Application form:
RTA Community Planning Program and
CMAP Local Technical Assistance Program

DEADLINE: Noon on Thursday, June 29, 2017

This application form is online at www.rtachicago.org/applications. You may submit the form by email to applications@rtachicago.org. Upon receipt of application, you will receive an e-mail verifying that your application has been received.

1. Name of Applicant

City of Des Plaines

2. Main Contact for Application

Name: Johanna Bye
Title: Senior Planner
Phone number: (847) 391-5392
Email: jbye@desplaines.org

3. Type of Applicant (please check any that apply)

X Local government

Multijurisdictional group*

Please list the members of the group (including government and nongovernmental organizations):

________________________________________
________________________________________
________________________________________

Nongovernmental organization*

Name of local government partner(s):

________________________________________
________________________________________

*Applications submitted by multijurisdictional groups and nongovernmental organizations must include a letter indicating support from each relevant local government. See the FAQs for more information.
Nongovernmental applicants are strongly encouraged to contact CMAP or the RTA prior to submitting their application to discuss their project and the demonstration of local support.

4. Project Type (please check any that apply)

Please check all statements below that describe characteristics of your project.

____ My project involves preparation of a plan.
____ My project involves updating an already existing plan.
____ My project helps to implement a past plan.
____ My project links land use, transportation, and housing.
____ My project has direct relevance to public transit and supports the use of the existing transit system.
____ My project is not directly related to transportation or land use, but implements GO TO 2040 in other ways.

5. Local Match Requirement (please initial to indicate you are aware of the local match requirements)

I am aware that a local match will be required for most projects, and understand that if my project is selected it is up to the project applicant to contribute a local match. (See the program guide for further details on local match requirements.)

____ Yes, I understand that applicants will be required to contribute a local match.

6. Project Location

Please provide a brief description of the location of your project. You may include a map if that helps to describe location, but this is not required. If your project helps to implement a past plan, please include a link to that plan.

See attached.

7. Project Description

Please tell us what you would like to do in your community, and what assistance is needed. If you have more than one idea, please submit a separate application for each project. Please be specific, but also brief (less than two pages per project idea)—we simply want to have a basic understanding of what you want to do. For plan updates please tell us how you will be building upon (or replacing) the previous work. Program staff will follow-up with you if we need any additional information to fully understand your proposed project.

See attached.

8. Previous Plan Implementation Efforts

Please describe actions you have taken to implement previous plans in your community—whether your efforts were successful or not—to achieve infrastructure improvements, development investment, policy changes, advocacy, volunteer involvement, or other actions. If you do not have experience implementing previous planning work, please describe what you will do to make sure that your plan is implemented. Illustrating a commitment to implement plan recommendations is very important to both agencies as we consider new planning projects.

See attached.

9. Additional Strategic Partnerships

Please list any additional partners you may want to include in this planning project. Please specify if you have made contact with them in advance of submitting this application.
See attached.
6. Project Location
The proposed project location is downtown Des Plaines and is identified in the map below:

![Parking Lot Map](image)

7. Project Description
We are requesting funding for a downtown area parking and traffic circulation study. We would like to identify problem parking areas for residents, employees, and visitors and whether or not there really is an overall parking problem (i.e., a lack of parking) in the downtown. Additionally, revitalization efforts with respect to business attraction and retention have been challenged by the existence of one-way streets (Lee Street and Graceland Avenue) and it is anticipated that a circulation study could provide support for future reintroduction of two-way movements on these thoroughfares and identify the steps needed for implementation. In December of 2016, Des Plaines participated in a Developer Discussion Panel, coordinated by the RTA, which resulted in the production of a report with suggestions for spurring development downtown. One of the recommendations was that the city complete a parking and traffic circulation study of the downtown area to determine the feasibility of converting one-way streets to two-way. The report is attached as part of this application.

From staff’s perspective, there does not appear to be a parking problem in that there are enough overall parking spaces; however, our elected officials believe that there is an issue, based on smaller problem streets and areas, and strictly enforce the zoning code’s parking requirements for developments in the
downtown. Our goal is determine what our parking challenges are, implement and enforce an innovative parking management plan, and potentially spur new investment by minimizing the current parking requirements in our downtown.

At present, our zoning code requires all dwelling units, regardless of size, number of bedrooms, or location, to be parked with two parking spaces. This requirement has been enforced for projects in our downtown that are within walking distance of the Des Plaines Metra station and multiple PACE bus lines. As a result of this parking requirement, developers have opted to not move forward with development proposals, particularly in our downtown where they feel the parking ratio is too high and not conducive to a successful development. We hope that a parking study can determine where pockets of parking challenges might exist, and show that overall, there is not a parking problem, but rather a parking management issue that can be resolved through new strategies and enforcement.

