What is a Character Plan?

Character plans offer advice for guiding the future physical development of a distinct geographic district within a larger community. In built out districts such as the districts selected for study through the UIC-Oak Park project, the advice centers on the relationship between the current physical landscape and future changes. Alternative development schemes for the future are compared and evaluated using a combination of publicly expressed desires and professional expertise. Once adopted, a character plan informs the expectations of residents, owners, investors, visitors and developers. The plan also helps frame and guide the decisions by the local public authority responsible for regulating and approving changes to the built environment.

Good character plans are:

**Fair:** involve relevant stakeholders without giving anyone unfair advantage.

**Balanced:** include the expectations and interests of current and future residents.

**Contextual:** build upon current physical assets and make way for future improvements.

**Comprehensive:** consider the plan effects on both those inside and outside the district.

**Sustainable:** adapt economic and social improvements to important environmental limits.

The UIC team spent more than nine months listening to the residents of Oak Park share their ideas about what the character plans for each district should include. The plans below include many, but not all, of these ideas. The plans that follow represent a distillation of widespread public input, not a rigid crystallization.

The visions and goals presented herein remain largely faithful to the testimony and feedback of the participants who played an active role in the planning process. Two stakeholder groups helped us apply these goals along with important planning principles to create and assess draft character plans for each district. The UIC team refined these draft alternatives to ensure that all the critical development issues were addressed in the final plans.

Increasing density is not what Oak Park needs. It will increase traffic, create a need for ugly parking garages and ultimately result in the loss of precious green space. Moreover, it seems unlikely that high-end condo buyers will be interested in purchasing a unit that backs up to the Ike. The risks created by increasing density are great. - email, Spring 03
The Purpose and Limits of Guidelines

The following guidelines for commercial district plans in Oak Park combine professional planning principles with the local knowledge of Oak Park residents, stakeholders, staff and officials. These guidelines translate this combination of experience into a practical shorthand for improving judgments about changes in the physical character of commercial districts in Oak Park. Guidelines inform public deliberation about the location, intensity, use, scale and form of commercial development. They do not function as standards. Standards define rules about the design and use of specific features of the built environment. For instance, we follow guidelines to prepare food safely in our kitchen, and these function differently than specific standards regarding refrigeration or cleanliness for specific foods.

Commercial
- The economic viability of commercial establishments ultimately relies upon market demand and not simply physical improvements.
- Improvement to Village commercial areas should support a mix of convenience and destination commercial activity that will foster economic growth.
- Physical signs or symbols created to represent a unique district identity can attract consumers from outside the Village.
- Reward development proposals that combine commercial and residential use and allow for more density.
- Foster an organic mix of businesses (moderate and small scale, new and old, local and franchise) that improves customer service while enhancing local character.
- Attract a few high-profile destination retailers should attract additional customers to the small shops and bring in expenditures from outside the Village.
- Tenants should offer goods and services that appeal to a younger demographic.
- Reward commercial site design features that soften and buffer the edge between commercial and residential uses.

Residential
- Reward mixed residential project proposals that combine housing types (e.g., multi-family and town homes).
- Discourage uses that will diminish residential property values.
- Increase the number and proportion of multi-family dwellings.
- Ensure a balanced and diverse mix of housing to ensure affordability across a wide range of income groups.

Transportation
- Create an environment where people are presented with a variety of feasible transportation alternatives to satisfy their travel needs.
- New or improved establishments should be friendly to pedestrians and bicyclists as well as drivers.
- The effectiveness of transit-oriented-development and other urban designs on affecting travel behavior should be evaluated based on valid empirical studies.
- Every effort should be made to present transit as an attractive and competitive alternative to driving alone especially in the area with excellent transit access.
- Provide sufficient parking to meet demand and avoid over-supply of parking.
- Commercial and some residential off-site parking acceptable if the walk between destination and parking safe, short and pleasant.
- New parking additions and improvements should favor shared parking arrangements to maximizes parking space use.
- For local and some collector streets various traffic calming measures should be used to create a pedestrian-friendly environment.
Planning and Design Guidelines for Two Commercial Districts

General Guidelines

Design
- Building heights along the linear blocks should be the same height to encourage visual continuity and balance along commercial corridors.

- District corridor gateways should designate the boundaries of each district.

- Rehabilitation and new construction of buildings should build upon and respect the best physical features of existing buildings.

- Each commercial area should have a physical focal point that makes room for diverse civic activities. The focal point might include open space, a park, a fountain, statue or sculpture or some combination of physical features that invites pedestrian use and facilitates a mix of commercial and public activity. Public plazas or squares offer a familiar example.

- Signs placed over sidewalks should extend no further than 50% of the distance from the face of the building to the curb line.

- Signs should not obscure architectural details of commercial buildings.

- Sidewalk cafes and other merchandising amenities should be encouraged but care should be taken that these improvements do not impede pedestrian traffic.

- A minimum of 15 feet sidewalk width is needed to accommodate outdoor cafe activities so that at least 6 feet width is available for pedestrian movement.

- Set backs on upper floors of new commercial buildings can be set back at least 15 feet above the prevailing cornice line to preserve the visual integrity of the existing street wall.

All sketches this page from City of Chicago Design Guidelines for Neighborhood Commercial Districts