



# Revitalization Strategies for the North Avenue Corridor

Oak Park and Chicago, IL

December 12-13, 2018

In Partnership with



Chicago Metropolitan  
Agency for Planning

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The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) is the official regional planning organization for the northeastern Illinois counties of Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry, and Will. The agency and its partners have developed ON TO 2050, a new long-range plan to help the seven counties and 284 communities of northeastern Illinois implement strategies that address transportation, housing, economic development, open space, the environment, and other quality-of-life issues.

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## Oak Park and Chicago, IL

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# The North Avenue Corridor

North Avenue at the edge of Chicago and the Village of Oak Park is poised for transformation – but only if it can capitalize on its hidden potential and create a plan for revival. A main east-west arterial across the Chicago region, North Avenue feels especially like a highway between Harlem Avenue and Austin Boulevard. Traffic races along in both directions while too many buildings sit vacant. The presence of multiple pawn shops and payday loan stores within

this relatively short stretch further detracts from the corridor character. At the western end of the study corridor, on the northeast corner of North and Harlem Avenues, the massive Sears center is now silent, awaiting a planned redevelopment.

Within the study area, North Avenue is also a divided street. On the south side is the Village of Oak Park, and on the north side of the street is the Galewood

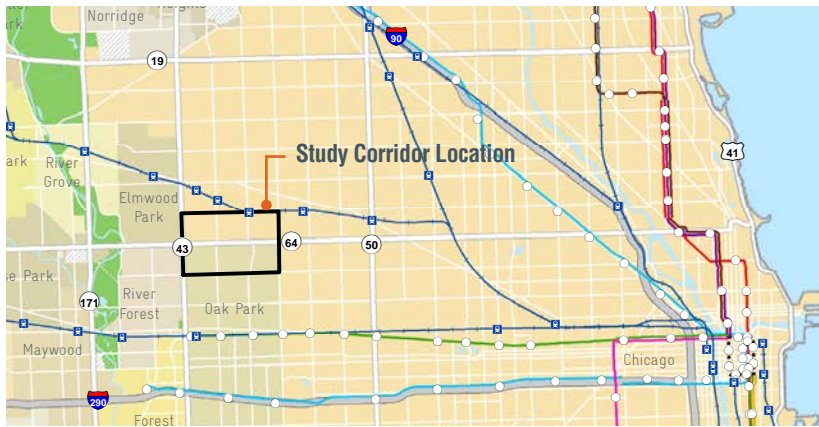


Figure 1. Locational Context: North Avenue Corridor  
Source: CMAP

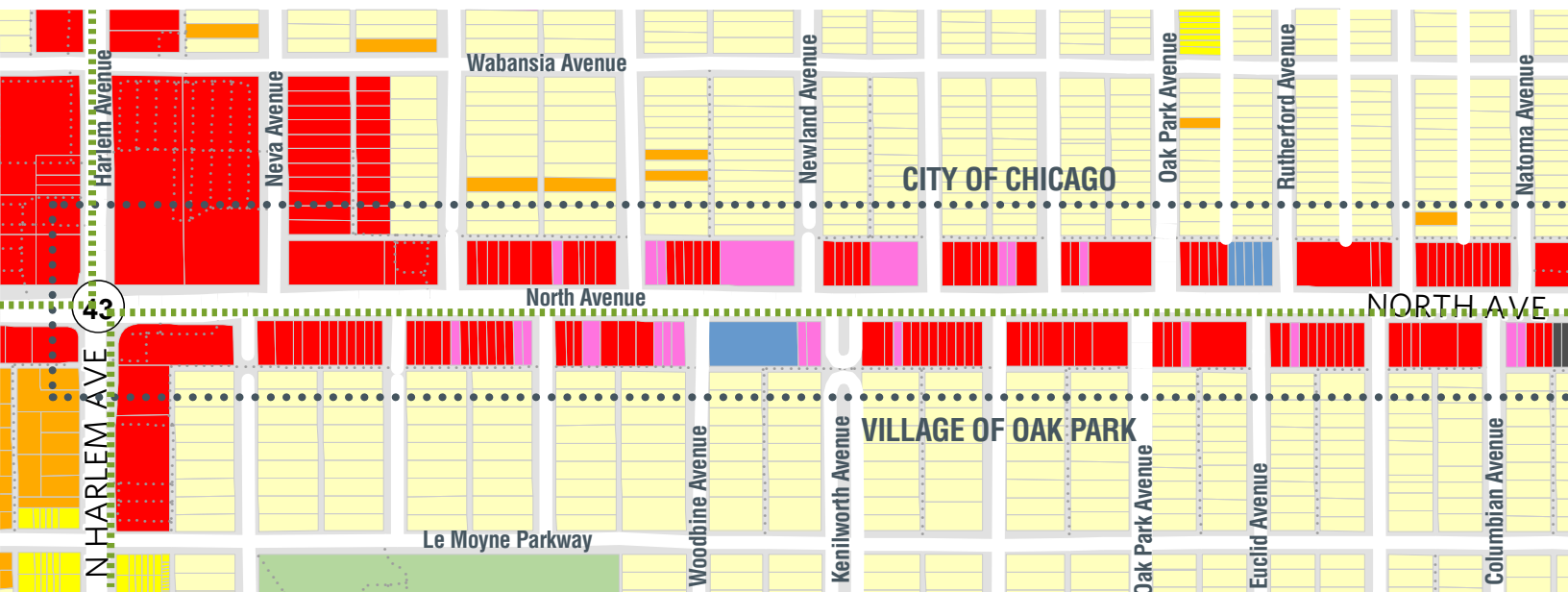
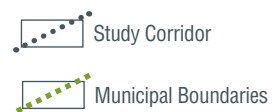


Figure 2. Study Corridor: Existing Land Uses

Data Source: Land Use Inventory 2013, Northeastern Illinois Development Database (NDD), CMAP, Base Map Source: CMAP  
Note: Land use inventory is based on parcel data; “vacant” land use category DOES NOT include parcels with vacant structures or unused surface parking lots.



neighborhood<sup>1</sup> in the City of Chicago. The two jurisdictions share this major thoroughfare, but are not always aligned, literally. A cross street on the Oak Park side misses its Chicago partner by 20 yards and is called Rutherford on one side and Euclid on the other. Even though the mis-aligned streets are a legacy of Chicago area townships being surveyed and platted independently, they pose a unique physical challenge for creating a unified and smoothly functioning North Avenue corridor.

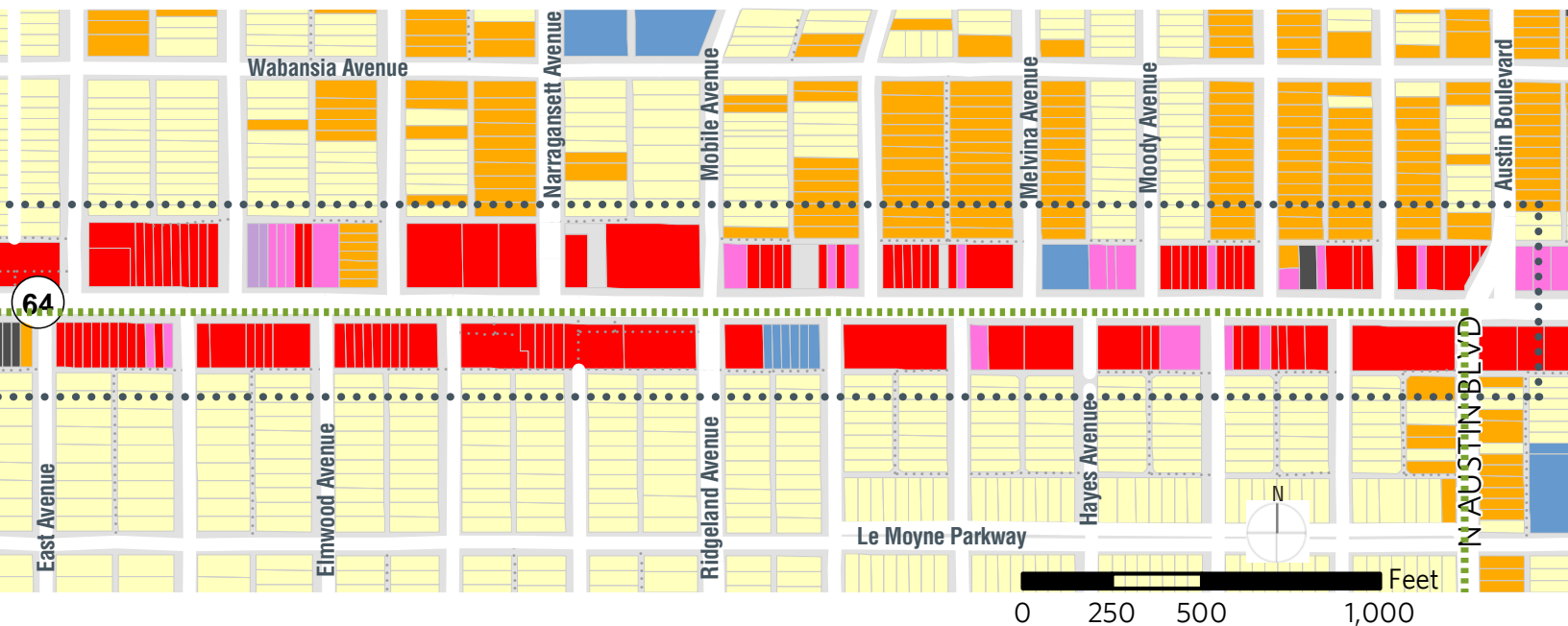
1. Galewood is defined as the community between Austin Boulevard and Harlem Avenue bordered by North Avenue on the south and the railroad tracks on the north and accounts for approximately 20% of the area within Chicago's 29th Ward.

**Top Right:** The study corridor has a mix of businesses include several pawn shops.

**Right:** A large volume of automobile and truck traffic passes daily through the study corridor creating both challenges and opportunities.



Photo Credit: CMAP



# The North Avenue Corridor

Additionally, the municipalities have different regulations, tax structures and different incentives/resources for businesses. Residents, too, have different habits and patterns. Oak Parkers tend to head south toward downtown Oak Park rather than toward North Avenue for shopping, entertainment, and commuting. On the north side, Galewood is more income and race diverse but also has distinct areas within it. The predominantly single-family neighborhood on the west side transitions to mostly multi-family apartments east of Narragansett Avenue. East of Narragansett, Galewood is also less racially diverse and has a greater concentration of lower-income households (Figures 3 and 4).

