

Hunting LaFox: A Political Fable

by Philip Bess

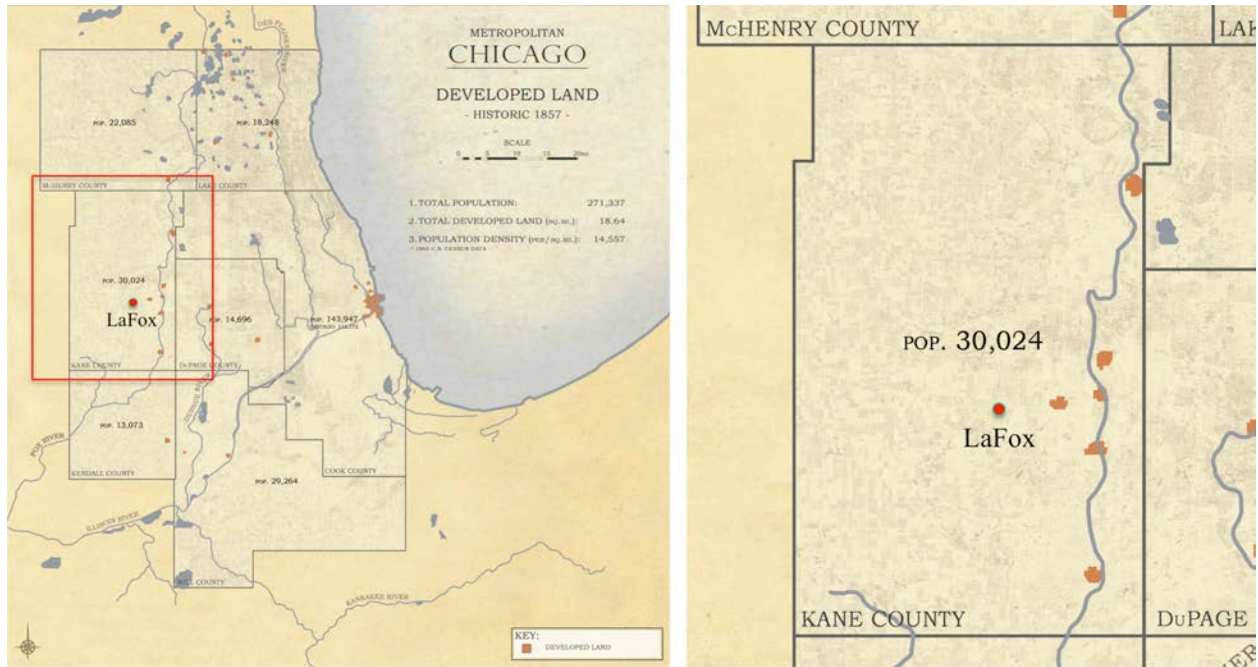


FIGURE 1: Metropolitan Chicago (left) and Kane County (right) Land Use, circa 1857.

LaFox, Illinois owes its origins to a spirited 19th century French expatriate, the youngest son of minor nobility who had lost their vestigial family privileges in the Revolution of 1848. A chance encounter with *Democracy in America* had prompted him, with impeccably bad timing, to quit his ancestral estate in the rural Parisian district of Clichy-Gennevilliers and sail for Philadelphia, less than two decades prior to his former districts's Second Empire ascendancy as France's premiere urban wastewater-enriched farmland. (“*Pas merde?*” he had smiled to himself on reading the news from home.) Wending westward toward Illinois, in 1852 he charmed the stolid young widow of one of Chicago's earliest successful real estate speculators ---“Nancy? Ah, *cher*: May I tell you of *Le Place Stanislaus*?”--- into giving him money to purchase 1200 acres of frontier prairie about four miles west of the present-day Kane County Fox River town of Geneva [Fig.1]. He drily dubbed its (not very) high-point “Mt. Reynard” and shortly thereafter adopted the *nom agraire* of Louis Francis Xavier LaFox. In 1854, during a short tenure as West Geneva's first postmaster, he sold an easement through his property to the Chicago and North Western Transportation Company. The sale allowed him to become a new-world gentleman farmer; and also to repay, court, and marry stolid Nancy, who turned out to be spirited herself and bore him seven children. Louis F.X. LaFox passed away in 1886, and his descendants tended

and remained in the orbit of the family farm up until WWII, after which Louis and Nancy LaFox's great-grandchildren began to disperse. LaFox the settlement was never more than a hamlet surrounding a freight line slicing through fertile Illinois farmland; but even after all of Louis's descendants had quit the land the original farmstead remained in the LaFox family.

The last gasp of metropolitan Chicago's sixty years of post-war automobile suburbanization [Figs.2 & 3] reached Kane County just prior to the onset of the early 21st

