

Des Plaines

Developer Discussion
Panel Summary
Report



Regional
Transportation
Authority



Urban Land
Institute

Chicago

INTRODUCTION

The Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) has invested over \$9 million of its own funds and leveraged over \$10 million of local and Federal funds during the past 18 years to complete approximately 188 transit-oriented development (TOD) planning projects through the agency's Community Planning program. This program funds TOD planning studies and implementation assistance services that promote walkable, mixed-income, mixed-use development co-located and/or well-connected to retail and business uses in transit station areas, while also increasing overall access to transit.

From the RTA's perspective, pursuing and achieving implementation of these plans can result in more efficient transit operations, improved access to transit services, and the potential to increase ridership on the transit systems of the agency's three Service Boards (Metra, Pace, and CTA). Implementation efforts can also increase private investment in TOD areas while promoting the principles of sustainability and livability.



Metra station in downtown Des Plaines

TOD Developer Discussion Panels

Recognizing that developers possess a realistic outlook on the real estate market's future, the RTA partners with the Urban Land Institute (ULI) to facilitate TOD developer discussion panels to solicit guidance on the development climate. These half-day events are intended for those municipalities that have completed a TOD plan, but need additional assistance in drawing transit-supportive projects within their study areas. The panels involve local government staff engaging with development experts to discuss potential strategies to effectively revitalize several key parcels of land in a community. Des Plaines is one of the approximately 25 municipalities that have participated in the RTA's discussion panels.

DISCUSSION PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Urban Land Institute (ULI) and the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA)

Mary Ellen Martin - Vice President & Chief Operating Officer, Morningside USA

Matthew T. Nix - Principal, REVA Development Partners LLC

Greg A. Terwilliger - Vice President of Business Development, Novak Construction

Cindy McSherry - Executive Director, ULI Chicago

Heather Tabbert, AICP - Local Planning and Programs Manager, RTA

Chris Szmurlo - Senior Planner, RTA

City of Des Plaines

Honorable Mike Charewicz - Alderman of the 8th Ward

Mike McMahon - Community & Economic Development Director

Lauren Pruss, AICP - Economic Development Coordinator

Derek Peebles, PE - Civil Engineer

Johanna Bye, AICP - Senior Planner



Panelists sharing their ideas and recommendations



A tour of downtown

BACKGROUND



Welcome sign in Des Plaines⁹

Des Plaines is a northwestern suburb of Chicago. The city is located 17 miles from the Loop, encompasses 15 square miles of area, and is home to just over 58,000 people¹. Des Plaines is primarily a residential community, but there are a few centers of mixed use activity within in its boundaries.

The city's downtown is the most prominent of those areas as a collection of restaurants, offices, and stores are located there. Despite all of these amenities, the potential for additional enhancements and development still exists as there is still room to improve the vitality of the area. To solicit guidance on improving their downtown, Des Plaines applied for and was selected to receive assistance from the RTA's Community Planning program to conduct a developer discussion panel.

The panel was held in Des Plaines on December 6th, 2016. The panelists were led on a tour of various sites in the downtown area. From their observations, these panelists then devised a prioritized list of recommendations that they believed would improve the overall vitality of the city's downtown. The following report summarizes their comments and suggestions.



Downtown Des Plaines in the summer⁵

STUDY AREA

Downtown Des Plaines was the study area for the discussion panel. This area is located just west of the Des Plaines River and surrounds the local Metra station on the Union Pacific Northwest (UP-NW) line. Des Plaines is an older community within the Chicago region with a mix of commercial, office, institutional, and residential uses on both sides of the tracks.



Map of the study area

PARKING RECOMMENDATIONS

There are differing perceptions on the availability of parking in the downtown area. Some locals believe the area has a shortage of spaces to accommodate its workers, residents, and visitors. Others think more than enough parking exists in the downtown area and that the real issue lies with the management of the existing spaces. Overall, there is a prevalent uncertainty on the status of downtown parking. The panelists acknowledged this and made the subsequent suggestions.



Parking that was observed on the tour of downtown Des Plaines

CONDUCT A PARKING/TRAFFIC CIRCULATION STUDY

- In order to get a realistic understanding of the current conditions, an updated parking/traffic study should be conducted.
 - The last study was completed in 2007 and as a result, the document is outdated.
 - Des Plaines should contract a consulting firm with parking experience to aid them with the update.