8. Previous Plan Implementation Efforts
Our goal is that the findings of a parking study will support our belief that there is not a parking problem in downtown Des Plaines, and that creative parking management solutions may help to alleviate many of the perceived challenges. If these findings are true, the plan can be used to revise zoning code parking requirements in our downtown. By reducing the parking requirements, we can spur investment in our downtown and promote Go To 2040’s emphasis on transit oriented development and livable places. Additionally, the findings of a traffic circulation study may support the reintroduction of two-way movements on certain thoroughfares downtown, which can further support economic development initiatives.

9. Additional Strategic Partnerships
It may be necessary to coordinate implementation efforts with private property owners who rely on city parking lots. In addition, the Illinois Department of Transportation will be a vital partner in any modifications to state controlled rights of way.
INTRODUCTION

The Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) has invested over $9 million of its own funds and leveraged over $10 million of local and Federal funds during the past 18 years to complete approximately 188 transit-oriented development (TOD) planning projects through the agency’s Community Planning program. This program funds TOD planning studies and implementation assistance services that promote walkable, mixed-income, mixed-use development co-located and/or well-connected to retail and business uses in transit station areas, while also increasing overall access to transit.

From the RTA’s perspective, pursuing and achieving implementation of these plans can result in more efficient transit operations, improved access to transit services, and the potential to increase ridership on the transit systems of the agency’s three Service Boards (Metra, Pace, and CTA). Implementation efforts can also increase private investment in TOD areas while promoting the principles of sustainability and livability.

TOD Developer Discussion Panels
Recognizing that developers possess a realistic outlook on the real estate market’s future, the RTA partners with the Urban Land Institute (ULI) to facilitate TOD developer discussion panels to solicit guidance on the development climate. These half-day events are intended for those municipalities that have completed a TOD plan, but need additional assistance in drawing transit-supportive projects within their study areas. The panels involve local government staff engaging with development experts to discuss potential strategies to effectively revitalize several key parcels of land in a community. Des Plaines is one of the approximately 25 municipalities that have participated in the RTA’s discussion panels.
DISCUSSION PANEL PARTICIPANTS

**Urban Land Institute (ULI) and the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA)**

Mary Ellen Martin - Vice President & Chief Operating Officer, Morningside USA  
Matthew T. Nix - Principal, REVA Development Partners LLC  
Greg A. Terwilliger - Vice President of Business Development, Novak Construction  
Cindy McSherry - Executive Director, ULI Chicago  
Heather Tabbert, AICP - Local Planning and Programs Manager, RTA  
Chris Szmurlo - Senior Planner, RTA

**City of Des Plaines**

Honorable Mike Charewicz - Alderman of the 8th Ward  
Mike McMahon - Community & Economic Development Director  
Lauren Pruss, AICP - Economic Development Coordinator  
Derek Peebles, PE - Civil Engineer  
Johanna Bye, AICP - Senior Planner

Panelists sharing their ideas and recommendations  
A tour of downtown
BACKGROUND

Des Plaines is a northwestern suburb of Chicago. The city is located 17 miles from the Loop, encompasses 15 square miles of area, and is home to just over 58,000 people. Des Plaines is primarily a residential community, but there are a few centers of mixed use activity within its boundaries.

The city’s downtown is the most prominent of those areas as a collection of restaurants, offices, and stores are located there. Despite all of these amenities, the potential for additional enhancements and development still exists as there is still room to improve the vitality of the area. To solicit guidance on improving their downtown, Des Plaines applied for and was selected to receive assistance from the RTA’s Community Planning program to conduct a developer discussion panel.

The panel was held in Des Plaines on December 6th, 2016. The panelists were led on a tour of various sites in the downtown area. From their observations, these panelists then devised a prioritized list of recommendations that they believed would improve the overall vitality of the city’s downtown. The following report summarizes their comments and suggestions.
STUDY AREA

Downtown Des Plaines was the study area for the discussion panel. This area is located just west of the Des Plaines River and surrounds the local Metra station on the Union Pacific Northwest (UP-NW) line. Des Plaines is an older community within the Chicago region with a mix of commercial, office, institutional, and residential uses on both sides of the tracks.
PARKING RECOMMENDATIONS

There are differing perceptions on the availability of parking in the downtown area. Some locals believe the area has a shortage of spaces to accommodate its workers, residents, and visitors. Others think more than enough parking exists in the downtown area and that the real issue lies with the management of the existing spaces. Overall, there is a prevalent uncertainty on the status of downtown parking. The panelists acknowledged this and made the subsequent suggestions.

