Downtown Aurora Master Plan
Existing Conditions Overview

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Acknowledgements

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Overview summary

The full existing conditions report contains an in-depth look at the following topics: background and history of downtown Aurora, transportation and circulation, built environment, economy and jobs, health and safety, natural environment, arts and community services. There is also an overview of community outreach conducted and the direction of potential recommendations to be pursued in the development of the master plan. This document contains excerpts from that report.

Walkability

A review of the various transportation options available in downtown Aurora highlights many recent improvements including new pedestrian and bicycling infrastructure, as well as two-way street conversions. Existing opportunities to creating a more walkable downtown area and improving safety for all modes include addressing jurisdictional hurdles, push-button wait signals, and infrastructure built around the personal automobile. Gateways into downtown lack distinction and due to traffic speed and narrow sidewalks, some thoroughfares are not comfortable to walk along.

Sustainability

The Fox River is the heart of the downtown study area, and the City has proven its interest in improving the river's visibility and quality with a number of green infrastructure projects and open space development. The river provides recreational opportunities, wildlife habitat, and some of the drinking water for Aurora residents and other users. While Aurora's drinking water is of good quality, the river itself suffers from impaired water quality, attributed to man-made dams, urban runoff, combined sewer overflows, and point source discharges, which can increase the cost of purifying the water before it is distributed to residents. Increasing the recreational use of the river and enhancing overall enjoyment for residents and visitors is a high priority for many, as evidenced by the recently completed River Edge Park development.

Livability

Downtown has an older and smaller housing stock with many studio and one-bedroom apartments. Although building codes have been modified recently to help facilitate redevelopment, there is a perception that some codes and requirements, such as having retail on the first floor, may still be obstacles. The City has many buildings of architectural significance, and passionate groups dedicated to protecting them. High-level arts, such as the Broadway Series at the Paramount Theatre, have been a great success in Aurora, attracting thousands of visitors to the area on a regular basis. Numerous museums and institutions offer culture, classes, and valuable programs that are often underutilized by the community.
Trends

A growing arts and culture scene has brought new interest and appreciation for the downtown area in recent years, which should complement the many public and civic organizations that exist and enhance economic development opportunities and attractiveness. However, economic development progress has been slower for downtown than some expected due to a number of factors, including weak private sector job growth, limited new housing development, a lagging recovery from the recession for Aurora and other markets, and significant competition in the retail market. High office vacancy rates may indicate that industry sectors such as finance and insurance, information, and other service-related sectors desire types of space not currently available in the downtown.

Despite a significant increase in safety and a decrease in crime in Aurora, based on public input it is apparent that people’s perception of downtown may still impact public willingness to visit, walk, and bike downtown. A multi-pronged approach to inviting people to enjoy the many cultural and recreational opportunities, while promoting growth in targeted industries, will help the downtown to build the future that so many see as its strong potential.
Section 1
INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT
In partnership with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, the City of Aurora is developing a downtown master plan amendment to the 2006 Seize the Future Downtown Master Plan. The updated plan will define the vision of the Downtown’s future and the steps needed to achieve that vision. Having an accurate understanding of the existing conditions in the City is a necessary step to developing an appropriate and effective downtown plan that addresses the issues and concerns of the community.

Purpose of the Existing Conditions Report

This Existing Conditions Report—representing the result of approximately four months of research, analysis, and public outreach activities—provides an overview of the current conditions in Aurora and is designed to provide a starting point for creating a shared vision of the future.

What is a Downtown Plan?

The Downtown Master Plan will serve as a guide for elected officials, property owners, City staff, community residents, business owners, and potential investors. The Plan will assist in making informed administrative and implementation decisions about future efforts that affect land use, transportation, infrastructure, urban design and identity, historical and architectural preservation, and capital improvements within Downtown.
Section 2
BACKGROUND
Historical context

This section gives an overview of downtown Aurora’s history, context in a regional setting, the relationship with this process and the GO TO 2040 Regional Comprehensive Plan, and past plans completed for the downtown area.

