Written by Rick Carter, Executive Editor
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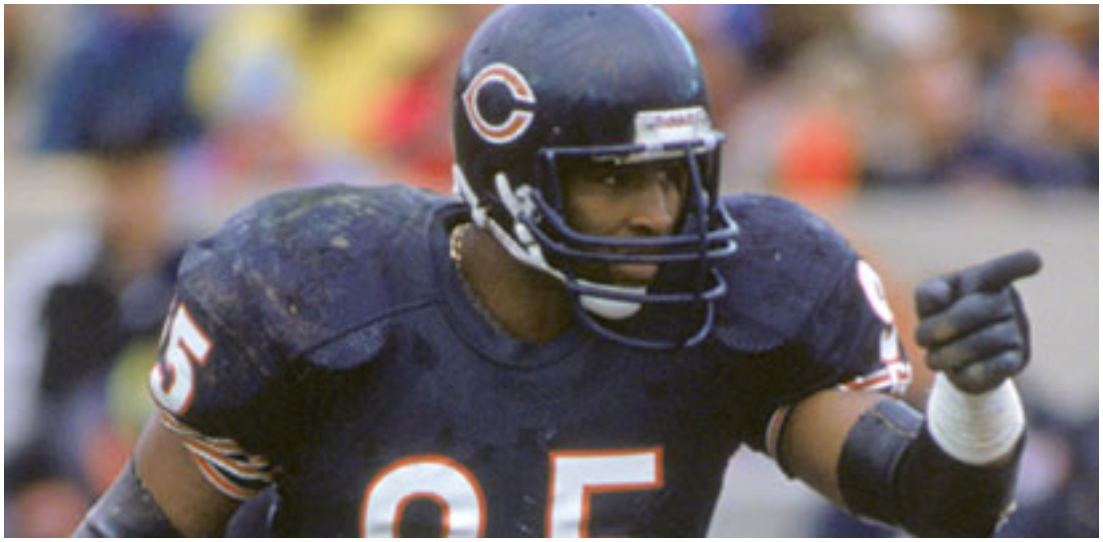


Businessman, philanthropist and NFL great Richard Dent goes green with a plan for a community-based project devoted to all things sustainable.

Former Chicago Bears' defensive end Richard Dent in October 2011 after his admittance to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Since leaving pro football in 1997, Dent has made a new mark as a philanthropist through his Make A Dent Foundation, and as a respected

Chicago-area businessman with his consulting company, RLD Resources, LLC. Go ahead. Ask any Chicago Bears fan to name his/her team's greats, and Richard Dent is likely to be on the list. One of the game's top defensive ends, Dent, who was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2011, routinely put fear in opposing quarterbacks with his exceptional sacking ability. His performance in Super Bowl XX alone is legendary and helped propel the Bears to a record-setting 46-10 win over New England in January 1986.

Dent retired from football after the '97 season, ending 14 years in the NFL, most of them with Chicago. He quickly moved on, transfer-ring his strong fan recognition and on-field talents to projects for the common good. A prime example is the "Make A Dent Foundation" (www.makeadentfoundation.org) that he established shortly before retiring from the pros. Over the years, this non-profit organization has directed thousands of dollars toward scholarships and leadership programs for promising Chicagoland students. Dent later founded RLD Resources, LLC, (RLD) a Chicago-based consulting group specializing in energy-related products and services and voice and data solutions. RLD has established itself as a serious player in the region, first through a successful data-storage company (since sold), then via project-management prowess in telecommunications. Dent's now using RLD to drive a unique plan for a high-tech, off-the-grid community-based operation devoted exclusively to the development and promotion of sustainable activities.

