

## **Initial Recommendation Directions for Blue Island Comprehensive Plan**

Currently, the Blue Island Comprehensive Plan is in the vision development stage. A community charrette was held October 19<sup>th</sup> and the results are being used to generate a vision, goals, and objectives. Based on the initial assessment of priorities identified through the planning process thus far – including the visioning charrette, findings of the Existing Conditions Report, key stakeholder interviews, focus group meetings, and results of earlier public meetings – some common issues and opportunities have emerged that provide direction for formulating recommendations. The purpose of this document is to communicate these issues for review, guidance, and general concurrence by the staff of the City of Blue Island Community Development Department.

This document describes interim ideas for directions for the Blue Island Comprehensive Plan for purposes of discussion only. It does not represent CMAP or City of Blue Island policy, is meant for internal review, and should not be distributed.

### **Summary of key findings**

Blue Island has experienced significant changes in its demographic and physical make up over the past decade. The declines in manufacturing employment which have affected the entire Midwest have been felt especially strongly in communities with high concentrations of industrial uses like Blue Island. Currently, the community is challenged by high rates of industrial and retail vacancies, low median incomes, below average educational attainment, and high unemployment rates. On the other hand, Blue Island's significant industrial and freight infrastructure presents unique opportunities for reinvestment in the community.

### **Potential recommendation directions**

#### Building Upon Previous Plans

Blue Island is no stranger to planning studies. Over the past decade, the City has completed over a dozen studies related to transit oriented development, economic development, housing, sustainability, and branding. Other significant subregional plans and studies (such as the Green TIME or Green River Pattern Book) have also helped to set the context for planning in the south suburban area. The goal of the Comprehensive Plan is not to reinvent the wheel. Wherever applicable, recommendations and implementation strategies outlined within the Blue Island Comprehensive Plan will build upon those contained in previous planning studies. In addition to reinforcing the recommendations within these previous studies, this will also allow the Comprehensive Plan to emphasize priorities for key City staff and elected officials as they move ahead with implementation.

#### Focusing on Implementable Strategies

The Comprehensive Plan will prioritize recommendations and implementation strategies such that local officials focus on quantifiable and achievable short-term strategies ahead of vaguer long-term goals. The following page contains a list of the top strategies that are recommended for immediate action. Currently CMAP has identified 11 strategies, but this is open for discussion. Each strategy will contain a series of prioritized action items that will allow appointed and elected officials to move forward with achieving the strategy's intended goals.

Prioritizing only a limited number of strategies is also intended to make the audience recognize that some positive activities are going to be lower priority. The City has finite staff resources and funding, so some worthwhile activities will have to be deferred. While this may lead to concerns from stakeholders who feel that their issue is not prioritized highly enough, CMAP believes that identifying and then pursuing a limited set of priorities is the only way to make progress toward implementation.

Feedback from the City on this direction of the Comprehensive Plan is essential. CMAP requests confirmation from City staff that focusing the Comprehensive Plan on implementation of high-priority strategies is an appropriate direction.

### **Top 11 Strategies**

The 11 strategies preliminarily identified by CMAP staff as the highest priorities to be focused on in the Comprehensive Plan are listed below. In the Comprehensive Plan, each will be described in some length, with supporting information and graphics as appropriate to justify the high priority of each strategy. Each will also include a detailed description of implementation actions necessary to accomplish the strategy, including responsible organizations and timelines.

1. Reconfigure Western Avenue and Gregory Street as two-way Complete Streets  
This strategy will address one of the most important concerns of businesses located in the Uptown District. In addition to addressing economic concerns, the reconfiguration will also reinstate Uptown's cultural and architectural significance.
2. Consolidate commercial uses along Western Avenue  
This strategy looks to create a more vibrant retail environment by focusing commercial and mixed use development at major intersections along Western Avenue, as well as within the TOD area near the Vermont Street Metra station, while transitioning the in-between parcels to complementary land uses.
3. Preserve housing mix while rehabilitating buildings to improve visual character  
This strategy will address ways to maintain the existing housing mix (single-family homes interspersed with multi-family units) while improving the overall aesthetics of buildings via enforcement and guidelines.
4. Promote Cargo-Oriented Development (COD)  
The City's unique location in the region also provides it a unique opportunity to create jobs and attract COD investment. This is another key area that the City needs to remain focused on moving forward. Beyond infrastructure, this strategy will also address other policy choices the City could make to support freight and intermodal investment.
5. Repair/Reopen/Re-program bridges to reconnect community  
In addition to improving the City's transportation network, re-establishing connections along the Cal Sag Channel will also remove perceptual and social barriers between residents on either side of the Channel.

