

Moran: Washington Street in Waukegan eyed for post-mall improvement



The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's City of Waukegan Washington Street Commercial Corridor Plan focuses on improving a venerable economic sector. (Dan Moran / Lake County News-Sun)



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Old-timers and not-so-old-timers in [Waukegan](#) will tell you about the city's glory days, when Genesee Street was both the social and commercial center for the local population and beyond.

What happened? As with most cultural upheavals, there were many factors, and not the least of which was the rise of the American mall. In Waukegan, that seismic shift began with the arrival of Belvidere Mall in 1965, the first enclosed shopping space in Lake County.

"There's only so much spending money around," reads a quote offered by one shopper at the time and now contained in the News-Sun archives. "One or the other is going to get hurt."

Those same archives record that Montgomery Ward moved a mile-and-a-half west from Genesee Street to become an anchor at Belvidere Mall. Six years later, the exodus of both major retailers and shoppers from the old business district accelerated with the opening of Lakehurst Mall — which saw Montgomery Ward move another two-and-a-half miles west to take up residence there.

So Belvidere poached off Genesee, Lakehurst poached them both and then Gurnee Mills arrived to suck everyone almost dry. A half-century after the landscape started shifting, communities like Waukegan are left to reassess their economic picture, and those reassessments often end up asking them to look to the past. Or maybe just the present.

Case in point: The [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's](#) City of Waukegan Washington Street Commercial Corridor Plan, which focuses on another mid-20th century economic sector that has "the potential to develop into an economically dynamic and successful area."

That phrase is one of many contained in a 66-page report that was formally accepted by the Waukegan City Council last week. Long story short, this CMAP plan offers recommendations to promote economic activity in a neighborhood-based commercial strip that runs about 1.5 miles between the Waukegan Ravine and McAree Road/Keller Avenue.

On the plus side, the report notes, Washington Street west of downtown already includes, "several well-defined, walkable commercial sections, with rows of stores and restaurants nestled up to the sidewalk," among other advantages. In fact, according to the report, there were 82 businesses in the sector as of 2014.

On the downside, the report added, "according to many residents and some business owners, the overall image of the corridor is 'a bit shabby,' and in need of enhancement."

Without getting into that debate, it's safe to say that not every economic-revitalization plan has to focus on big pictures like lakefronts, or brownfields, or other giant tracts of land. This Washington Street package looks at amenities that are not only already in place, but don't necessarily need a ton of public money to rebuild infrastructure, or carve out new roadways, or erect parking garages.

So what does this plan suggest? Among others: Broadening the customer base by breaking down language and cultural barriers; widening sidewalks; improving both on-street parking and parking-lot options; and increasing frequency of [Pace bus](#) routes through the area.

Key practical suggestions include adding enhanced pedestrian crosswalks at five different locations, like Victory Street by Waukegan High School's Washington Campus; and improving both the safety features and visibility of the crossing for the Robert McClory Bike Path, which experience reveals is currently a bit on the accident-waiting-to-happen side.

There is also this observation, which should be familiar to anyone who has ever headed toward Downtown Waukegan on Washington: "Establish a consistent lane structure." To no one's surprise, this is referring to many choke points, including the blocks immediately east of Lewis Avenue and west of Jackson Street.

"Washington Street currently oscillates between a four-lane and two-lane street along the length of the corridor," the report notes. "Stakeholders discussed how the transitions between a four-lane and two-lane street can cause confusion among drivers."

Amen to that. The sudden funnel of eastbound traffic after crossing Lewis, for example, creates a sense of mild chaos that isn't associated with pulling to the curb to park, and shop, and eat, and stay a while.

Maybe that sums up the basic challenge for turning Washington Street into a post-mall, 21st century walkable and bike-able commercial sector — too many people might see the roadway as simply a passage, a thing they blindly drive through as part of the city's daytime population.

But for people who live and work in Waukegan, the revitalization of something that isn't just another road to a mall is more than just a passing concern. They'll wait and see if this is one plan that comes to fruition.

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