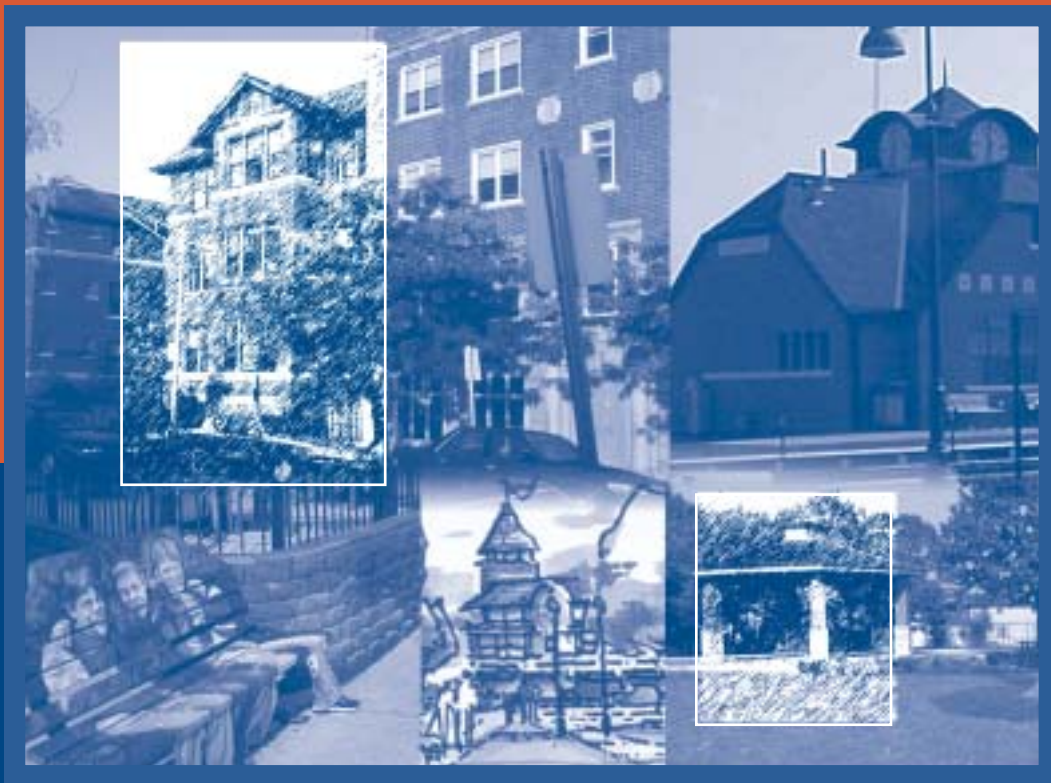




Urban Land Institute Chicago

New Places for a Changing Population: Highwood, Illinois



Technical Assistance Panel

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CAMPAIGN FOR SENSIBLE GROWTH

ULI Chicago

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The Chicago District Council consists of more than 800 ULI members living and working in the Chicago region. One of the first ULI District Councils formed, today it is one of the largest in the nation. The Chicago District Council presents annual lifetime achievement awards, holds monthly leadership breakfast meetings and leads periodic advisory workshop panels for local governments. The Public Policy Committee, formed in early 2002, oversees technical assistance for the Chicago District Council.

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The Campaign for Sensible Growth is a coalition of government, civic and business groups. The Campaign promotes strategies to enhance the economic vitality of the six-county Chicago region while preserving open space, minimizing the need for costly new infrastructure and improving the livability of communities. Among the goals of the Campaign is the revitalization of existing communities. The ULI Chicago District Council was an original Steering Committee member of the Campaign for Sensible Growth and has partnered with the Campaign for the past four years on symposiums and forums exploring matters of joint interest.

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New Places for a Changing Population is the third in a series of Technical Assistance Panels convened by the Urban Land Institute Chicago and Campaign for Sensible Growth. The 2002 series of panels also focused on Chicago and Richmond, Ill.

For more information on the series visit www.growingsensibly.org or call 312/922-5616.

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Highwood, Ill. is a unique community. A small town with a population of less than 5,500, Highwood is located between Highland Park and Lake Forest, two of the most affluent suburban communities in the United States. The city has changed demographically over the last 10 years. A population increase (after a lengthy stagnation) brought increased ethnic and economic diversity. Highwood's current political and community leaders are seeking downtown redevelopment but are also concerned about Highwood becoming too much like its neighbors: they want the community to retain its small-town atmosphere.

