

Morton Grove

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.



Morton Grove's Metra station

TOD Developer Discussion Panels

Developers bring a realistic outlook to the future of the real estate market. Recognizing this fact, the RTA and Urban Land Institute (ULI) partner together to host 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. Morton Grove 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)

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

Village of Morton Grove

Honorable Daniel P. DiMaria - Mayor

Nancy M. Radzevich, AICP - Community and Economic Development Director

Dominick Argumedo, AICP - Zoning Administrator/Land-Use Planner



Panelists sharing their ideas and recommendations



A tour of the sites

BACKGROUND



Existing TOD housing in Morton Grove

Located approximately 13 miles from the Loop, Morton Grove is a near north suburb in the Chicago region. The village has a population of 23,270 people and is just over 5 square miles in area³. Even though it is an older community and much of the area is already built-out, there are still numerous opportunities for development. This is especially the case near Morton Grove's Metra station in its downtown.

Local officials have over the years gradually been trying to transform this area by conducting planning studies as well as implementing projects. These efforts began with a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district being adopted in 2000 to improve the physical conditions within the downtown. The village then partnered with the RTA in 2002 to complete the Lehigh/Ferris Subarea Plan. The document identified

strategic ways in which Morton Grove could promote transit-oriented development within its locality. Several dense multi-family buildings, like the Woodlands and Trafalgar Square Condos, were also constructed during this time. Located across the tracks from the local commuter rail facility, these projects have brought residents closer to transit. The Lehigh/Ferris Framework Plan was then drafted in 2008. It was an update to all of the previous planning efforts and also incorporated new ideas and recommendations for the village's TOD area⁶.

Despite all of these initiatives, the potential for additional improvements and development still exists. There are, for instance, various vacant properties in close proximity to the Morton Grove Metra station. These locations would be ideal for redevelopment and can certainly assist in enhancing the downtown area. To solicit guidance on accomplishing this, the village applied for the RTA's Community Planning program to conduct a discussion panel.



