Almost half a century ago, the State of Illinois sliced Oak Park into two separate parts with the construction of the Eisenhower Expressway. The improvement for the entire region ripped apart the physical fabric of several existing neighborhoods, deepening the separation caused by surface rail lines. While the freeway improved access to the region for many Oak Parkers, it also disrupted commercial activity along Harrison Street and the shopping area on Oak Park Avenue at the Ike. At the same time the popularity of the automobile was growing along with the increasing decentralization of employment. The auto proved more convenient as a way to get to work than the train or bus. As a result, transit lost a large share of commuting trips to automobiles over the last several decades. In contrast, statistics show a steady growth in both the number of automobiles owned by the village residents and the average automobiles per household during the same time period.

The bridges constructed along with the Ike were designed to move traffic across and provide vehicle access to the expressway, not provide a graft that might help close the social, economic and aesthetic wound left behind. For decades Oak Parkers accommodated themselves to the rupture, accepting the separation as a necessary accommodation to the demands for greater accessibility. The quality and value of the housing stock near the freeway diminished relative to similar stock elsewhere in the Village. The commercial districts lost local customers and attention as places worthy of new private investment. The growth of strip shopping centers and regional malls took off across the region, and most Oak Parkers like other suburbanites, hopped in their cars, to do their shopping elsewhere.
Planning Together: Character Plans for Oak Park Commercial Districts

Overview and Purpose

In the past ten years or so local land owners, artists, designers, crafts people and assorted entrepreneurs have taken steps to reclaim and improve commercial properties in both the Harrison Street and Oak Park Ike Commercial Districts. Village officials have encouraged such investment and taken steps to improve infrastructure and parking. Residents, owners, employers and investors have gained confidence in the future prospects for each district. Many hope to build upon the recent improvements and take more ambitious actions to go beyond coping with the legacy of the expressway gap and try to find ways to fill it. Developing character plans provides a way to organize these interests and energies to help leverage Village support for joint improvement efforts.

Planning Goals and Objectives

Bridge the Gap at the Ike

The Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) has undertaken a study to expand the capacity of the Ike by adding lanes. Concerned about potential impacts, Village officials urged IDOT to consider a transit alternative. In addition, the Village requested and received a grant from IDOT to study the feasibility of constructing a cap over the expressway. Should the funding and construction of a cap be approved, the resulting increase in land area would bridge the gap, but increase the prospects for commercial improvements in the two districts.

Cap the Ike?