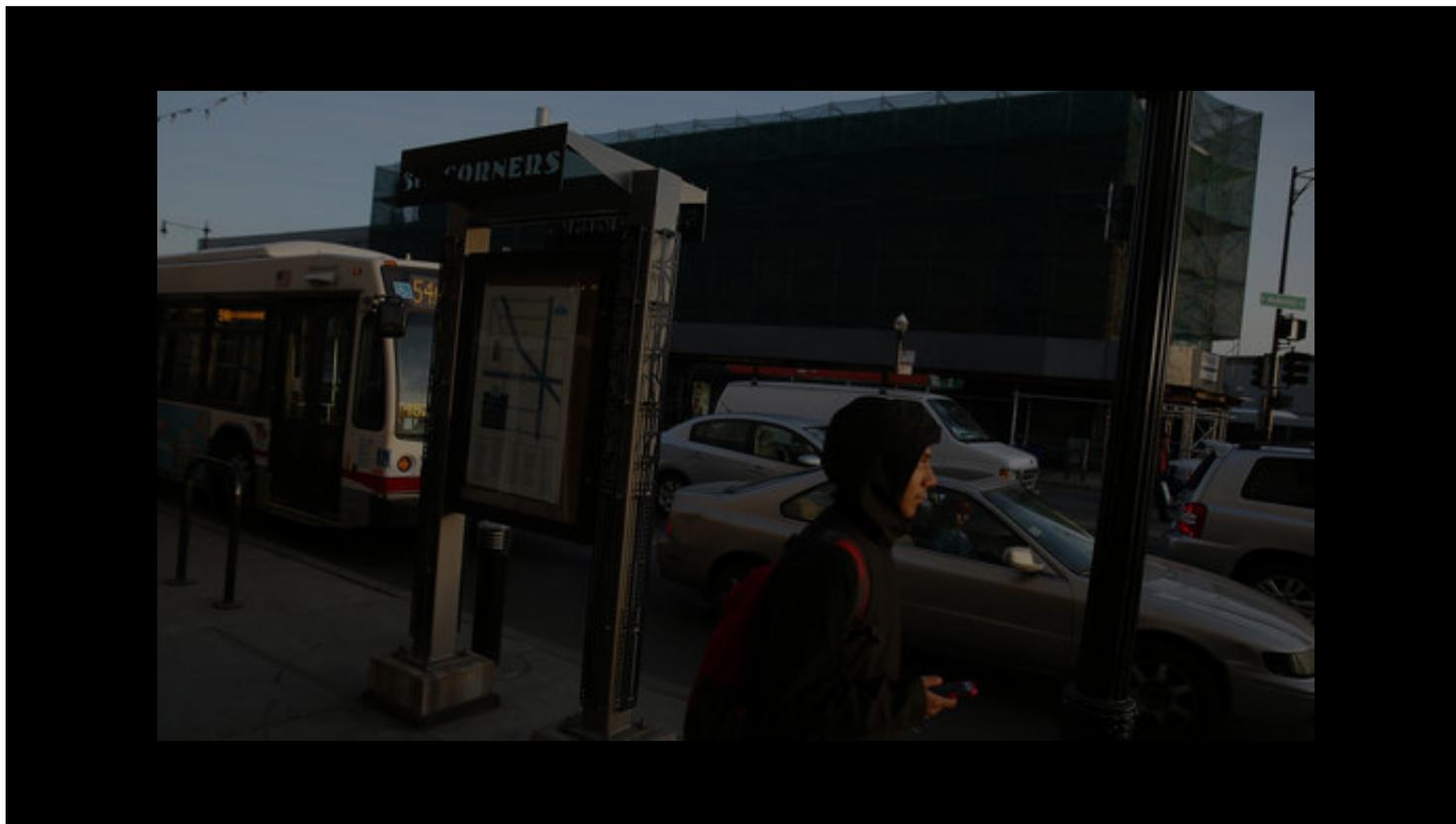


Turning a corner in Portage Park: Business coming back to Six Corners area



Kelli Wefenstette, executive director of the Six Corners Association, talks about major developments and the continued growth of small business in the area. (Terrence Antonio James / Chicago Tribune)

By **Lauren Zumbach** · Contact Reporter

Chicago Tribune

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If Lynn Ankney has her way, there will soon be no confusion about whether Wicker Park or Portage Park is home to the real Six Corners shopping district.