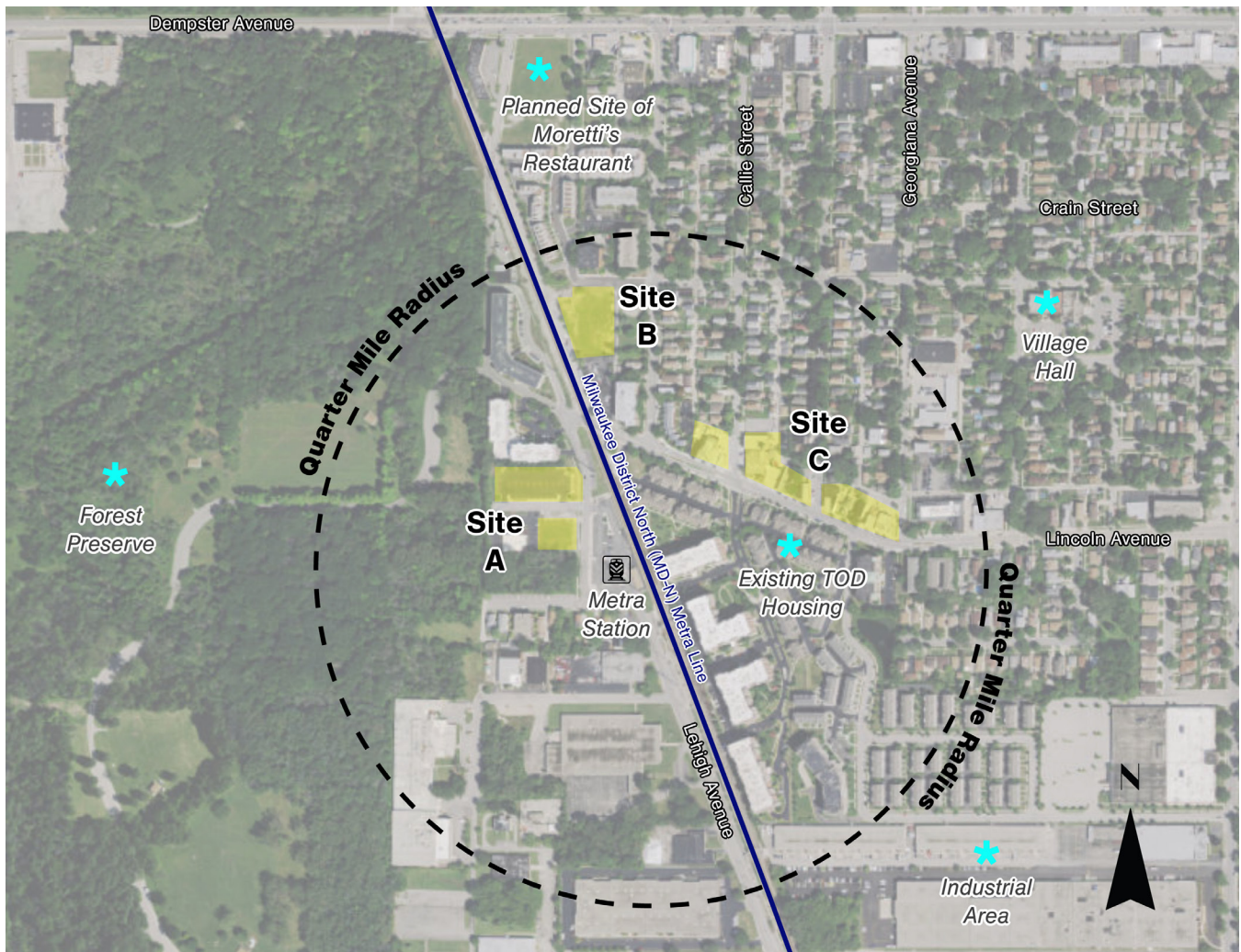
Village's welcome sign²

The panel was held in Morton Grove on September 30th, 2016. Those in attendance provided their feedback to the village on the challenges of enhancing the area surrounding the Metra station, the best use of several key sites while also promoting increased transit service, and how local officials can encourage as well as attract further development in the TOD area. This report will go in depth discussing the recommendations while also touching upon all of the potential that exists in Morton Grove.

STUDY AREA

The study area for the Morton Grove developer discussion panel surrounds the village's Metra station on the Milwaukee District North (MD-N) line. A range of residential, commercial, and institutional uses are all found there. As a result, it is known as Morton Grove's downtown and TOD area.

The developers and planners that participated in the panel specifically looked at three locations that are within a quarter mile radius from the commuter rail facility. These places are labeled on the study area map and referenced throughout the report as Sites A, B, and C. The panelists primarily focused their discussion on the three sites. However, several guiding comments were also made for a few other places nearby as well as the whole village in general.