CONDUCT A PARKING/TRAFFIC CIRCULATION STUDY

- In order to get a realistic understanding of the current conditions, an updated parking/traffic study should be conducted.
  - The last study was completed in 2007 and as a result, the document is outdated.
  - Des Plaines should contract a consulting firm with parking experience to aid them with the update.
● In addition to examining the availability of spaces, the parking/traffic study should also contain an analysis on the circulation of vehicles in downtown Des Plaines.

○ The street network, which consists of one-way pairings, is unorthodox and can be intimidating to drivers. The city should investigate the possibility of making the streets bidirectional.

○ Altering the one-way streets isn’t an immediate issue, but the potential effects of such a change are worth investigating as such a configuration is usually viewed negatively by retailers.

EXAMINE THE PARKING RATIO
● The current parking ratio in the downtown area should be examined to better understand how it affects the development of new structures.

○ This effort should include a survey on the usage of parking spaces at all of the existing multi-family complexes that are nearby so to obtain data on the actual demand for residential parking.

○ The subsequent findings will clarify what sort of parking ratio should be mandated for new development projects.

INVESTIGATE THE PARKING LOT LEASES
● The leases for the downtown parking lots should be investigated and documented.

○ Several surface lots appear to be underutilized, like the one at the intersection of Prairie and Graceland Avenues, which sat mostly empty during the tour.

○ The situation won’t be resolved through piecemeal attempts so municipal officials need to undertake a collective, high level campaign to revise the management of the lots.

○ Sorting the issue out could allow for some parking spaces to be shared between daytime and nighttime visitors to downtown resulting in additional parking options.

○ Vacant surface parking lots can be considered as “low hanging fruit” for future infill development.
METROPOLITAN SQUARE RECOMMENDATIONS

Metropolitan Square is a mixed use development in downtown Des Plaines that opened in 2006. Described as a “mini-lifestyle center,” the square is anchored by a 40,000 square foot grocery store and includes a series of structures that are comprised of 135 residential units, around 22,000 square feet of office space, an additional 56,000 square feet of retail space, and a public parking garage. Despite all of its features, the square has faced a number of issues over the years. These include commercial vacancies and a lack of vibrancy. The panelists made the following recommendations to help revitalize the space.

**RECONFIGURE THE ROADWAY DESIGN**
- City staff stated that there have been ongoing plans to reconfigure the crescent-shaped space at Metropolitan Square. All of the panelists agreed that this was a good effort to undertake.
  - The current design is awkward and confusing for motorists as well as pedestrians. The panelists all agreed that a traditional 4-way intersection would be a better design for the space.
  - The square could also be turned into a shared street similar to Argyle Street in Chicago and Marion Street in Oak Park where vehicles, bicyclists, and pedestrians are all able to travel through freely.
  - The panelists advised the city to get additional estimates on the cost to reconfigure the roadway to a 4-way intersection.

**INCREASE CIVIC EVENT PROGRAMMING**
- Metropolitan Square should be used for more civic events.
  - Supporting more events in Metropolitan Square can assist in activating the space.
  - For instance, the local farmer’s market or 4th of July celebrations could be held there.
○ Allowing seasonal pop up shops could also be a short term solution for the vacant storefronts.

○ If attracting retail outlets continues to be a struggle, the square may instead become a prime location for service establishments.

ENHANCING METROPOLITAN WAY
● The panelists also made specific recommendations for Metropolitan Way, the thoroughfare that connects the square with Miner Street.

○ Additional lighting should be added to brighten the space up. This could include setting up strings of lights above Metropolitan Way or putting more illumination on the Metropolitan Square sign. Electronic billboards and neon signs should be avoided.

○ Parking along the street should be reconfigured to allow more space for pedestrians and outdoor seating for local restaurants.

○ The city could also consider transforming some of the parking spaces along Metropolitan Way into parklets. These are temporary extensions of the sidewalk that could be added during the summer months. Parklets enhance vibrancy by creating engaging public spaces and are a cost effective alternative to repaving sidewalks to be wider.\(^\text{2}\)
DOWNTOWN RECOMMENDATIONS

The participants of the discussion panel also had focused comments for the broader downtown area. They ranged from direct actions for specific lots to general considerations for the downtown as a whole. The following section will summarize those suggestions.