Located along Lake Michigan approximately 28 miles north of Chicago, Highwood was settled in the 1830s and incorporated as a municipality in 1887. Despite a prime North Shore location close to transportation and the lake, Highwood is much smaller than its neighbors, geographically and in population. Its early residents were mostly Scandinavian immigrants, followed by Italians who started to settle in the community in 1906. Immigration of Italians rose dramatically in 1930 and again after World War II, so that they became the dominant ethnic group. In the last few decades, that has changed dramatically. The 2000 Census reported the city had become approximately 40 percent Latino, but it is highly probable that the numbers are actually higher due to undercounting.

Another recent change was the 1989 closing of the adjacent Fort Sheridan military base. The 750-acre area has since been transformed into 185 acres of Navy-operated military housing (serving officers from the Great Lakes Naval Base approximately eight miles north), a 105-acre Army Reserve facility, a 290-acre Lake County Forest Preserve golf course and a 138-acre subdivision known as the Town of Fort Sheridan located at the eastern edge of downtown Highwood. That subdivision is divided between the cities of Highland Park and Highwood, and has become an upscale housing development. It has been designated as a national historic landmark district, and includes 96 historic buildings (formerly officers' homes, barracks and stables) – renovated into residential units, and new single-family homes, condominiums and townhomes – with prices ranging from \$379,000 to over \$2.1 million. The entire subdivision will contain 551 units, approximately 220 of them in Highwood. The municipal boundaries of the remainder of the former military base have been allocated between the cities of Highwood, Highland Park and Lake Forest.

To help Highwood evaluate its options and expand downtown development potential while maintaining historic community character, in September 2002,

the Urban Land Institute (ULI) Chicago and the Campaign for Sensible Growth co-sponsored a Technical Assistance Panel (TAP). TAPs are two-day sessions in which a panel of ULI Chicago members, selected for their expertise, come together to provide advice on land-use issues. The community develops a problem statement, identifying issues for the panel to address. The panel analyzes the problem and offers recommendations at a public meeting at the end of the two days. At the end of Highwood's TAP, the community received both a presentation of recommendations and a written report.

The TAP program provides ULI Chicago members and other professionals with an avenue for giving back to a local community by providing planning expertise. The Campaign for Sensible Growth, a coalition of approximately 200 government, civic and business organizations in northeastern Illinois' six counties (Cook, DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry, Will) works to promote the economic competitiveness of the region, supporting development and redevelopment, open space preservation and community livability improvements. One of its major strategies is providing technical assistance to local communities.

The Highwood program on Sept. 18 and 19, 2002 was the second TAP in 2002, following a similar program (with different panel participants) for the Village of Richmond, Ill. in August.

After a series of meetings with the Highwood City Council, community leaders and staff, the following problem statement was developed:

- What will be the future niche(s) for Highwood's Central Business District?;
- and
- What urban design, marketing and development options will lead the city toward that future?

The city was seeking guidance on how to:

- Maximize the future of the existing restaurant market niche;
- Identify other market niches;
- Identify potential development sites; and
- Prioritize, maximize and leverage tax increment finance (TIF) funds.

The ULI panel was composed of talent and experience in both urban and sub-urban development, as well as expertise in housing (including affordable housing development), retail development, finance, land planning, architecture, traffic and transportation, and marketing.

“It’s a very rare opportunity to bring together this kind of talent in any scenario, and especially in a volunteer capacity,” said Paul Diambri, the Highwood city attorney.

Over the two days, ULI members toured the target area in the city’s downtown, studied Highwood’s history and U.S. Census and commercial development statistics, and conducted a series of interviews with local politicians and business people. “It’s a very direct and stimulating process,” said panel member Pam Gecan, of Chicago-based American Marketing. “You take in a lot of information and put it into practice right away. The group works with a tight focus that brings together all kinds of expertise and ideas. There’s a lively exchange among the group.”

Said Fidel Lopez, an executive with Broadacre Management Co., Chicago: “It’s intense and friendly at the same time; working through the information together, sorting out the problems and issues in workgroups and coming back together to hash it out. The purpose is to identify strengths and weaknesses and what the city can do about each, offer some strategies for development, and help the community figure out how to pay for it.