History of Aurora and the Downtown

Before the first European settlers arrived in the area now known as Aurora, Potawatomie Indians inhabited the land along the Fox River near Stolp Island. In 1834, two brothers from New York, Joseph and Samuel McCarty arrived in the Fox Valley searching for a new home. They decided to build a mill at a bend in the Fox River and close to a waterfall on Stolp Island. The rest of the McCarty family arrived and established a permanent settlement on the east bank of the Fox River called the Village of McCarty Mills. Quickly, the village grew as people settled close to the river and mill. In 1837, the Village of McCarty Mills was renamed Aurora.1 On the west bank of the Fox River, new settlers established the town of West Aurora and in 1857 the two towns joined to form the City of Aurora, agreeing to locate public institutions on Stolp Island, so as not to favor one side over the other.2

In the nineteenth century, Aurora emerged as the industrial powerhouse of the Fox River Valley, initially producing textiles and later as a railroad manufacturing hub. Factories and mills developed on both sides of the river in order to utilize the Stolp Island waterfall. In 1855, the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad Company built its offices and construction shops in downtown Aurora. The railroad company remained the City’s largest employer until the 1960s. These events encouraged construction of a roundhouse on the east side of the river, the largest in the country.3 Workers moved to the City for factory jobs, increasing housing demand prior to the Civil War. Housing development started moving west away from the central business district. Commercial buildings and businesses opened in downtown looking to capitalize on the City’s economic growth. In 1881, Aurora leveraged its industrial strength to publicly light the entire City with electricity, becoming the first city in the United States to do so and earning the nickname “City of Lights.”4

About this timeline. The line across this timeline corresponds to population estimates for downtown Aurora. Census data, available from 1960 to 2010 was used, with earlier years following trends in the City as a whole. Prior to 1960, there is no population data available for the downtown area.
Community engagement

To emphasize a broad-based inclusion of the community, the outreach and engagement process has entailed close coordination with City staff and the Steering Committee and involved several activities including meetings with the steering committee, confidential interviews with key community leaders, a public visioning workshop, and an online survey and social media. The following provides a summary of what has been done so far; outreach activities will continue during the course of the planning process. Since the start of the formal planning process, over 1,700 residents and stakeholders have participated (see Table 3.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public Engagement Activities</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st Steering Committee Meeting</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder Interviews</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public visioning workshop</td>
<td>160</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online engagement (as of 3/15/16)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MetroQuest Online Survey</td>
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<tr>
<td>Site visits (Completed surveys)</td>
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<td>Focus group presentations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Media followers</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total unique visitors interacting w/ Facebook page</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,725</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CMAP, Metroquest, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr.

Common themes expressed so far at outreach activities:

- Make the downtown a destination place with mixed used development and nightlife entertainment.
- New businesses are desired in the downtown area such as diverse retail/shopping amenities and restaurants to complement current arts and culture scene.
- The City should celebrate the diversity and character of the community.
- Aurora suffers from a major perception problem; people who haven’t been downtown in many years mistakenly think the river still smells bad, crime is rampant, parking is still metered, and there’s nothing to do.
- Maintaining and preserving historic structures and landmarks is an important way to maintain the downtown’s character.
- Absentee landowners are a problem with vacant downtown buildings. Some are waiting for a better market to do anything with their property, while many buildings deteriorate.
- More improvements to streetscape elements would create an attractive and walkable downtown.

*These statements represent common perceptions from local stakeholders and may not represent factual conditions or the opinions of all who were interviewed.
Section 4
TRANSPORTATION AND CIRCULATION
Transportation overview

This section provides an overview of existing transportation options within Aurora. In order to develop appropriate recommendations for improving active transportation, this section outlines information about how people access the downtown area, how they travel within the downtown area, and potential barriers to increased active transportation. The information in this section was obtained from various sources, such as the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT), Regional Transportation Authority (RTA), Metra, Pace, Cook County, the City of Aurora, and is also based upon a visual assessment of existing conditions in the community.

