society. I feel like a lot of that also comes down to guilt, then they don't want to acknowledge that, because then people don't want to be accountable to be like, "Okay, yeah, this is happening, so it's time for us to acknowledge it, and make that change and move forward." But it's so much easier for people to put their blinders on and be like, "No, everything's fine. Let me keep living life how it's been being lived ." And because, you know, progressive change, you have to really be willing to accept that things can be done better.

Barb: Right.

Haley: Because people don't want to make that innate assumption that things weren't being done right in the past.

Barb: And you have a particularly difficult job right now in trying. I mean, we all do, those of us who are trying to, you know, maintain that optimism while also understanding the weight of it all. We're not out of a pandemic yet.

Haley: Yeah. I think now would be a good time to wrap up part one of this episode. ***Outro Music*** As always, I would love to thank Barb Chidley for sharing her valuable insight during part one of this discussion. I would also like to thank anyone listening in on this podcast. As always, I appreciate your support of *Green Exploration: Rockford*. As I do at the end of each episode, I would just like to remind you to take whatever you learn from this series and consider how you as an individual can be a contributor to a sustainable future in your day to day life. And don't forget to not only show Mother Earth some love, but your fellow humans as well, each and every one of them because all humans deserve to live in a quality environment. My name is Haley Dahll, and I'm signing off. Stay green, and stay exploring Rockford