Wicker Park "may have six corners, but they're not the Six Corners," said Ankney, president of the Old Irving Park Association.

The Portage Park area's Six Corners, extending a couple of blocks in each direction from the intersection of Milwaukee Avenue, Cicero Avenue and Irving Park Road, was once the biggest Chicago shopping destination outside the Loop. It was home to Woolworth's and Sears — the latter still open in its original 1938 building — and the iconic three-story Portage Theater, built in 1920.

When Quay Tao, owner of restaurants The Portage and Community Tavern, moved to the area five years ago, he said it was "ghost-townlike."

Two redevelopment projects have community members like Chuck Giovenco, general manager of Fantasy Costumes, saying things are "finally going in the right direction" for Six Corners.

Some worry, though, that the already-announced tenants, including Ross Dress for Less and Aldi, aren't the kind of development that will bring Six Corners back to its heyday. But community leaders and a developer said the high-profile projects will spur interest from a wider variety of retailers and could boost local shops too.

At 4747 W. Irving Park Road, a former Bank of America building at Six Corners' central intersection will make way for a 100,000-square-foot shopping center, dubbed The Point at Six Corners, with one floor of retail and a second story with parking.

About half the building is set aside for anchor tenants Aldi and Ross, both of whom are in lease negotiations, said Peter Eisenberg, principal with developer Clark Street Real Estate. Plans also call for public spaces and amenities for pedestrians and bicyclists.

Clark Street purchased the building in 2014 from Bank of America, which continued operating the branch until it moved into a new, smaller branch adjacent to its old site in December, Eisenberg said. He declined to comment on the development's price tag, beyond saying it's in the "tens of millions" and a "substantial investment."

Demolition was scheduled to start Thursday. Eisenberg said he hopes to break ground on the new building this summer, with opening slated for summer 2017.

"We are extremely excited and have been looking for opportunities at Six Corners for a long time. I think the Six Corners Association and Ald. (John) Arena have done a great job improving this iconic, historic retail district, and I think we'll be able to make a contribution to continuing to evolve the area," Eisenberg said.

Down the road at 4901 W. Irving Park is another former Bank of America building that will soon be home to a Binny's Beverage Depot and Retro Fitness gym. Other buildings on the same block will be redeveloped into a Culver's and an Elly's Pancake House, developer Charles Cui said in a statement.

The City Council is considering a proposal to provide \$2 million in tax increment financing assistance as part of the roughly \$14 million, 71,000-square-foot project, which includes an agreement to preserve the 300-seat theater in the bank building as a community arts center, said Arena, 45th.

"Our goal is to work with the local community and city to revitalize the old glory of the Six Corners, and to make our center a community-based, art-themed community center, where local residents can shop, dine and entertain," Cui said.

Film enthusiasts had been holding screenings at the theater since the 1970s until the Bank of America branch shut down in 2010, said Northwest Chicago Film Society co-founder Kyle Westphal.

"It's an institution," said Portage Park Neighborhood Association president Patricia Conroy. "That's TIF money well-spent."

The larger projects follow an uptick in small-business activity. About 25 businesses opened in Six Corners last year when a typical year sees three or four, said Six Corners Association Executive Director Kelli Wefenstette. Recent additions include a Chipotle, a Jimmy John's, and local businesses like Josi's Frozen Yogurt Cafe and Tao's Community Tavern.

The association has been working over the past 10 years to build ties within the business community, help market the area and clean up the streets. The association helped put together a master plan in 2013 outlining the kind of development the community wanted to see and got volunteers to paint murals in empty storefronts to make them seem more inviting, Wefenstette said.