At the end of the first day, the panel divided into four subcommittees: housing, physical plant, commercial development and implementation. Each provided suggestions and formed proposals. By the middle of the second day, the panel convened as a whole and prepared its findings and recommendations to present at a public meeting. The meeting at the end of the second day included about 30 residents and other interested parties, such as representatives from neighboring communities. The local public access cable station also filmed the meeting for repeated re-broadcast over the subsequent weeks.

Background

Highwood was once regarded as a small “wet” town between Highland Park and Lake Forest, having licensed saloons in 1893 when the rest of the North Shore was legally dry. Shortly after the turn of the last century, Highwood became well known for its restaurants, mostly Italian, which were frequented by North Shore residents as well as servicemen from Ft. Sheridan.

Highwood still consists of mostly bungalows with average prices from approximately \$200,000 to \$350,000, depending on size and land, and two- and three-story commercial buildings.

For most of the 20th Century, the homes have been owned mostly by Italian immigrants and their descendents, who worked in service jobs in Highland Park, Lake Forest and other communities on the North Shore. High school students attend Highland Park High School – one of the highest quality public schools in the nation. Yet, many young people graduate from college and do not return to Highwood. Population growth among Italian settlers and their descendents has been stagnant. Change has come with new residents of Ft. Sheridan and an influx of Latinos. According to the 2000 Census, per capita and median household incomes in Highwood, measured before residents came to the new Ft. Sheridan subdivision, were less than half those of nearby Highland Park, Lake Forest, Deerfield and Northbrook. For example, median household income in Highwood in 2000 was \$42,993, compared to \$100,967 in Highland Park, \$136,462 in Lake Forest, \$107,194 in Deerfield and \$95,665 in Northbrook.

A Sluggish Economic Base

For more than 100 years, the primary economic focus of Highwood has been its restaurants. Sales tax revenue from that source, however, has flattened for nearly 15 years as increased competition from new and more varied restaurants in the neighboring suburbs has pulled away business. A McDonald's franchise just outside the central business district nearly outperforms each of the full-service, locally owned restaurants. Many of the restaurants have successful dinner trades, but do not open for lunch because of lack of customers.

One local business person, Dominic Uglioni, spoke to the panel about the decline of the restaurants. He faulted them for failing to improve and change over time. "Sometimes that's charming, but for most it's not a good business plan. We like family-owned restaurants, but the successors don't seem as committed as the original owners."

Although Highwood has lively evening business, lack of daytime business activity concerns city leaders and local business people. Daytime trade, they believe, holds the future to the city's growth and stability. Several businessmen told the panel that the city does not do enough promotion, does not communicate well with businesses, and has clung to the perspective of Highwood as "a small town." It was with some irony that local leaders noted that many owners of Highwood businesses now live in the surrounding suburbs.



This redevelopment of a Highwood retail strip provides an example that can be replicated.

Highwood's retail development lacks basic services. The most recent development includes two small strip malls outside the traditional downtown across from the entrance to Ft. Sheridan, and a new bank and pharmacy across from City Hall and adjacent to the train station that are scheduled to open in 2003. Other new businesses have appeared: an art gallery – opened by a hometown graphic designer who returned to Highwood – across from the future pharmacy, and Chicago Brass, an upscale plumbing fixtures supplier that relocated from a nearby suburb, reportedly because of lower rents. Many of the other newer retail stores – primarily updated small grocery stores – exclusively serve the growing Latino population.

Though some empty storefronts have undergone renovation and repair at the City's urging under Mayor John P. Sirotti, many are in disrepair. Rents in a recently renovated 12,000 sq. ft. retail building across from City Hall are \$20-\$22 per square foot, and the storefronts await occupancy. As panel member Brian Bernardoni said, "Highwood has two personalities. During the day it's a placid small town, and at night there's no parking because people are out enjoying themselves. These two personalities need to talk and figure out how to help each other."

This mix of retail is indicative of what panel members called "the general disconnect." Many home supply stores – some emphasizing handcrafted tile – are owned by people who seem disconnected from other kinds of contracting and improvement shops in the town. Grocery stores that serve different populations are isolated and can be hard to spot. Some do not have signs. A live theater space is situated above a restaurant, a location one panelist called "almost impossible to find."

