Civic engagement and activism is essential to the success of representative democracy. Local government offers a particularly promising arena for citizen participation because local residents experience the “planning issues” on a day-to-day basis and have direct personal experience in coping with the situation. The benefits of citizen participation are fully realized only when the public recognizes that planning – an essentially future-oriented activity – is a civic and community endeavor and an on-going process. Good planning continually strives to balance between individual interests and community well-being, for the present and for years to come.

The Village of Oak Park enjoys a strong tradition of civic engagement. Both the 1979 and the 1990 Comprehensive Plans consciously recognize and emphasize citizen participation as one of the critical elements of Oak Park’s commitment to improve the quality of life for its citizens. The Village leadership routinely recruits citizens to serve on advisory boards, commissions and other special bodies. They also solicit advice and request feedback from citizens when important issues are being debated. The UIC team shares this commitment and dedicated much time and effort to improving the scope and quality of citizen participation in community planning over the course of this project.

**[principles]**

**Work from the bottom-up**

The UIC team organized the design ideas into two scenarios – a high impact and a low impact scenario. The impacts analyzed included economic and fiscal impacts, traffic and transportation impacts, and the visual changes that were likely in the physical environment. These scenarios were presented to the community at large. These scenarios were then reviewed by a group of stakeholders who used these scenarios to develop a more comprehensive plan for each district. The final plans presented in this report resulted from an interactive process where the physical changes proposed (e.g., increasing the percentage of retail business activity) were adjusted depending on the potential positive and negative impacts that could result. In the end, the UIC team made professional judgments about the intensity and type of development in each business district which were informed by feedback from citizens with very diverse and sometimes conflicting agendas.

The process of planning and design began immediately, with the urban design studio. In the studio, graduate students developed design ideas for the revitalization of the two districts based on their analysis of data and information gathered from readily available sources. The data collection phase was not artificially separated from the planning and design phase. As students listened to opinions and preferences of immediate neighbors, they began to design proposals that were based on precedent (best practices from other communities) and the expressed preferences of active stakeholders and neighbors who were likely to be directly affected by any type of physical change. Student ideas encompassed a wide range – some were modest proposals for a block of buildings or storefronts in one of the districts while some proposed radical changes for the entire area. None of the design ideas were bounded by impact analyses.

**Process, Participation and Collaboration**

**Principles**

**Fairness**

Ensure that all participants have equal opportunity to express opinions, offer ideas and advice.

**Respect**

Acknowledge and recognize the participation of individuals and groups, regardless of their views.

**Inclusion**

Include interests and voices of those directly affected by the plans, but also those who did not participate, or whose participation did not receive meaningful attention.

**Relevance**

Focus citizens’ testimony, advice, and deliberation on issues related to the purpose and context of the project.

**Competence**

Solicit, support, and use the skills and knowledge of participants to improve the quality of the process and the creation of the plans.