The Great Lakes Center

Officially called the Great Lakes Center (GLC) for Energy Smart Communities, this aspect of Richard's Dent's post-football career may be his most ambitious. Based on input from Dent's small, yet talented, team of experts and his own industry connections, the GLC is being cast as a first-in-the-nation, community-centric operation devoted to sustainable-related research efforts and training, jobs-formation and consulting. Designed as a practical way to help citizens reduce their carbon footprint and integrate sustainable principles into their lives, it may eventually spur a range of new sustainable activities—*within its sphere of influence and as a template for other GLC-type operations across the country.*

"This is something new for us," says Bill Lynes, an RLD partner and the group's chief information officer. It began when Dent asked him "how we might make a name for ourselves in the sustainable energy space." The request complemented research Lynes was conducting into local-government requests for proposals on energy-conservation programs. After reviewing several such RFPs, Lynes concluded that "in Illinois, we were shifting into a new paradigm of building automation, smart grids, smart appliances, smarter technologies and the need for the end-user to be smarter, all of which would require an integrated, complementary approach to education." The idea of the GLC, he says, was born out of their perceived need to not only educate the market on how to develop sustainable technologies for buildings of all types, but to

ensure things were done according to a plan. “This would mean having a timeline and following best practices and standards so early implementation of technologies could be the basis for more implementation.” The goal? “To help drive the transition of communities to what we believe an energy-smart community needs to be.”

When complete, the GLC will offer physical evidence of that belief as a rehabilitated 100,000-sq.-ft. former manufacturing site in the village of Park Forest, IL, 20 miles south of Chicago. The 50-year-old building (which RLD expected to assume ownership of at press time) has been unoccupied since 2006—*a fact the group says also dovetails with the GLC mission to bring new life to older communities.*

“One reason we chose Park Forest was because it was the home of many veterans of World War II,” states Lynes, noting the town’s 1948 founding as an early planned community for returning service members. While the area has seen some difficult years recently, with so many veterans now coming home and looking for jobs, he says, “our timing couldn’t be better.”

Post WWII Park Forest, IL, one of the first planned “G.I. Town” communities

Research, consulting, jobs

Exactly what will take place at the GLC operation in Park Forest remains a work in progress. A company brochure states that it will support “advanced R&D laboratories to vet renewable energy technologies planned as possible products/services for community retrofit projects and new master-plan community developments; energy-assessment and conservation-consultancy practice; and a classroom/e-learning center that will provide instruction and online courseware for suppliers, installers, energy consultants and community residents.” The building’s proposed floor plan shows ample space for the above, plus space for a data center, GLC offices and an eventual waste-gasification system that will generate electricity from the burning of waste that would be provided by a local hauler. The plan reflects wide-ranging hopes for the project that

Lynes breaks down as “a service, whether it’s consulting or offering space to vet and incubate technologies, to figure out how to commercialize them, take them to market, then train people in their use.”