Said Mayor Sirotti, “We’ve been struggling with what to do with the streetscape, to establish standards that people can follow.” He hopes a recently completed train station, with a subtle new retro-style design, will “provide some architectural inspiration for people already here and for some new development.” Indeed, the architectural style of a recently constructed bank down the street complements the station, and its officers plan to participate with other businesses in establishing a Chamber of Commerce office in the space next to the station.



A new train station in downtown Highwood provides an anchor to nearby redevelopment opportunities.

“The city worked very well with us in constructing the bank,” said the bank’s manager. “(They were) very cooperative. We’d like to see them do the same with other new developments.”

One longtime local business owner cited a need for better diversity of services in Highwood. “We need a program for growth. Our businesses have been closing. There used to be a clothing store, a shoe store, and they’re gone with nothing to replace them. If we want some of those items, we have to get in the car and drive somewhere else.”

“We hope the chamber will bring in more people who can learn from each other, and promote everybody’s interests,” said Mayor Sirotti. “We also hope the office will have information about tourism and the city’s history.”

Highwood is attempting to lure new businesses, but unlike its neighbors, many in Highwood do not want or think they have the space for large office buildings or campuses. Commonplace in Northbrook, Deerfield and Glenview, these developments could contribute significantly to the tax base and provide daytime customers for local businesses. “We certainly don’t want any office buildings of any kind,” said one business person and long-time resident of the town during an interview. Yet, he acknowledged, “It’s hard to imagine how we’re going to get some steady traffic during the day unless people make Highwood a destination point, which it isn’t today.”

A Changing Population

Local leadership is only beginning to appreciate the implications of Highwood's shifting population. While the Town of Ft. Sheridan development lures people who could afford to settle in more affluent suburbs, the city's largest population segment (40 percent or more) consists of middle- and working-class Latinos who have moved to the area for its reasonable housing costs and accessibility to jobs along the North Shore.

As panel chair Stephen Friedman, of S.B. Friedman & Co., Chicago, observed, "the broadening cultural diversity of the city needs to be recognized and dealt with immediately. Is there opportunity for the Latino population? Is there any incentive for this new population to become involved with local politics? How much and what kind of pressure will the Highwood residents of Ft. Sheridan exert? How can the various populations in such a small town begin to talk with each other about what kind of town they all want to live in?"

Added Robert DuBoe of Metro Transportation, Chicago, "we have many of the factors of a classic gentrification situation, but there's not enough communication between old and new residents and from the government toward making that bridge. The city leadership cannot put together a vision for the future without knowing what all the residents – with their significantly different perspectives – want or hope Highwood to become."

Tipping TIF in the Right Direction

Highwood has recently taken two steps to chart its future: drafting a master plan for downtown redevelopment, and passing a \$2.9-million tax increment financing (TIF) district.

While local leaders are extremely proud of the TIF and what it can be used for, several panel members note that TIF funding is being used purely for infrastructure improvements. Panelists thought that while it is fine to fix streets, TIF money should be used for improvements that are going to make Highwood appealing for businesses.

Attorney Greg Furda of the Chicago law firm of Sidley Austin Brown and Wood, tied it together. "There's a question of experience here. It's possible that the

idea of the application of a TIF was misunderstood. Structural improvements are fine, if connected to a plan for development. But that's not the case here. While unintended, (this TIF) is really more like 'off-the-books' financing for infrastructure."

Another weakness Furda noted was Highwood's lack of staff resources to devote to a long-term vision of its future. "Only three full-time staff members with limited expertise in planning, development and/or land use serve the city," Furda said. "Mayor Sirotti has an outside, full-time job. The building department has a single employee."

Added another panelist: "At \$2 million, TIF funding does not even cover the estimated projected cost of utility improvements cited in the Downtown/Central Business District Redevelopment Plan, completed earlier this year. Stimulating redevelopment – both infrastructure and above ground – is an effort that needs to be made a priority. The community and its leaders need to have a vision that's shared by the people who live here."

Creating a Vision

ULI panel members spent two days creating recommendations for Highwood's problem statements on downtown re-development, and placed them in the context of the need for an overall vision. Because the City's existing comprehensive plan included ideas consistent with many of the panel's recommendations, they suggested the City review that plan and begin to work on its implementation.