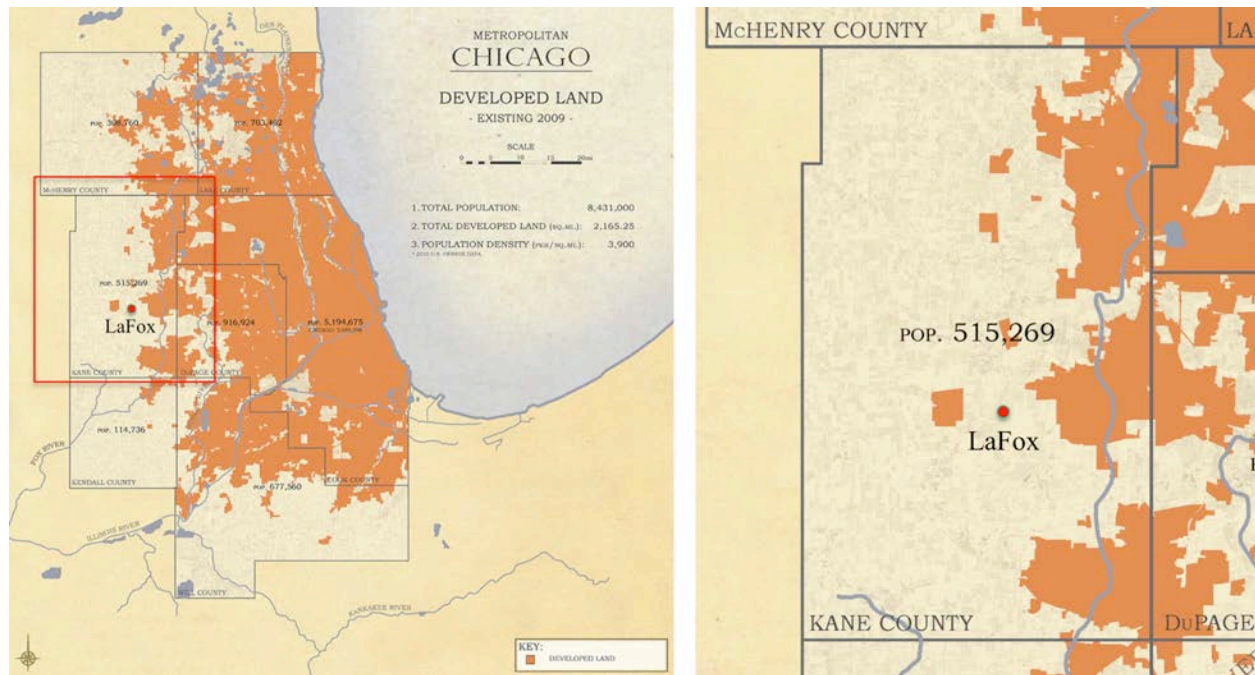


FIGURE 2: Metropolitan Chicago (left) and Kane County (right) Land Use, circa 2009.

century economic downturn that came to be known as The Long Contraction. By 2010 Illinois and Chicago had become poor unawares. By 2020 everyone was aware, and by 2030 the economics of northeast Illinois' suburban road and sewer infrastructure had become visibly problematic. In a rapid series of extraordinary developments Illinois's ongoing 21st century fiscal and political crises led it to cede its state-park-and-road-maintenance authority to county and 'super-county' regional jurisdictions, just as the federal government ended all local road-and-highway subsidies save for partial funding of interstate highways, each of which also became a toll road. In the ensuing fiscal and demographic shakeout, Kane County was not alone in seeing its low-density suburban subdivisions first devalued then rented; subjected to neglect, foreclosure, then vandals, then squatters; and finally abandoned, as revenue-strapped local

governments unable to tend to far flung road and sewer repairs were forced to shrink the circle of their public infrastructure.

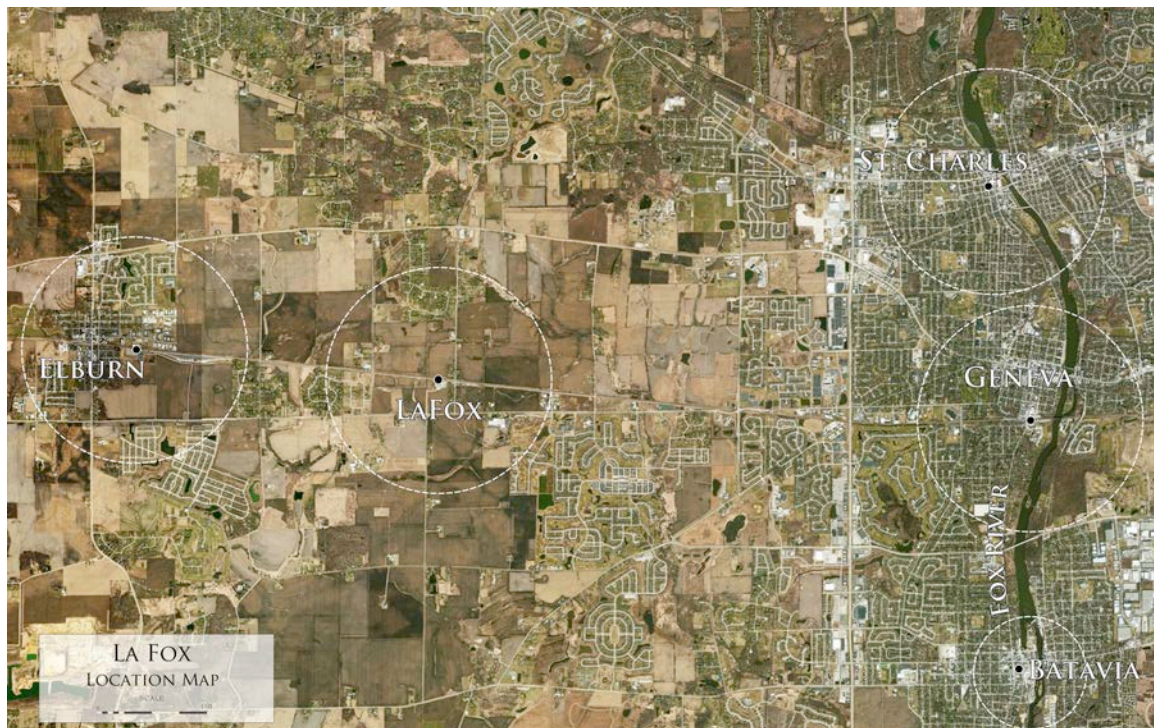


FIGURE 3: LaFox, Illinois, centered on its Chicago Metra rail stop, circa 2015. [Large circles = one mile radius]