The potential connection between the neighborhoods to east and west, and on the north and south sides, is North Avenue, however, few in the area see it as central to their daily lives. Rather than an intersection of neighborhoods where residents can mingle, North Avenue is perceived by many as a boundary between neighborhoods

And yet, there are spots of vibrancy. A children’s museum draws families from far and wide. A Schwinn bike shop has been the place where countless kids got their first bike over the last thirty years. Some local restaurants are mainstays with a loyal customer base. A cigar bar is in the works, and a coffee shop is being proposed for another location. Mom and pop stores are intermingled with bank branches, fast-food restaurants and medical centers, and a drive-through Starbucks thrives.

The study corridor is also well served by transit, with multiple CTA and Pace bus lines and three Metra stations nearby. Neighbors are engaged, and committed to creating a revitalized, vibrant North Avenue. The Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT), with the support of the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) is currently conducting a mobility study for the corridor to prioritize transportation improvements.

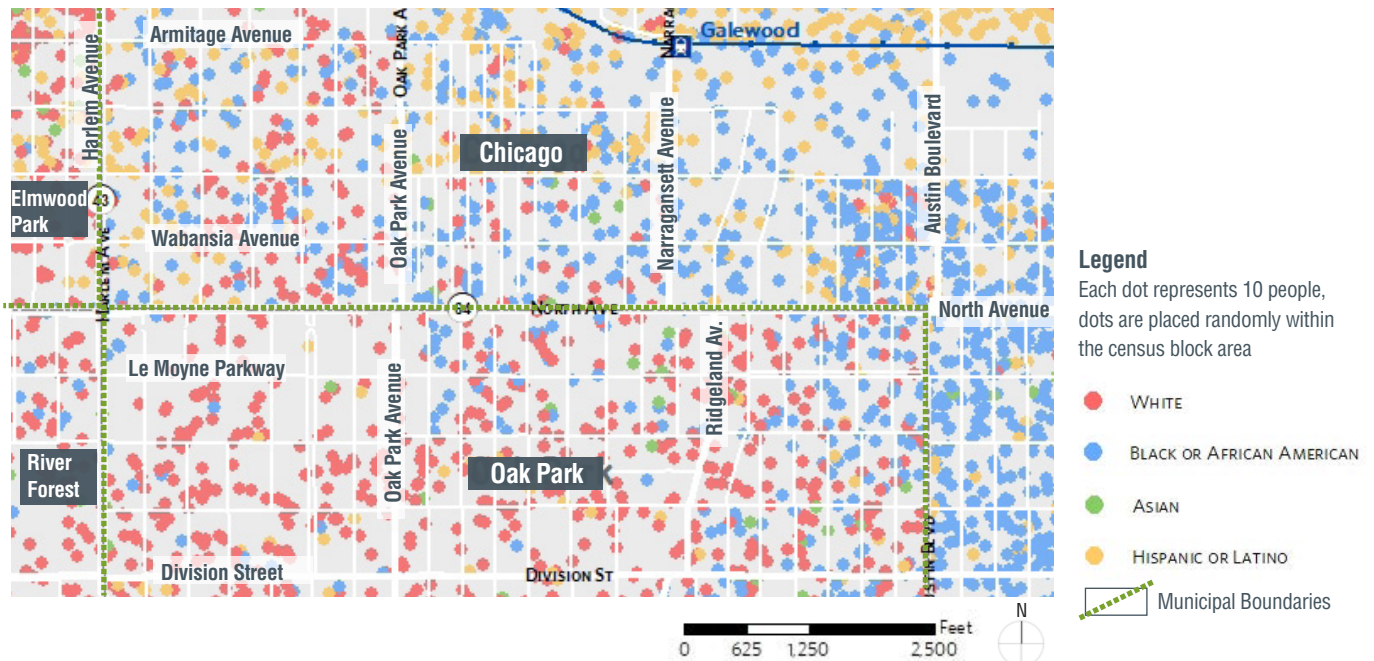


Figure 3. Race and Ethnicity Patterns in the Study Corridor by Census Block  
 Data Source: Block level data from American Community Survey, 2012-2016 Estimates, Map Source: CMAP

## Corridor Studies

### Chicago-Oak Park Traffic Safety and Mobility Study on North Avenue

The Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT), in collaboration with the Village of Oak Park, initiated this study to identify multi-modal transportation improvements along North Avenue (IL Route 64), from Harlem Avenue to Central Avenue (east of Austin Boulevard). The primary focus is to identify traffic, safety and mobility issues along North Avenue affecting all roadway users and adjacent land uses. Study recommendations will address pedestrian, bicyclist, transit and motor vehicle accommodations as well as where to direct transportation resources to support economic development in the area.

### North Avenue Smart Corridor Study

The Cook-DuPage Smart Corridor Study was sponsored by the West Central Municipal Conference to identify low-cost solutions including incorporating Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) strategies for improving mobility for all modes of transportation. North Avenue (IL 64) from the Kane/DuPage County Line to Cicero Avenue in Cook County was selected as one of the pilot corridors.

Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) is completing the 1st Phase Preliminary Engineering Design for the North Avenue Smart Corridor. The study is considering improvements such as dynamic message signs and travel time monitoring for motorists, transit signal priority, far-side bus stop relocations and pedestrian improvements such as continuous sidewalks, high visibility crosswalks and pedestrian countdowns.

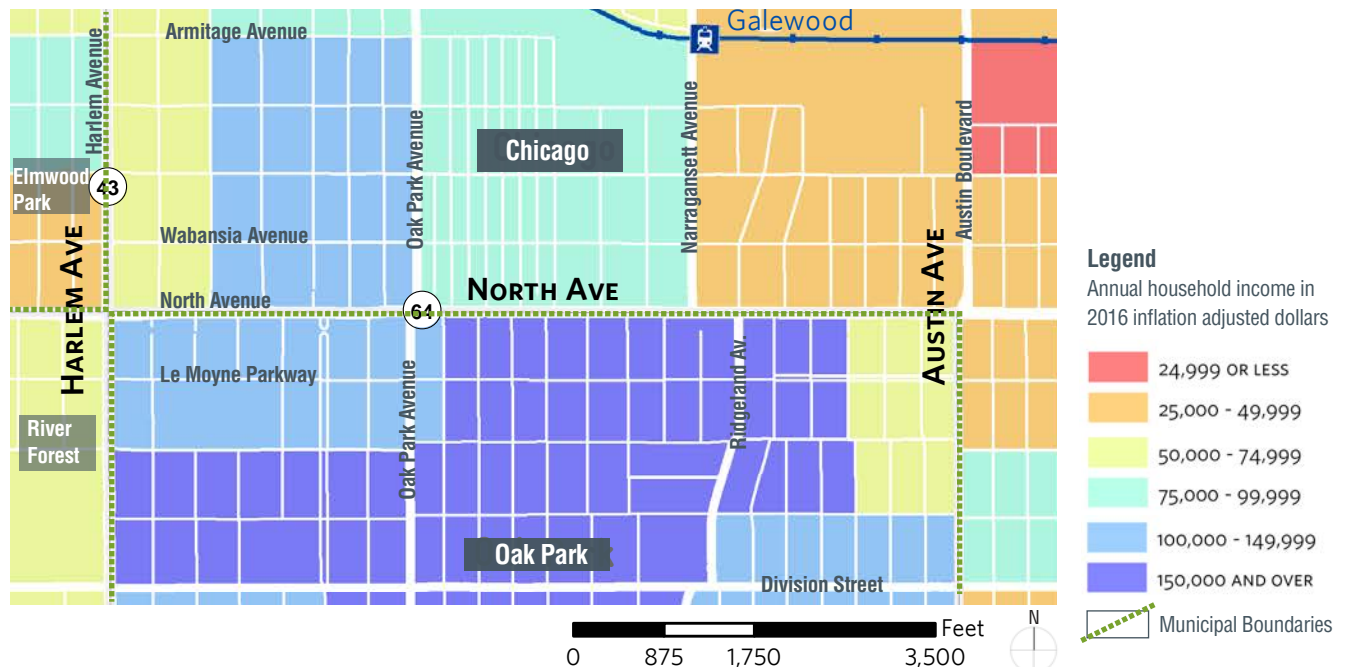


Figure 4. Median Annual Household Income in the Study Corridor by Census Block Groups in 2016 (Inflation Adjusted) Dollars  
 Data Source: American Community Survey, 2012-2016 Estimates, Map Source: CMAP

## The Technical Assistance Panel (TAP)

North Avenue, between Harlem and Austin, has the potential to be much more than a high-speed arterial roadway. In addition to moving large volumes of traffic, the corridor can also be an asset for the surrounding neighborhoods, it can be a place where people choose to live, work and shop for goods and services. Recognizing the corridor's potential, the North Avenue District, comprised of community leaders from Oak Park and the Galewood neighborhood of Chicago, in partnership with the Village of Oak Park and City of Chicago's 29th Ward, applied to the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) for planning assistance. As a part of its Local Technical Assistance (LTA) Program, CMAP is preparing

a revitalization and mobility plan for the corridor and is partnering with the Urban Land Institute Chicago District Council (ULI Chicago) to conduct a Technical Assistance Panel (TAP).

On December 12-13, 2018, ULI Chicago convened a 2-day TAP to prepare strategies for leveraging development opportunities along North Avenue and to create a stronger, revitalized corridor. The panel brought together 11 ULI members with expertise in various aspects of the real estate industry including residential, commercial and mixed-use development, land-use and transportation planning, architecture, urban design, finance and law.

### Scope of Work

**The North Avenue District, 29th Ward Alderman Taliaferro, City of Chicago and the Village of Oak Park are the sponsors for this TAP and have posed the following questions to the TAP:**

- 1. Which sites along the corridor offer key redevelopment opportunities? What are the highest and best uses for these site(s)?**
  - Are there opportunities for multi-family residential development along the corridor? If so, what type and where?
  - Are there segments of the corridor that are better suited for auto-oriented or pedestrian-oriented uses?
- 2. What type of transportation and streetscape improvements could enhance access, safety and overall development potential of the corridor?**
  - Should the streetscape enhancements along the western third of the study corridor be extended east to Austin Boulevard?
- 3. Funding strategies:**
  - What are potential sources of funding for any recommended public improvements?
  - Are any financial or other incentives needed to attract private investment? If so, what type of incentives for which parcels/areas?
- 4. What are the opportunities for and challenges to creating a coordinated, cohesive North Avenue corridor given its inter-jurisdictional nature (Chicago to the north and Oak Park to the south)?**
  - Differences in regulatory environment (zoning and building codes, enforcement)
  - Difference in financial burden and available incentives
  - Potentially different priorities and different development and design preferences
  - Organizational structure that can facilitate consensus building and implement improvements



The ULI Chicago Panel worked collaboratively over two days to answer the questions posed in the TAP’s scope of work and prepare market-based, implementable strategies for revitalizing North Avenue. In advance of the TAP, panelists prepared by reviewing extensive briefing materials with socio-economic, land-use, zoning and other development information and results of the resident and business survey completed by CMAP. During the TAP, panel members toured the study corridor and interviewed 29th Ward and Village representatives, IDOT and CDOT representatives, business and property owners, residents and other community stakeholders. The panel’s findings and recommendations are presented in this report.