"Growth, where it happens, is slow," said one long-time Highwood businessman. "Deterioration happens quickly and is hard to reverse. Unless we change people's ideas of what coming to Highwood means – like the art gallery or the theater – the decline will simply continue."

The panel's recommendations balanced concern for social issues and economic stability, looking for the nexus where both could be successful. A clear example was the suggestion for a change in zoning laws to provide for taller (four to five stories) mixed-use buildings downtown (current height allowance is only 35 feet) that could accommodate both market-rate and affordable housing with a retail component at street level. Such buildings would increase density and pro-

vide a new group of consumers. “Use the TIF to back a developer’s note for a luxury building,” said affordable housing developer Peter Levavi of Northbrook-based Brinshore Development. “Diversify the market quickly. Housing options expand dramatically, and so could population – but within reasonable density goals.”

Another idea was to reassign some of the TIF funds into a façade rebate program. It was suggested that the City select aspects of the redevelopment plan that could realistically be funded, and undertake them one project at a time.

Part of the discussion centered on the identity Highwood should promote. As one local businessperson said in an interview, “quaint doesn’t work for Highwood.” Picking up on this idea, panel members suggested a marketing concept that attracts businesses such as convenience stores, coffee shops and dry cleaners – “that transcend any particular ethnicity and accommodate everybody” – and that “have a harmony in a concentrated area.”

“With that kind of base, larger – though not chain-stores – can begin to see their market potential,” said Gecan. “It has to evolve steadily, if slowly, from a series of dry goods purveyors to something like a supermarket that can anchor a larger development in the future.”

Interviews with local business leaders revealed an emerging arts culture. The aforementioned gallery owner recently organized nearly two-dozen artists based in Highwood to paint and festoon public benches, similar to a popular program in Chicago. “This (arts community) is something that the city should look into and see if it has potential,” said Robert Perlmutter of the Evanston-based Davis Street Land Co. “The North Shore is filled with connoisseurs of many types of art. It’s a distinguishing characteristic for marketing, and it could signal a healthy diversity of community interests.”

Having pulled together the suggestions, proposals and various commentaries, the panel synthesized their observations into a presentation at City Hall.

Informing the Public

Stephen B. Friedman, panel chair, opened the presentation by noting the limitations of the TAP process: “by design it is time constrained and has a focused

approach that nonetheless can help establish a direction for the community and its development. It will take a great and widely cooperative effort by many people throughout the community ... its various populations and interests.”

Friedman explained that the panel observed Highwood’s current “three-culture community,” the result of the significant demographic transitions over the last decade, with the historic Italian population joined by new residents from Ft. Sheridan and a large Hispanic population. “It’s something to which everyone in town should be responsive, because understanding the needs and ambitions of a diversified population informs better development and more responsible growth for everyone who lives here,” he said.

He also pointed out that the panel saw a lack of agreed-upon vision within the community leadership, something that is essential for planning for the future, and that the city has a limited public sector capacity.

Reviewing the existing conditions, the panel pointed out that opportunities exist for change and development, including vacant parcels and stores, underdeveloped parcels and aging sites. Overall, the existing building stock will require substantial improvement. Duane Sohl, an architect with Chicago-based DeStefano and Partners, noted that “Highwood needs a coherent land-use pattern. There are many empty lots (“missing teeth,” one panel member called them), and no definable architectural style. Parking during the day was available – despite many comments by locals that it was scarce – but could be better organized through signage and regulated traffic patterns that recognize and accommodate problem spots. Walking on the main streets should be encouraged. Shared parking should be instituted.

The panel also found that a general “disconnect” exists in land usage, as exemplified by a recently developed park outside the main district but close enough that it should be better linked to Green Bay Road, one of the central business district main streets. “Connecting public spaces in the central district gives it a feel of diverse yet concentrated vitality,” Sohl added.