Happily however, Kane County had assets lending themselves to economic renewal. The seed of LaFox's development and Kane County's recovery was a Metra commuter rail-stop-and-parking-lot planted in 2006 amidst the corn atop Mt. Reynard, the unlikely love child of a late-night budget-session liaison of powerful Chicago Democratic and suburban Republican congressional representatives. But more than the rail stop, more even than Kane County's rich topsoil, LaFox and Kane County owed their mid-21st century emergence from hard times to the re-birth of a 'yeoman ideal' centered in family farms, small businesses and manufacturing, prudential regional transportation policy, and local place-making. As the economic, demographic, and political fortunes of both Illinois and Chicago bottomed-out, a pro-natal post-Millennial generation of global-city expats, immigrant political refugees, and disciplined and generous religious communities pioneered what later historians called the Mid-American Great Awakening. And in Kane County and LaFox, this generation became the source, the core constituency, and the beneficiaries of transformative civic leadership provided by three historically consequential figures: Kane County Board Chairman Abraham Dwight Truman;

Chicago philanthropist Mary Armour Ott-Brigham; and one Peter Louis Francis Xavier LaFox, who suddenly and unexpectedly returned home.

Abraham Dwight “A.D.” Truman (“C.E.” Truman to his closest friends) had been an All-Conference quarterback at Prairie Ridge High School before going to the University of Virginia to study political theory. A two-year post-baccalaureate term as associate editor at *The Hedgehog Review* had introduced him to the late-19th-century social reformer Henry George and the early-21st-century Congress for the New Urbanism. In the course of his subsequent law school studies in Charlottesville Truman met his future wife, a doctoral student of particle physics from Wisconsin; and their marriage and her acceptance of a job at Fermilab occasioned Truman’s return to metropolitan Chicago where they settled in the Kane County Village of Batavia.

Not long thereafter Truman renewed a friendship with a high school teammate who had studied architecture at the University of Notre Dame, from whom Truman learned of a nearly forgotten early 21st century riff on Daniel Burnham’s 1909 *Plan of Chicago* by some Notre Dame architecture school students and faculty [Fig.4]. Looking it up, Truman later said that when he saw it “scales fell from my eyes.” In particular, Truman began to see metropolitan Chicago’s too-sluggish economy and shrunken middle class as the largest unforeseen consequences of short-sighted transportation policy and land use practices, bad zoning law,

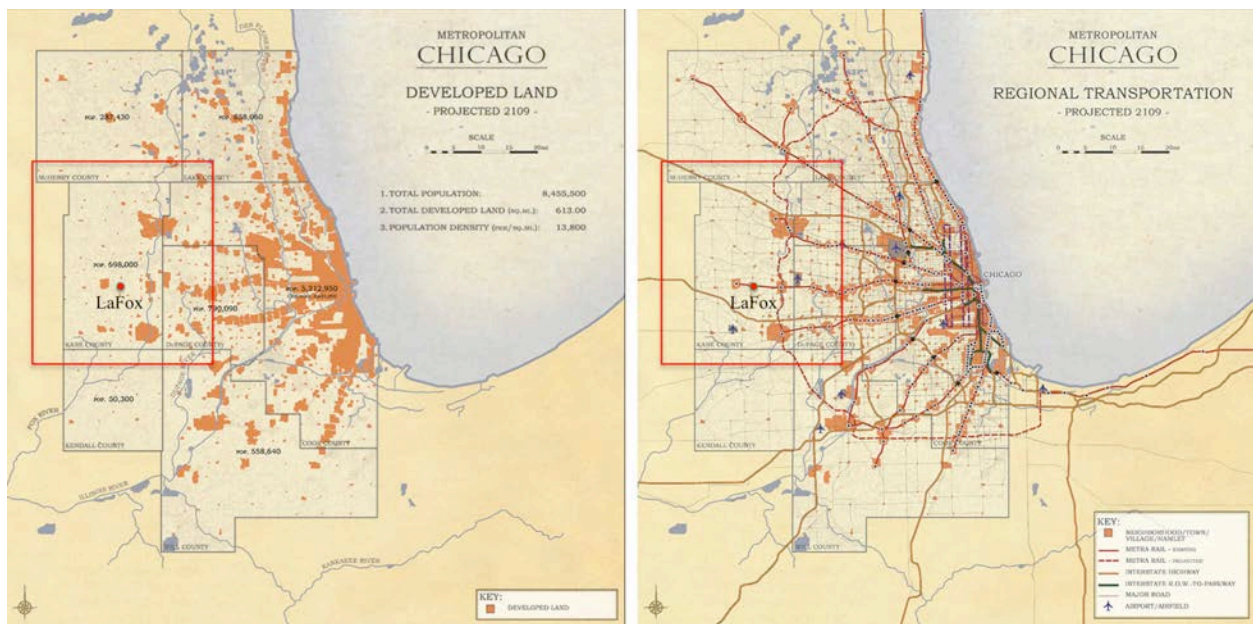


FIGURE 4: Projected 2109 Metropolitan Chicago Land Use (left), and Land Use Relationship to Regional Transportation (right); from *The Notre Dame Plan of Chicago 2109*.

public and private financial chicanery, and a tax system at every level too complex, opaque, arbitrary, and unjust. Surmising too that growing economic inequality was less a bug than a feature of the global economy, Truman began to imagine that a neo-Georgist / neo-traditional urban cultural moment had arrived. Restless in his legal practice, he ran for Chairman of the Kane County Board ---his genuine earnestness both masking and heightening the pleasure he took in his easily acquired nickname ‘Honest Abe’--- on a policy platform of better town-and-country land use centered on streamlining and re-organizing development around Kane County’s existing major roads and rail transportation, and related issues of zoning and tax reform.

