



# City of Aurora Developer Discussion Panel



## Summary Report

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Chicago Metropolitan  
Agency for Planning



Urban Land  
Institute  
Chicago

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# Introduction

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) developed and now guides the implementation of GO TO 2040, metropolitan Chicago's first truly comprehensive regional plan in more than 100 years. GO TO 2040 establishes coordinated strategies that will help the region's 284 communities address transportation, housing, economic development, open space, the environment, and other quality of life issues. It provides principles that municipalities and counties can apply when they decide how and where development should happen or which infrastructure investments to make in their communities. The plan recommends supporting local planning through grant programs, infrastructure investments to implement plans, technical assistance, and collaboration between municipalities on shared priorities.

CMAP established the Local Technical Assistance (LTA) program to direct resources to communities pursuing planning work that helps to implement GO TO 2040. Since launching this program in 2011, CMAP has initiated more than 180 projects with local governments, nonprofits, and intergovernmental organizations to address local issues at the intersection of transportation, land use, and housing, including the natural environment, economic growth, and community development. For each project, CMAP conducts the technical work but coordinates closely with community representatives to ensure that the project reflects local concerns and priorities. After a plan is adopted, CMAP will remain involved to monitor and encourage progress on the implementation actions specified in the plan.

As part of these efforts, CMAP is working with the Urban Land Institute (ULI) in Chicago to provide guidance and advice to communities that have completed LTA projects on ways to attract investment and strengthen developer connections.

## Background

In 2014, the City of Aurora requested technical assistance from CMAP through the LTA program to update, complement, and enhance their 2005 Seize the Future Master Plan, with a component dedicated to developing the transportation opportunities and walkability of Downtown Aurora. The new Downtown Master Plan provides policy direction in the areas of sustainability, economic development, open space and recreation, arts and culture, and other quality-of-life factors. The Aurora City Council approved the Downtown Master Plan on November 14, 2017, setting the stage for Aurora to pursue future plans and projects.

The Downtown Master Plan for Aurora includes a vision for the community's future and recommends a wide variety of planning projects that could address its future needs and investment priorities for the downtown, including:

- Enhancing the built environment to create a sense of place
- Developing and implementing a comprehensive signage and wayfinding program
- Enhancing marketing, branding, and communication



- Improving feelings of comfort and safety
- Focusing on economic development initiatives and programming to encourage investment
- Focusing on growing small, local, and niche businesses
- Supporting the downtown core by enhancing livability

The CMAP/ULI developer discussion panel, which took place on November 30, 2017, provided feedback to the City about general downtown development challenges as well as on key sites (Figure 1). This report summarizes the panel's key recommendations and suggested strategies for the City to effectively attract new development.

## **Developer Panel Participants**

- Ken Allen, Sheehan Nagle Hartray Architects
- Anastacia Fratto, ResElevate
- Swasti Shah, ULI Chicago
- Lance Ramella, Housing Trends LLC