- In addition to examining the availability of spaces, the parking/traffic study should also contain an analysis on the circulation of vehicles in downtown Des Plaines.
 - The street network, which consists of one-way pairings, is unorthodox and can be intimidating to drivers. The city should investigate the possibility of making the streets bidirectional.
 - Altering the one-way streets isn't an immediate issue, but the potential effects of such a change are worth investigating as such a configuration is usually viewed negatively by retailers.

EXAMINE THE PARKING RATIO

- The current parking ratio in the downtown area should be examined to better understand how it affects the development of new structures.
 - This effort should include a survey on the usage of parking spaces at all of the existing multi-family complexes that are nearby so to obtain data on the actual demand for residential parking.
 - The subsequent findings will clarify what sort of parking ratio should be mandated for new development projects.



Empty parking lot



Commuter parking along the Metra tracks

INVESTIGATE THE PARKING LOT LEASES

- The leases for the downtown parking lots should be investigated and documented.
 - Several surface lots appear to be underutilized, like the one at the intersection of Prairie and Graceland Avenues, which sat mostly empty during the tour.
 - The situation won't be resolved through piecemeal attempts so municipal officials need to undertake a collective, high level campaign to revise the management of the lots.
 - Sorting the issue out could allow for some parking spaces to be shared between daytime and nighttime visitors to downtown resulting in additional parking options.
 - Vacant surface parking lots can be considered as "low hanging fruit" for future infill development.

METROPOLITAN SQUARE RECOMMENDATIONS

Metropolitan Square is a mixed use development in downtown Des Plaines that opened in 2006. Described as a “mini-lifestyle center,” the square is anchored by a 40,000 square foot grocery store and includes a series of structures that are comprised of 135 residential units, around 22,000 square feet of office space, an additional 56,000 square feet of retail space, and a public parking garage⁴. Despite all of its features, the square has faced a number of issues over the years. These include commercial vacancies and a lack of vibrancy. The panelists made the following recommendations to help reinvigorate the space.



Entrance to Metropolitan Square



Retail space in the square

RECONFIGURE THE ROADWAY DESIGN

- City staff stated that there have been ongoing plans to reconfigure the crescent-shaped space at Metropolitan Square. All of the panelists agreed that this was a good effort to undertake.
 - The current design is awkward and confusing for motorists as well as pedestrians. The panelists all agreed that a traditional 4-way intersection would be a better design for the space.
 - The square could also be turned into a shared street similar to Argyle Street in Chicago and Marion Street in Oak Park where vehicles, bicyclists, and pedestrians are all able to travel through freely.
 - The panelists advised the city to get additional estimates on the cost to reconfigure the roadway to a 4-way intersection.

INCREASE CIVIC EVENT PROGRAMMING

- Metropolitan Square should be used for more civic events.
 - Supporting more events in Metropolitan Square can assist in activating the space.
 - For instance, the local farmer’s market or 4th of July celebrations could be held there.

- Allowing seasonal pop up shops could also be a short term solution for the vacant storefronts.
- If attracting retail outlets continues to be a struggle, the square may instead become a prime location for service establishments.

ENHANCING METROPOLITAN WAY

- The panelists also made specific recommendations for Metropolitan Way, the thoroughfare that connects the square with Miner Street.

- Additional lighting should be added to brighten the space up. This could include setting up strings of lights above Metropolitan Way or putting more illumination on the Metropolitan Square sign. Electronic billboards and neon signs should be avoided.
- Parking along the street should be reconfigured to allow more space for pedestrians and outdoor seating for local restaurants.
- The city could also consider transforming some of the parking spaces along Metropolitan Way into parklets. These are temporary extensions of the sidewalk that could be added during the summer months. Parklets enhance vibrancy by creating engaging public spaces and are a cost effective alternative to repaving sidewalks to be wider².



Example of a parklet in Urbana, IL²



Rendering of the shared street concept on Chicago's Argyle Street⁷



Parking spots along Metropolitan Way

DOWNTOWN RECOMMENDATIONS

The participants of the discussion panel also had focused comments for the broader downtown area. They ranged from direct actions for specific lots to general considerations for the downtown as a whole. The following section will summarize those suggestions.



Miner Street in downtown Des Plaines

FAÇADE IMPROVEMENTS

- A portion of the money collected from the downtown TIF fund should be utilized to improve the façades of the existing buildings on Miner Street.
 - The thoroughfare's building stock is well established, but a fair amount of structures could use some aesthetic enhancements.
 - Financial resources could be distributed on an individual need basis to local businesses or the municipality could promote more businesses to apply for its existing façade improvement programs.
 - The improvements will entice more people to walk around and check out all of the storefronts and additionally, it will bring a cohesive look to the area's streetscape.