Panel members and community leaders engage in discussion during the TAP.

## Community Groups

### **The North Avenue District (The District)**

The North Avenue District is an independent non-profit organization with the mission of revitalizing the North Avenue corridor between Austin and Harlem. Founded in 2013 as the North Avenue Zoning and Development Advisory Committee, the organization was incorporated as The North Avenue District, Inc. in 2016. The District is focused on supporting existing quality businesses on North Avenue and recruiting new commercial and residential development that enhances the corridor’s character. More information is available on The District’s Facebook community page:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/107435609823334/>

### **North Avenue Business Association (NABA)**

Established in 2000, NABA’s mission is to enhance the overall image and promote the long-term economic viability of the business district on North Avenue between Harlem Avenue and Austin Boulevard. Any business in the district can apply to be a member. NABA’s best-known event is an annual expo, it also holds meet and greet events for businesses. Additional information is available on the association’s website:

<http://www.northavenuebusinessassociation.com/>

### **29th Ward Galewood Economic Development Committee (GEDC)**

Formed in spring of 2017 at the encouragement of 29th Ward Alderman Chris Taliaferro, the GEDC is comprised of a dozen active residents from Galewood. The initial charge of the GEDC is the study of the commercial district along North and Harlem Avenues. The committee meets monthly to discuss and evaluate development opportunities, has completed a survey of property ownership in anticipation of a future Special Service Area (SSA) and is currently implementing the installation of branded trash receptacles along the Chicago side of North and Harlem Avenues. The GEDC also organizes networking events for businesses and residents and has hosted numerous North Avenue Clean Up events. The GDEC has been involved in the Ward’s Participatory Budgeting Initiative and engages with various City agencies through the Ward office as well as with The District and NABA.

# Panel Findings

Based on a review of existing conditions analyses completed by CMAP and CDOT, resident and business owner surveys, site tours and conversations with community stakeholders, the panel identified key issues that are impacting North Avenue’s development into a vibrant, mixed-use corridor. The key issues are outlined below.

## High Traffic Speeds and Unsafe Pedestrian Environment

Within the study corridor, North Avenue has a wide right-of-way and the lane markings, including on-street parking, are not always clearly defined. In addition, there is nearly a half mile between traffic signals on both ends of the study corridor—between Harlem and Oak Park and between Ridgeland and Austin (Figure 5). Cars are therefore able to travel at much higher speeds than the posted limit of 30 miles/hour through most of the study corridor creating an unsafe environment for pedestrians and bicyclists.

As shown in Figure 6 on Pages 10-11, these sections of the study corridor tend to be hotspots for traffic crashes. Many residents mentioned that sidewalks along North Avenue are uninviting because of minimal streetscape improvements but crossing the street can be downright dangerous. It is not uncommon for residents to make shopping choices based on the side of North Avenue they live on. At higher speeds, drivers are also less likely to notice corridor businesses that they might otherwise stop and visit. This results in potentially lost business for restaurants and retailers along the corridor.

## Lack of Convenient, Safe Parking

While CDOT assessments do not reveal any overall significant parking shortages, many residents and business owners report a lack of adequate parking along the corridor. This is likely because the available parking spots might not always be conveniently located or perceived as safe/comfortable. On-street parking along North Avenue is especially underutilized in many sections because the parking lanes are not

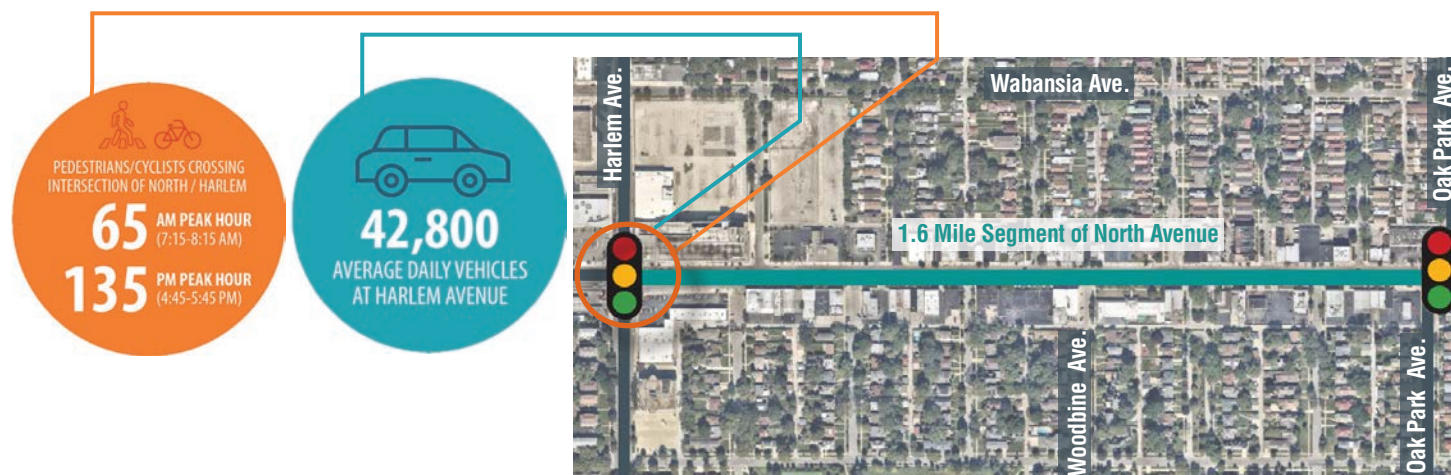


Figure 5. Existing Transportation Conditions

Source: Existing Conditions Maps prepared for the Traffic Safety and Mobility Study on North Avenue led by the Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT). Note: CDOT Study Area for North Avenue extends farther east beyond Austin Boulevard to Central Avenue; the above map is an excerpt from the original map created for the CDOT Study.

well-defined or protected. The rushing traffic on North Avenue makes parallel parking extremely difficult, if not dangerous when drivers use the parking lanes as passing lanes. Because of the uninviting streetscape, people prefer to park directly in front of their destination. Yet certain parcels with heavy need, like day care centers, have only a few parking spots in front.



**Top:** High traffic volume, wide right-of-way, and minimal pedestrian amenities have led to an uninviting and unsafe pedestrian environment along several sections of North Avenue.



**Right:** On-street parking is not marked clearly in many sections of the study corridor.



## Panel Findings (continued)



East of Oak Park Avenue North Avenue has a cluttered, unattractive streetscape.

### Unattractive, Unfriendly Streetscape

The study corridor does not currently present a cohesive, inviting environment that could entice drivers passing by to slow down, park and shop or dine along the corridor. Lack of pedestrian amenities also make it challenging to draw area residents to the corridor. Based on community surveys and interviews, few people currently utilize North Avenue as a multi-destination commercial corridor. Even if they live relatively close-by, most people drive to the North Avenue business they want to visit and leave once they've completed the errand. Well-designed streetscape can help change that pattern by creating an attractive and comfortable corridor for all users.

From Harlem to Oak Park Avenue, North Avenue has newer streetscaping with decorative pedestrian-scale lighting and medians, but these improvements do not continue through to Austin Boulevard. Additionally, lack of proper maintenance is evident in many parts of the corridor creating a disjointed appearance.

### Underutilized Development Opportunities

While the North Avenue corridor has many beloved long-time businesses as well as several new developments underway, these “bright spots” are too few and far between to activate the whole study corridor.

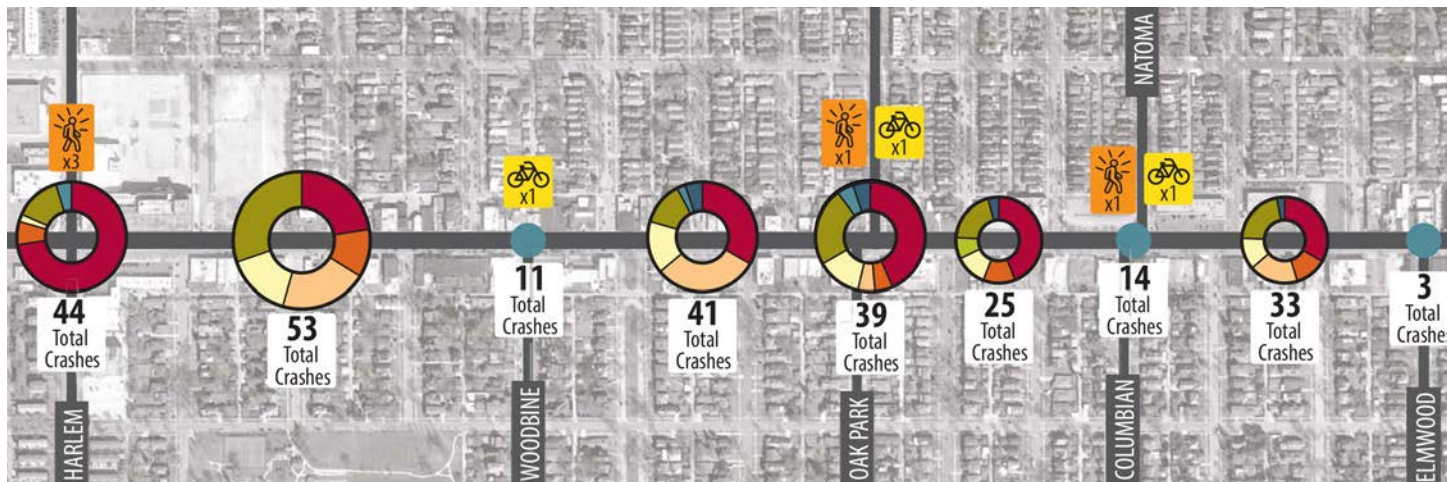


Figure 6. Crash Data Evaluation, 2014-2016

Source: Existing Conditions Maps prepared for the Traffic Safety and Mobility Study on North Avenue led by the Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT).

Property values have been steadily declining as many buildings and sites continue to remain underutilized or even vacant.

A new mixed-use development with ground-level retail and multi-family residential is being planned for the former Sears site at the northeast corner of Harlem and North. This redevelopment could potentially transform the entire study corridor however, vacant sites and buildings frequently interrupt the development flow, especially as one moves eastwards. Currently, the corridor lacks strong development nodes that can capture and transfer the development momentum from the western end down to the eastern end of the corridor.

