

Residents hear plans on North River communities

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by KEVIN GROSS

The North River Commission discussed a draft of its North River Communities Neighborhood Plan that recommends a new special service area, transit-oriented development, and helping residents and neighborhood businesses to thrive in the area.

About 75 residents heard from commission representatives and planning staff from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which is helping with the plan, at an open house held Tuesday, April 17, at Roosevelt High School, 3436 W. Wilson Ave.



The study area of the plan is the Albany Park, Mayfair, North Mayfair, North Park and Ravenswood Manor neighborhoods. Staff from CMAP studied an area bound by the North Shore Channel and the Chicago River to the east, Bryn Mawr Avenue to the north, Cicero Avenue and I-94 to the west, and Montrose Avenue to the south.

CMAP associate planner and project leader Brian Daly said that the final plan could be completed by mid-June and would include residents' input. Residents at the open house were concerned about gentrification, maintaining home affordability, reducing crime and parking issues.

Planners recommended the creation of a new special service area west of Kimball Avenue, which NRC vice president of economic development Scott Berman said could at least extend west along Lawrence Avenue from Bernard Street to Pulaski Road.

Special service areas are local taxing districts that fund services and programs through a tax levy on properties in the service area. The areas require statements of support from at least 20 percent of property owners within the boundaries, and approval by the City Council.

Berman said that local support is not guaranteed, citing opposition to SSA #6 that existed in the area from 1983 to 1987.

"Property owners rose up and organized. Not the chamber of commerce, which did like it, or the business people or the tenants or the stores, but the property owners, and they went to the alderman and said, 'We don't want the SSA,'" Berman said.

The NRC provides services within the existing Albany Park and Irving Park SSA #60, which in 2017 taxed properties at a rate of 0.39 percent of the equalized assessed value along Lawrence between Kimball and the Chicago River, as well as Montrose between Central Park Avenue and the Chicago River, Irving Park Road between Spaulding and Sacramento avenues, Kimball between Lawrence and Leland avenues, and Kedzie from Irving Park Road to 4907 N. Kedzie Ave.

SSA #60 services include sidewalk and vacant lot cleaning and funding of the facade improvement program, which reimburses up to \$7,500 or 50 percent of exterior improvement costs to property owners or tenants in the area. NRC representatives said that they would likely be the service provider in the new SSA and would hope to provide similar services to boost the commercial viability of Lawrence Avenue further west.

"One of the questions is, do business owners who are there just a few blocks away west of Kimball say '(The SSA) it's working over there, we want some of those services?' Support is not universal everywhere," said commission executive director Thomas Applegate said. "But we want to see what we can do in the meantime, because it takes a couple years to do that (create an SSA)."

"Many immigrant owners don't come with a college business background, and they might not know about how things such as membership in a chamber of commerce might benefit them," said Enrique Castillo, assistant planner for CMAP. "We could hold drives to help with connections, or applications to existing programs such as the facade rebate program."

Planners additionally emphasized the importance of transit-oriented development, particularly near the CTA Kedzie and Kimball Brown Line stations, 4648 N. Kedzie Ave. and 4755 N. Kimball Ave., respectively.

Stephen Ostrander, senior planner for CMAP, said that transit oriented development laws allow for higher density within proximity of train stations as well as loosened code requirements for parking spaces at new developments, which could lead to more affordable rates to renters or homebuyers.

"A parking space in a building costs often about \$25,000 to build," Ostrander said. "At the end of the day developers are interested in making profit, but still they could include affordable housing if we allow them to build more units and less parking."

High-density projects in other areas, such as a mixed-income housing proposal at 5150 N. Northwest Highway in Jefferson Park, have faced scrutiny from some area residents. However, Ostrander said that CMAP does not control developers' projects, and suspects that residents within neighborhoods such as Albany Park mind density less.

"I think there might be more openness over here (to density), it seemed projects like that in Jefferson Park weren't going to be okay anyways. The CTA, they've been involved in these (transit oriented) development studies and polled people a lot ... and we haven't heard of any major opposition to having a new development next to Kimball or Kedzie (stations)," Ostrander said. "The main concern we've repeatedly heard from residents is housing affordability and spurring gentrification."

"It's a difficult line to toe, between wanting to rapidly finance welcome improvements to the area and managing the cost of living here for many of my family members and neighbors, who made their first home here after moving from Mexico, the Philippines and such," one resident said,

Data from the study shows that the study area's population is about 32 percent white, about 47 percent Latino/Hispanic and 14 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, and that about 59 percent of occupied housing units are renter occupied in the study area.

Swasti Shah, community engagement director from the project-partnering organization Urban Land Institute Chicago, emphasized preservation of two-to-four unit multi-family buildings as "naturally-occurring affordable housing," which comprise about 42 percent of the housing stock in the study area according to CMAP data.

Officials said the neighborhood plan could play a strong role as a roadmap for the neighborhood going forward.

"The CMAP plan is one of those things that helps us have a discussion with elected officials, with DPD," Applegate said. "Here's a plan that says, 'We need to do better regarding certain aspects of support for our district.'"

To view CMAP'S North River Communities Neighborhood Plan page, visit <http://www.cmap.illinois.gov/programs/ita/north-river-communities>.

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