Key Findings

- One-way streets lower overall access and connectivity. The City is in the process of converting many downtown one-way streets to two-way streets, which may cause initial confusion, but should result in improved safety, traffic flow, and business visibility.
- While only two blocks away from downtown Aurora, the Metra station feels disconnected from the downtown. Due to an unfriendly pedestrian environment, the eight-minute walk along the state highway to the downtown core is perceived to be far, unpleasant, and to some, dangerous.
- Aurora has a rapidly improving bicycle route network. Completion of the City’s first barrier-protected bike lane (along River Street) fills a major gap in the regional trail network, and improved connections to City neighborhoods are forthcoming.

- Pedestrian infrastructure in the downtown core is strong. Sidewalks, planters, and clearly marked crosswalks are present throughout much of the study area, with excellent examples in the core. The corridor along Broadway, connecting to the train station, needs improvement.
- Major gateways into the downtown area are unappealing. The first impression when driving into the downtown area is mixed, depending on the direction of travel.
- Pace and Metra serve Downtown Aurora, but Aurora transit ridership is low. While there are approximately 4,000 people getting on or off trains at the Aurora Metra Station during the weekday, less than five percent of Aurora’s commuting population uses transit to get to work.
- After an in-depth analysis of low Pace ridership in early 2015, the agency has instituted changes to routes in the Fox Valley District.
- According to the 2008 Walker Parking Study, there are approximately 650 on-street and 3,550 off-street parking spaces in the downtown core, with more in the full study area. The City updated parking policies in 2013 and continues to improve the system with some areas experiencing more parking congestion than others.
- Intersections along Broadway, New York Street, and Galena have high crash incidents. For people walking, biking, or driving, these streets have a poor safety record.
- Aurora households drive more miles annually than the regional average, but fewer than Kane County households. Despite the walkable downtown area, bus and train service, households utilize their car for daily needs more frequently than the regional average.

Stakeholder interview comments related to Transportation:

Everyone always complains about parking. When it was metered, they complained about paying. Now that it’s free, they complain that they can’t park for longer.

People would walk more if there were more destinations to walk to.

Biking from the Fox River Trail to ATC / Roundhouse is unpleasant.

There is the culture of the car here.

Parking is particularly problematic by Restaurant Row.

Entering downtown along Broadway from the north is unattractive.

The number of bicyclists is increasing.

There are many regional bike routes close by, downtown is where the connections fall short.

Parking on Broadway is dangerous and many people with kids avoid it entirely.

*These statements represent common perceptions from local stakeholders and may not represent factual conditions or the opinions of all who were interviewed.
Section 5
BUILT ENVIRONMENT
Built environment overview

The following section describes the existing built environment in downtown Aurora, focusing on its urban design, housing, land use, and zoning. This section also provides an overview of Aurora’s historic preservation initiatives and significant infrastructure. To create effective recommendations, a solid understanding of the area’s physical characteristics is necessary. The information in this section has been obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau, the City of Aurora, stakeholder interviews, and a visual assessment of the community undertaken by the project team.

Key Findings

- **Significant recent housing construction in Aurora has been taking place outside the downtown area.** Nearly one fifth of the City’s housing stock has been constructed between 2000 and 2013, while only 85 housing units have been built in the downtown study area during the same time period.

- **The downtown study area has a high housing vacancy rate compared to the rest of the City.** In 2013, Aurora’s vacancy rate was 7.7%, while the downtown study area’s was approximately 20%.

- **There is a concentration of vacant land along the east bank of the Fox River south of the downtown core.** The 2008 housing market collapse halted potential development of these lands.

- **The combined cost of housing and transportation, as a percent of household income in the downtown Aurora study area, is affordable.** The Center for Neighborhood Technology’s (CNT) Housing and Transportation Affordability Index shows that the average percent of household income spent on housing and transportation is 40%. This is lower than CNT’s standard of affordability, which is 45%. Also, the index suggests that downtown Aurora is more affordable than Kane County and the region.

- **Downtown Aurora’s housing stock is older and smaller compared to the rest of the City.** 58% of the downtown housing stock was built before World War II and 52% of downtown dwelling units are studios or one bedrooms.

