

Barb Chidley, City of Rockford: Part 2

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Rockford, people, residents, neighborhood, area, brownfields, terms, recognize, community, sustainability, rent, City, programs, students

Haley: Hello, my name is Haley Dahl. And welcome to another episode of the grain exploration Rockford podcast. And today, I will be meeting with Barb Chidley, the neighborhood specialist for the City of Rockford. We will continue discussing sustainability and environmental justice in Rockford through the context of neighborhood development, and overall wellbeing during part two of this episode.

Barb: I miss, I miss being a teacher, and so being able to have somebody...

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: ...and talk and listen to you talk about your passions and, and what you want to achieve through your education and your career, and everything else. I'm like, that's, that's a gift to me.

Haley: I really, I really appreciate that. Because, you know, I could say the same about all the information and knowledge that you're sharing with me. So I really, really appreciate that.

Barb: Thanks.

Haley: Since you have such a dynamic influence and role in the Rockford community, it's just really assuring to hear how you think about things and how you really consider those relationships. And, you know, I was, I've been asking this question in my head throughout this whole conversation, but how do you feel like we can start building that trust, especially with BIPOC communities, communities that aren't, communities where all of the infrastructure gets put and the money gets sent, like how do we, how do we curb that? How do we build that trust? How do we reach out to these communities and really have them feel heard?

Barb: So I did some stuff in the classroom that was very similar to what one of our former aldermen always did. He's now the Winnebago County Board Chairman. So I'm gonna call him out, Joe Chiarelli is one of those incredible people who models exactly what we need to do. And it's, we have to get past this idea that we don't have the time or the money. We have to find that resource, we have to make that

time. We have to meet people where they are. I have gone door to door with different information and people will say, "Thank you so much for being out here in the neighborhood." It shows you care, right? You came to me, you're on my front doorstep, that shows you care enough to be here to reach out to me. We have to understand how valuable that is. We also have to listen without an agenda, right? Other than I need to hear your perspective, that's my agenda, I want to get to know you, I want to hear from you. We can't have that agenda of, "Oh, it's going to lead to something." Because we know this, right, we all have these goals that we have to achieve. So if we have any kind of checkbox out there at all, that somebody is saying, "You need to show results," then that agenda always ends up coming through and people see through, right through it, and that betrays trust. We have to commit, we have to internalize this belief that building that relationship and building that trust is an end in itself, which is easy for me because I project called [Connect Rockford](#) where really, all we're trying to do is get people connected, you know, build social capital, and then make sure people are connected to the resources that they need. Because we know that just helping people get connected in the neighborhoods, that's going to make a difference in their neighborhood. I don't have to tell them how to go about their business, I just want to help support them getting connected. That's my, that's my agenda. And that's such an innocent, you know, there's no threat. Because I recognize that, you know, I have a program for to how to train block captains, but if a neighborhood already has some connection, I'm not going to come in there and say, "No, you need to do it my way."

Haley: Yeah, yeah.

Barb: I'm in there and say, "Hey, can we at least communicate?" Because I just want to make sure if there's something you need, I can help you, get you connected to it. I'd like to hear your feedback so that we here at the City know how to handle things, right? So we have to, we have to let go of those other agendas. We have to, we have to really get out there and listen, and then incorporate that feedback, right? And then we have to, we have to then, when we incorporate the feedback, still take things back to people and say, "Okay, this is what we heard, this is what we're doing as a result of what we heard. What do you think about this?" And get feedback again, and so it has to be that whole iterative process, you know, repetitive touches in terms of that relationship building. We have to make sure that people are involved in the process in a really meaningful way that derives what we're doing. Because we say, "You know what? We are the experts on our end, we know that a couple of these things work, we're gonna give a couple of options to people" and just say, "Hey, what do you think about this?" And then say later, "Well, we went out and we got input from people." That's not, that's not sincere, that's not authentic. We have to let go of our own egos as being the experts that are in our subject areas and recognize the expertise of the people with the lived experience.

Haley: It's like essentially, we don't want it going in one ear and out the other because that's, again, just going to destroy that trust. If we want people to feel heard, they need to see their voice coming to fruition. That clearly doesn't happen enough. So we were talking about building trust, and getting that connection which, okay, I really liked how you were talking about how, you know, you didn't want to go in there and be like, "You have to do things my way." Like you wanted to go in there, see what the community had to offer and work with enhancing that instead of taking it over, essentially. I wanted to talk about the brownfield redevelopment in Rockford because I talked to the brownfield specialist,

Robert. He was talking about the brownfield projects that they had going on, and are a majority of the brownfields on the west side of Rockford?