Truman campaigned on a short list of inter-related themes. He focused first upon Kane County’s antiquated zoning ordinances mandating the separation of ordinary daily activities. He conceded that these ordinances spoke to once common desires, but argued that evidence everywhere showed that the low-density settlements and far-flung and costly road, storm-water, and wastewater infrastructure these ordinances had led to had proven themselves economically unsustainable. For reasons both economic and environmental Truman proposed replacing the old zoning ordinances with form-based codes allowing a mix of uses within pedestrian proximity across a range of lower-to-higher building and population densities. But the beneficial effects of zoning reform, Truman argued, would be further promoted by tax and fiscal reform that would both provide incentives for would be home-builders and town founders, and make Kane County taxes more simple, clear, predictable, and fair. Truman called for a revenue-neutral county-wide land value tax (LVT) ---an updated version of Henry George’s classic theory--- that would tax only land and not buildings or other improvements, based on its proximity to Kane County’s desirable natural and man-made goods. Contending that land is the foremost common resource that both can and should generously finance all of Kane County’s public services, Truman promoted his proposal as the best means by which both to tax land for its value to the community and to reward private landowners for maximizing its productivity. In debates and advertisements, and in countless face-to-face public arenas, Truman pounded home his themes:

“My proposal would derive all of Kane County’s operational revenues from land and land alone, and be the fairest most progressive tax of all. Land can’t be hidden! Land can’t be shipped overseas to foreign banks! Land *is* common wealth, and title to land a form of stewardship. Yes, private property is a right; but to hold title to land is to be a trustee, and land ownership is both an economic opportunity and a communal obligation!

“Working men and women of Kane County, propertied or not, you have a *right* to reward for your labors! You deserve *relief* from the arbitrary and unjust burdens of our current tax system! A single tax ---a land value tax replacing all other Kane County taxes save for our ‘sin taxes’ on tobacco, concrete frame construction, inoperable windows, and research university middle managers--- will relieve renters of all non-federal tax obligations; just as it will relieve landowners of all non-federal taxes save for our single tax on unimproved land.

“But landowners, you too have a right to the fruits of your labor, a right to profit from employing your wealth to create wealth. Hard work, prudential judgment, and a level playing field create the private and public prosperity making possible the large generosities ---the parks, schools, playgrounds, and theaters, the houses of worship, the charitable foundations, the endowed scholarships--- that enrich our common life.”

Truman acknowledged too much of Illinois and Chicago were broken, but proclaimed,

“Illinois and metropolitan Chicago still possess some of the greatest natural and cultural resources on the planet. Together we can make this work! Kane County can show the way to a culture of opportunity in which a broad middle class can prosper, the working poor can raise themselves from poverty, and the special needs of our neediest can be met by the wealth we produce. For all who work and invest, for all who want to work and invest, a land value tax will work for you and will work for Kane County!”

After two unsuccessful runs for office Truman was elected in 2044 as the leader of a slate of candidates pledged to zoning reform and a land value tax. Under his administration (in a national context of reforms to the Internal Revenue Code, and a regional context of “underwater homeowner” debt forgiveness), Kane County began a ten-year transition from taxing buildings and land to taxing land alone. In conjunction with a one-generation grandfather-clause to protect Kane County homeowners on fixed-incomes who had paid off their homes under the old regime, all previous tax abatement and tax-increment-financing programs were also phased out and eliminated. Several large businesses that formerly had been benefiting from these and similar sweetheart deals left Kane County. But others rose up to take their place encouraged by the

simplicity, clarity and predictability of the county's new (single) land tax regime, attracted by the opportunity to profit from their own entrepreneurial skills in Kane County's streamlined regulatory environment. By 2054 Kane County's former conventional property tax assessment system had been completely superseded by a LVT sufficient to cover Kane County's entire budget, including its primary roads, its fire and police protection, its water and sewer infrastructure, its share of regional commuter rail service, its public parks, and all its certified public, charter and religious schools. Speculative land banking diminished, then disappeared. Farming thrived under the new regime, at scales large and small. And in Kane County's villages, towns, and city neighborhoods local small-scale developers financed by local lenders began building, lot-by-lot and block-by-block, attractive mixed-use ensembles of buildings that cumulatively spoke to something deeply and historically Midwestern and American.

Taking cues from its existing county road-and-rail transportation network [Fig.5], the new tax regime [Fig.6] made a primary category distinction between *rural land* and *urban land* in order to maximize the economic and environmental efficiencies and benefits of each. Urban land was comprised of four discrete settlement-types ---*Hamlets, Villages, Towns, and Cities*--- defined by area and population density [Fig.7], and by their proximity to intersecting county roads and/or rail-transit- stops. Any new non-agricultural 'greenfield development' on rural land was required to take the form and density of Hamlets or Villages, subject to the urban tax rates