- **Downtown zoning districts aim to create a pedestrian-friendly environment and encourage access to the Fox River.** The Aurora Zoning Ordinance emphasizes pedestrian comfort and walkability in the downtown and provides standards to ensure new developments maintain pedestrian access and incorporate potential views of the Fox River.

- **Downtown Aurora has a high number of historic buildings and landmarks which are maintained through various historic preservation initiatives.** Twenty historic buildings are within the Stolp Island National Register Historic District, including the Paramount Theatre and the Grand Army of the Republic Memorial.

- **Several facades in Downtown Aurora would benefit from architectural enhancements.** Some businesses in the downtown district may benefit from better lighting, signage, use of color and texture in the facades to attract visitors and to maintain favorable visual effect along business corridors.

- **Aurora has integrated many streetscape and signage amenities in downtown Aurora.** However, many of these amenities are located in Stolp Island and signage pertinent to the business district is limited.

Stakeholder interview comments related to the built environment:

* Maintaining and preserving historic structures and landmarks is an important way to maintain the downtown’s character and can be a potential economic development source.
* Some downtown building owners are waiting for a better market to do anything with their property, while their buildings deteriorate.
* The first floor commercial requirement makes new residential construction financially difficult to justify.
* The City does an excellent job with infrastructure—water, bridges, streets, etc.
* Increased housing options and density near the Roundhouse is desired.
* Demand for housing in the core is increasing.

* These statements represent common perceptions from local stakeholders and may not represent factual conditions or the opinions of all who were interviewed.
Section 6
ECONOMY AND JOBS
Economy and jobs overview

This section reviews the economic conditions in Downtown Aurora. As has been reported over recent decades, downtown Aurora has good development potential if it can overcome the challenges of high retail competition, the need for different types of space, and not enough people with strong purchasing power living in close proximity. The findings are based on a review of past Aurora plans and documents, site inspections, review of interviews conducted by CMAP, additional data gathering and analysis, and interviews with identified stakeholders.

Key Findings

- Private sector jobs have declined. There was a 10.2 percent decrease in private sector jobs in downtown from 5,346 in 2002 to 4,800 in 2013.
- Jobs in health care, social assistance, arts, education, and recreation have increased. Together, these sectors have added over 1,300 jobs between 2002 and 2013.
- The number of public sector jobs has increased between 2002 and 2013. The largest employment sector is public administration with 2,014 jobs, a 64% increase from 1,228 in 2002.
- The downtown area has significant competition in the retail market. Retail trade sales in the downtown may be too low to attract national retailers.
- Office space in downtown may have lost attractiveness to office-related businesses in recent years. The loss of employment in downtown Aurora in typical office space sectors, finance and insurance, information, and other service related sectors, suggests that the high office vacancy rates are due to the outmigration of firms within these sectors.
- Historic buildings are attractive; however, newer or updated space may be needed. As of late 2015, there was no Class A office space in downtown Aurora and the average age of office space was 80 years old.
- Downtown retail has not fully recovered from the recession. The downtown area was hit harder by the recession than neighboring submarkets, and is still recovering.

Stakeholder interview comments related to economic development:

- Groceries, restaurants, and nightlife desired.
- There is a need for another hotel, ideally part of the casino.
- There is a need for convention space.
- Efforts to attract big businesses to Aurora seem to take precedent over supporting existing small businesses downtown.
- Much of the available retail space does not meet the needs of what retailers are looking for.
- While Hollywood Casino and Waubonsee Community College draw people to the downtown, their visitors rarely patronize other local businesses.

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Health and safety overview

There is a strong relationship between health and planning issues such as transportation, open space, and food access. The dramatic rise in chronic disease rates in communities throughout the country has put the spotlight on the importance of the relationship between public health and planning. To help improve community health, planners and public officials have begun to promote design and development patterns that encourage physical activity. However, residents who don’t feel safe are unlikely to choose to walk or bike for transportation. Community health and safety are key pillars of creating a livable downtown. This section reviews data on public safety, public health, and food access.

