Chapter 10: Plan Participants

Process

The study was sponsored by the Southwest Conference of Mayors (SCM), funded by RTA and IDOT, and conducted with active participation from Pace, Metra, the CTA, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), the Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways (CCDOTH), the City of Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT), the City of Chicago Department of Aviation (CDOA), and the Illinois Tollway Authority (Tollway).

A Steering Committee composed of the leadership from the Corridor Communities and SCM oversaw the process and contributed to the definition of improvement projects and implementation priorities, with active input from the noted agencies. The Steering Committee met six times during the course of the study.

The study sponsored a website at http://www.cicerocorridor.com, which served as the primary vehicle for reporting project findings and soliciting public input via interactive surveys.

A series of developer focus groups engaged developers and brokers to ascertain interest and feedback on the strength of the market.

Additionally, the consultant team provided briefings on the study at various points throughout the study at events such as the 2014 SCM Expo, periodic meetings of industrial councils, and municipal meetings.

Summary of Public Input / Themes

A pair of online public surveys to obtain input on Corridor issues and desires for change was rolled out in May 2014 and available through July 2014. The project website and surveys were publicized through press announcements, distribution of flyers for posting in the Corridor Communities, links to the website from Corridor Community websites, and email invitations to participants of the SCM's recently completed Cicero Avenue Corridor Plan.

The consultant team used the detailed survey results to enhance the technical analysis completed during preliminary phases of the study. Findings from the survey, together with input from the study's Steering Committee, will shape the priorities and concepts developed by the study team that can contribute to improvement of transportation, economic development, and urban design/visual identity on the Corridor.

What do Respondents think about the Roadway?

When presented with a variety of improvement types, respondents prioritized improved speed along the Corridor as their top priority.

When asked to characterize the level of roadway congestion around certain intersections as "Very Little", "Moderate", "High", "Severe" or "Don't Know", the most frequent response for congestion around Midway, 111th Street, and 127th Street was "High." The most frequent response for congestion around Ford City and 95th Street was "Severe."

When asked to rate attributes or features of the roadway including pavement condition, safety, signage, access to businesses and access to interstates as "Excellent", "Good", "Average", "Poor", "Very Poor", or "Don't Know", the most frequent response was "Average". Pavement condition was most frequently ranked as "Poor".

What do Respondents think about Public Transportation?

Transit usage among survey respondents was low or infrequent, regardless of service provider.

Transit users arrived at their primary public transportation service by all modes, but most frequently were dropped off, or drove alone. Few transfer from one service to another in the course of their trips. Regarding condition of elements that may make transit ridership more appealing, respondents marked most elements as "Average" or "No Opinion."

In response to a question about whether current public transportation service on the Corridor meets rider needs, 69% of respondents said "Yes."

What do Respondents think about Non-Motorized Options?

The vast majority of survey respondents never walk or bicycle on Cicero Avenue, use the recreational walking or bicycle trails that intersect the Corridor, or bring their bicycles on transit along the Corridor.

Regarding the non-motorized infrastructure on the Corridor, many respondents commented unfavorably on the condition and continuity of sidewalks along the corridor as an impediment to walking safely or efficiently.

What do Respondents think about Streetscape?

Streetscape questions dealt with assessment of conditions and availability of street furnishings, and landscaping styles and preferences.

When asked to characterize the condition of medians along the Corridor, the most frequent for every segment was "Poor."

- 55th Street to 63rd Street
- 63rd Street to 71st Street
- 71st Street to 79th Street
- 79th Street to 111th Street
- 111th Street to 127th Street

Ratings related to parkway conditions were distributed across the options "Very Good," "Adequate," "Poor" and "No Opinion."

Questions pertaining to street furnishings (trash receptacles, benches, bike racks, bus shelters, etc.) indicated that respondents considered current conditions and quantity to be "Adequate", with the exception of bike racks, which were deemed "Poor." There was not much differentiation among categories noted as the "Most Important" item for investment.

Responses to visual preference questions seem to suggest that respondents favor both manicured as well as grassy landscaping styles. Improved bus shelters and pedestrian crosswalks were perceived favorably (79%).

A majority of respondents (62%) indicated that the recent streetscape and signage improvements around Midway Airport have had a positive impact.

What do Respondents think about Urban Design?

Urban design questions dealt with assessment of architectural style and layout / form of the built environment.

When asked about form for new development along Cicero Avenue, most respondents responded positively to typical design guidelines: positioning buildings close to the street; landscaping; compatible heights and mass; height maximums; and mixed use. While easy pedestrian access was noted as important, so was automobile access.