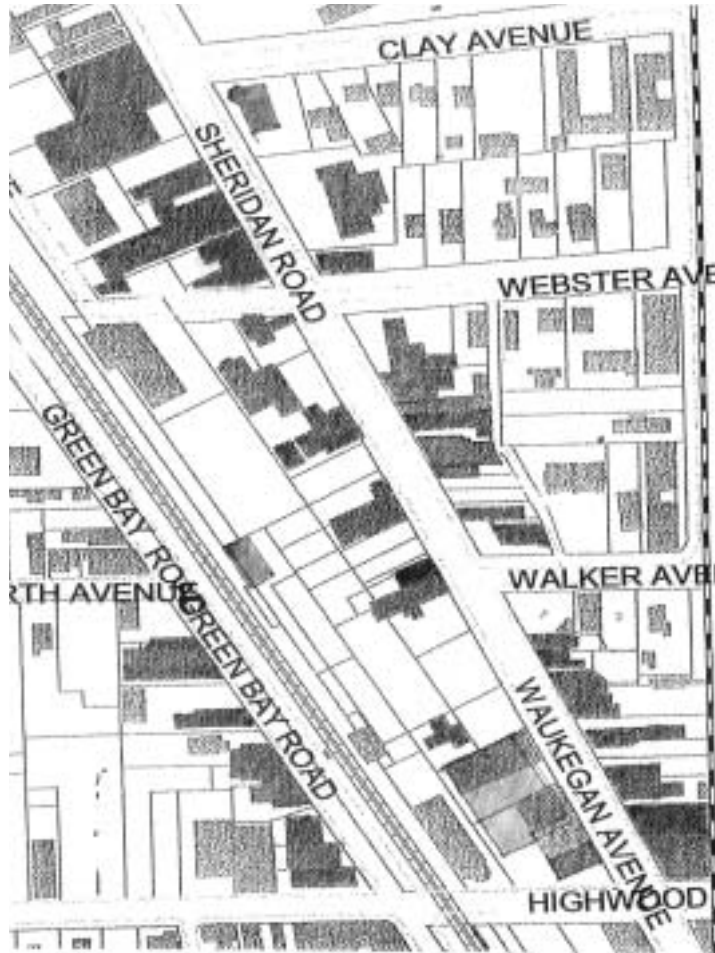
The panel recommended a strategic approach, starting with creating an identity for Highwood. A “village center/small town” concept that embraced the three cultures was suggested. For the commercial sector to be successful, the community has to understand its primary markets as the three cultures: Italian-American, Latino and Ft. Sheridan residents, each with its own needs.



The ULI/Campaign recommendations for Highwood's downtown reinforce the City's comprehensive plan.

Secondary markets should include destination visitors, residents of surrounding communities and local commuters. New businesses can be attracted if the emphasis for new development is placed on:

- Convenience retail, serving the three populations;
- Restaurants/Bars, including a coordinated effort to grow the historically strong restaurant business and reestablish Highwood as a destination with a diversity of food offerings and price points;
- Ethnic offerings that include different kinds of retail and public activities;
- Home design/building trades; and
- Cultural stores and services.



Downtown Highwood continues to have vacant parcels available for new development.

These changes would allow downtown Highwood to complement its neighbors while being unique through a new identity as a marketplace, with mixed-use developments and increased building heights. Just slightly adding population and mixed-use activity would create synergistic business traffic without jeopardizing the small-town feel.

The panel recommended that TIF dollars be concentrated and spent on improving the streetscape from Highwood Avenue north to Webster Avenue on Waukegan/Sheridan roads, rather than spread throughout the entire district. This would allow the City to aggregate lots and build on current available land, and help link TIF investment to both the existing commuter station and down-

town area. In particular, mixed-use (residential and retail) development sites were recommended at the southeast and northeast corners of Walker and Waukegan roads and the southeast corner of Webster Avenue and Waukegan Road.

The retail approach should include developing public policy strategies to encourage reinvestment, including utilizing shared commercial parking requirements to allow for more dense development, and a more effective downtown marketing program.



Existing downtown housing above retail should be upgraded through code enforcement and façade improvements.

Marketing specialist Gecan talked about downtown activity. “Residential housing – at all price points – is essential to getting the consumer base that will shop, create daytime traffic and leverage the current assets to attract other businesses and fill in the empty storefronts.” In the panel’s evaluation of potential, she said, there is a belief in a strong market that would include young professionals from Highwood and communities around it, as well as

Highwood empty-nesters. “We believe people would be attracted to small, four-to five-story condominium buildings with convenience and service retail on the first floor. It won’t be easy to put all the pieces together, but the City could help lay the groundwork for developers,” she said.

