

A redevelopment plan for North Ave. in the works

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Surveys, focus groups to be held before plan's expected completion in 2019

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Contributing Reporter

The North Avenue District, Ald. Chris Taliaferro (29th), the village of Oak Park and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning have teamed up to develop a unified plan to improve the portion of North Avenue between Harlem Avenue and Austin Boulevard.

The plan is being funded by CMAP's Local Technical Assistance Program, which helps municipalities and nonprofits develop plans designed to improve transportation, land use and quality of life. The plan would also set development priorities for the corridor, delving into what kind of new businesses it should have, what kind of housing should be built nearby and what can be done to improve the corridor's appearance and branding.

According to Judith Alexander, T-NAD's chair, the plan should be completed sometime in the first half of 2019.

The portion of North Avenue in question is one of several streets in Chicago's western city limits that are split between two municipalities. The north half is part of the Galewood neighborhood in the Austin community area while the south half is part of Oak Park. Alexander's group has been working to bridge the dividing line and encourage economic development on both sides of North Avenue.

The North Avenue District completed the program application, with Taliaferro and Oak Park Mayor Anan Abu-Taleb writing letters of support. According to the narrative portion of the application, the once-thriving corridor has been slowly declining "for decades." The narrative cited the 2016 North Avenue Business Corridor Study to explain the reasons why.

"There's been a proliferation of vacancies and negative uses, including currency exchanges, payday/title loan operations and pawn shops," the application stated.

The application also pointed to the supply of office and retail spaces exceeding demand, as well as traffic issues. The increased rush hour traffic made commuters more likely to try to use the nearby side streets to get around the traffic jam.

That, in turn, led to the construction of cul-de-sacs, which solved the traffic problem but created other problems. With cul-de-sacs, residents have a harder time reaching the North Avenue businesses, and the supply of parking spaces became more constricted.

The application also argued that because the corridor is split between two municipalities, creating a unified plan becomes that much harder to do.

Still, the application argued that the corridor has positive features, such as successful businesses, proximity to thriving middle- and upper-middle class neighborhoods and a range of transit options—from Pace and CTA buses to the Green 'L' line and two nearby Metra lines.

The study, the application stated, would develop a unified vision for what the corridor would look like and what kind of development it should get, in terms of both residences and businesses. It would delve into what kind of landscaping, streetscaping and transportation improvements the corridor needs, as well as whether there will be any street art and banners.

The plan would be used to apply for grants and create taxing districts such as Tax Increment Financing districts, Special Service Areas or Business Improvement Districts. Alexander said that a unified plan will make it easier for the two municipalities to coordinate their development efforts and apply for grants.

Currently, Alexander said, there are three surveys being circulated among North Avenue businesses and nearby churches, including an online survey open to the public: <http://www.oak-park.us/northavenuesurvey>. Alexander said that the organizations will collect feedback in other ways.

"Many business owners are being interviewed individually," she said. "There may be focus groups of local school councils and [Parent Teacher Organizations] at the five schools within a couple of blocks of North Avenue, as well as congregants of churches on or near North Ave."

Alexander also indicated that they are planning at least two public meetings.

"The first will be an open house/initial public introduction to present CMAP's existing conditions report, [and it will take place] sometime in the fall of 2018," she said. "The second will be an open house to present a draft North Avenue plan. Responses and ideas will be solicited at both meetings."

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