The majority of respondents (46%) noted that specific architectural style was not important as long as quality is good.

What do Respondents Think about Development?

Development questions asked for feedback on economic development priorities and on preferred development opportunities.

Commercial/office, commercial/retail and public uses were the development categories that most respondents thought were appropriate for the corridor. Specifically, respondents thought that big box, strip centers, and mixed use were appropriate forms for the corridor.

When asked to comment on priorities, all categories (a range of economic development goals) were noted as "Important."

- The two categories that received the most responses for "Most Important" were "Variety of Restaurants and Bars" and "Creating local jobs".
- No single category stood out as receiving an outstanding number of "Unimportant" or "No Opinion" responses.

In response to questions about where respondents shop, the majority did not consider Cicero Avenue as their primary shopping destination (64%). Orland Square Mall / LaGrange Road was the most commonly noted destination.

Respondents were asked to comment on the concentration of certain business types along the Corridor, whether there are too few, adequate number, too many, or no opinion. The four categories most noted as being in short supply:

- Fine Dining Restaurants (83%)
- Casual Dine-In Restaurants (75%)
- Entertainment Destinations (75%)
- Small, Locally-Owned Retail (75%)

The three categories of businesses that received notable response as too prevalent are:

- Payday Loan (100%)
- Cash for Gold (92%)
- Auto Title Loans (92%)

One-third or fewer respondents answered questions pertaining to types of residential development appropriate for Cicero Avenue. Townhomes and condominiums received some favorable votes, followed by "no residential is appropriate." Senior housing, assisted living, student housing, and rental apartments received no votes as appropriate.

Summary of Developer Feedback

A series of developer focus groups were conducted in May and June 2014, at which existing conditions and real estate market conditions were presented to audiences of developers and brokers to ascertain interest and feedback on the strength of the market.

How do Developers generally assess the Corridor?

Conversations with developers indicate that the market may support some types of redevelopment along the Corridor, including affordable senior housing and medical offices. There may also be an opportunity to build a limited amount of new retail space and attract new tenants to vacant retail space. However, relatively high land prices and a lack of sufficiently large, available sites may challenge near-term redevelopment. Municipal planning and assistance will therefore likely be necessary to overcome market-level and site-level challenges to redevelopment. Public-private partnerships with municipal involvement in site assembly, coordination with property owners, and use of incentives to defray infill development costs and attract tenants could encourage redevelopment along the Corridor.

What do Developers perceive as Corridor Strengths?

Developers articulated a number of strong points or assets in the Corridor. These include a high volume of potentially retail-supporting traffic; an existing inventory of industrial, hotel and retail tenants; and key anchors such as Midway Airport and Advocate Christ Medical Center. Developer input regarding general perceptions of the Corridor is outlined below:

- **Character of the Corridor.** The Corridor has developed as an auto-oriented corridor, with auto-accessible retail and other uses. The Corridor is considered a largely built-out area with few large redevelopment opportunities remaining.
- **Traffic Counts.** Cicero Avenue has constant, high traffic counts, even relative to other major corridors in the south suburbs. The high volume of traffic throughout the Corridor creates opportunities for drivers to access retail and other development, and is not considered an impediment to most types of development.
- **Parking.** The Corridor has adequate parking to enable access to retail, office and service uses. While redevelopment is at times challenged by limited availability of parking, the relatively high level of existing parking along the Corridor allows flexibility in development.
- **Demographics.** From a demographic perspective, the relatively high population of households within a half mile of the Corridor makes it attractive to developers. The area is largely middle class; median household income in the corridor communities is approximately $52,500, slightly higher than the median for the Chicago metropolitan area. According to interviews, while this level of income does not provide high disposable income, the stable wages are adequate to support a range of necessary retail goods. However, the income mix of this population may limit support for some types of retail development.

What do Developers think are Opportunities for Redevelopment?

Developers also provided overall feedback regarding the potential for redevelopment along the corridor, as summarized below for three sectors.

For **retail** development:

- According to developers, the current market is unlikely to support speculative new construction retail development. Identifying and targeting specific retail tenants not currently found along the Corridor may be an effective strategy to fill currently vacant anchor retail spaces, particularly where larger anchor tenant spaces exist, such as at Ford City Mall or Burbank Town Center.
- Improving the “curb appeal” of established retail centers by upgrading the facades of older buildings, enhancing visibility, and making other property improvements may help to attract retail tenants and shoppers.
- Concentrating larger retail tenants in highly-visible and accessible retail nodes located every few miles along the Corridor, while supporting improvements to neighborhood and convenience retail, as appropriate, outside these nodes.