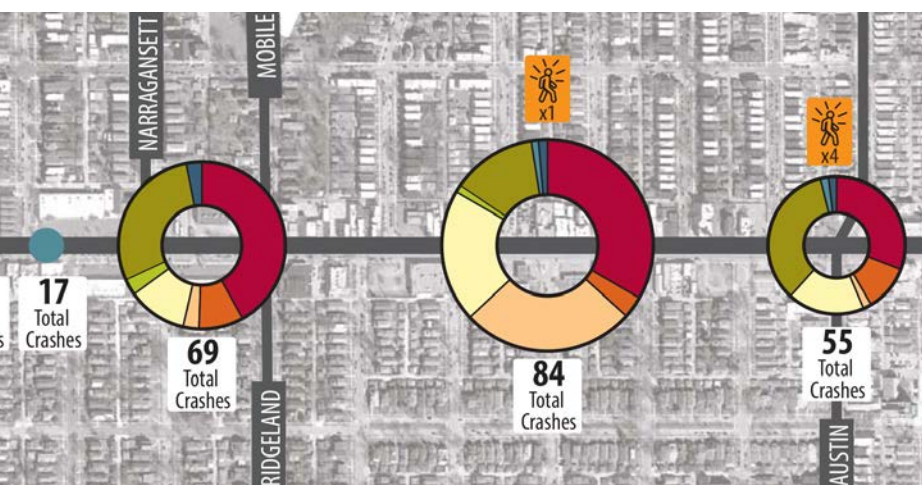
### Interjurisdictional Coordination

The north and the south sides of the study corridor are in two different jurisdictions—City of Chicago and Village of Oak Park respectively, which means that the two sides are subject to different regulations and have different sets of resources available to them. The two municipalities have their own priorities for their side of North Avenue, which are not always aligned, making it more challenging to create a cohesive corridor. Additionally, residents and community groups on both sides of the corridor are engaged but their efforts are not always coordinated. There is clear commitment from community members and leaders, including elected officials from Chicago and Oak Park to revitalize North Avenue, but there is no unified vision or plan of how to get there.

Vacancies are a common sight, especially along the eastern third of the study corridor.



Photo Credit: CMAP



#### Legend

● Total Crashes <20



## Panel Recommendations

North Avenue's challenges are multi-faceted; the ULI panel therefore recommends a multi-dimensional strategy, made up of near-term tactics and longer-term improvements to strengthen and revitalize the corridor.

The panel's recommendations start with improving the physical infrastructure of North Avenue to enhance mobility, safety, and usability to create a corridor where people want to be. Economic development efforts should be focused on strategic nodes, which can have a catalytic impact on the rest of the corridor. And most importantly, there should be a unified vision supported by both Oak Park and Chicago's 29th Ward for revitalizing North Avenue that can be implemented by a common entity/organization also supported by both sides.

## Mobility and Streetscape Recommendations

North Avenue (IL-64) is a designated Strategic Regional Arterial (SRA), which means IDOT considers it a major regional thoroughfare carrying large volumes of auto traffic and is interested in ensuring that traffic continues to flow smoothly and safely through the study corridor. North Avenue is also a pilot corridor for IDOT's smart corridors project that aims to improve mobility for all transportation modes through low-cost solutions and the use of Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS).

The panel urges community members to acknowledge and even embrace the auto-centric nature of North Avenue without letting it be the only defining factor.

Smooth traffic flow along North Avenue allows area residents to easily access other parts of the region and provides a tremendous opportunity for corridor businesses to capture a portion of the drive-through traffic. At the same time, streetscape improvements can be made to make the corridor pedestrian-friendly and accessible for people of all ages and levels of mobility, drawing in additional patrons for corridor businesses. The panel's recommendations for streetscape improvements are presented below; the panel also recommends coordinating closely with CDOT and IDOT to further develop and integrate these recommendations into the overall transportation plan for the corridor.



Curb bump-outs at the Damen/Lincoln intersection on Irving Park Road, a Strategic Regional Arterial (SRA) similar to North Avenue, help with traffic calming, clearer delineation of on-street parking and enhance pedestrian safety. Other SRA's with some similar improvements include Cicero Avenue south of Irving Park in Chicago and LaGrange Road in downtown LaGrange.

## 1. Enhance Safety for Pedestrians and Other Non-Auto Users

**Install Pedestrian Refuge Islands.** Medians should be installed at select locations within the corridor to allow pedestrians to cross halfway and wait in a safe location before they can cross over to the other side. In addition to serving as pedestrian refuges, medians can help control excessive auto speeds by visually narrowing the pavement width available to drivers. Even with the added safety of medians, pedestrian crossings at non-signalized intersections and mid-block locations can be challenging to navigate and should be installed only after careful consideration. Heavily landscaped medians can be expensive and difficult to maintain; the panel therefore recommends primarily hardscape or lower-maintenance designs for medians.

**Install Curb Bump-outs.** Curb bump-outs at key intersections can shorten the crossing distance for pedestrians, making it less daunting to cross North Avenue. Bump-outs will also provide a significant added benefit of clearly defining the on-street parking lane by serving as “bookends.”

**Improve Bike Connectivity.** Because of the large volume of high-speed auto traffic, North Avenue is not an ideal bike-corridor. At the same time, it should not be a barrier for bicyclists looking to cross North Avenue or visit North Avenue destinations from adjoining neighborhoods. Implementing the recommended pedestrian safety enhancements at intersections will make the corridor more accessible for bicyclists as well, allowing them to cross North Avenue safely. The panel also recommends adding bike-share stations at strategic locations along and near the corridor to further enhance bike access. For example, Divvy bikes at the Galewood Metra station located a few blocks north of the corridor, could help fill the “last-mile” gap for many Metra riders allowing them to get to North Avenue destinations more easily from the train station.

## 2. Support Parking Demand

A significant amount of parking currently exists in the study corridor but is not always easy to access. The panel provides the following strategies to better utilize existing parking resources and explore opportunities for providing additional parking.



Photo Credit: CMAP

Implementing safety improvements along the corridor and key intersections will also enhance safety for bicyclists looking to cross North Avenue or access destinations along it. While sidewalks are not recommended for bicycle-riding, many side streets along North Avenue have relatively low traffic making it easier for bicyclists to share the road with vehicles.

## Mobility and Streetscape Recommendations (continued)

### 2. Support Parking Demand (continued)

**Improve On-street Parking.** On-street parking is currently allowed on both sides of North Avenue throughout the study corridor but is very underutilized. A part of the parking problem in the study area can be solved by making already available on-street parking safer and easier to use. The panel recommends curb bump-outs and fresh striping to help define the parking lane more clearly. These relatively low-cost improvements will discourage drivers from using the parking lane as a pass-through lane, making it safer to park on the street.

**Encourage Shared Parking.** There are many different types of businesses along the corridor with different parking needs. A day care center, for example, needs a lot of short-term parking spots during morning drop-offs and evening pick-ups but none after that. A restaurant on the other hand, requires most parking spots during dinner and lunch times. When peak parking hours for businesses are complementary rather than overlapping, the panel recommends encouraging them to share their parking lots—the restaurant could allow the daycare to use their spots during drop-off and pick-up, in exchange for using the daycare’s parking spots during lunch and dinner hours. Sharing parking spaces will help

maximize the use of off-street parking spaces within the corridor.

**Utilize Vacant Parking Lots.** Currently, North Avenue has vacant parking lots that in the near term can be used to provide off-street parking. The panel recommends working with property owners to explore the feasibility of opening these parking lots for customers visiting area businesses—in addition to activating sites that are currently unused, this will also help assess how much additional off-street parking is really needed along the corridor. If the parking lots are heavily used, it might indicate the need for developing a more long-term off-street parking solution for the corridor.

**Add Side-street Parking.** Currently many of the north-south streets in the study area have on-street parking that complements the limited spaces available in the shallow lots along North Avenue. The north-south side streets are quieter and provide a more sheltered parking environment than North Avenue. The panel therefore recommends exploring opportunities for on-street parking on additional side streets. For example, Oak Park Avenue has two south-bound lanes on the south side of North Avenue; if one southbound lane is enough to maintain smooth traffic flow, then there might be an opportunity to convert the second lane into on-street parking.





Many side streets along North Avenue provide a convenient and comfortable parking option for North Avenue visitors. However, inconsistent traffic management strategies such as the use of barriers on the Oak Park side (**right**) and one-way streets on the Chicago side (**bottom**) can create a confusing environment for drivers and generate disproportionate amounts of cut-through traffic on some residential side streets and alleyways.



### 3. Improve Efficiency of Traffic Operations

**Coordinate Traffic Management.** The panel recommends coordinating traffic management strategies for side-streets throughout the study corridor and on both sides to reduce excessive cut-through traffic and speeding in portion of adjoining neighborhoods.

Currently, many of the residential side streets on the Oak Park side, and some on the Chicago side have cul-de-sacs or diverters to keep out any North Avenue traffic. This approach might keep traffic away from some neighborhood streets but has the unintended consequence of diverting excessive traffic on to other side streets and alleys in residential neighborhoods. To minimize localized negative impacts, the panel recommends considering alternative traffic-calming strategies along side streets instead of constructing cul-de-sacs or barriers on some of them. Implementing improvements such as narrower travel lanes, on-street parking, special paving and speed tables in a coordinated fashion on side streets can help effectively manage any spill-over traffic from North Avenue without cutting off portions of the residential neighborhoods and creating “cut-through zones” in others.

**Right-size Intersections.** The panel recommends identifying opportunities to minimize “big footprints” at some intersections where misaligned streets create a jog, and thus an even larger intersection that can be challenging for both pedestrians and cars to navigate. For example, the “slip lane” for right-turns on the northeast side of the North and Austin intersection, could be redesigned for a more appropriate, potentially non-traffic use such as a people spot or plaza.



**Figure 7:** North Avenue at Austin Boulevard

Source: Google Earth. Map data © 2018 Google, Imagery © 2018 Google.

## Mobility and Streetscape Recommendations (continued)

### 4. Create an Attractive, Coordinated Streetscape

North Avenue, between Harlem and Austin, does not have a distinct character. While newer streetscape features such as pedestrian-scale street lamps are present on the west side, the overall corridor experience is disjointed. Improving the streetscape to create a safer and attractive North Avenue was consistently expressed as a priority by community stakeholders. The panel recommends implementing low-cost but high-impact improvements to transform North Avenue into a high-functioning and attractive arterial roadway for all users. Near term improvements should include:

**Medians, Bump-outs, Crosswalks.** Many of the transportation improvements outlined earlier including curb bump-outs, medians, clear pavement markings including parking lanes and crosswalks, repurposing of excess pavement for on-street parking and/or plaza space are all relatively low-cost investments that will yield high returns in safety and usability and help create a unified look along the corridor.