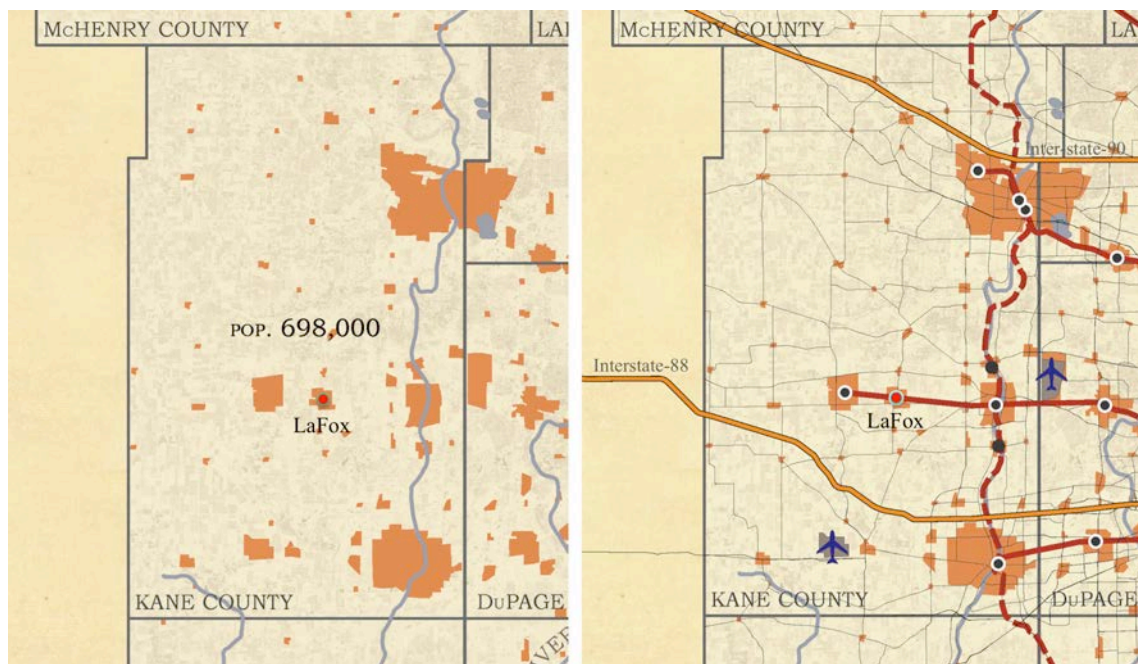


FIGURE 5: Projected 2100 Kane County Land Use (left); County Land Use Relationship to County Transportation (right).

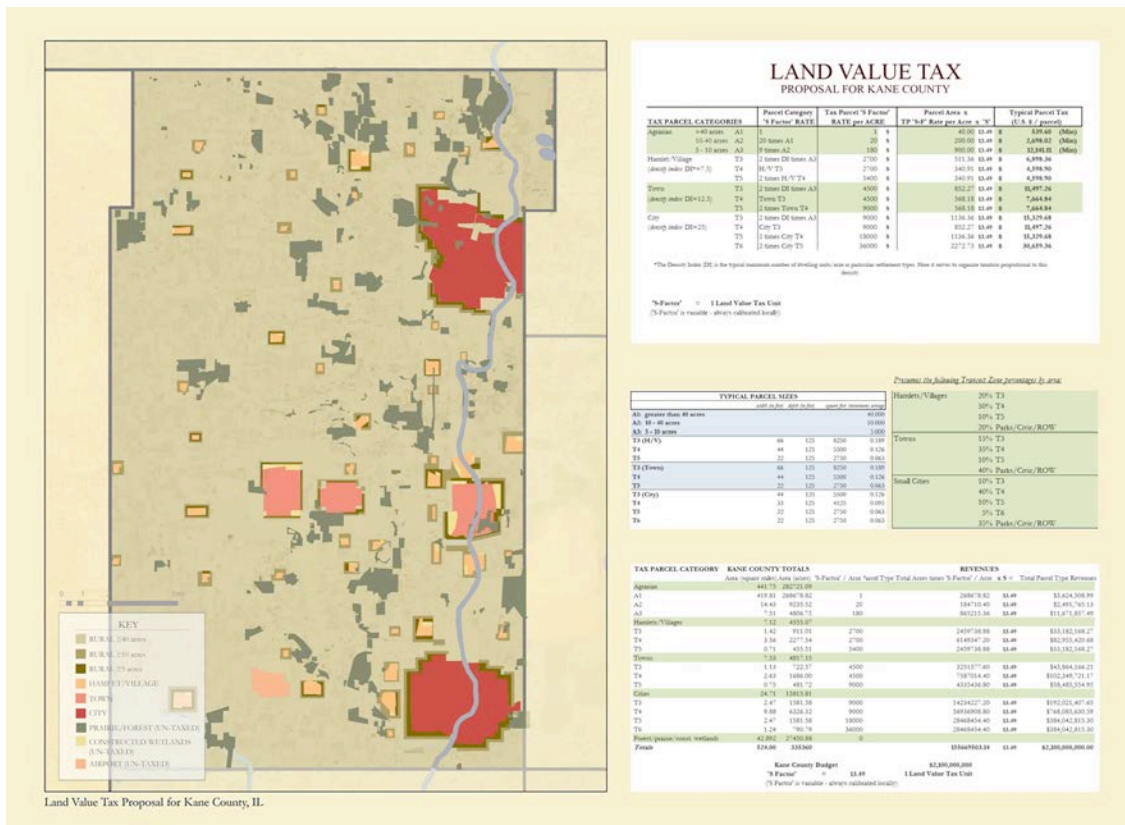


FIGURE 6: Kane County Land Value Tax Map (left) and Parcel Types (right).