For **medical /health care** development:

- The Advocate Christ Medical Center, located in Oak Lawn on 95th Street one-half mile east of the Corridor, anchors some existing medical office development along 95th Street and Cicero Avenue. A recently-completed 36,000-square-foot Class A medical office development on 95th Street east of the hospital is fully leased, and developers are looking for opportunities to develop additional space within this existing concentration of medical offices, diagnostic centers, and other health care facilities.
- The relatively high rents paid by tenants of medical office facilities can in some cases make acquisition and demolition financially feasible.

For **senior housing** development:

- There appears to be a need for senior housing, and particularly affordable senior housing, in the south suburban area, as evidenced by the aging of the local population, and long waiting lists at existing independent living affordable senior housing facilities.
- Because of criteria set by the Illinois Housing Development Authority ("IHDA"), the state's housing finance agency, the developers typically require sites to be located near transit and in walkable areas, within a half mile of community facilities, medical services, and other amenities.
- Because of the relatively long process for financing and developing affordable senior housing, the developer will typically require a willing and patient seller for property they wish to acquire.

What do Developers think are Broad Challenges to Redevelopment?

Developers discussed several broad market-level challenges to attracting investors to redevelop sites along the Corridor.

- Speculative new construction of retail is unlikely due to costs and competitive pressures. Therefore, developers are likely to pursue retail development only when specific retail tenants demand new space in a particular location.
- Furthermore, developers suggested that large retail tenants are often unwilling to pay rents that are sufficient to cover relatively high land costs and make redevelopment feasible with market returns. Developers may therefore be unwilling to pursue new retail development without economic incentives in the form of Tax Increment Financing ("TIF") assistance, land transfers, or infrastructure improvements.
- The existing concentration of retail tenants along the Corridor, just south of the Corridor in Crestwood, and in the greater south suburban submarket (e.g., Orland Park) limits the number of new retail tenants that might be attracted to the Corridor, since many suitable tenants are already present in or near the Corridor. These established retail centers make the retail market in the south suburbs highly competitive. This may pose a challenge to attracting new retail development, and to attracting retail tenants for existing retail spaces.
- On one hand, the large existing inventory of retail development may be a strength for the Corridor. However, a large amount of the existing development is mature and aging, and there are a number of retail spaces outside of core retail centers along the Corridor that may not be as marketable to retail tenants.
- Stable population in the Corridor communities over the next five years is likely to limit the market for new residential development on and around the Corridor.

What do Developers think are Site-Specific Challenges to Redevelopment?

Developers identified varying levels of market potential along the Corridor for new medical office, senior housing, and some additional retail or industrial development. However, developers indicated that challenges at the site level may currently limit redevelopment potential of the priority sites.

- Many sites along the Corridor are too small or too narrow to support modern development. Narrow sites often cannot accommodate adequate loading areas, parking, and circulation required for modern commercial development. Small sites can also be a barrier to development because site assembly can be an expensive and time-consuming process. Many blocks are divided with commercial development along Cicero Avenue and residential development behind; the entire width of the block would likely be needed to build according to modern commercial standards.
- Several developers identified acquisition and site assembly as a significant barrier to redevelopment along the corridor. According to developers, real estate costs are rising in the south suburbs, and may be an impediment to redevelopment. Furthermore, the majority of sites along the corridor are currently improved, requiring demolition and possibly remediation.
- Fractured ownership further complicates site assembly and acquisition, with the potential for a hold-out owner raising costs of the entire development. The availability of sites currently on the market or lack of owners willing to consider redevelopment may also limit potential.
- The development potential of some sites on the Corridor is limited by adjacent land uses that are incongruous or undesirable for target development types. For example, residential development will not typically locate adjacent to industrial uses or in high traffic areas. Retail typically locates near existing retail and population centers, and would be less suited to areas adjacent to open space or industrial developments.

Acknowledgements

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Bedford Park
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Participating Agencies

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RTA
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About This Plan

In preparing this plan, URS Corporation and its consultant team members made assumptions and estimates that are subject to uncertainty and variation. Some estimates are based on data obtained in interviews with third parties, and such data are not always completely reliable. In addition, we make assumptions as to the future behavior of policy makers, consumers, transportation conditions, the general economy and political environment that are subject to uncertainty. Therefore, while our analysis has been conscientiously prepared on the basis of our experience and the data available to us, we make no warranty of any kind that the plan concepts will, in fact, be achieved. URS Corporation shall have no obligation to update our findings and conclusions for changes in market conditions, transportation service levels, or agency priorities that occur subsequent to completion of this study.