### Lighting, Banners, Public Art and Street Furniture

In addition to mobility improvements, the panel recommends continuing streetscape elements throughout the corridor. The street lamps that currently stop at Oak Park Avenue should be extended all the way east to Austin Boulevard, and fitted with new banners that reflect the unique interjurisdictional identity of North Avenue. The panel recommends developing a design palette and a co-branded logo that includes Galewood and Oak Park that can be displayed on banners and used consistently throughout the study corridor. Public art installations, such as the mural on the Wonder Works Museum building, should be encouraged throughout the corridor. Well-designed and coordinated street furniture and bus shelters can also help enhance the user experience along North Avenue.

**Open Space.** Currently, the study corridor has very few public spaces that can provide a place to gather or even just take a break from work or errands. The green boulevard along Kenilworth Avenue offers this



North Avenue Existing Conditions:  
Oak Park Ave. to Austin Blvd.



North Avenue Existing Conditions:  
Harlem Ave. to Oak Park Ave.



Potential Future North Avenue Streetscape:  
Harlem Ave. to Austin Blvd.

Extending the streetscape that currently exists from Harlem to Oak Park Avenue farther east and investing in low-cost improvements such as banners and clearly marked crosswalks can help create a cohesive, visually appealing corridor.

opportunity, and the panel recommends extending it by creating a curb-less, shared street along Kenilworth between North Avenue and the alley. This would transform the existing pavement on either side of the boulevard into a “flex space” that can be temporarily blocked-off for cars and together with the green median, used for holding events such as a weekend farmer’s market. The panel also recommends exploring opportunities to activate the U.S. Bank plaza at the southwest corner of North Avenue and Austin Boulevard, potentially with arts-related programming to complement the planned STEAM center at the Monumental Building site.

## 5. Coordinate with IDOT and CDOT

The panel recommends that community leaders work closely with IDOT and CDOT to advance the transportation and streetscape improvement strategies

outlined above and to ensure that they complement IDOT’s smart corridors project and CDOT’s safety and mobility study. Representatives from both transportation agencies have been active participants in the TAP process, providing critical input and feedback. As CDOT develops recommendations for mobility improvements, there is a tremendous opportunity to delve deeper into ULI’s recommendations and incorporate them in the improvement plan for North Avenue.

The panel also recommends using the CDOT study to build on the existing plans for the corridor and complete a new Phase 1 Plan Streetscape Plan for North Avenue. This will help unlock funding opportunities for advanced planning and ultimately construction, available through federal and state transportation infrastructure improvement programs.



Photo Credit: CMAP



Green boulevard along Kenilworth Avenue (top left) can be transformed into a flex space for gatherings and events along North Avenue by creating a curbless street (top right).

Public art, such as the mural on the Wonder Works Museum building on North Avenue, create help an attractive, dynamic corridor environment. The panel encourages the community to expand public art displays and explore the use of arts related programming to activate the corridor.



## Development Opportunities Recommendations

Within the approximately 1.6-mile-long study corridor, North Avenue changes in character. The western section, from Harlem to Oak Park has newer street-scaping and active storefronts with few vacancies. The Sears store that anchored the northeast corner of North and Harlem is currently vacant, but as per initial public presentations by the development team, plans are underway for a new mixed-use development on the site that will bring new residents to the corridor in addition to new, smaller commercial spaces. This redevelopment project, when complete, is likely to be transformative, especially for the western section of the corridor.

East of Oak Park Avenue, the streetscape is not as attractive, but there are many bright spots of activity including the Wonder Works Children’s Museum. On the Oak Park side, new developments are underway and while relatively smaller in scale, they will add to the vibrancy of the corridor and help move the development momentum eastwards. At the east corner of North and East Avenues, a multifamily residential

building is under construction, with an upscale cigar bar next door. Four townhomes and 2 loft residences are planned for the vacant lot between Columbian and East Avenues and a coffee roaster and coffee shop are being considered for a site just down the street at 6537 W. North Avenue.

Farther east, beyond Ridgeland, there are many more vacancies and businesses such as pawn shops. More buildings suffer from deferred maintenance and the streetscape is defined by uncoordinated, unattractive signage with minimal pedestrian amenities. This stretch of the corridor is perceived as unsafe by many, even though actual crime levels remain low.

Clearly, development potential changes significantly along the study corridor as we move eastwards from Harlem towards Austin. Therefore, in addition to guiding overall redevelopment, the panel’s recommendations include strategies to leverage the different opportunities available in each section of the study corridor.



Long-standing businesses such as the Schwinn bike shop are bright spots in the eastern portion of the corridor, which suffers from significant vacancies.



New residential construction is underway at the east corner of North and East Avenues.

## 1. Overall Development

### Recommendations: Suitable Land Uses

While each site's unique characteristics will help determine the best use for it, understanding what types of uses are most likely to succeed along the corridor can help target developer and/or tenant recruitment efforts. The panel's recommendations for appropriate land uses are presented in this section.

**Residential.** The panel expects new, well-designed residential development to lead North Avenue's revitalization. In the study area, North Avenue has many assets that make it a perfect location for new multi-family residential, both for-sale and rental units. It is well-connected by transit—multiple bus-lines run along North Avenue and two Metra commuter rail stations, Galewood and Mars, are located just a few blocks north of North Avenue providing an easy commute to downtown Chicago. A variety of shops and services are present along the corridor itself and in close-by destinations including downtown Oak Park and the Brickyard Mall.

New multi-family residential on North Avenue could attract existing area residents who might be looking for the convenience of multi-family living as they grow older but would like to remain in the neighborhood. It is also likely to attract younger workers who are looking for urban lifestyles without having to pay high downtown-level rents/prices. In fact, as one of the panelists explained, renters today are potential homeowners of tomorrow. Many younger workers and even families choose to rent while they explore whether they want to live in the neighborhood. Nationally and locally, there is an increasing shift in housing preferences—more people are choosing renting over buying or delaying the purchase of their first homes. Also, as more people choose to age-in-place, there is a greater need for diverse housing options in neighborhoods. North Avenue is well-positioned to benefit from this

Existing multi-family residential with ground-level commercial at the west corner of New England and North Avenues provides a good example of the type of mixed-use development that can be supported along the study corridor.

continuing demand for new multi-family residential; specific sites that offer near-term opportunities for residential are discussed later in the report.

Replacing vacant and underutilized buildings and sites on North Avenue with new residential development will energize the corridor and add to the potential customer base of area businesses helping them thrive. New residential development will also provide construction jobs, generate additional property tax by increasing the value of the subject property, and result in additional municipal revenue through permit and other fees. The panel recommends encouraging multi-family residential along North Avenue and working with developers to ensure that new developments are well-designed and professionally-managed, so they can add to the character of the street and the neighborhood.



## Development Opportunities Recommendations (continued)

### 1. Overall Development Recommendations: Suitable Land Uses

**Restaurants.** Food-related businesses are a strong driver of economic development. The study corridor has several restaurants and delis that were highlighted as popular destinations by many community stakeholders, and as it redevelops, new restaurants could thrive along North Avenue. New mixed-use developments will bring additional residents to the corridor, creating an increased demand for “third-places” or places for social interactions outside of one’s home or workplace. Neighborhood restaurants and cafes are often a typical “third-place,” and especially for younger households, an important consideration in choosing where to live. With relatively lower rents and access to a large, vibrant population-base, North Avenue could be a perfect site for a local chef trying to launch a new restaurant concept. An incubator for food-businesses with space for pop-up restaurants could support such entrepreneurs along North Avenue. Fast-casual restaurants with easily accessible parking and/or a drive-thru would also be attractive to drivers along North Avenue looking to make a quick stop.

**Commercial Service.** Service businesses such as child-care centers, dry-cleaners and hair and nail salons, many of which already exist along the corridor,

are resistant to online sales. Additionally, these businesses can draw from residential neighborhoods on either side of North Avenue as well as the thousands of people who drive through the corridor each day, making them a viable use for the study corridor.

**Retail.** Parcels on both sides of North Avenue are relatively shallow and mostly adjacent to single-family homes, making it challenging to accommodate new large or medium-sized retail stores. Additionally, as online shopping continues to surge, few retailers are interested in opening new stores except in the strongest retail locations. The study corridor is therefore unlikely to attract significant new retail businesses.

**Office.** The study corridor currently has a significant amount of vacant office space, indicating weak demand for new office. However, medical offices and other service providers such as attorneys and CPAs who attract a significant amount of customer traffic could be viable uses. The panel also recommends exploring the opportunity of creating a co-working space which could be part of a community center or library along the corridor. Well-managed co-working spaces combine flexibility, convenience and wrap-around services such as business planning and marketing that can help jump-start new, small businesses.



Photo Credit: CMAP



Photo Credit: CMAP

# Why Multi-family Residential?

Many residents are concerned about the height and density of multi-family buildings altering the quiet, predominantly single-family character of their neighborhood and generating too much additional traffic. They also worry that renter households will not be invested in the community, and that the rental buildings will not be well-maintained. However, the profile of today's renter and the type of rental housing they are seeking has shifted. More households are renting today than ever before, and a significant percentage of that increase is driven by households actively seeking the flexibility and carefree lifestyle of renting. These households, who are renters by choice, tend to be higher-income and are seeking high-amenity residential buildings in high-amenity neighborhoods. Therefore, new apartment buildings tend to be well-designed and well-maintained, usually by professional management companies. Also, building new or completing a significant rehab of an existing building to create new apartments typically requires significant investment, and most developers/investors will be vested in the success of the neighborhood where they are choosing to build and/or own property.

Additionally, renter households are already an integral part of the neighborhood—nearly 21% of the households in the study area rent their homes<sup>1</sup>. There are several multi-family residential buildings on the eastern half of the corridor; anecdotal evidence suggests that many single-family homes and condominiums all along the corridor are also being rented out. New well-designed and well-managed residential apartments along North Avenue are not likely to significantly alter the study area's character. Similarly, additional vehicular trips generated by new multi-family residential will likely not have any perceptible

1 CMAP analysis of ESRI data

impact on the existing high traffic volumes along North Avenue.

Since 2005, there has been an unprecedented rise in the number of households renting their homes, while home-ownership levels declined. According to the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard, between 2005 and 2015, the share of all U.S. households that rent, rose from 31% to 37%, representing a gain of nearly 9 million renter households, the largest gain in any ten-year period on record<sup>2</sup>. Importantly, this gain in renter households has been broad-based, across age and income levels (Figure A).