Barb: Not necessarily. One of the things that I didn't even realize, because like I said, I came to Rockford to teach at Auburn, you know, which is west side. I didn't realize how much poverty there is existing on the southeast side, as well. And I don't think other people do either. As a matter of fact, are you familiar at all with the Ready To Learn project? So there's, there's an initiative in Rockford, addressing the concept that, you know, when we've got so many kids that don't come to kindergarten ready to learn, and we know that those gaps just widen as they go to school. And so they did, they worked with the Erickson Institute out of, they're in the Chicago area, to do this data collection. And we discovered that based on five different developmental domains that the census tract in Rockford that has the highest percentage of students that are vulnerable. In at least one of those developmental domains, based on was one set of kindergarteners, the one year, every single kindergarten teacher in RPS 205, and then some of the private schools, filled out this like 110 question questionnaire regarding their students. The highest percentage of students that are vulnerable in at least one of those domains is in southeast Rockford. And I think a great number of people would think that it would have been one of our west side census tracts. Now there are some census tracts over there that are, you know, are close to that same percentage and when you boil down the numbers, you might realize that there are you know, students are vulnerable in more than one domain, you know, whereas it might just be one, but really, we have a lot of vulnerability throughout the community because we stereotype.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: Because people of color are concentrated on the west side.

Haley: How about on the southeast side?

Barb: Well, you know, we've got industrial, we still functioning industrial areas further east. I mean, right here from City Hall, even just a little bit east, and then south of us, we've got factories and abandoned buildings and such— quite a bit, right? Because there was a lot of concentrated industrial on this side as well. Probably more on the west side, but probably not as disproportionate as, as you might think. When you're talking both sides of the river, obviously, have had a lot of industrial, like the watch factory is just south of us. We've got anything, anything that was industrial at all ends up being, you know, a brownfields needing.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: Say, South Main, there's such a heavy concentration over there. And I know...

Haley: By the Embassy Suites, that new Embassy Suites?

Barb: Well, right. And then once you get south of there, and the Barber Coleman facility, if you're familiar with any of that. So there are a couple of other abandoned industrial properties over there as well. But I do think it's less than than one would think because we do tend to think east versus west.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: But we have a lot of struggles, especially directly south of city hall here. There's still a whole lot of stuff going on further south and some struggling neighborhoods.

Haley: So, with this brownfield redevelopment, is this something that is done with the interest of enhancing the community as it is now, as in like, uplifting current residents? Or is the brownfield redevelopment done more in a gentrification type manner in the sense where they're like, "We're trying to attract new, whiter, more affluent residents."

Barb: I think too often we don't give sufficient consideration to how we can impact the current residents.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: And I think too often, we have negative, a negative attitude toward low income housing.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: And because we don't have the kind of wraparound services that are necessary. Too often, when we do provide, you know, housing, we haven't supported people in being uplifted enough to overcome some of the other challenges, so we still have this negative perception of people in poverty. So yeah, I think I think oftentimes, we end up with a focus on things that is more about, "Hey, how cool would this be to have this fancy restaurant," and we're not thinking in terms of the surrounding residents aren't going to be using it.

Haley: Let's pause for a second, though, raising property value, that's good in theory, but are you displacing residents in the process?

Barb: Right, right. I think that, I think we have a lot of things that need to be addressed.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: When we worked with USEPA, and focused on a couple of the census tracts in the South Main area, Rob and I both agreed that there were a lot of things that we needed to focus on that would be serving the current community. And I do think that we have a long way to go to help people recognize how providing for the existing neighborhood can have such a significant impact on the rest of the community. I think it's easy to think in terms of economic development means that we need to bring in a lot of dollars.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: So along the riverfront there, Rob and I were talking about, you know, what kinds of places for people can we create that will really engage the neighborhood in some uplifting ways, whether it be performance space, you know, music, other street vendors that are local types of street vendors. I think

it's easy to think in terms of, "Oh, but wouldn't that be a cool space for a neat, you know, riverside restaurant or something that would end up being a little pricey for people who can't afford it over in the area, but then it would bring dollars to the area and bring into the air." I mean, I understand that thinking, but I think we need...