FIGURE 7: Projected 2109 Kane County Urban Settlement Types (Hamlet, Village, Town, City), by area and population density.

proper to each --- the effects of which were on the one hand to permit such development but concentrate it around existing county roads, and on the other hand to actively promote agricultural activity on rural land and more dense settlements on urban land. Finally, for different urban-settlement-type self-determined master plans, county-wide LVT *lot types* were differentiated according to their proximity to socially created goods such as transit stations, public parks and squares, main streets, and other public places, with tax rates for each lot type established accordingly.

The benefits to Kane County began well before full transition to the LVT regime was complete. Owners of large farms paid taxes at rates at or below those of adjacent counties, making their corn, soybean, and oat rotations (dairy farming too) more profitable. Smaller scale specialty produce farms found ready markets in Kane County and other metropolitan Chicago towns and villages. Urban land was taxed at higher rates sufficient to meet Kane County revenue needs; and although revenue-neutral LVT rates were regularly adjusted in accord with land sale prices, the decline of land speculation under the new LVT regime effectively ended boom-and-bust real estate cycles. An American tradition of Town Squares, Main Streets, and detached single-family houses fronting tree-lined streets (with rear-loaded garage coach-houses) flourished anew. At the same time demand also rose for other traditional urban housing types; and especially on the more steeply-taxed building lots closer to public transit, builders responded with owner-occupied duplexes, three-flats, and urban walk-up apartment buildings. The result was a new supply of good, well-built, low-rise urban housing stock that enabled working adults of different means (and their families) to live in or near the neighborhoods, towns, and villages where they worked, or near public transit. The only losers in the new regime were land speculators and real estate developers who trafficked in land banking and/or making and flipping cheaply-constructed buildings, who had grown accustomed to paying low taxes on unimproved urban land but now found themselves with a financial incentive to either improve or sell their urban properties. But under the Kane County LVT regime even their ‘loss’ was nothing but that portion of their land value that had been created by others.

In this context of greater metropolitan Chicago’s deteriorated suburban landscape and the early successes of Kane County’s new tax and zoning regime, the fortunes of metropolitan Chicago received a completely unexpected boost from the reclusive Chicago philanthropist Mary

Armour Ott-Brigham. The intensely private Ott-Brigham divided her time between Chicago and Utah and was heir to two substantial fortunes, one dating back to Chicago's 19th century meat packing industry and the other from a late 20th century Salt Lake City-based chain of international ski resorts. It was a cliché, but the young Mary Ott-Brigham had studied art history and become a patron both of neo-modernist architecture and, for family reasons, environmental causes. (Ott-Brigham harbored a deep personal shame over Chicago's Bubbly Creek, about which she never spoke save to her spiritual advisor and a few close friends.) In mid-life however, she decided she was done with modern architecture. In a rare but pointed magazine interview that instantly became a famous (and devastating) rant, Ott-Brigham lowered the boom:

"I grew tired of being linked to buildings that are confusing, expensive, ecologically questionable at best, and for the most part ---forgive me--- butt-ugly. The preponderance of modern buildings lack all conviction, the best betray either deep cynicism or unconscionable innocence, and ---my god!--- the award-winners: *full* of passionate disdain. The cost of good architecture is to be expected, but it's the... the... the... what? the *gnostic unreality* of the putative *avant-garde* that's responsible for the absurd repair and renovation costs of these buildings, almost from Day One and often at public expense. A couple of those 'starchitect' projects were enough for me. And you watch: the modern Landmarks People won't even let those horrible unlovely buildings die a natural death! So I got out."

But Mary Ott-Brigham was intrigued by A.D. Truman's Kane County policy experiment, and after her due diligence invited him to a private lunch on her Gold Coast penthouse terrace overlooking Lake Michigan. There, she informed a stunned and grateful Truman that she was prepared to buy on short sale ruined and abandoned Kane County subdivisions and dead shopping malls and donate them to a new Kane County Rural Land Trust for restoration as forest and prairie preserves, or agricultural land, or for development as hamlets or villages. And she did. Over more than two decades the value of Ott-Brigham's purchases and gifts exceeded ten-figures, the happiest effects of which were to recover Kane County land lost to sprawl but also to inspire a cascade of comparable (if individually smaller) philanthropic donations for landscape restoration throughout metropolitan Chicago. And then, shortly thereafter, Peter L.F.X. LaFox showed up in Kane County, representing the family that still owned that sizeable parcel of Kane County farmland at the center of which was an under-valued Metra stop.

Pete LaFox ---Chicago-born great-great-great-great-grandson of his namesake Louis F.X. LaFox--- had been home-schooled as a youth, showing talent as a draughtsman and watercolorist. But his youthful passion was baseball, and as an adolescent he proved good enough to be drafted and signed by the New York Mets -- alas however, never quite good enough to play for them. After four years of minor league ball LaFox had Peter-Principled-out in two frustrating seasons with the Savannah (Georgia) Sand Gnats. Nevertheless, he liked Savannah --the food, the city, the ladies-- and after hanging up his cleats decided to stay and pursue an architecture degree from the local college of art and design that long before had reinvigorated Savannah's historic center. The school's antiquated modernist curriculum had chafed his common sense, because although Pete LaFox loved gadgets old and new, he saw clearly that neither buildings nor cities are gadgets. He found himself fascinated instead by Savannah's historic center of wards and squares [Fig.8], and its many beautiful 200-year-old buildings. Upon graduation he had thought to remain permanently in Savannah, until he got word from family members (and their tax advisors) of new circumstances in Kane County. Uncertain