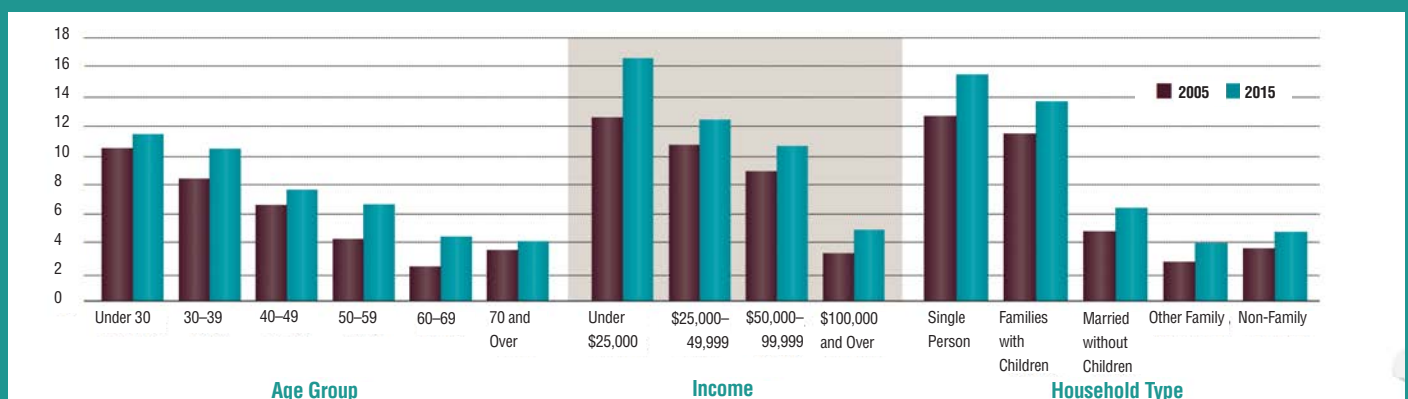
More recent trends, since 2016, indicate that the rapid growth in renter households might be slowing down. Even with that, the Joint Center projects an annual growth of approximately 500,000 renter households nationally from 2015-2025, indicating that renting is going to continue to be attractive to an increasing number of households<sup>3</sup>. Cook County mirrors this national trend. According to DePaul University's Institute of Housing Studies (IHS) analysis, the percentage of rental households rose to 44% in 2015 from 38% in 2005. Since 2016, the rapid growth in rental households appears to be leveling out in Cook County as well, but the actual number of renter households remain at all-time high<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, the percentage share of higher-income households (earning more than 120% of Area Median Income), rose to nearly 22% of all renter households in 2016 from 15% in 2007 indicating a strong demand for market-rate rental housing.

2 [http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/americas\\_rental\\_housing\\_2015\\_web.pdf](http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/americas_rental_housing_2015_web.pdf)

3 [http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/01\\_harvard\\_jchs\\_americas\\_rental\\_housing\\_2017.pdf](http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/01_harvard_jchs_americas_rental_housing_2017.pdf)

4 <https://www.housingstudies.org/releases/2018-state-rental-housing-cook-county/>

**Figure A. The Decade-Long (2005-2015) Increase in Renter Households Has Been Broad-Based**



Note: Household counts are three-year trailing averages and define children as under age 18 only.

Data Source: JCHS tabulations of US Census Bureau, Current Population Surveys. Graphic Source: America's Rental Housing, 2015, Joint Center for Housing Studies, Harvard University

## Development Opportunities Recommendations (continued)

### 2. Focus Redevelopment Efforts: Establish and Strengthen Strategic Nodes of Activity

As described earlier, existing conditions and resultant development opportunities vary significantly along the 1.6-mile-long study corridor. Specific sections and sites along North Avenue offer stronger, near-term

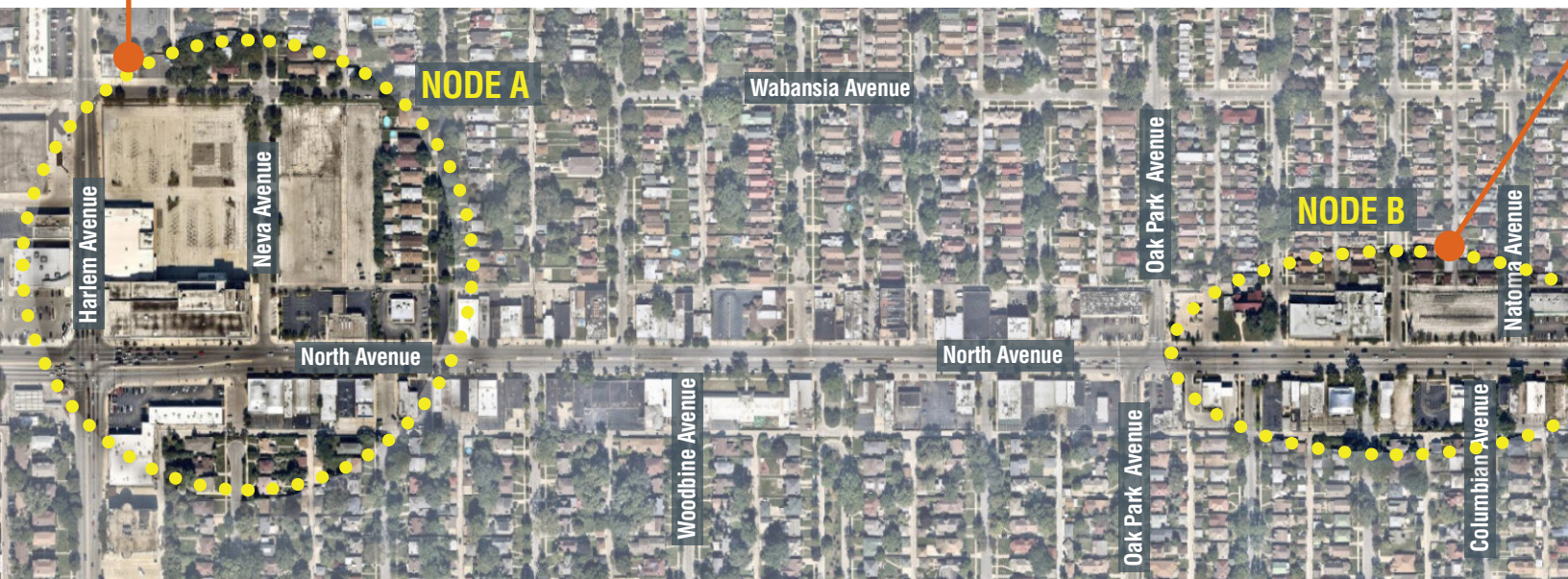
development opportunities that can be catalytic for the rest of the corridor. Therefore, the panel recommends focusing initial redevelopment efforts on these strategic nodes (Figure 8) to jumpstart revitalization. As the sites within these nodes develop to their full potential, they will create a ripple effect of expanding development opportunities, strengthening the entire North Avenue corridor.



**Node A: North and Harlem Intersection.** The former Sears building and site is the largest redevelopment opportunity along the corridor and will serve as an anchor for the western end of the corridor for years to come. The panel recommends encouraging a development program and design that will respond and connect to North Avenue, helping create a dynamic street environment.



A new mixed-use development including rental apartments, townhomes and some commercial is being proposed for the former Sears department store at the northeast corner of North and Harlem Avenues (left) and the parking lot along Neva (right).



22 Figure 8. North Avenue Corridor: Development Opportunity Nodes



**Node B: North Oak Park to Nashville.** New developments are underway on the Oak Park side of North Avenue including new construction multi-family residential, and smaller-scale commercial. A cigar lounge has been proposed for one of the commercial spaces, and another property owner is exploring the possibility of attracting a coffee roaster with a small coffee shop. Across the street, the former US Bank building and parking lot are currently vacant, but ripe for redevelopment. A recent development proposal for the site did not come to fruition, but the property is under new ownership now presenting an opportunity to start a new conversation. Integrating both sides of North Avenue through a coordinated streetscape

and strong pedestrian connections will enhance the development potential of the US Bank site and create a more vibrant environment for the new Oak Park developments.

The panel recommends retrofitting the existing bank building and perhaps adding another story on top, to create a mixed-use building with 30-50 apartments and street-level retail. A portion of the adjacent parking lot could also be redeveloped to add more residential units. Redevelopment of the US Bank site will fill a significant gap in the corridor and help move the development momentum eastwards.



The former US Bank building could be retrofitted to add new multi-family residential along the corridor, helping propel the development momentum eastwards along the study corridor.

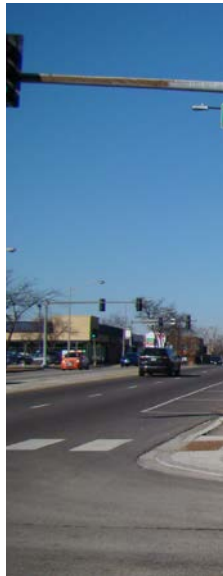


## Development Opportunities Recommendations (continued)

**Former IHOP Building.** Located on the west side of Elmwood Avenue between nodes B and C, the vacant IHOP building is a great site for a new restaurant or food-related establishment. The Chicago region has an increasingly creative culinary scene, and this could be a perfect site for a local chef looking to start an experimental restaurant concept, or for an incubator for food-related businesses.



The former IHOP building could be a perfect site for a new restaurant or food-related business.