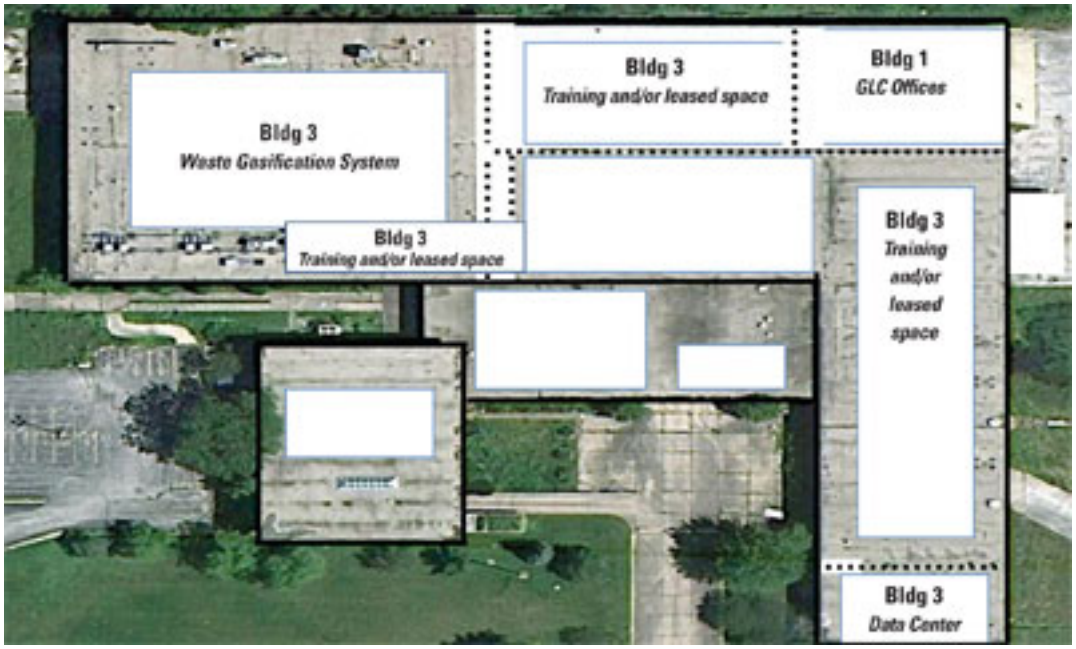
In keeping with its past successes, RLD Resources intends to only facilitate GLC activities, leaving the menu of actionable options up to its tenants. “Our plan is to acquire the building, retrofit it and make the retrofit itself an energy-efficient showcase,” says Mark Barry, an independent energy consultant working with RLD to activate GLC and attract tenants. Lynes says the GLC facility “will be off the grid. We will power our own building, and it will meet or exceed all EPA metrics for clean emissions. It will be gold LEED-certified.” Then, says Barry, “we’ll see who steps up as a tenant. We really want the learning center and community to benefit from the tenants’ presence.”

While the space could be leased to a single manufacturer of, say, a new type of energy-saving product, Barry anticipates more diversity. “The idea is to bring high school kids in and veterans, and allow them to learn as many technologies as possible,” he says, “so we really want to have about a dozen tenants. We think that by putting in a learning center and surrounding it with advanced R&D of one kind or another—*but all tied to energy*—coupled with the new energy paradigm will create an opportunity for interaction among the lab tenants. Early-stage ventures also housed there would have the opportunity to benefit from the larger companies there and from each other.”

According to Barry, a prerequisite for taking space in Park Forest is that tenants buy into GLC’s community vision. “There has to be an advantage to Park Forest from your product,” he says. “We want people to be able to test the product in the community with the cooperation of the local government,” which RLD has cultivated through its close relations with Park Forest leadership. “The lab will work with the village of Park Forest to deploy and fund new technologies,” Barry explains, adding that the village’s 10,000 residential units and 400 commercial buildings will be touted as a vast, built-in test zone for GLC research. As he describes it, if a tenant were to manufacture rooftop wind turbines, for example, they could place them on local roofs, then follow up with owners’ experiences to fine-tune the design for commercialization.

GLC also promises to be a job-generator. “GLC’s two main benefits to Park Forest are to save energy and create jobs,” Barry notes. “And these jobs will have a purpose—*to save energy*—so they’ll sort of pay for themselves. It’s not like people will be digging ditches. It could be veterans who get trained in a new technology or how to become an energy-efficiency community squad leader, for example, where they would go into neighborhoods and make them more efficient. It

could also be kids who learn how to blow insulation into attics, anything that saves energy. In the process," he says, "Park Forest may transform itself into a hub of energy innovation, which is our vision."



Aerial view of the soon-to-be Great Lakes Center (GLC) in Park Forest, IL, and a possible internal layout. RLD Resources was to take possession of the former manufacturing facility in late 2011 and begin rehabilitation immediately. (Click to enlarge)

The visionary

The face of GLC is, of course, Richard Dent, who is a tireless worker for his causes. In October 2011, for example, he had time to speak with President Obama about GLC during a White House celebration for the 1985 Super Bowl Champion Bears. Sports took him there, but his off-field accomplishments got him the President's ear. "Richard is our PR and is out on the street almost 24/7," says Lynes. "He creates an awareness and an interest among others to follow up."