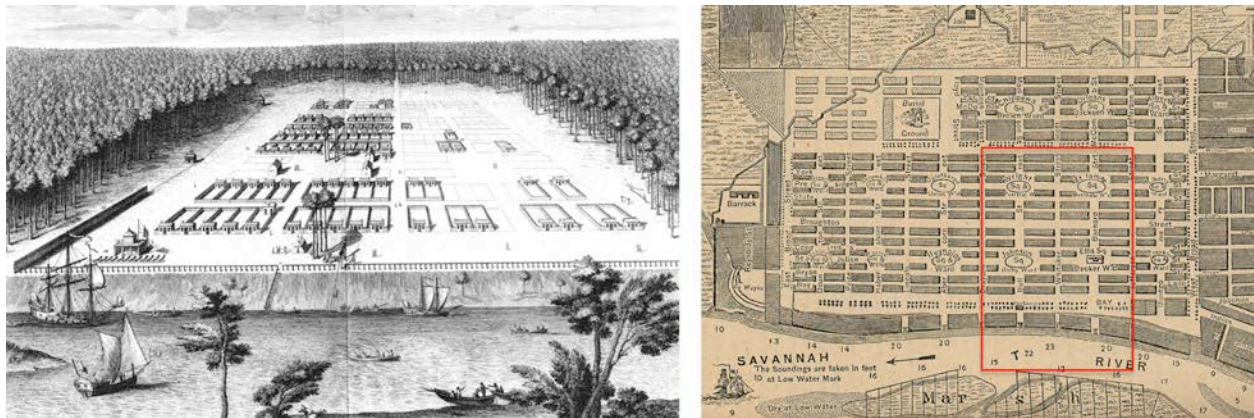


FIGURE 8: A depiction of the first four wards of Savannah, Georgia under construction in 1734, one year after its founding (left); and a depiction of Savannah circa 1818 (right).

of what to do next, LaFox later claimed to have been guided in part by a recurring dream. A more cerebral than spiritual Catholic, LaFox wrote in his autobiography that during his last days in Savannah he'd had several visions of his great-great-great-great-grandfather seated between Savannah founder James Oglethorpe and Aristotle, the three of them together behind his dugout at a baseball game.

historic virtues. So he returned to Kane County and rented the big Metra parking lot, where he held a barbecue and press conference. Speaking from the train platform atop Mt. Reynard, Honest Abe Truman at his side, he announced that the historic hamlet of LaFox would be expanding in accordance with Kane County's new land value tax regime, and unveiled his preliminary plans for the expansion. "In this moment of trial and opportunity . . . What does LaFox say? LaFox says: We are blessed with good soil! Proximity to Chicago and a Great Lake! A rail line! And The Continental Congress Land Ordinance of 1785! Let us therefore with confidence and loving care make the most of them!"



FIGURE 10: LaFox, Illinois existing conditions (left); LaFox, Illinois 2100 build-out plan (right), with constructed wetlands local passive wastewater treatment fields at perimeter.

As Pete LaFox's plan became known and his eponymous town grew and took form [Fig.11], locals unacquainted with urban density and its possible low-rise configurations called him crazy; to which he always flashed his best Jack-Nicholson-grin and gave the same reply: "Yep; crazy like LaFox." But under his steady direction over some forty years LaFox grew in size from a hamlet to a village until it finally maxed out its area as a town.

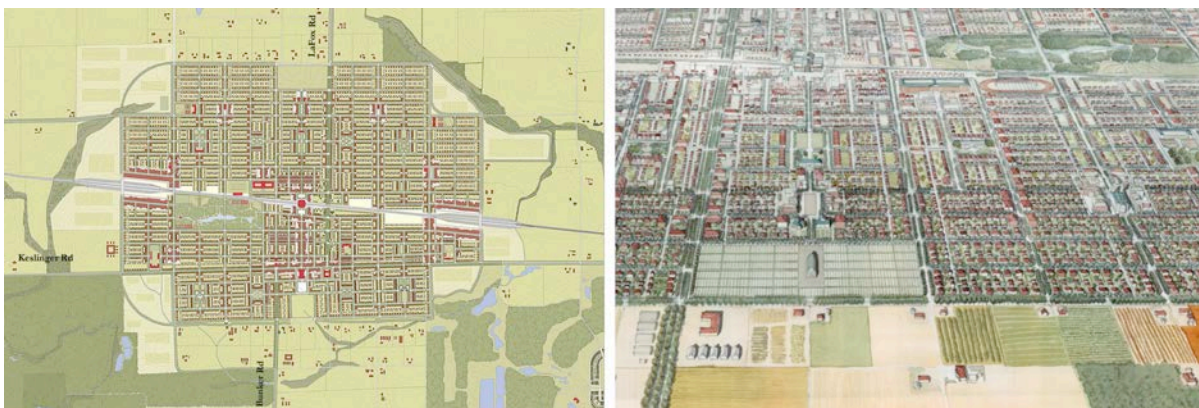


FIGURE 11: Plan of LaFox, Illinois in 2100 (left); partial aerial view of LaFox in 2100 looking south (right), LaFox Boulevard at far left.

All of Kane County flourished under the LVT, and especially LaFox and its residents. Soil quality, low ag-land taxes, and homesteading opportunities afforded by the Kane County Rural Land Trust promoted good and more profitable farming, while related fiscal incentives inclined Kane County residents toward more compact and connected settlements that incubated entrepreneurs, jobs, and civic life. In a predictably American way, LaFox's demographics proved fluid and unpredictable. Post-suburban Kane County Americans of Anglo, Latino, African, and south Asian descent migrated to LaFox and other Kane County towns and cities, joined there by a tragically steady influx of religious exiles fleeing genocides in west Africa and the Middle East being resettled in Kane County by Mennonite charities and orders of Catholic nuns. No one had imagined that Syrian, Iraqi, and Lebanese Christian refugees would make LaFox renowned throughout Kane County for its middle-eastern restaurants and small businesses; but they did.