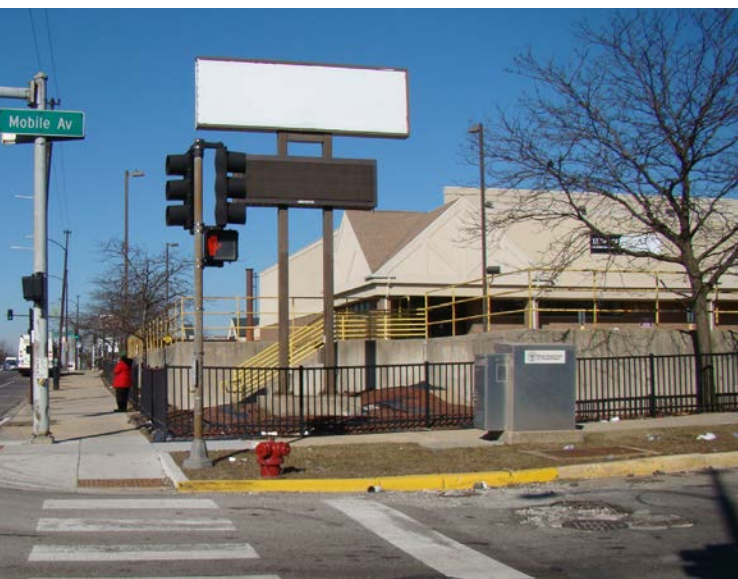


**Node C: Narragansett to Mobile/Ridgeland.** The former Walgreens at the northwest corner of North and Mobile Avenues is another large development site, and the panel recommends a mixed-use development with multi-family residential. This site is only four blocks from the Galewood Metra station and close to many shops and services making it an ideal

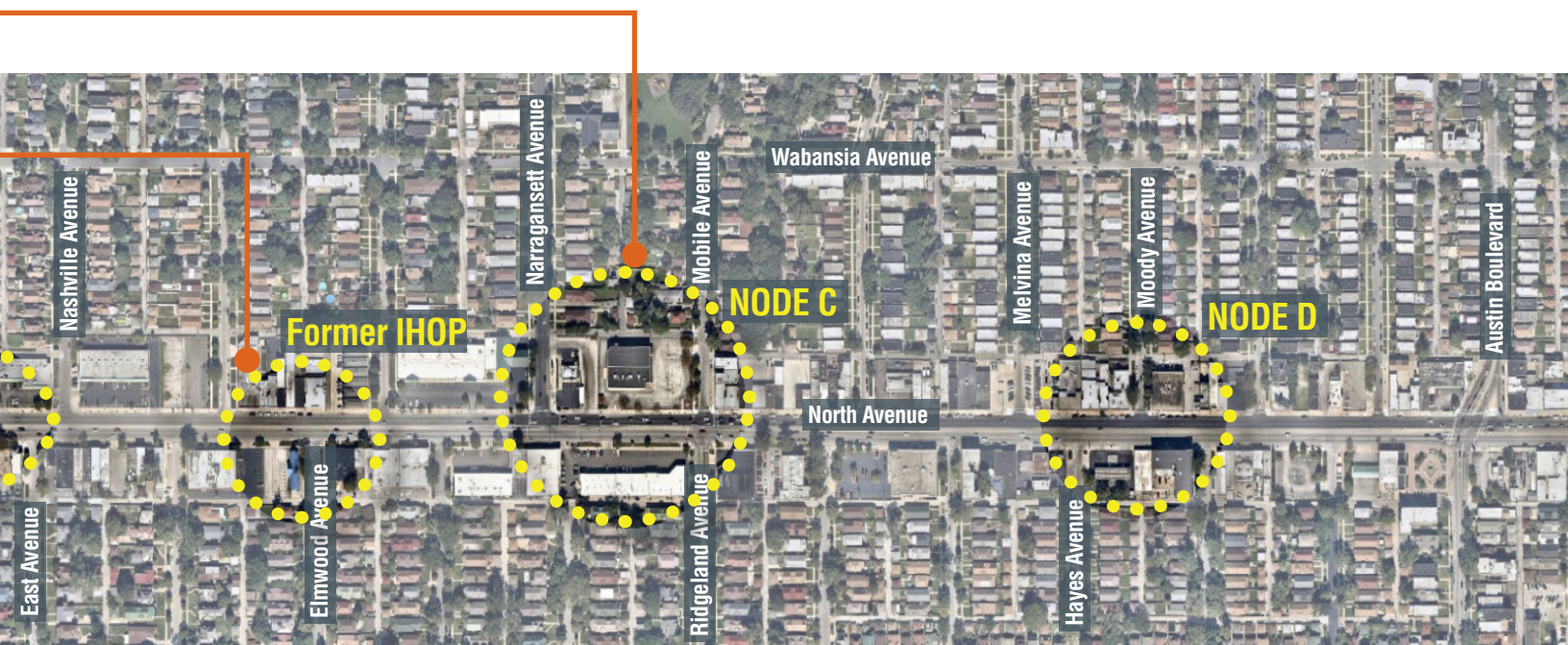
location for new residential. Because of its proximity to amenities this site could also be a great location for senior housing.

The panel recommends exploring the feasibility of relocating the CTA bus turn-around, located immediately west of the Walgreens building, to a site closer to the Galewood Metra station. This would allow for a better train-to-bus connection, and the elimination of wide curb-cuts from North Avenue will make it more pedestrian-friendly. From the development perspective, integrating the bus turn-around and the adjacent Dunkin Donuts with the former Walgreens site will create a much larger and potentially more lucrative development opportunity. Dunkin Donuts could be housed in a new space within the new development.

The site falls within an existing TIF district (Austin Commercial TIF) which could be used to finance TIF-eligible project costs including public infrastructure improvements.



The former Walgreens site at the corner of Mobile and North Avenues could be redeveloped as multi-family residential with ground level commercial.



## Development Opportunities Recommendations (continued)



A new STEAM center proposed for the Monumental office building could be the beginning of a creative/arts hub on the eastern end of North Avenue.



**Node D: STEAM Center.** Nationally renowned actor and comedian Hannibal Buress, who grew up in the neighborhood, has bought the Monumental building on the east side of Moody along North Avenue. He is working with two partners to rehabilitate the building and create a STEAM center (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math) for local youth. The STEAM center would be a great addition to North Avenue—when fully completed and programmed, it will be a hub for creative activity on the east side. To create a stronger node, the panel recommends exploring opportunities for opening a new community center near the Buress STEAM center to provide complementary programming based on the community’s needs. The community facility could be housed within a new development or developed as a stand-alone facility.

Sites along the western portions of the corridor are more development-ready and in the near-term, for-profit investors and developers are likely to be attracted to those sites first. Mission-driven projects, such as Hannibal Buress’ STEAM center, that are

not driven by the need for an immediate financial return, can serve as a strong anchor for the east side. Coupled with strategic public investments in streetscape, infrastructure and a well-programmed community center, the STEAM center could help raise the profile of the east side. A new crosswalk planned near Hayes will help tie the north and south sides of the street closer together, allowing for a stronger activity hub.

The panel recommends putting the community’s full support behind Hannibal Buress’ project and a new community facility, and leveraging funds available through the TIF district and other City programs such as the Neighborhood Opportunity Fund (NOF). Other potential funding sources could include philanthropic organizations and foundations such as the Marwen Foundation, known for its commitment to free arts programming for teens in under-resourced areas.



## Getting It Done: Leadership and Funding Recommendations

Implementing cohesive change, especially along an inter-jurisdictional corridor with varying physical, social and economic characteristics, is not an easy task. North Avenue, however, is well-positioned for this change—the community on both sides of the corridor, including residents, business owners, civic leaders and elected officials are committed to revitalizing North Avenue. Community stakeholders as well as transportation agencies, IDOT and CDOT, are working to help transform North Avenue into a vibrant thoroughfare that serves the larger region as well as neighborhoods located along it.

Volunteers from both sides of the street have been true assets for North Avenue, helping jumpstart its revitalization. Yet the corridor is now at a juncture that requires more than volunteer effort to move it forward. Moreover, parallel efforts by multiple groups, even when working towards the same end-goal, are not as effective as a unified organization working towards a common goal. Therefore, the panel recommends creating a new organizational structure with dedicated staff to lead North Avenue's revitalization.

### 1. Create a New Umbrella Organization to Lead Revitalization

In order to pool all available resources and facilitate a coordinated approach towards revitalizing North Avenue, the panel recommends creating a new umbrella organization. The new umbrella organization would be focused exclusively on North Avenue and have a governing Board with representatives from each key community group, business and property owners, and staff members from Oak Park and City of Chicago's 29th Ward. The new organization should also include representatives from all sections of the corridor—north, south, east and west—so it can represent all voices effectively.

In addition to elected officials and staff members from the Village of Oak Park and Chicago's 29th Ward, key organizations include The North Avenue District

(The District), 29th Ward Economic Development Committee and the North Avenue Business Association (NABA). The Oak Park Economic Development Corporation (OPEDC), a non-profit economic development organization and the Oak Park-River Forest Chamber of Commerce with members in Oak Park and surrounding areas including Galewood, are also valuable resources and should be a part of the revitalization effort. It is important to recognize that most of these organizations, except for The District and NABA, serve a larger area beyond North Avenue. They might also have different organizational missions and focus areas, as well as different levels of capacity based on whether they are staffed by volunteers or paid personnel. The presence of multiple committed groups is an asset for North Avenue, but if they are acting independently, it can result in a fragmented approach, diluting the collective strength.

The umbrella organization will be responsible for developing a unified vision for the future of North Avenue that is embraced by both municipalities and by community stakeholders and is consistent with IDOT's and CDOT's plans for mobility improvements. It will also guide and oversee the implementation of strategic tasks to help realize that common vision. Towards that end, the panel recommends that the organization hire a paid staff person or consultant who can work with the Board to implement its agenda and be a resource for North Avenue businesses and property owners.

### 2. Hire a Dedicated Staff Person to Implement the Organization's Priorities

The Village of Oak Park and 29th Ward should jointly fund a paid position to staff the newly created umbrella organization for North Avenue. The position, which would be like an Executive Director for the organization, could be funded through the creation of a Special Service Area (SSA) on either side of the corridor and through programs such as Chicago's Neighborhood Business Development Center (NBDC)

program. Roles and Responsibilities for this position should include:

**Coordinating Planning Efforts, Building Consensus.** Besides the ULI TAP and CMAP's Corridor Plan for land-use and economic development, CDOT and IDOT are currently preparing mobility improvement plans for North Avenue. The Executive Director will be responsible for coordinating these planning efforts, will help prioritize key implementation items to create an action agenda and build community consensus around it.

**Managing lower cost Special Service Area (SSA) for Chicago and Oak Park.** The panel recommends establishing two separate SSAs, one on either side of the corridor to provide management services that can help create a stronger and more supportive business environment along North Avenue. Even though each municipality will have its own SSA, having one common entity manage both will help ensure consistent service throughout the corridor. To minimize the additional tax burden from the SSA creation on corridor businesses, the panel recommends a lower cost SSA that is utilized to finance only selected services and small-scale improvements identified as most useful/critical by businesses.

**Branding and Marketing.** The Executive Director will facilitate the creation of a co-branded identity for the corridor, representative of both Oak Park and the Galewood neighborhood of Chicago and be responsible for incorporating that identity throughout the corridor's streetscape including banners, art installations and street furniture. They will also develop and implement a marketing and communication plan for the corridor.

**Information Hub.** The panel recommends that the new North Avenue organization serve as an information hub for existing and prospective business and property owners along the corridor. Navigating

various regulatory and licensing requirements can be challenging for small businesses, and especially in an inter-jurisdictional environment where the rules change based on the side of the corridor. Similarly, small businesses are often not able to take advantage of business improvement grants and other funding opportunities because they might not be aware or find the process too time-consuming. The organization could serve as a one-stop resource for businesses guiding them through the applicable regulations and available incentives, and how they might vary along the corridor. Additionally, the organization should create and maintain a central database of spaces available for lease or sale – this will help in targeting new business recruiting efforts and make it easier for interested businesses to find new facilities or expand existing facilities along the corridor.