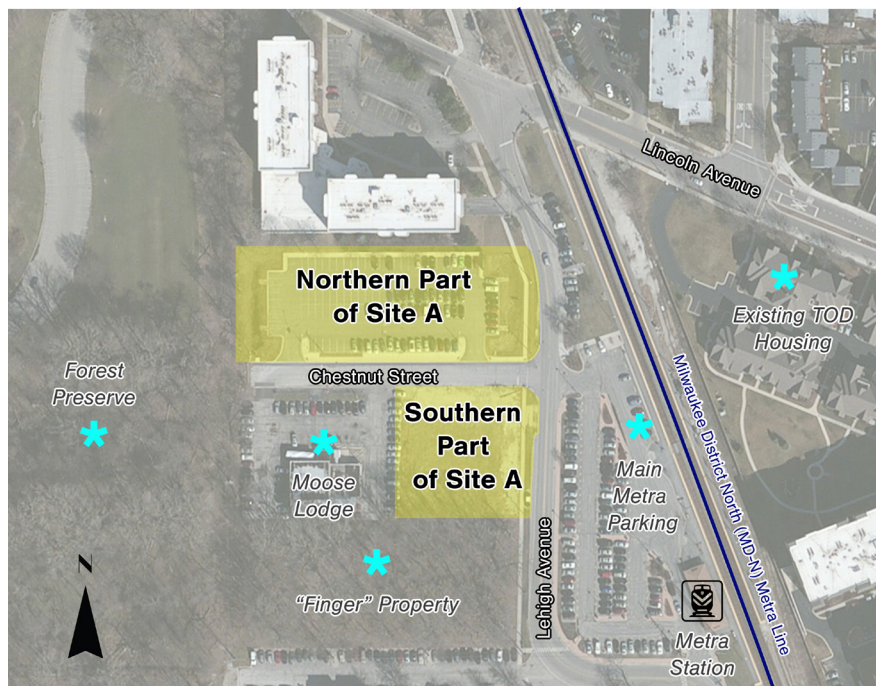


Map of the study area

SITE A RECOMMENDATIONS

Site A includes two separate lots that are located immediately to the west across Lehigh Avenue from the Morton Grove Metra station. They are separated from one another by Chestnut Street and both are under the village's ownership. In terms of existing conditions, the southern parcel at 8500 Lehigh Avenue is vacant. A stretch of Cook County Forest Preserve land, locally known as the "finger" because it juts out from the nearby wooded grounds, is abutting this property to the south. The northern parcel, 8550 Lehigh Avenue, has been leased for the last several years as additional surface parking for Metra commuters. It primarily serves as an overflow lot as the main parking spaces are located adjacent to the commuter rail facility.

There has recently been some interest in developing the two lots as Morton Grove released a request for proposals (RFP) in March 2016. Local officials view Site A as a critical piece in their efforts to redevelop the TOD area and the RFP mentioned that the village envisions a mixed use structure being there⁷. The panelists had the following recommendations for Site A.



Map of Site A

- There has been some discussion in putting a patio restaurant or retail space at 8500 Lehigh, the southern parcel of Site A. The panelists advised the planners to give this proposal careful consideration.
 - Commuters may be present in the morning and late afternoon, but they are usually gone for most of the day so the establishment may lose out on their patronage in the long run.
 - The village might be better inclined to cluster businesses down the street on Lincoln Avenue.
- In the short term, the village should think about utilizing the two lots at Site A for civic events.
 - There is a need to host more gatherings and ceremonies within the downtown area.

- Local officials should move the Farmer’s Market from the Civic Center in Harrer Park along Dempster Avenue to either the vacant parcel or the additional Metra surface parking to bring more activity into the downtown area.
- The panelists believed Site A would be a great place to have a park or municipal campus. Overall, they saw a lot of potential in this part of the TOD area.
 - They thought these 2 lots on Lehigh Avenue would be ideal for a municipal campus that could house administrative offices, police facilities as well as other institutional uses.
 - The municipal campus would be centrally situated across from the Metra station and near Lincoln Avenue, the main thoroughfare in the area.
 - Morton Grove’s downtown also lacks public spaces like a park or plaza for people to gather at so these features could also be placed at Site A.
 - In addition, parks are great land banks so the option to redevelop the parcels in the future would still exist.
- Local officials may want to hold out on redeveloping the vacant parcel at 8500 Lehigh because there might be a possibility to acquire the entire block in the years to come.
 - Morton Grove may enter in an agreement in the future with the Cook County Forest Preserve to potentially swap land for the “finger” property at 6412 Elm Street.



Southern part of Site A



Northern part of Site A

SITE B RECOMMENDATIONS

About two acres of vacant land is found at the southwest corner of Ferris and Capulina Avenues. This is called Site B by local officials and the following report also refers to it by this name. The property was formerly comprised of a furniture warehouse on its western end near the railroad tracks and several single-family homes on the other end along Ferris Avenue. Over time, the structures were abandoned so the village assembled and cleared the lots from 2005 to 2009 in the hopes of redeveloping them⁵.

Morton Grove's officials are still looking to transform the property so that it can complement its surroundings as well as assist in enhancing the TOD area. Specifically, a mixed use project that includes dense multi-family units in the rear with detached/attached single family homes or retail uses possibly along the street has always been desired.



Map of Site B

- Site B seems to be well suited for condominiums, townhomes, or a mid-rise multi-family structure.
 - Any projects that are denser would be out of place with the single-family residences just to the east of the property.
 - The attached row homes (300-318 Narragansett Court) near the planned site of the Moretti's flagship restaurant are a good example of what sort of housing should be built on Site B.
 - A development similar to the compact houses on School Street in Libertyville would also make sense for this property as such a project would be pedestrian friendly, transit-supportive, and fit in with the neighborhood.



Vacant land at Site B



An exemplary row home development in Morton Grove



Libertyville's School Street development

SITE C RECOMMENDATIONS

A majority of the panel’s discussion focused on Lincoln Avenue, Morton Grove’s main thoroughfare, from Lehigh to Georgiana Avenues. This area is considered the village’s downtown, but it lacks vibrant gathering spaces and could use additional destinations for residents as well as visitors. The corridor consists of a linear three block stretch of businesses, institutional uses, and multi-family housing. The residences are all clustered on the southern part of the street while the other uses are primarily found to the north.

