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Small Plans: Why Illinois' Asian carp response has Daniel Burnham spinning in his grave

Chicago has a secular patron saint. His name is Daniel Burnham. We quote him *ad nauseum*.

“Make no small plans. They have no magic to stir men’s blood.”

These are words that have guided Chicago for over 100 years. They helped make this city one of the fastest growing cities in the world, and informed the 1907 Plan of Chicago that directed that growth toward innovative and integrated open space, transportation and sustainable resource commitments. The words reflect the Chicago “I Will” spirit that rebuilt a torched metropolis after the Great Chicago Fire. And it is the mindset that led Chicago to reverse the flow of a river to protect the Great Lakes from pollution released in the metropolis.

And that is why Daniel Burnham is probably spinning in his grave today.

The State of Illinois and federal government are confronting one of the region’s biggest problems and potential opportunities and choosing only the small plans: half-measures like a failed electric fence that they should already know will not be effective.

“The status quo is OK by us and good enough for everyone else”--that is the signal coming from new filings by the state and the federal governments before the Supreme Court over the Asian carp crisis. The basic position is: “Yes, yes, everyone involved is concerned about the potential devastation of Lake Michigan and the Great Lakes. But to take immediate action would be radical and dangerous.” In response to the request of Michigan, joined by other Great Lakes states, that the problem of Asian Carp invasion be addressed with the urgency it deserves, Illinois and the federal government assert that it is completely inappropriate and should be rejected out of hand.

Over the weekend, the *New York Times*' excellent local reporter Monica Davey [filed a story](#) focused on how the Asian carp crisis, and Michigan's suit to force the closure of locks on the waterway system that spawned Chicago's reversed river, threatens the unity that governments in the region had recently forged to protect the Great Lakes. I think she missed the big point. There is unity. Ohio, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Indiana, New York, and the Canadian province of Ontario all support or have joined Michigan's suit. And, along with the State of Illinois, all signed the recent Great Lakes Compact which specifically notes that any threats from the Chicago Diversion (the waterways in question) to the health of the Great Lakes should be dealt with in the exact fashion that we are seeing today.

The frustration for Great Lakes advocates, the other States, and even some of us wide-eyed Chicagoans, has been the response. It is the epitome of "small plans." The State's response to a legitimate prodding from its neighbors is to deny the urgency of the problem, demand that the problem be further studied rather than taking any immediate action, and adamantly state that the request shouldn't be filed with the Supreme Court anyway. It is spineless politicking, legal obstruction, and a concerted effort to delay a real solution. It is all that is wrong with Illinois politics in a nutshell.

But for me, it is most frustrating in its short-sightedness. The solution is clear. We might be forced to wait 10 years for the Army Corps of Engineers to finish a study on permanent solutions to this mess, but it is inevitable that some sort of barrier will have to be put in place to re-establish the separation that existed between the Great Lakes and Mississippi River basin to prevent this dangerous invasive species, and the multitudes of other queued up to follow, from threatening 1/5 of the world's fresh water. It seems to me that the threat should spur action on its own, but as I've noted repeatedly in this slow-motion disaster, the State and Obama administration should seize this moment as the biggest opportunity that this region has seen in a century to fix real problems and begin the real work of improving the environment, economy and commercial transportation infrastructure of the Great Lakes.

- Fixing this problem will require a public investment that would create jobs at a time when we are hemorrhaging them.
- It means fixing woefully inadequate infrastructure. The Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, one of the defendants in Michigan's case and the quasi-governmental body responsible for the waterways in question, is on the record with gloom and doom threats of the City of Chicago flooding should Michigan get its wishes that the locks be temporarily closed. Ummm, isn't this an indictment of what is in place, an admission of its manifest inadequacy---all the more reason to fix it?
- And it means taking advantage of resources that are actually fleetingly available. Due to that political unity amongst the Great Lakes states this administration has admirably dedicated heretofore unheard of dollars to restoring the Great Lakes and protecting them from invasive species. Those funds will not be available for long...

Today, Chicagoans still reap the benefits of Burnham's 1909 plan for Chicago. And there are still aspects of it that we aspire to bring to life. It was audacious. It was far-seeing. It was

innovative. It took all of the ugliest challenges of urban living head-on. All things that are the complete opposite of our leaders' response to this challenge today.