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6. Clean up Cal Sag Channel to accommodate active and passive recreation  
Recommended action items for this strategy will focus on policies and partners that can help capitalize on recreational opportunities provided by the Channel. This strategy will also address advancing the planning for an off-street trail along the Channel.
7. Undertake small-scale/low cost infrastructure improvements  
This strategy will highlight small-scale infrastructure improvements that are 'low cost and low effort' but will go a long way in improving the quality of life for residents, businesses, and visitors to Blue Island. These include sidewalk repairs, crosswalk improvements, and other similar improvements.
8. Improve transit efficiency by investigating the consolidation of Metra stations  
While Blue Island has a wealth of transit infrastructure, some of its Metra stations (for example, Prairie Street and 123<sup>rd</sup> Street) are in close proximity to each other and therefore compete for ridership. Consolidating stations could lead to improved amenities at the remaining stations as well as increased efficiency for Metra. While the Comprehensive Plan may not recommend a specific consolidation proposal, this strategy will outline a methodology to use to evaluate the pros and cons of station consolidation. (Alternatively, if the City wishes to pursue this strategy more aggressively, a more specific proposal could be included within the Comprehensive Plan).
9. Create workforce training opportunities  
Workforce development is a key tool to ensure future business investment in Blue Island. Primarily geared to promote economic growth, this strategy will also forward housing goals outlined within the Comprehensive Plan. CMAP has recently contracted with a nonprofit workforce development organization, the Chicago Jobs Council, which will assist in formulating recommendations in this area.
10. Improve historic preservation efforts  
Recommendations will enhance the City's existing preservation efforts by focusing on policies that the City needs to enforce and agencies that they need to partner with in order to preserve the community's architectural heritage.
11. Improve organizational structure and implementation prioritization  
There are a number of planning and implementation initiatives underway at any given time in Blue Island. This strategy will provide administrative and logistical direction to assist entities responsible for heading up these initiatives. Unlike the other strategies, this would be focused on internal changes in the City's administration – for example, hiring a grants coordinator to reduce the pressure of grant application and administration on the planning department staff.

#### Other recommendations

In addition to those listed above, several potential plan recommendations are important to improving the City. However they have not been prioritized as top actions that the City needs to lead. In many cases, these activities would be led by others, or will require support but not as much explicit action by the City to accomplish them. These will be addressed under one umbrella section titled "Other Recommended Strategies" or "Additional Recommendations". These include, but will not be limited to:

- Promote Local Food Production and Community Gardening

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- Continue support for CREATE projects
- Coordinate investments with neighboring communities
- Support reforms to Cook County tax structure
- Others

**Implementation considerations**

After review and discussion of these potential recommendation directions with the City of Blue Island Community Development Department, CMAP and City staff will begin to develop priority recommendations and identify implementation actions in more detail. Part of this process will involve identifying organizations that would be responsible for implementing recommendations. It will be important to bring those organizations into the planning process, if they are not already, so that they will be knowledgeable about the relevant recommendations of the Blue Island Comprehensive Plan before it is released. Once priority recommendations are identified, CMAP will work with City and Plan Commission to begin specific outreach to likely implementers.

We would like to request review and guidance from Blue Island staff on the potential recommendation directions described in this document. We would like feedback by **Monday, November 21<sup>st</sup>** at the latest. After that point we will schedule an in-person meeting or conference call with you to discuss next steps in the completion of the Blue Island Comprehensive Plan.