The recommendations made by the panelists focused on the 10 or so parcels of commercial uses that are found on the northern part of Lincoln Avenue. This collection of lots is referred to as Site C.



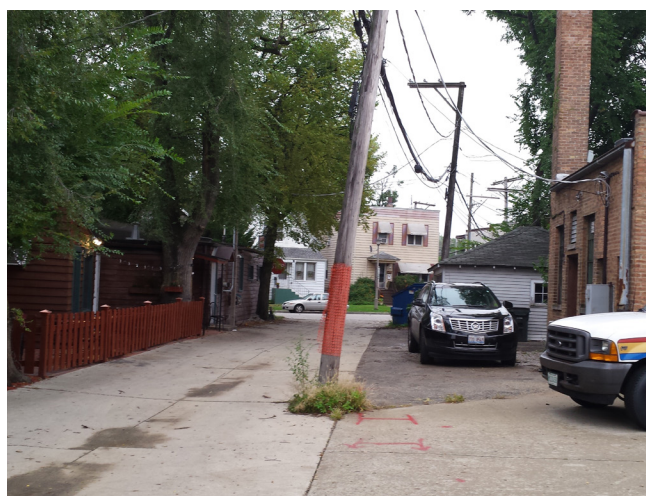
Map of Site C

- Morton Grove’s character and sense of place needs to be better accentuated. This could include enhancing its image through aesthetic improvements.
 - A clearly defined entryway should be installed on Lincoln Avenue, somewhere between Lehigh and Georgiana Avenues.
 - The existing streetscape on Lincoln Avenue is excellent and should be maintained in the future.
 - A façade improvement program should be established where local businesses would be subsidized by the village to improve the look of their structures.
 - In particular, the siding that surrounds the old village hall should be removed so that the structure’s original features can be exposed.
 - A charrette should be conducted for Lincoln Avenue. This will prove to be extremely beneficial for the area as it will assist the planners and elected representatives in creating a rendering of their future visions for the TOD area.

- As it was stated earlier, the TOD area lacks public spaces like a park or plaza. The village should attempt to create such spots near Site C.
 - A small open area does exist near the bending intersection of Lehigh and Lincoln Avenues. There are bike racks there now, but it'd be advantageous to add benches, a small gazebo, rain garden, or public art installations.
 - The alley near the intersection of Lincoln and Fernald Avenues could be vacated to become an open courtyard where people can gather, sit, and relax. A portion of it could possibly also be used as outdoor seating for the nearby restaurants.
 - Unlike Dempster Avenue to the north, Lincoln does not experience a lot of traffic. Village officials may want to consider shutting it down on several weekends in the summer for festivals and civic events. The street could be another place to relocate the Farmer's Market from Harrer Park. It could also be a great place to host the 4th of July parade.



A portion of Lincoln Avenue



Downtown alley that could possibly be vacated for an open courtyard

- Even though there has been growing interest in setting up a restaurant or retail outlet at Site A near the Metra station, the panel suggested that it might be better in the long run if new businesses were to establish themselves in the vacant or underutilized lots on Lincoln Avenue. Overall, there needs to be more reasons for people to come downtown.
 - A critical mass already exists in the well-designed residential units on the southern end of Lincoln Avenue. The other side of the street now needs to be filled in with more commercial uses so as to enhance the vibrancy of the entire TOD area.
 - A walkable restaurant row would be ideal for the village. Highwood is a good case study of a TOD area that is comprised of numerous well-respected eateries in close proximity to one another.
 - Boutiques shouldn't be discouraged from opening up in downtown Morton Grove, but restaurants seem to be a better fit for the area.
 - Pop up retail or seasonal commercial activities are good interim uses.