Key Findings

- For a city of its size, Aurora has one of the lowest crime rates in the nation. Although violent crime rates per capita are higher in Aurora than neighboring communities, the rate is lower than the national average, on a per capita basis.
- Aurora is a strong advocate of health and wellness, but South Kane County fares worse than Central and North Kane County in a number of health indicators. The City works with a number of long-established service providers to deliver a number of community programs to improve the overall health of its residents.
- While Aurora is host to a successful farmers’ market, there are no supermarkets or larger grocers within the downtown study area.
- Community gardens are an important component of Aurora’s sustainability vision. The City has been proactive about expanding the number of community gardens to develop a citywide garden network.
Section 8
NATURAL ENVIRONMENT
Natural environment overview

This section provides information on the environmental features in Downtown Aurora. The information was obtained from the City of Aurora, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA), the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), and environmental advocacy groups, along with a visual assessment of existing conditions in the community.

Key Findings

- Aurora residents enjoy access to a large amount of riverfront open space. Lands along the river offer passive and active recreation opportunities, community event space, and a pleasant environment for walking and biking along the river. The City offers a number of high quality parks, as does the Fox Valley Park District. RiverEdge Park, with its performance space and high quality amenities, is a notable recent addition to the downtown environment.

- The Fox River provides recreational opportunities, wildlife habitat, and drinking water. The City draws the majority of its water supply from the Fox River. The river also provides aquatic habitat, opportunities for canoeing and kayaking, and a popular site for fishing.

- The presence of the Fox River along the southern limits of Downtown could be better utilized. According to stakeholder interviews, there is a desire to build a better connection to the river with improved amenities.

- The Fox River suffers from impaired water quality. The Fox River exhibits water quality problems along its entire length, including in the study area. According to the Illinois EPA, the river has multiple pollutants and low levels of dissolved oxygen, creating an environment that does not adequately support aquatic life, fish consumption, primary contact, or aesthetic quality. Sources of impairment include the effects of dams, urban runoff, combined sewer overflows, and point source discharges.

- Significant portions of Downtown Aurora are located in floodplains with a 1% or 0.2% annual chance of flooding. While a large amount of the floodplain in the study area is part of parks and preserved open space, there are industrial areas and even some commercial and mixed-use areas in the floodplain. The largest developed areas within the floodplain are along Indian Creek near where Broadway crosses the stream.

Stakeholder interview comments related to natural environment:

- Whatever happens, the river should play a central role in Aurora’s future.
- Economic development and riverfront protection/enhancement should happen simultaneously.
- Completing the RiverWalk is important.
- RiverEdge Park is an incredible asset to the area.
- Brownfields are a problem along the river.

*These statements represent common perceptions from local stakeholders and may not represent factual conditions or the opinions of all who were interviewed.
Section 9
EDUCATION, ARTS, and COMMUNITY SERVICES
Education, Arts, and Community services overview

The purpose of this section is to provide an inventory of public services and facilities and identify gaps, if any, that need to be filled going forward. Existing community services are provided by the City, township, Kane County, regional organizations, and private entities. The information in this section was obtained from City staff, the Institute of Education Sciences, a division of U.S. Department of Education, and project team research and analysis.

Key Findings

- Downtown Aurora is home to many public and civic organizations. In addition to City and Township government offices, Downtown Aurora has a number of schools, religious institutions, a library, post office, police and fire stations, parks and recreation department, historic museums, and other cultural organizations within the study area boundary or within close walking distance.

- With so many arts efforts in the community, there is a need for direction and coordination. To avoid duplication of efforts and to build upon successes in related areas, improvements in coordination of efforts is needed.

- The east side school district has lower rankings than the west side for all schools. Lower student-to-teacher ratios and more children with linguistic challenges hurts the area’s test scores.
Looking Forward

Downtown Aurora is rich in history, arts, cultural and natural resources, all of which are highly valued and contribute to the quality of life enjoyed by residents. Enhancing these qualities should be one of the central themes of the Downtown Plan. Based on the key findings of this report, the following themes emerged as priority issues to be addressed by the plan:

*Increase residential density and variety, particularly near transit infrastructure*

Adding new residential units and rehabilitating older structures to provide additional housing will strengthen the downtown. Recommendations in the master plan will focus on ways to promote residential housing, with a focus on areas with excellent access to transit and amenities.