The unexpected appearance of Amish farmers ---who knew good soil, and had a nose for land bargains--- inspired Pete LaFox to hire several to teach traditional timber framing; and later to import a cadre of traditional masons from Charleston (SC) who he had met during his time in Savannah. Together they established the Construction-Zone-known-as-LaFox as a *de facto* center of traditional building construction, the effects of which rippled throughout Kane County. Many townspeople worked in businesses related to agricultural equipment and supplies, many others in local manufacturing activities in new light-industrial loft buildings adjacent to sidings just off of LaFox's freight rail line. For several decades there was a living to be made in material salvage and recycling from the deteriorated subdivisions being re-ruralized by the Kane County Land Trust. Millwork, brickmaking, bicycle sales, auto supplies, metallurgy, electronics, distilled spirits and other productive activities ---including local cultivation of medical marijuana--- abounded; and a community of professionals and religious orders provided financial services, health care, and a range of educational choices. Local Buddhists built a block-sized monastery in LaFox; Dominican missionary-teachers a Catholic church and school.

LaFoxians (pronounced 'La-foe-shuns') commuted to work both in and out of town by train, car, bike, or on foot. Some telecommuted. As the global economy sputtered from seemingly endless war and terrorism, disrupted commercial transportation, broken supply lines, and population migration and decline, work in LaFox (and throughout middle America wherever

there was ample water) became increasingly tangible, increasingly entrepreneurial, increasingly local. People worked profitably, and in slow steady increments created new and lasting wealth.

Learning from Clichy (old Louis LaFox's ancestral home), LaFox processed all its wastewater locally in dry and odorless constructed wetlands **[Fig. 10, right]** and returned it directly to the ground as purified water; and used its solid waste to fertilize nearby truck farms [sic], piloting an exemplary wastewater treatment program that over time became normative for metropolitan Chicago towns, villages and hamlets. But LaFox became most famous as the jewel of Kane County's small towns **[Figs.12 & 13]**, achieving a gross population density of 15,000



FIGURE 12: Aerial view of the LaFox Eastside Public Library and Plaza, looking northwest.



FIGURE 13: View of the Peter L.F.X. LaFox monument and LaFox Town Hall, looking south on LaFox Boulevard. Peter LaFox is buried in a simple grave in the public cemetery on the north side of town, where his earthly remains rest awaiting the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

people per square mile, higher even than early 21st century Chicago, in residential and mixed-use buildings rarely taller than two-stories (and never more than six). More than half of all LaFoxians lived in detached single-family houses; yet these combined with LaFox's other residential, commercial, industrial, and civic buildings still occupied less than 60% of LaFox's total two-square-mile land area, the rest occupied by public parks, squares, and streets.

Though constrained by Kane County land use law from expanding beyond its designated urban perimeter, there was no real pressure for LaFox to grow either taller or denser than it had become by the end of the 21st century. The county-wide scope of both land use law and the land value tax made it unnecessary. LaFox's value was entirely a function of Kane County's agricultural land, LaFox's rail stop and proximity to Chicago, and the quality of LaFox's town plan and buildings. Moreover, Kane County's land value tax experiment yielded similar benefits for the towns of Geneva, St. Charles, Batavia and Elburn, as well as the cities of Elgin and Aurora. Most significantly, Kane County was emulated, flourishing even as other Illinois counties faced insolvency and, occasionally, the imprisonment of their public officials. What once was unimaginable, the land value tax was adopted by adjacent Chicago "collar counties" one-by-one, and finally by Cook County and the City of Chicago themselves. And this in turn led ultimately to two levels of political jurisdiction below those of state and national government: metropolitan Chicago, and local political communities of place (i.e., Hamlets, Villages, Towns, and Cities), public services at these two levels all funded by the region-wide land value tax.

Subject to the LVT's settlement-type parameters, local communities retained responsibility for their own local design and development guidelines, for public safety, for street construction and maintenance, for sanitation services, for their public parks, and for articulating and enforcing communal norms within a culture of free associations and a legal framework of constitutional rights. In turn, metropolitan government oversaw regional land use (including nature preserves and ag-land), wastewater treatment, watershed protection, solid waste management, public transportation, rural road infrastructure, and funding for elementary and secondary education as locally defined, administered, and delivered. Metropolitan Chicago's seven regional counties consolidated into a single political unit known as Chicago County; and in 2060 A.D. Truman became its first elected Count. With Washingtonian *gravitas* (in a local culture where hereditary rule had not been unknown) Truman pledged in his re-election

campaign to serve no more than two terms of office. Urged frequently and from many quarters to seek higher state and national office, Count Truman always laughed it off: “Why would I want to do that? The Cubs, and all the really good action, are right here in Chicago.”

Pete LaFox, revered as a town founder, stayed and grew old in LaFox. He maintained vigor well into advancing age, but gradually suffered a complete loss of hearing; and died tragically but poetically one summer evening in 2086 at the train station atop Mt. Reynard, struck and killed instantly by the last night train stopping at LaFox on its way to Elburn. He had closed down a wedding party in the station’s grand hall, and with a music only in his head had wandered onto the tracks. An autopsy determined he had consumed a large quantity of champagne. The distraught train engineer reported that Pete LaFox appeared to be dancing.

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