- The village may want to consider acquiring some of the vacant buildings or lots within Site C for redevelopment while also providing some support to the existing businesses on Lincoln Avenue.
- Quick schematics should be prepared for some of the buildings to assist potential developers to understand how the space can be used. These graphics can show square footage and possible visual outlays for operating a business there.
- Setting up economic development Kickstarter campaigns to help independent businesses get started may be a unique strategy for Morton Grove.
- **Local officials should incorporate additional strategies to manage the village's economic development.**
 - It is important to realize that as more independent businesses open up in downtown, the village will need to offer them some sort of assistance. Such establishments often need help operating in their early years of existence.
 - Creating a small business program could prove to be crucial in effectively dealing with such matters.
 - Other actions may include either hiring extra staff to manage the village's business community or outsourcing such work to a professional that specializes in economic development. Morton Grove could also strengthen its relationship with the local Chamber of Commerce.



Several buildings in Site C



Multi-family structures across from the Metra station

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

The panelists also had a few suggestions for other places near the TOD area and for the whole village in general.

- Village staff should continue to put their visions for downtown in writing.

- The village's short and long term goals should be written in a physical document that can be used to guide their efforts.
- This will also help potential developers and investors comprehend the types of projects the officials are looking for in the area.



Panelists observing the local housing stock

- Signs should be set up in other parts of the village to attract more people to visit the TOD area.

- The TOD area is situated away from major roads so signage can help draw visitors off of the major thoroughfares and direct them towards downtown, particularly from Dempster Avenue.
- Glen Ellyn is a great example of a local municipality that has successfully used extensive signage to bring more people to its central business district.
- The Forest Preserve's North Branch bike trail runs to the west of the station area. Signs could be placed near this route to attract bicyclists to make a pit stop in Morton Grove.
- As individuals are becoming more connected with technology, the geo-targeting components found in various phone applications can also be utilized to advertise the village's destinations and amenities.

- The village should promote its unique character across the region through advertising campaigns.

- The western suburb of Berwyn is a good case study as it has recently used posters and billboards to brand its community. This effort has brought visitors to check the area out and even attracted some to reside there.
- Morton Grove could publicize its identity as a quaint and easily accessible suburb with a diverse, affordable housing stock.

CONCLUSION

As it was observed at the panel, Morton Grove's downtown has many things to offer. The village is a quaint community that has its own unique character and sense of place. It is easily accessible by several modes of transportation as there is a Metra station and the Eden's Expressway is in close proximity. In addition, Morton Grove has a diverse housing stock that includes older bungalows, newer homes as well as a multitude of well-designed multi-family units right by the Metra station.

There is, however, still room to strengthen the downtown. Several vacant parcels can be found near the Metra station and they unfortunately are conceived as gaps in the area. The main thoroughfare, Lincoln Avenue, could also be improved upon by attracting more businesses to locate there, fixing up the façades of its buildings, and implementing other revitalization efforts. The recommendations that were made by the panel can assist Morton Grove in their revitalization efforts.



Metra train arriving in Morton Grove

REFERENCES

1. "Map of Morton Grove." *Map Office*. GIS Consortium, n.d. Web. Fall 2016.
2. "Morton Grove Welcome Sign." *General Information*. Morton Grove Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MGCCI), 2013. Web. Fall 2016.
3. "Our Community." *Local Information*. Village of Morton Grove, n.d. Web. Fall 2016.
4. Rockrohr, Phil. "Moretti's Restaurant Wraps Up Financing Agreement with Morton Grove." *Pioneer Press*. Chicago Tribune, 17 Oct. 2016. Web. Fall 2016.
5. "Site B Redevelopment Parcel." *Request for Proposals (RFP)*. Village of Morton Grove, 17 Apr. 2014. Web. Fall 2016.
6. "The Lehigh/Ferris Framework Plan." *Community and Economic Development*. Village of Morton Grove, Nov. 2008. Web. Fall 2016.
7. "Village Issues RFP for Redevelopment of 8500 and 8550 Lehigh Ave Sites." *General News*. Village of Morton Grove, 2014. Web. Fall 2016.
8. "Village Receives IEPA Grant for Site B and Extends Time for Development Proposals." *General News*. Village of Morton Grove, 2014. Web. Fall 2016.



**Regional
Transportation
Authority**

RTAChicago.org

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

Phone: 312-913-3200

Follow us on Facebook and Twitter

 ChicagoRTA  @RTA_Chicago



**Urban Land
Institute**

Chicago

Village of Morton Grove

Department of Community and Economic Development
6101 Capulina Avenue Morton Grove, IL 60053

commdev@mortongroveil.org

Phone: 847-470-5231