

Soot to Solar

Crawford Generating Station – Little Village Neighborhood, Chicago, IL

In 2012, after more than a decade of organizing led by the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO), Chicago's Crawford Generating Station shut down (LVEJO n.d.).

The Crawford plant and its sister, the Fisk Generating Station, were the last two coal plants operating within the limits of a major US city. The plants' retirements were celebrated around the country as a turning point in the transition away from coal and a display of what determined environmental justice communities can accomplish. However, the closure of these plants was not the end of the Little Village community's struggle for environmental justice. It marked the beginning of a still-ongoing debate around how to transition the Crawford site.

After the plant closed, a task force appointed by Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel issued a report which stated that the Crawford site can be a community asset where Little Village residents can "live, work, and play in a healthy environment" and that the redevelopment of the site should be conducted with broad stakeholder input. A memorandum of understanding mandated that the site's owner solicit input from a group of community stakeholders before selling the site (FCTRF 2012).

Yet in February 2018, Hilco Redevelopment Partners publicly announced they would be buying the Crawford site and expressed interest in turning the site into a logistics facility, similar to developments Hilco has built in other cities (Hilco 2018). LVEJO and other community stakeholders vehemently opposed the logistics facility plan, which would add to existing diesel traffic in the neighborhood, including from a Unilever plant (Lopez 2017). The logistics facility "would bring with [it] a massive increase in dangerous toxic diesel pollution from trucks," said LVEJO executive director Kimberly Wasserman. "Simply moving from one toxic air pollution source from burning coal to another toxic air pollution source of diesel means risking the health of our community once again" (Spielman 2018). The sale of the land to Hilco and its

subsequent move to unilaterally redevelop the site violated the 2012 memorandum of understanding around the Crawford plant's retirement. After a public outcry, Hilco and the local elected officials opened the door to other uses and stated their intent to further engage with the community (Spielman 2018).



The Crawford Generating Station is located in the Little Village community. The plant closed in 2012 after more than a decade of organizing lead by Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO). [Photo Credit: Flickr/Eric Allix Rogers]

Community members in Little Village have suggested several uses for the site in the past, including commercial use and public river access. But after they surveyed the property with their eyes and noses, it became clear that because of nearby industrial uses, the Crawford site as it is today is incompatible with public green space. The site lies within an industrial corridor that the city of Chicago is planning to redevelop, and community leaders are asking the city to address the Crawford site as part of planning for the industrial corridor modernization more holistically. This could include green spaces on the Crawford site, but only with adjustments to nearby land use, as discussed in a recent report by LVEJO on planning guidelines. The report, Little

Village Environmental Justice Organization Guidelines for Future Planning and Development, also cites sustainable food production, small business incubation, and affordable



Little Village Community members and allies demand a just transition for the Crawford Generating Station at a press conference hosted by LVEJO at City Hall in September 2018. Hilco wants to build a 1 million sq. feet warehouse at the coal plant site. The warehouse will only bring temporary jobs, and increased air pollution from diesel trucks. [Photo Credit: James Gignac/UCS]

housing as community goals for the industrial corridor modernization (LVEJO 2018). A just transition for communities near coal plants does not stop at the fence line of the plant site, and neither do those communities' aspirations.

But even with the challenges the Crawford site presents for green space beyond its boundaries, there are other options for the site itself. The community has expressed interest in putting solar panels on the site. Analysis of the area by the Union of Concerned Scientists shows that it could accommodate a 10 megawatt solar farm using 73 percent of its land area, as well as a 10 megawatt energy storage installation using only 0.18 percent of the land. A model for this type of development can be found in Chicago's West Pullman neighborhood, the 8 megawatt Exelon City solar farm, also on a former industrial site (SunPower n.d.). The existing grid infrastructure on the Crawford site increases its appeal as a location for a solar farm, and pairing solar with storage offers additional benefits, including increased grid reliability and a reduced need for expensive, polluting gas-fired power plants (Jacobs 2017). Finally, a solar farm on the site could leverage two key provisions of the Future Energy Jobs Act: first, because it is

a designated brownfield site, it would be eligible for extra financial incentives; second, such development could help create jobs for local community members trained through the law's Solar for All training program.

Past plans, made without community input, envision the site as huge, unremarkable warehouses, bringing more diesel pollution to a community already rife with it and squandering space on Chicago's burgeoning riverfront. But a truly collaborative partnership between community members, local elected officials, and business leaders could transform the Crawford site into a crown jewel of Chicago and a national model for the just transition of urban coal plants. It has the potential to accommodate a solar farm that would bring pollution-free power and good jobs. A blueprint for this project already exists in bits and pieces, through similar projects elsewhere (such as Holyoke, Massachusetts, and Lansing, Michigan) (Richardson 2017; Plaisance 2016; SunPower n.d.). Forward-thinking leaders would do well to bring those pieces together.

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NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

Two Brattle Square
Cambridge, MA 02138-3780
Phone: (617) 547-5552
Fax: (617) 864-9405

WASHINGTON, DC, OFFICE

1825 K St. NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20006-1232
Phone: (202) 223-6133
Fax: (202) 223-6162

WEST COAST OFFICE

500 12th St., Suite 340
Oakland, CA 94607-4087
Phone: (510) 843-1872
Fax: (510) 843-3785

MIDWEST OFFICE

One N. LaSalle St., Suite 1904
Chicago, IL 60602-4064
Phone: (312) 578-1750
Fax: (312) 578-1751