

Large Lot Research Assessment

A study of residents in Greater Englewood and East Garfield Park who purchased the first offerings of large lots is now underway by researchers from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The project includes an environmental assessment of changes made to large lots and their blocks over time and a social assessment from a mail survey and focus groups of large lot owners.

Highlights from the environmental assessment

- 40% of large lot owners made noticeable changes in the first season (2015). These changes included cleaning-up trash and refuse, installing fences, infill of subsidence, hardscape removal, turf improvements, planting (flowers, vegetables, trees, and shrubs), putting-up signage, ornamentation, development of social/recreational facilities, and vehicle storage or parking.
- These observed changes resulted in an 8% decrease in properties that were in violation of City mowing standards. It appears, however, that large lot ownership encourages residents to go beyond basic management. In this respect the assessment found an 18% increase in lots that were being regularly mowed and a 10% increase in lots that were actively gardened.

Highlights from the social assessment mail survey

- The most important reasons for purchasing their lots were to keep it neat and clean (88%) and improve the attractiveness of their existing lot (74%); to make spaces to socialize with family and friends (55%) and for kids to play (48%); and to grow vegetables (46%) and ornamentals (51%).
- Large lot owners were satisfied with their purchase (88%), felt the purchase process was easy (72%), and feel attached to the parcel they purchased (83%). This level of attachment is not surprising given 66% of respondents reported they were already taking care of their lot prior to purchasing it, and of those nearly half (48%) had been taking care of the vacant lot for more than 10 years.
- Residents' investment in their large lot reflects a broader commitment to their neighborhood. The majority of owners have lived in their neighborhood at least 10 years (65%), plan to stay at least another 10 years (69%), and would be unhappy if they had to move from their block (62%). They feel a bond (48%) and often chat (72%) with their neighbors, and most participate occasionally or more often in a range of neighborhood environmental improvements and activities.
- A neighborhood that maintains "safety" and is "free of crime" were the most important factors in determining neighborhood quality of life among a list of 19 social, economic, and environmental factors, with more than 90% rating the two items as "extremely important."
- Demographics of Large Lot owners from surveys returned to date (N=166, 60% return rate): 73% African American, 16% white, 7% Hispanic; 26% 41-50 years, 40% 61+ years; 20% college degree, 20% grad degree

Highlights from the focus groups

- Many residents affirmed their **family identity** by staying in the family home and not fleeing to another neighborhood or the suburbs. Said one resident, "...from the advice of [my now deceased father] I always knew that I could never sell the family home and wanted to make it better."
- A related impact was a block that had become **quieter and safer**. As one resident remarked, "...if people know the lot is vacant then they will do dirt in the lot; ownership helps to make the dirt go away. [Our neighbors] now have an obligation to take action."
- Some residents felt as if their large lot allowed them to **take ownership of their neighborhood**. In their words, they stated "a large lot is a great investment. It allows us to tell our own story and it is a story so unlike the ones being told about Englewood. This is about history making for Englewood, and it's time for us to take ownership of our community."