Haley: But it neglects the individual.

Barb: Right, right. And we're, again, I think, we need immediate results, right? We need immediate, regeneration, we need those tax dollars, we need, we need the revenue dollars. If I understand, I understand, but if we really want long term sustainable change, we have to understand the significant impact overall of uplifting the whole community. And so...

Haley: Instead of just displacing poverty, you got to tackle that problem at the root.

Barb: Correct, correct. That's, and that's harder when you have limited resources. And, you know, Rockford has extremely limited resources, not just financially, but we don't even have the staff that a City our size could have, so it's, it does make it incredibly challenging. I am really grateful for my position, not just for myself, but for Rockford in general. The fact is, I think we really do recognize the need for someone to advocate on behalf of residents. I push consistently here at City Hall, that we need to be doing that kind of meaningful outreach, that we need to revamp our methods, that we need to be focusing on what's going to build relationship and I'm being heard. I feel like my position is incredibly well respected in terms of, you know, having that influence. It's not a quick overnight thing, because we still face the kinds of limitations that have an impact for sure, but slowly but surely I am seeing, you know, some change in terms of our outreach, our relationship building, you know, valuing resident input. And so I'm hoping that in terms of brownfields redevelopment, we start recognizing that's an economic development thing ultimately as well, right.

Haley: Economic, environmental and social, it hits it all.

Barb: Correct! Right, and it's, it's hard. Because even here we hire somebody who is in the economic development division. I'm in the neighborhood division, but everybody else in my division is working on our CDBG funds for, we use for, you know, housing rehab, and that kind of thing. I'm the sole person that is here to serve directly to the residents and amplify their voices and make those connections and bridges between residents back to, back to the City. And there are 150,000 residents in Rockford, so obviously I can't hear all of them, so, but it is something, right? I mean, we're moving forward. I panicked during the pandemic, like is my, is my job going to be one of those that they consider to be superfluous, but I think if I had quit, they might not have immediately rehired somebody.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: They didn't, they didn't, they didn't eliminate positions. I'm grateful, I'm grateful that this still exists, so I know that we believe in it, we have a long way to go. I do know that I am grateful for the people that I work with here in the City. I truly believe that we want to do the right thing for people in the right way. We really do care about residents, we really do care about doing right by them, listening, you

know, empowering them. We have a long way to go to make sure that that's really truly happening. But I do think that in terms of brownfields with it, that we are having a lot of those conversations regarding the impact on residents. And nobody's chastised me yet for speaking up or speaking too loudly about these things.

Haley: Yeah, so you feel like Rockford intentions are in the right place.

Barb: I do. I really, I really do. I do.

Haley: Everyone I've spoke to feels that way. Gives me hope. I feel like this community has the potential to really turn itself around, especially if they really buy into that whole Sustainable Development idea, but keeping that in a holistic lens, where they're not neglecting any of the pillars.

Barb: Right.

Haley: You know, I was part of the GreenTown advisory board meeting, actually.

Barb: Were you?

Haley: Yeah, and people were talking about things from not just environmental perspective, but economic and social. And I was like, you know, what if this can actually get something on the ground, a sustainability plan in place, like, we're on the right track.

Barb: Right. I mean, something is better than nothing, for sure.

Haley: Yeah, yeah.

Barb: But I'm sure you've also heard the things that make you go, "Yeah, we're kind of glossing over this, we need to dig a little bit more deeper."

Haley: Yeah, no, for sure, for sure. Even throughout my interviews, there are certain times where I was like, I feel like this has kind of diverted, but I will say this has been one of my more in-depth interviews, so I really appreciate your honesty and willingness to really look at how things are not how things should be or how they should be presented, but more so just like, truth, truth of the matter. And, for example, like...

Barb: We can't move forward, if we don't know where we are, right? We don't even know where we are to begin with.

Haley: Exactly!

Barb: I gotta find my starting point on the map.

Haley: Yeah, yeah, no, 100%. Instead of just these band aid solutions, beating around the bush, it's time to really hit these roots, as painful as it can be. That's the best way to facilitate.