*Build upon connections to the ATC*

In late 2015, the City of Aurora was awarded $8.6 million in federal funds through the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality program for changes to the Aurora Transportation Center (ATC), including a pedestrian bridge over the Fox River. The City also has a $2 million grant from the Kane County Forest Preserve District to put towards the project. The recommendations put forth in the updated master plan should build upon the improved bicycle and pedestrian access planned for the ATC.

*Address safety concerns to enhance walkability*

In addition to having more destinations to walk to, research in this report and commentary provided by stakeholders has identified a number of gaps in the network of safe streets in the study area. The recommendations in the report will identify missing connections, areas for lighting enhancements, and infrastructural changes to improve safety.
Coordinate arts and culture efforts
In a city of Aurora’s size with a fast-growing arts and culture scene, there are many different groups working to promote and enhance arts in the downtown area. Some of these efforts are city-sponsored and others are grassroots. Lack of coordination can lead to redundancy and duplication of efforts. Ideas for improving coordination of arts and culture ventures will be addressed in the recommendations.

Address concerns with building codes developers perceive as restrictive
In an effort to promote rehabilitation of older structures, the City has gone to great lengths to help developers understand and work within the building code. They have created a forum on building and permits; they have a Development Services Team dedicating to helping streamline the development process. The City of Aurora has hosted regional seminars on efficiently working with the International Existing Building Code (“Chapter 34”). However, some developers have pointed to certain codes or requirements that prevent them from building in downtown. The report will take a deeper look into those restrictions to understand where there is confusion, which restrictions are state- or federally-based, and where changes to the code are recommended.

Foster a supportive business environment
Innovative approaches to creating a supportive business environment have led to the creation of the region’s first fiber optic cable system to support the tech industry. Current business recruiting and retention efforts have brought new businesses to the downtown. Ongoing efforts to understand the needs of existing businesses should continue. Improved communication with, and support for existing small businesses is also needed. Identifying specific needs to attract a diverse range of businesses to the downtown will be examined in the master plan.

Increase riverfront access and recreational enjoyment
Strategies for introducing visitors to the river as well as better utilizing the riverfront as a community asset will be a key feature of the plan. Maintaining and building connections to local and regional trails, especially along the riverfront, is also a priority. Additionally, increasing recreational use of the river and improving water quality is an important goal, and removing obsolete structures and improving viewing sites should be considered.

Increase the visibility of Downtown Aurora
Downtown Aurora stands out for its tall buildings and dense urban fabric. However, it is not highly visible to those traveling on nearby major roads. With multiple routes into the Downtown off of Route 25 and Route 31, improved signage or gateways on these heavily traveled corridors will help draw potential customers in to support local businesses. Improving wayfinding signage from the train stop will also help draw visitors further into downtown.

Preserve and promote the unique history of Aurora
Residents are proud of their historic community and the downtown plan will focus on preserving and strengthening this heritage. From George Elmsie to Mayan Revival architecture, the educational and economic development potential of Downtown can be expanded. Informed by approaches in similar communities, like Oak Park, the plan will present recommendations for building on current efforts already underway.
Make it easy to visit

Creating a city that is easy to navigate and welcoming to all is an important consideration. For those that drive, knowing that they’ll likely get a parking space is an important consideration for their trip. However, too much parking can also make it harder to create lively, walkable places. The plan will present recommendations for how the City can achieve a balance so that pedestrians, bicyclists, commuters, and drivers are encouraged to visit and that they can easily get around once they are downtown.

Next Steps

After the Existing Conditions Report is presented to the Steering Committee and City staff for review and discussion, the next step in the process will be to work with the community to create a shared vision. CMAP will work with residents, business owners, elected and appointed officials, and Village staff to begin creating a draft plan and recommendations.
Photo by Flickr user David Wilson.