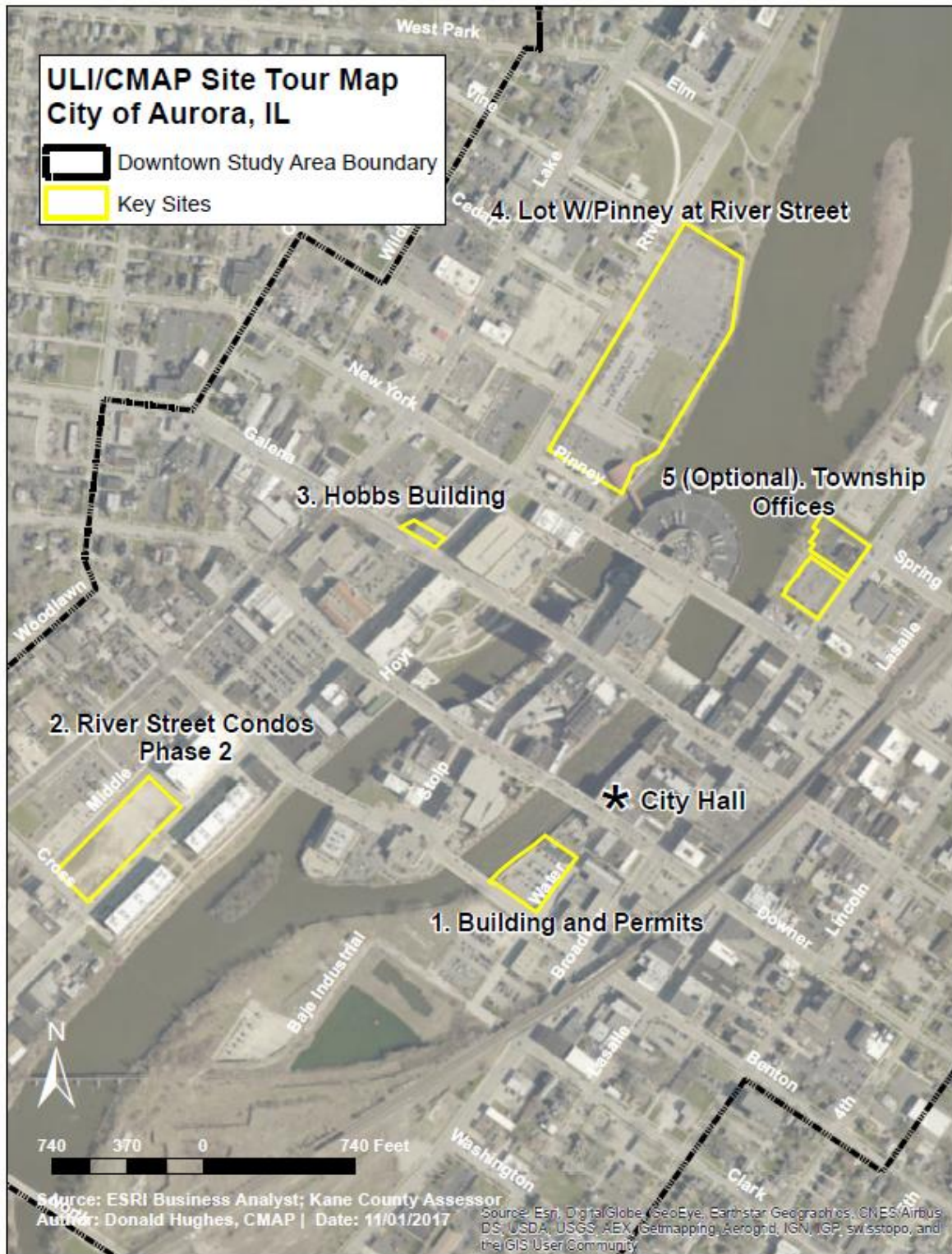
## **City of Aurora Participants**

- Donald Hughes, Downtown Development Coordinator
- David Hulseberg, President/CEO, Invest Aurora
- The Honorable Richard Irvin, Mayor
- Stephane Phifer, Planning and Zoning Director
- Bill Wiet, Chief Development Services Officer





Figure 1. Downtown Aurora Site Tour Map



# Key Recommendations

The panel admired the existing amenities in the Downtown area of Aurora, as well as the City's efforts thus far to improve infrastructure, inventory redevelopment opportunities, offer development incentives, and have a long-term plan for redevelopment. The City should continue these efforts, especially those efforts that focus on development incentives, to attract new investment. Efforts to attract development in the area of Downtown that already has activity – near the Aurora Transportation Center, Roundhouse, and Casino along the Fox River should be immediate. The Downtown is rich in architectural history and the City should also strive to preserve as much of the history as possible through rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of existing buildings. Additionally, continuing to activate the Riverfront will not only attract investment, but also increase the visibility of the Fox River as a recreational amenity.

## Short-term opportunities and actions

The panel believes that the City of Aurora needs a large, catalytic residential project to stimulate development in the Downtown. The first step to realizing this recommendation would be to conduct a market study to identify the types of rental housing units and density the Downtown can support. Assembling the properties on the east side of the River adjacent to the Two Brothers Roundhouse and Aurora Transportation Center (ATC), where activity already exists, should be the City's primary area of focus for redevelopment during the current development cycle. These sites are the most attractive for development in the short-term, and could accommodate a 200+ rental residential unit development. A successful development of this size would add critical residential density to the Downtown to support existing retail businesses, and would help to attract additional retail in the future.

Following development on the east side of the Fox River, the City should next focus efforts to redevelop the west side of the River, across from the ATC. While the parcels on the west side of the River may be more feasible to acquire in the short-term, the viability of a project on the west side is not yet as strong as the east side.

Additionally, the City should consider relaxing the 1<sup>st</sup> floor retail requirements as an incentive to fill existing, vacant retail space. Creating “flex space” on the first floor of existing, vacant buildings allows for the market to help identify the highest and best use of these spaces, without forcing a use that may not be sustainable. The City should also consider relaxing this requirement for new developments in the Downtown, but immediate focus should be on incentivizing the reuse and rehabilitation of existing building stock.



## Long-term opportunities and actions

The ULI panel noticed the large number of surface parking lots throughout the Downtown, and recommends that the City consider consolidating areas to park, as well as continue to reduce parking where possible. Over time, consolidating parking to specific areas encourages Downtown visitors to park once and walk to various destinations, rather than park in multiple locations for short amounts of time.

Once the Downtown residential density grows through larger developments near the ATC, the City should focus redevelopment efforts further south on larger undeveloped parcels in the Downtown, including the vacant land owned by Shodeen Group, just south of Stolp Island.

Additionally, the City may want to investigate the potential for a road diet or reconfiguration of Broadway through downtown to manage traffic and make the street more inviting for pedestrians and bicyclists. This may not be feasible due to the limited geometry of the road, however, but exploring options may uncover new ideas for traffic flow and non-automotive mobility.

## Next Steps

The City should continue with its current efforts to highlight available properties, offer financial incentives, and improve Downtown infrastructure. Continuing to promote the arts and culture the Downtown area offers is also very important for attracting visitors. Immediate new efforts should include conducting a market study to identify the demand for rental housing the Downtown Core, especially on the parcels of land adjacent to the ATC and Roundhouse (east of the Fox River).

Additionally, the City should continue to strengthen relationships with existing Downtown businesses, property owners, and large users such as Waubensee Community College. Identifying additional ways the City can provide additional support to existing Downtown uses and offering complementary amenities can help bolster the Downtown economy and continue to attract new visitors.