Gecan pointed to two separate types of housing that could be integrated into the downtown. At Prairie Avenue and Green Bay Road, a “gateway” to Highwood, market-rate condominiums could be built, while at the intersection of Central Street with Walker and Waukegan roads, housing could include market-rate and affordable units, possibly subsidized by the City or required as set-asides in building permits. “This activity would increase the property tax base, create a built-in market for shopping downtown and stimulate more investment,” Gecan said.



A vacant downtown parcel available for condominiums at the corner of Walker and Waukegan roads.

Among other recommended housing strategies was City assistance for land assemblage, something that could be possible since the City already controls a number of sites at the corner of Walker and Waukegan roads and a number of others are up for sale.

Housing developer Levavi urged the city to consider development of rental apartments for seniors and families. “We’re encouraging a good mix of people,” he said. “That includes housing for the working class who live here, improving

the currently sub-standard housing in the downtown area, improving code enforcement and establishing tax incentives to pay for improvements. We want to create housing options across the income spectrum.”



Existing downtown housing should be renovated.

Code enforcement was repeatedly cited as imperative, both to create downtown housing that is visually attractive and able to support additional population, and as a first step toward improvement of the appeal of the central business district for new investment and development. The panel recommended using Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) and HOME funds, for example, to motivate property owners to upgrade existing housing.

Continuing the focus on the central area, Ron Kysiak, of Evanston Inventure, endorsed assigning TIF investment for more visible improvements such as façade rebates, to sustain the momentum already started with the pharmacy and bank development projects near the train station. “Move quickly to use what’s underway and complement it,” he said.

Moreover, Kysiak suggested, “The City should establish a special service area (SSA, a commercial district where business owners have a majority vote for

additional taxes that are returned to the district for maintenance, decorations and events) that can focus development in the central district. This will allow for a massing of diverse business density that can be marketed successfully as a destination for shopping.” He cited as an example, a “strong core of businesses dealing with home improvement that could be brought together in a single area instead of the current dispersion.”

Other physical strategies to create an attractive streetscape that were recommended include upgraded landscaping, decorative sidewalks, new lighting and the elimination of nonconforming uses. To maintain a consistent street wall, the City should adopt ordinances for zero setbacks in the downtown wherever possible, strict signage enforcement, and improved pedestrian access and connections to the Metra station.

Addressing a chronic problem, James Matanky, of Chicago-based Matanky Realty, said the panel recommended a parking management plan that emphasized “cooperating business owners sharing available public space. The City may want to consider developing a parking structure near the library,” he said, “that could accommodate more activity downtown. By bringing many of these suggestions together, we are hoping for more pedestrian participation, more energy in the central district.” Other possible traffic improvements include striping the turn lanes at Sheridan Road and Washington Street, and accepting jurisdiction of Sheridan Road from the State, allowing the City to control its destiny. This policy continues to be discussed by the City.

Broadacre’s Lopez called implementation of the recommendations “catalytic actions that will build momentum toward a place that is lively, interesting and alluring both day and night.”

But the panel, through Chairman Friedman, also made the case for the practical work such ideas involve. “Increase the staff that can deal with developers and others who are building in the city: for example, a coordinator of a special service area, and one to manage the TIF financing as well as land acquisition, and housing,” he said. It was suggested that these positions be funded out of TIF monies. “The TIF is the tool to rebuild downtown,” Kysiak said, urging the community to “do it the right way. Build your staff with people who can work with people who can rebuild Highwood,” he said.

The panel ended with a list of “next steps,” including:

- Create a process to develop consensus around implementation of the major recommendations;
- Use the TIF funds for streetscape renovations concentrated along Waukegan and Sheridan roads;
- Create plans for parking management, marketing and housing; and
- Hire a TIF manager and a downtown coordinator, using TIF and SSA funding, respectively.

Noted Friedman, “the best plan does not implement itself. Use the master plan you already have, take the suggestions we have offered and create a vision for what Highwood can become. Then plan a steady, consistent effort toward those goals.”

Mayor Sirotti was pleased. “I’m amazed with what I saw,” he said. “I can’t dispute any of it ... Maybe the (Highwood City Council) has to rethink its ideas. If we want to keep a viable downtown, we have to be somewhat flexible and allow change. I believe we can do that without changing the character of the downtown, and of Highwood, that everyone is so passionate about.”



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