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DEALIN' IN THE 'HOOD

*SOUTHWEST SIDE DUMP DEVELOPMENT TURNS OUT TO BE
VINTAGE JIM CAPRARO*

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In Chicago, calling someone a "behind-the-scenes dealmaker" isn't usually a compliment.

This is, after all, Clout City, where a better idea or a lower bid will get you . . . nowhere. That is, until somebody-who-knows-somebody--an insurance-peddling ward committeeman, perhaps, or a connected partner at a connected law firm--opens the right door.

Chicago's most accomplished door-openers (Relax fellas, no names here) often work on a percentage basis. Or for a piece of the action.

Then there's James Capraro.

Jim Capraro may be Chicago's most underrated behind-the-scenes dealmaker. He proved it again last week, nailing down a \$50 million factory project that will bring 400 good jobs to his neighborhood.

But as far as I can tell--and I've been watching him do his thing for 20 years--the guy they call "Cappy" down at 63rd and Western is in it for love, not money.

Capraro loves Chicago, of course. But he is most smitten by the dowdy parts of town--those parts, neither Gold Coast nor slum, where hard-working families get their first bite of the American apple. Most of all, he loves the Southwest Side, and in particular, the Chicago Lawn neighborhood (aka Marquette Park) where he was born and raised. This is where he does his deals, primarily as executive director of Greater Southwest Development Corp., a not-for-profit community group he founded in 1977.

Capraro's victories don't make the front page or lead the 10 o'clock news. They should. The city's future depends as much on the fate of Chicago Lawn, and the few racially diverse neighborhoods like it, as it does on a booming downtown and trendy north lakefront. It will be in Chicago Lawn, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was once greeted with a thrown brick, that Chicago finds out whether residential integration is sustainable ... whether the lose-lose process of resegregation, while sometimes slowed, can ever be stopped.

What's more, the economics of 63rd and Western are as tricky, if not more so, than redeveloping a Navy Pier or Block 37 in the Loop. Downtown has become a safe bet. The winds of speculation are at your back. Investing in Chicago Lawn still is an act of faith. But faith is Capraro's long suit.

Over the years, Greater Southwest has brokered deals to keep Sears Roebuck at 61st and Western; to bring in a Jewel food store and a Bank One branch; to get rid of a porno theater and replace it with a neighborhood arts center; to convert seedy walk-ups into subsidized housing for seniors. A few years ago, to stem the area's constant loss of good-paying jobs, Capraro waded into industrial retention. Greater Southwest helped Nabisco Biscuit Co., negotiate tax incentives that led to an expansion of their South Kedzie Avenue bakery and its 2,000 union-scale jobs.

All of which pales next to Capraro's latest coup--turning the largest of the Operation Silver Shovel illegal dump sites into a modern industrial park. Better yet, an industrial park anchored by a plastics molding plant run by an African-American woman who grew up in Robert Taylor Homes.

"This was the hardest thing we've ever done," Capraro told me last week, just before Mayor Richard Daley showed up for the ground-breaking ceremony.

One thing I noticed, though, looking around the 62 acres of freshly reclaimed wasteland at 75th and Southwest Highway, was that Capraro's methods never change. It was as though he had landed another shoe store for 63rd and Western.

His "troops" were there in force--in this case, dozens of school kids and senior citizens from local parishes and congregations. Last year, when the industrial park deal was in trouble before the City Council, Capraro bused his army downtown to stare down an obstructionist alderman (who has since been convicted and sent to jail for bribe-taking in the federal Silver Shovel probe.)

The VIPs were there, too. And Capraro made sure that every one--the mayor, the aldermen, the city commissioners, the developers, and most of all, Martha Williams, CEO of StyleMaster Plastics--was singled out as though he or she were the one who made it all happen.

There was even a kind word for a newspaper guy who, after climbing the mountain of rubble with Capraro, wrote a column or two that may have helped bring the absentee landowners to the negotiating table . . . and shoo away that sleazy alderman.

Like an old violin, it felt good to be played by a master. Even if he is a behind-the-scenes dealmaker.