Barb: You mentioned the band aid, so for like with, with the medical analogy, I think it's like *House*, where it was so difficult to make a diagnosis on anything, because there are so many other things that are complicating it. And so we have to get past all of these different symptoms and identify where each of these symptoms is coming from. Because they aren't necessarily all from the same, you know, the same diseases or something. And that's what makes it so complex. So if we're not really trying to diagnose all these issues and recognize this is where we are, we're not going to get there.

Haley: Our society is definitely diseased in many different ways and it's just, it's time to start finding the cure. And I really am on your side, I feel like it comes down to connection. And just listening to what people really need, and not dehumanizing people, recognizing that everyone regardless of income, regardless of color of skin, regardless of gender, any of that, everyone deserves a quality life, everyone deserves to be heard, everyone deserves to be respected.

Barb: Everyone has value.

Haley: Yes, and valued!

Barb: Everyone has expertise.

Haley: Yep. I remember when I was asking Rob, and I was like, "So how do you help residents as property values increase? How do you help the residents who can't keep up? And he told me that there were social programs for that, and I asked him what were the programs, and he actually referred me to you. Because he said, you [are] the neighborhood specialist. So I guess like, is there social programs to aid with that, like adjustment process or...

Barb: Which process specifically?

Haley: Like, once they revitalized the brownfield sites, and then the property values get raised? What happens to the residents who can't keep up with that?

Barb: Okay, so if we're talking homeowners, increased property values is going to mean increased taxes. I don't have any idea what kind of program might be out there, that's gonna help people pay higher taxes.

Haley: And then renters, if their rent is raised.

Barb: And then if rent is raised, they have rental assistance programs. We have a long way to go on this. Because the truth is, we have so many, we have so many limitations. Here's an example, right here in our Human Services Department with the City, we have an eviction assistance program, right. So if somebody is going to be evicted, because they haven't paid their rent, they can get assistance for paying back rent, but you have to have not paid your rent due to a crisis outside your control. And we

don't include certain mental health crises as a crisis outside your control. Right. So if somebody lost a job and became deeply depressed and started abusing substances, we consider that to be their fault. And they don't qualify. So that's where that's, right. We have social programs. The one really positive thing that has occurred is, you know, we have a family peace center up and running, and so the concept there is definitely total wraparound services, but that's only for victims of domestic violence. And I think there are an awful lot of people out here who are victims of domestic violence in some way, but that doesn't mean they've been, that doesn't mean that they're seeking services specifically for that.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: The way a lot of our other social services run is, you know, it's very focused on, "here's one aspect," and so if we're not wraparound services, I don't know what kind of services there would be to help people who are priced out of where they're living. You know, if a landlord doubles your rent, because now all of a sudden, the housing value. And I don't understand, you know, everything that home rule could help us do, or whatever, but I know that there are things that have to do with housing, very specifically, because there were things that we could do with in terms of putting, you know, certain things in place that could help, you know, cap rents or those kinds of things, but we don't have control. So I think that, you know, on a political level, on a legislative level, you know, on a policy level, there are an awful lot of shifts that would need to be made to be able to put in place those...

Haley: Protections.

Barb: Those protections, correct.

Haley: And it's probably not on the forefront of thought because it doesn't predominantly affect white people.

Barb: Right, right. I think, I think we need to identify it. I mean, I think, I think we need to state this, that we don't currently have protections in place that would prevent things like landlords raising rent and such.

Haley: The last thing I wanted to touch on before, you know, we concluded this conversation is, have you seen any type of sustainable neighborhood development happening in Rockford, or any type of implementation of green infrastructure? I know the R1 Planning Council, you know, they have that greenway project that's trying to go down on the Keith Creek and their EV charging stations, but I guess more so in the development aspect, has there been any type of sustainability implemented in that respect?

Barb: So we're talking infrastructure, I think if you want to talk to a couple more city people that could give you some perspective, so Kyle Saunders, who is the director...

Haley: I actually, I talked to him with Rob.