**Facilitating Shared Agreements, Implementing Pilot Projects.** The Executive Director should take the lead in facilitating agreements for shared parking between uses, for temporary use of vacant sites for public parking, and other corridor projects/programming that require collaboration between multiple parties.

**Securing Funding.** Securing funds to implement improvements is challenging in an environment of increasingly constrained budgets. Being able to successfully compete for limited funds, whether government, nonprofit or private, requires a coordinated, strategic approach. The Executive Director would work with the Board and appropriate government agencies to identify the most appropriate potential funding sources for priority implementation tasks and lead the application/request process to secure funds. Having a dedicated staff person will make it easier to prepare strong applications and indicate to potential funders that there is adequate organizational capacity for successfully utilizing any awarded funds.

## Getting It Done: Leadership and Funding Recommendations (continued)

### 3. Potential Funding Sources

Securing adequate funds for financing infrastructure improvements and incentivizing private development is frequently one of the biggest challenges that communities face when trying to revitalize a neighborhood or corridor. Potential funding sources for improvements along North Avenue are presented below.

#### Transportation and Streetscaping Funding.

Many of the mobility and streetscape improvements recommended for North Avenue could be eligible for financing through a combination of local, state, and federal programs. These funds are limited and awarded on a competitive basis across the region and state. The panel recommends reviewing previously completed streetscape design documents and completing a Phase I design for the entire study corridor from Harlem to Austin to access some of these funding opportunities. Some key funding opportunities are listed below; the panel recommends working with CMAP and the transportation agencies to evaluate the most appropriate funding sources for recommended improvements.

**Illinois Transportation Enhancement Program (ITEP).** Administered by the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT), ITEP is a federal grant program that provides matching funds for transportation improvements that expand travel choices, including bike and pedestrian facilities, and for streetscape improvements. Local or state governments with taxing authority can apply. Phase I Engineering Design for the proposed transportation improvements must be completed in advance of the application. Additional information is available at <http://www.idot.illinois.gov/transportation-system/local-transportation-partners/county-engineers-and-local-public-agencies/funding-opportunities/ITEP>

**Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) Improvement Program.** CMAQ is a federally funded program for helping finance surface transportation improvements that are designed to reduce congestion

and improve air quality. In northeastern Illinois, CMAP's MPO Policy Committee is responsible for selecting the projects that will receive CMAQ funds. Examples of eligible projects include improvements to transit facilities, pedestrian and bicycle improvements, and intersection improvements to facilitate smoother traffic flow are examples of the type of transportation projects eligible for CMAQ funds. Additional information can be found on CMAP's website at <https://www.cmap.illinois.gov/mobility/strategic-investment/cmaq>

**Invest in Cook Program.** Invest in Cook is a Cook County Department of Transportation (DOT) and Highways program designed to provide funds to transportation improvement projects in Cook County that advance the priorities outlined in the Connecting Cook County Plan. Improving pedestrian and bike facilities and access to transit, especially in lower-income communities that are still facing the impacts of years of disinvestment, are priorities for Cook County. Funds are available to cover the cost of planning and feasibility studies, engineering (including the Phase I Design plans required for accessing funding programs such as ITEP), right-of-way acquisition, and construction of transportation projects, and are often used to provide the local match required to unlock state/federal funds. This is a competitive grant, and local governments, transit agencies and private partners are eligible to apply. Additional information is available at <https://www.cookcountyil.gov/investincook>

**Access to Transit Program.** The Regional Transportation Authority's (RTA) Access to Transit Program provides funding for small-scale capital projects that improve access to transit for pedestrians and bicyclists. The program leverages RTA and local funds with federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program (CMAQ) funding to help implement recommendations from planning studies completed through the RTA's Community Planning program or CMAP'S Local Technical Assistance (LTA) program. The ULI TAP and the larger neighborhood plan for the North Avenue corridor are a part



of CMAP's LTA program, and therefore the Access to Transit Program can be a great resource for the community in implementing some priority pedestrian/bike improvements. Additional information is available at <https://www.rtachicago.org/plans-programs/access-transit-program>

### **City of Chicago Programs.**

**Austin Commercial Tax Increment Financing (TIF) District.** Available on the Chicago side of North Avenue from Narragansett to Austin Boulevard. The entire TIF covers 256 acres in the Austin neighborhood and besides North Avenue, includes portions of Division Street and Chicago and Central Avenues. TIF funds are usually available to support land assembly, rehabilitate existing structures, infrastructure improvements, corridor beautification projects and to incentivize housing for lower-income residents. The redevelopment of the former Walgreens site, the STEAM center being proposed for the Monumental Building on the east side and other private and public projects in the eastern section of the corridor could be eligible for TIF funds.

**TIFWorks Program.** Can be used to fund workforce training costs for employers, educational institutions, and other organizations located within TIF districts. Organizations within the Austin Commercial TIF would be eligible to apply for the TIFWorks program. Additional information is available at [https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/dcd/supp\\_info/tifworks\\_program.html](https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/dcd/supp_info/tifworks_program.html)

**Neighborhood Opportunity Fund (NOF).** Chicago's NOF program, launched in 2016 to promote equitable development, provides funds to strengthen commercial corridors in underserved areas of the City. Business or property owners located within select commercial corridors are eligible to apply for grants for new construction or for the rehabilitation of existing commercial spaces. In the TAP study area, North Avenue from Narragansett to Austin Boulevard (the same section that is within the Austin TIF district)

is a designated "priority investment corridor" and businesses within this stretch are eligible to apply for smaller grants of up to \$250,000 as well as larger grants if they meet additional requirements. Additional information is available at <https://neighborhoodopportunityfund.com/>

**Small Business Improvement Fund (SBIF).** The SBIF program provides grants to owners of commercial and industrial properties within TIF districts to repair or rehabilitate their facilities for their own business or on behalf of tenants. All grants must be pre-approved and can cover up to half the cost of remodeling work, with a maximum grant amount of \$150,000. Additional information is available at [https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/dcd/supp\\_info/small\\_business\\_improvementfundsbf.html](https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/dcd/supp_info/small_business_improvementfundsbf.html)

### **Village of Oak Park Programs.**

**Commercial Façade Improvement Program (C-FIP).** Available to commercial businesses with primary first floor retail use, C-FIP provides matching grants of up to \$10,000 to property owners or tenants to help them rehabilitate their building facades. Commercial property owners on the Oak Park side of the corridor could leverage this program to complete eligible improvements to their buildings.

### **Cook County Tax Incentives.**

Cook County offers several tax incentives to owners of industrial and commercial properties, such as the Class 6b for industrial properties and Class 7b and 7c for commercial properties. By providing a reduced rate of assessment on real estate taxes for multiple years, thereby reducing operating costs for businesses, these incentive programs serve as an important economic development tool. The panel recommends encouraging eligible commercial and industrial property owners in the area to take advantage of these tax incentive programs. Additional information on these incentives is available on the Cook County Assessor's website: <http://www.cookcountyassessor.com/Pdf-Forms/Incentive-Forms.aspx>

## Getting It Done: Leadership and Funding Recommendations (continued)

### Non-Profit, Philanthropic and Private Sources.

**Small Business Assistance.** The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) provides a host of programs including business counseling and low-cost loans to small businesses to help them thrive. Other organizations such as the Womens Business Development Center (WBDC), Accion, the Chicago Neighborhoods Initiative (CNI) offer many similar services and micro-loans to small businesses. Smaller-scale entrepreneurs are often not aware of these resources or how to access them. By connecting area businesses, both existing and new, with these organizations, North Avenue can create a more supportive environment for small-scale entrepreneurs.

**Philanthropic Organizations.** Philanthropists and local foundations could be valuable partners in helping revitalize North Avenue, especially in areas where the market is not yet strong enough to provide an

adequate financial return for private investment, such as the eastern section of the corridor. North Avenue should explore grant opportunities for community development initiatives, such as Hannibal Bures's STEAM Center, a new library or community facility, programming for local youth or workforce training, when they align with the mission of specific foundations. For example, The Marwen Foundation is focused on providing opportunities for visual arts education to young people from Chicago's under-resourced communities and could be a great potential partner for bringing arts-related programming to North Avenue.

**Corporate Sponsors.** The study corridor has many larger companies that are likely to have community development budgets. Several big banks, including the Old Second, PNC, US Bank and Bank of America, healthcare companies including Advocate and Loyola,



Photo Credit: CMAP



Photo Credit: CMAP

and Starbucks are present along the corridor. These companies, and even other smaller local businesses along the corridor, might be willing to finance street-scape improvements to help create a more attractive, user-friendly North Avenue. Banners, public art such as murals and street furniture such as benches, are relatively lower cost improvements that could be financed and maintained by corporate sponsors.

**Special Service Area (SSA).** A Special Service Area is a specific geographic area within which expanded services and programs are provided (in addition to basic municipal services) through an additional tax levy. SSAs are typically established in commercial districts to provide services such as installation and maintenance of beautification elements in the public way such as banners and street art, coordinated district-wide marketing and promotional events, façade

improvements, business support services and other economic development initiatives.

The panel recommends establishing a lower cost SSA for both Chicago and Oak Park sides of the study corridor under one common managing entity with representation from both municipalities. This will help ensure a much-needed higher and consistent level of service for the entire study corridor and provide one “go-to” entity for corridor businesses and property owners. Recognizing that establishing an SSA increases the tax burden on businesses who might already be operating with thin margins, the panel recommends that the SSA not be used to initiate high cost or higher maintenance improvement projects including elaborate landscaping.

## Looking Ahead to a Vibrant North Avenue

With a clear vision for the corridor and a new governance structure that unites both sides of the corridor under one umbrella organization, North Avenue can realize its potential as a multi-modal, mixed-use corridor—a corridor that carries large volumes of regional automobile traffic, but also serves its adjoining neighborhoods by supporting a vibrant business and residential environment in a pedestrian-friendly setting.

The study corridor has a lot going for it, including committed residents and community leaders, established businesses, and a strong potential customer base. IDOT and CDOT’s transportation improvement plans provide a great opportunity for implementing physical improvements to create a better user experience along North Avenue. Capitalizing on its existing strengths while addressing challenges can transform North Avenue into an attractive corridor with a unique identity, a place where people choose to live, work and shop. Community stakeholders should lead this transformation by coming together and focusing on near-term strategies to achieve their long-term goals for the corridor.

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