Joe Angelastri, owner of City Newsstand, said the area was still lively when he opened his corner newsstand, now magazine store, in 1978. But then the banks that once employed hundreds shrunk or closed, bringing fewer people to the neighborhood, and businesses followed, he said.

Suburban malls also started competing with urban shopping districts like Six Corners, Wefenstette said. Norridge's Harlem Irving Plaza is just 3.5 miles from Six Corners. Between 1976 and 1979, Harlem Irving Plaza grew by 134,000 square feet, according to the mall's website. While Six Corners struggled during the 1980s and 1990s, two department stores came to Harlem Irving Plaza, which also added a half dozen new stores and a food court.

Things "had to get worse before they got better," Angelastri said.

Property is now cheap enough that people are willing to give the area a try and "there's optimism," he said.

An influx of residents from livelier neighborhoods might also be playing a role, said Ankney, who moved to Old Irving Park from Lakeview in 2004 when starting a family.

"There are a lot of people who come here and say they love living on the Northwest Side but wish there was more shopping you could do locally," she said. "I think a couple trailblazers did really well and

realized there was some unmet demand."

The Portage Park community area that includes Six Corners is home to about 63,600 people, with a median income of \$53,557, about 13 percent higher than the city overall, according to a Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning report using 2013 Census data.

The neighborhood's population fell about 2 percent between 2000 and 2010, slower than the nearly 7 percent drop citywide, and housing prices have been rising. The median sales price for a detached single-family home in the neighborhood in 2015 — \$254,000 — was nearly 50 percent higher than in 2011, while the median sales price for attached single-family homes jumped about 141 percent, according to Chicago Association of Realtors data.

The amount of traffic traveling the three thoroughfares making up the Six Corners is appealing for large national chains, but there were few locations that suited those businesses before the recent redevelopments, said Peter Graham, vice president of real estate firm CBRE's retail services group, who said he is representing Aldi.

"It's an area they should have been looking at a while ago, there was just a lack of opportunities for them. When you get a critical mass in there, it should increase business for everybody," he said.

Some residents and business owners said the tenants at The Point announced so far, particularly off-price chain Ross Dress for Less, weren't quite what they were hoping for.

"I'm not sure it's the image we want for the neighborhood," Tao said. Others said a more upscale retailer would have provided some variety at an intersection that already has a Sears and a Marshalls.

Customers are interested in value, Eisenberg said. Arena acknowledged some residents weren't thrilled but said the project would spur additional interest.

"We look at this as two tenants out of 12. We need retail to attract retail," Wefenstette said.

The changes are also prompting talk about what Six Corners' new reputation ought to be.

The theater in the 4901 W. Irving Park development could be part of a growing arts community, said Julie Ritchey, artistic director at Filament Theatre. Filament's building, across the street from the Portage Theater, is also home to the National Veterans Art Museum, a gallery and the Chicago Ballet Center.

Katherine Birchfield, co-owner of CrossFit Chisel, which opened about two years ago, is unabashedly enthusiastic about the new development, despite being across the street from the development that

includes another gym.

"We're excited. The whole area is being revitalized," she said.

Tao said he's happy to see the activity but also has "some trepidation" about where the area is heading.

"What I don't want to see is Six Corners, Portage Park and Old Irving Park becoming just a big-box destination. It's really hard to go back from that once you're there," said Tao. He's already planning to open another restaurant next to Community Tavern and is bullish on Six Corners' potential, but said the growth in independent businesses that make a neighborhood unique has been more sluggish than he'd hoped.

Conroy, who remembers neighborhood's heyday, worries big-name retailers could squeeze out existing family businesses.

"What I miss most is the variety, and the independent clothing shops that are hard to find these days," she said.

But others said they think there's still plenty of room before they need to worry about being overrun by big chains. Arena said he hopes the two most recent projects will be a "tipping point" spurring more growth.

"While I can walk down the street and point to empty things that are now full, drivers who aren't local need to see the scaffolding up, need to see some renewal, to spark the idea that we're a shopping district again," he said.

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