Barb: Kyle, he has our total overview, in terms of like, things we've done with our water pumping stations and others. It's not necessarily, it's not necessarily neighborhood. We had an intern, in 2019, who got us to the SolSmart designation for us. A lot of that, a lot of the stuff that he was working on, we didn't necessarily pick up and run with. You know, we didn't have a person to handle it. But so Kyle's the one was the overview of everything. I will say also that Karen Hoffman, who's the Eighth Ward Alderman, she and Mark Bonne, who's the new alderman for the 14th ward, both are involved in a, it's a stormwater project down off Newburg, I think, and are trying to get feedback from residents or, you know, put some stuff out there to get feedback from residents as to whether they would want, you know, grass in this area that would then end up having been mowed. Or if we could do like natural plantings, and native plantings and people were saying, "Do the native plant stuff, " and so there's definitely some intentionality there. So I do think that, you know, that might be one of the areas in which we're becoming a little bit more cognizant in some areas. Because I think that, that's kind of, people are getting more into the concept of native plantings and pollinator gardens and kinds of things as well.

Haley: Just getting more in touch with that natural environment, which I talked extensively about with Dan Kane from the Boone County Conservation District and how they've been trying to, you know, implement conservation with neighborhood development.

Barb: So I wouldn't say that I haven't seen a whole lot, but those are some of the conversations and some of the little smaller things that are taking place. That's really the only thing I've heard down there in terms of sustainability.

Haley: The sustainable infrastructure aspect, specifically, green infrastructure is pretty niche. And I've tried to touch on it with everyone that I've spoke to, but I also completely recognize that that's not everyone's place of expertise.

Barb: Right.

Haley: But like, I've also been really enjoying with this podcast is the whole broad array of insight that I've been able to compile in respect to sustainability. You know, I've spoken to people like you more so involved in neighborhoods. I've spoke to my old biology teacher. So, you know, I mean, you come from an education background as well. I've spoke with someone with business backgrounds, public health, conservation, engineering, it's been really fascinating. So I really appreciate all the different types of insight.

Barb: I mean, oftentimes there are little things being done that we're not even thinking about.

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: I mean, people love the trees and rocks, they look pretty, but they're not thinking in terms of how intentional, you know, tree canopy can be in terms of environmental and sustainability and stuff. And so, we recently did a tree giveaway. I mean, we have a program where if you've got parkway, you know, that right of way area that doesn't have to be and it's wide enough, City will come plant a tree, but we don't have people taking advantage of it enough. And so, few weeks ago, there was a huge tree

giveaway where it was, you can plant it anywhere, City's giving you trees to be planted, right, so this intentional greening of the community. I still think we need to be more intentional about getting out there and identifying areas, it, you know, in certain, in certain neighborhoods where we need to be the ones to get out there and say, "We are going to put trees here. We're going to do this sort of something." But it's definitely something and it, I think we're always looking toward how can we improve? How can we grow? Definitely the response that I get from from my colleagues here at the City so,

Haley: And, you know, that's, that's the important part, the willingness to grow, to change, to evolve. That's where we're really gonna see our city thrive.

Barb: Yeah.

Haley: I appreciate the forward thinkers that are trying to push Rockford along a bright future, a good path. Thank you, Barb.

Barb: Absolutely. And thank you for all you're doing Haley. You give me hope.

Haley: Aw, that means a lot.

Barb: Young people like yourself, I mean, that's just like, your, your the hope for our future. So thank you.

Haley: Well, you know what, I can't do it without guidance. So thank you so much.

Barb: Well, none of us can do it on our own, right? We need to surround ourselves with the other experts and the other passionate people and the other, the other people who want to walk their talk and really get out there and do so. Yeah. I always say it takes a village. I mean, it takes, it takes a committed team. So yeah, every team that has you on it is lucky to have you there.

Haley: Thank you, Barb you too, you too for real. You have amazing perspective. So thank you. And you seem very altruistic, like truly like, is that the word I'm looking for? Like...

Barb: Yeah.

Haley: Truly there to help others, which I can...

Barb: Yeah.

Haley: I can relate to, and I really appreciate that.

Barb: I think that comes from teaching, right?

Haley: Yeah.

Barb: I mean, you can't be in the classroom worrying about how you look, as a teacher, it's all about the students and needing them to succeed. And so that's, yeah, that's where I'm at. It's not about me, it's about supporting others and thinking that, you know, we can improve quality of life for others, and yeah.

Haley: Well, thank you so much for your time and dedication.

Barb: Thank you, thank you.

Haley: I think now would be a good time to wrap up part two of this episode. ***Outro Music*** As always, I would love to thank Barb Chidley for sharing her valuable insight during part two 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 Dahl, and I'm signing off. Stay green and stay exploring, Rockford.