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Alderman, local groups to seek input on 53rd St.

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Participants in a May 3 workshop on the future of the 53rd Street commercial corridor will take to Hyde Park's streets, cameras in hand, to document its built environment.

"It might help create kind of a portrait of 53rd Street," said Irene Sherr, a local planning consultant who is one of the event's organizers. "Hopefully, it'll give people a chance to see things differently."

The evolution of the street's shopping strip is the focus of the 53rd Street Vision Workshop, to be held from 9 a.m. to noon at Kenwood Academy, 5015 S. Blackstone Ave. Registration begins at 8:30 a.m.

It is the second in a series of three workshops meant to determine what kind of development the community likes, so that developers interested in building along 53rd Street can propose projects that are likely to get local approval.

"It facilitates progress, in a way," Sherr said. "It also gives city and elected officials a better way to respond, because these issues have been looked at broadly."

The workshop will begin with brief presentations from four to five experts in architecture or urban development, Sherr said. The speakers haven't yet been finalized.

Breakout sessions will follow that will allow smaller groups to discuss specific issues in more depth. These groups will then take cameras out into the neighborhood, to gather visual evidence of some of the topics they've discussed.

The images, along with responses from attendees, will eventually appear online,

according to Sherr. Those who have digital cameras are encouraged to bring them, and those who don't will get disposable cameras to use during the workshop, she said.

The event is the second of its kind organized by Ald. Toni Preckwinkle (4th) in conjunction with a broad array of community groups, including the South East Chicago Commission, the 53rd Street TIF Advisory Council, the University of Chicago, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, or CMAP, and Community Counsel, Sherr's consulting firm.

At the first Vision Workshop, held Dec. 8 at Canter Middle School, 4959 S. Blackstone Ave., almost 200 people used handheld devices distributed by CMAP to share their responses to a series of questions about how 53rd Street should be redeveloped.

Sherr said that certain issues surfaced again and again in people's responses: diversity, density, urban design and aesthetics — and the accessibility of the neighborhood by car, train or on foot. "People just want more," Sherr said. "People just want an active community with a lot of choices."

The purpose of the May 3 workshop is "to clarify and define the themes that emerged from Dec. 8," Sherr said.

It's also meant to lay the groundwork for a third workshop in the fall, which will use techniques developed at the Corridor Housing Initiative in Minneapolis, she said. These community workshops allowed participants to model developments with their own hands using blocks and aerial maps. Computers instantly tabulated the financial viability of their ideas.

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