FAÇADE IMPROVEMENTS

- A portion of the money collected from the downtown TIF fund should be utilized to improve the façades of the existing buildings on Miner Street.

  - The thoroughfare’s building stock is well established, but a fair amount of structures could use some aesthetic enhancements.
  
  - Financial resources could be distributed on an individual need basis to local businesses or the municipality could promote more businesses to apply for its existing façade improvement programs.
  
  - The improvements will entice more people to walk around and check out all of the storefronts and additionally, it will bring a cohesive look to the area’s streetscape.
THEATER CONVERSION
● There have been recent plans to convert the vacant Des Plaines Theater on Miner Street into a live music venue, with the potential to also use it as a traditional movie theater. The panelists thought such a transformation would once again make the theater a local destination.

○ The venue would definitely become an active space in downtown Des Plaines. It would be an ideal location to host such events as a Battle of the Bands competition or classical music recitals.

○ The Arcada in St. Charles is a great example of a theater that was transformed into a music venue.

○ If additional parking is needed, the facility could be tied to the municipal garage in Metropolitan Square.

○ Hopefully, the potential to restore the space as a vintage movie theater still exists as the panelists believed such a use would be more accessible to a wider range of demographics.

FOCUS OF DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT
● It is important that downtown development does not get pushed too far north or south. The city should focus on revitalizing those parcels that are immediately along or near the Metra tracks.

○ The panelists specifically stated that more restaurants should be established on Miner Street as having a walkable restaurant row would be ideal for the area.

○ The city could concentrate businesses and restaurants on the north side of the tracks while bringing more institutional and office uses to the south.

○ Local officials should continue to enhance the downtown area as a center of transit-oriented development by attracting a mix of land uses around the city’s Metra station.
CONNECTIVITY RECOMMENDATIONS

Downtown Des Plaines is home to numerous amenities. These include restaurants, offices, municipal institutions, retail outlets, and local landmarks. There are also several natural resources, like the Des Plaines River and Northwestern Woods, that are nearby. The participants of the discussion panel provided feedback to better connect these amenities.

EXAMINE PEDESTRIAN ACCESS AND CIRCULATION

● In addition to analyzing the movement of cars, a separate study should be conducted to examine the circulation of pedestrians in downtown Des Plaines.

  ○ Walkability is an important characteristic of a vibrant downtown area, thus the local pedestrian environment should be well integrated with its surroundings.

  ○ A high volume of traffic travels through the area so it is important for the local streetscape to accommodate the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists.

  ○ Adding more stop signs, setting up countdowns at major crosswalks, installing pedestrian refuges, and incorporating curb bump outs within the street network could assist with safety.

● The existing streetscape in downtown Des Plaines was recently refurbished and it looks great. Nonetheless, it is important that these features are maintained for the future.

  ○ The presence of street furniture, trees, and wide sidewalks make walking through the area enjoyable.

CONNECT TO THE DES PLAINES RIVER TRAIL

● The panelists encouraged the city to connect its downtown with the Des Plaines River.

  ○ Des Plaines is one of the few northwestern communities in the Chicago region where a body of water is located in close proximity to its downtown. Recognizing this, the municipal officials should take advantage of such an asset.
○ The Des Plaines River Trail has an access point on Miner Street. It includes paths for walking and biking. Not too many people know about its existence because it is at a lower grade than the street. Adding signs would be helpful in bringing more people to recreate there.

○ Signs guiding users to downtown should also be put on the trail to attract bicyclists and runners to take a break in Des Plaines.

○ Trying to access the River Trail with a bike is difficult as someone has to go down a series of steps to get to the trail. An inexpensive solution would be to install a bike rail along the steps so as to allow bicyclists to go up and down without having to physically carry their bikes.

INCORPORATE MORE WAYFINDING

● Improved wayfinding should be incorporated within the city’s downtown.

○ Signs and map kiosks should be placed at various locations to provide visitors with information on the many amenities that are nearby.

○ Park Ridge is a local example that a number of years ago launched a successful wayfinding campaign for their Uptown district.
CONCLUSION

Downtown Des Plaines is the community’s most prominent center of activity. Visitors and residents can find shops, restaurants, and offices all in walking distance to the Metra station. Even though the area has so much to offer there are still a lot of opportunities to strengthen it. The participants of the discussion panel recognized this and devised these recommendations to assist in shaping the downtown area for the years to come.

REFERENCES