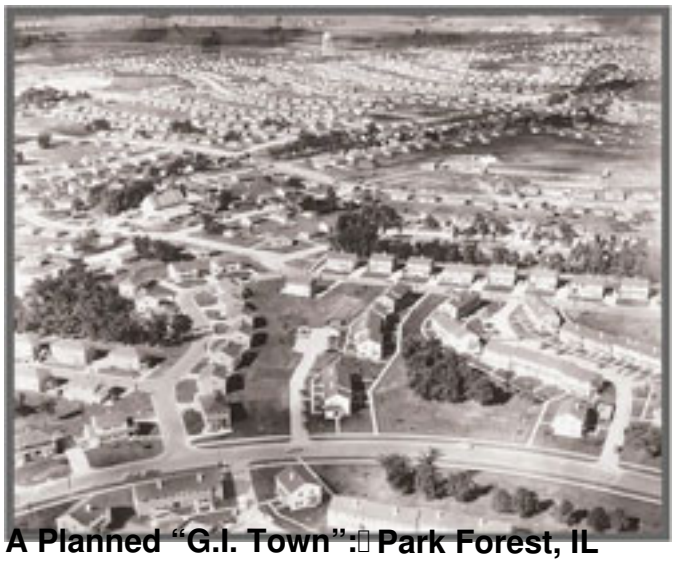
The estimated $11 to $23 million needed to purchase and rehabilitate the Park Forest site has been obtained largely due to Dent's ability to create interest at many levels. This includes the federal government—*which has approved a grant for the project through the Department of Energy* —state and county governments and smaller contributors of many

stripes. Corporate involvement includes partnerships with Commonwealth Edison, Northern Illinois' electricity supplier, and other utilities, and may include on-site participation from AT&T, Verizon, Siemens, HP, Oracle and General Electric.

Dent himself is soft-spoken and matter-of-fact about his ability to form such a far-reaching project and enlist the resources to make it happen. "Everybody needs to be a little bit smarter about energy conservation, smart technology and reducing their carbon footprint," he says. "Fortunately, I've been in business for quite some time, and my foundation has been in the education and learning business for quite some time, from scholarships to education. So I decided to put them together to create awareness and job training for the workforce. I think the sooner we're able to start training people who have old trades and teach them new trades and teach kids and the community about smart technology and energy conservation, as well as give them scholarships, the better off we'll be."

Despite Richard Dent's abilities, to attract real interest, his plan must be solid. In this case, even without an official promotional campaign for the GLC, Dent seems to have touched on an idea that finds easy traction in many circles. Barry credits the plan's high-tech, but common-sense approach that favors community participation and gain, as well as its stated preference to help veterans. "There are a lot of ideas floating around with regard to energy," he says, "but very few of them center on both technology and community. We can't patent or franchise the idea of an energy community center," he adds, "but once we get our coalition firing on all cylinders, we may be able to go out and propagate dozens of these things—*but I think the world needs hundreds."* **MT**

For additional details on the Great Lakes Center, log on to: www.makeadentfoundation.com ; or telephone: (312) 804-9595.



A Planned "G.I. Town": Park Forest, IL

Developed by American Community Builders, Park Forest was designed by Elbert Peets to provide housing for veterans returning from World War II. According to the Encyclopedia of Chicago History, *by 1950, 3000+ families had settled there.*

As another Chicago icon later wrote in a best-selling book: "The suburb [until 1946] had been the exclusive domain of the 'upper class.' It was where the rich lived. The rest of us were neighborhood folk. At war's end, a new kind of suburb came into being. . . Thanks to the GI bill, two new names were added to American folksay: Levittown and Park Forest… A new middle class had emerged. Until now, the great many, even before the Depression, had had to scuffle from one payday to the next… [Before there had been one] car on the block. Now, everybody was getting a car. Oh, it was exciting."

…Studs Terkel, pg. 12, *The Good War,* Pantheon Books, NY 1984