Planning Goals and Objectives

Enhance and Expand Viable Commercial Activity

Commercial improvements in the two Ike districts should focus on a combination of destination retail and local-serving retail and service businesses. Creating an identity that attracts customers becomes an important part of such improvement. The ‘character’ in the character plans speaks to this identity and helps give it shape. Part of the character building includes careful attention to the scale and physical organization of new buildings and other physical improvements. Part also includes making room for a merchandising mix that Oak Parkers and others from nearby communities (including Chicago) will want to patronize.

Destination retail will generate the consumer density necessary to support ancillary businesses, such as convenience stores and quirkier, specialty retailers. Some of these kinds of businesses are already in place, but currently not enough to make either locale a thriving commercial district.

More commercial uses will also translate into new employment opportunities and increased tax revenues from the new sales and property values that can offset some of the increasing property tax burden on Oak Park residents. Extending the draw of the businesses beyond the Village will allow the municipality to “export” some of its fiscal burden (i.e., sales tax revenue could be derived from other taxpayers who do not live in the Oak Park).

Commercial growth on Harrison Street and Oak Park Ike could also have “spillover” effects on those businesses and properties elsewhere in Oak Park. Economic spillovers depend on the linkages between the new businesses in the corridors and those in related sectors located nearby. For example, the addition of a landscaping company that purchased its flower beds from an existing Oak Park business would increase the volume of sales at the existing business, generating sales tax revenues and potentially warranting the creation of new employment opportunities.

We hope the charm and diversity of Oak Park will not be replaced by a slicked-up corporate mall look. Small businesses that provide useful services are used by the community, and really liked by those of us who are long-time residents of the area. We like the diversity and relative affordability of the area and would hate to see that lost.

Oak Park households have grown in prosperity in the decades since the expressway was built. But today, unlike fifty years ago, Oak Parkers make most of their commercial purchases somewhere other than Oak Park. Moreover, retail practices have changed dramatically since the Village’s business districts were first developed. Auto-oriented convenience stores require much larger lots and floor areas than the current parcels and building footprints allow. Many aging suburban communities face the same problem and seek to carve out space for big box retail stores. But there are recent examples of successful commercial business ventures such as, at Lake and Harlem in Oak Park and River Forest that seek to capitalize on local assets without trying to offer what other suburban locales do better.

We should not recreate downtown OP on Harrison. Businesses on a smaller scale—restaurant, used book store, music store, along with practical businesses like hardware or grocery store (as long as not huge chain)—seem appropriate.

- internet form, 03-30-03
- email, 04-04-03