

Chicago prepares to put its past, present on revamped Web site

City Clerk's records finally moving out of 19th Century

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Chicago has an easy-to-navigate street grid system, but buried deep in city records that may soon be unearthed for the Internet is a reminder of how different it might have been.

The city in the late 19th Century was a confusing hodgepodge of similarly named streets. A special aldermanic panel in 1889 proposed a name and number revamp that would have used the main branch of the **Chicago River**, and by extension Fulton Street, as the dividing line for north and south addresses and the Indiana border as a baseline for addresses on roads running east and west.

Madison and State Streets -- Chicago's present-day ground zero -- would have been designated 400 South and 5000 West, respectively.

The proposal, never enacted, is detailed in a City Council journal gathering dust in a basement vault at City Hall. But City Clerk Miguel del Valle has big plans to rescue from obscurity such fascinating artifacts of Chicago history while also shining a much brighter public light on City Council activities of the present and into the future.

Del Valle has convinced city technology czars to carve out a \$700,000 grant for an open government initiative that clerk staffers like to say will transform the clunky City Council Web site run by their office (chicityclerk.com/information_2009.php) from the Flintstones to the Jetsons. The Daley administration runs a separate Web site for the rest of city government.

To outsiders, an air of mystery and confusion swirls around meetings where aldermen each month may literally weigh in on more than 2,000 proposed ordinances on subjects ranging from budgets and taxes to individual building permits and the placement of stop signs.

The Web site upgrade, expected to be phased in beginning early next year, should make it easier to follow and understand the action from the comfort of your own home. A far richer vein of documents explaining the sometimes circuitous trip of a proposal through the process should be posted, and the new software is designed to make a search for a specific topic far more intuitive.

For example, it would be difficult on the current site to find the record of council actions involving city vehicle stickers. The material is there, but to find it you would have to search for "wheel tax," which is the official designation for the sticker program. The new software is designed to facilitate keyword searches in layman's terms and allow them to be refined by legislative sponsor, date range, address, ward and council committee.

Council meetings are broadcast live online but can't be rerun. Software improvements would archive and allow viewers to jump to specific subjects while scanning the legislation and supporting documents. Del Valle, a former state senator, said he experienced culture shock when he was appointed to the clerk's post in late 2006 to replace James Laski after a corruption conviction. Half the desks in the office still had typewriters. It was only in 1997 that Laski's office had quit recording council minutes by hand.

Even today, thanks to arcane council rules and a lack of uniformity in software, ordinances and supporting materials submitted in electronic form often have to be printed and re-entered in a different format. Monica Carranza, deputy director of the clerk's City Council division, said the new system should put a big dent in overtime costs that have soared to \$200,000 annually.

Perhaps the most intriguing element of the upgrade is its ability to aid history buffs in their understanding of how Chicago has been shaped and transformed over the decades. Historical records of City Council activity abound and, Carranza said, the plan is to eventually have them scanned and made available on the new Web site in an easily searchable form.

"Chicago has an amazing history that researchers, students, press and the public want to see," she said.
"There's history here that is really important that we want to make available."

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The Milwaukee City Council Web site already includes many of the open government features that Chicago soon will implement. For a rough idea of how that will look, go to chicagotribune.com/cityrecords

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