THEATER CONVERSION

- There have been recent plans to convert the vacant Des Plaines Theater on Miner Street into a live music venue⁶, with the potential to also use it as a traditional movie theater. The panelists thought such a transformation would once again make the theater a local destination.
 - The venue would definitely become an active space in downtown Des Plaines. It would be an ideal location to host such events as a Battle of the Bands competition or classical music recitals.
 - The Arcada in St. Charles is a great example of a theater that was transformed into a music venue.
 - If additional parking is needed, the facility could be tied to the municipal garage in Metropolitan Square.
 - Hopefully, the potential to restore the space as a vintage movie theater still exists as the panelists believed such a use would be more accessible to a wider range of demographics.

Des Plaines Theater⁶

Existing TOD housing

FOCUS OF DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT

- It is important that downtown development does not get pushed too far north or south. The city should focus on revitalizing those parcels that are immediately along or near the Metra tracks.
 - The panelists specifically stated that more restaurants should be established on Miner Street as having a walkable restaurant row would be ideal for the area.
 - The city could concentrate businesses and restaurants on the north side of the tracks while bringing more institutional and office uses to the south.
 - Local officials should continue to enhance the downtown area as a center of transit-oriented development by attracting a mix of land uses around the city's Metra station.

CONNECTIVITY RECOMMENDATIONS

Downtown Des Plaines is home to numerous amenities. These include restaurants, offices, municipal institutions, retail outlets, and local landmarks. There are also several natural resources, like the Des Plaines River and Northwestern Woods, that are nearby. The participants of the discussion panel provided feedback to better connect these amenities.



The Des Plaines River Trail during the summer months³



Streetscape enhancements in downtown

EXAMINE PEDESTRIAN ACCESS AND CIRCULATION

- In addition to analyzing the movement of cars, a separate study should be conducted to examine the circulation of pedestrians in downtown Des Plaines.
 - Walkability is an important characteristic of a vibrant downtown area, thus the local pedestrian environment should be well integrated with its surroundings.
 - A high volume of traffic travels through the area so it is important for the local streetscape to accommodate the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists.
 - Adding more stop signs, setting up countdowns at major crosswalks, installing pedestrian refuges, and incorporating curb bump outs within the street network could assist with safety.
- The existing streetscape in downtown Des Plaines was recently refurbished and it looks great. Nonetheless, it is important that these features are maintained for the future.
 - The presence of street furniture, trees, and wide sidewalks make walking through the area enjoyable.

CONNECT TO THE DES PLAINES RIVER TRAIL

- The panelists encouraged the city to connect its downtown with the Des Plaines River.
 - Des Plaines is one of the few northwestern communities in the Chicago region where a body of water is located in close proximity to its downtown. Recognizing this, the municipal officials should take advantage of such an asset.

- The Des Plaines River Trail has an access point on Miner Street. It includes paths for walking and biking. Not too many people know about its existence because it is at a lower grade than the street. Adding signs would be helpful in bringing more people to recreate there.
- Signs guiding users to downtown should also be put on the trail to attract bicyclists and runners to take a break in Des Plaines.
- Trying to access the River Trail with a bike is difficult as someone has to go down a series of steps to get to the trail. An inexpensive solution would be to install a bike rail along the steps so as to allow bicyclists to go up and down without having to physically carry their bikes.



Example of a bike rail¹⁰



Des Plaines River Trail³

INCORPORATE MORE WAYFINDING

- Improved wayfinding should be incorporated within the city’s downtown.

- Signs and map kiosks should be placed at various locations to provide visitors with information on the many amenities that are nearby.
- Park Ridge is a local example that a number of years ago launched a successful wayfinding campaign for their Uptown district.



Wayfinding kiosk⁸



Welcome sign in Uptown Park Ridge⁸

CONCLUSION

Downtown Des Plaines is the community's most prominent center of activity. Visitors and residents can find shops, restaurants, and offices all in walking distance to the Metra station. Even though the area has so much to offer there are still a lot of opportunities to strengthen it. The participants of the discussion panel recognized this and devised these recommendations to assist in shaping the downtown area for the years to come.



Metra tracks in downtown Des Plaines

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**Regional
Transportation
Authority**

RTAChicago.org

RTA Administration Offices
175 West Jackson Boulevard, Suite 1650
Chicago, Illinois 60604

Phone: 312-913-3200

find us on:



**Urban Land
Institute**

Chicago

City of Des Plaines

Department of Community and Economic Development
1420 Miner Street Des Plaines, IL 60016

Phone: 847-391-5380