

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL

JUNE 16 AND 17, 2005



CAMPAIGN  
FOR SENSIBLE  
GROWTH



# BUILDING A STRONG VILLAGE CENTER

## MIDLOTHIAN, ILLINOIS

# Table of Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Executive Summary</b> .....                   | <b>1</b>  |
| The Backdrop .....                               | <b>1</b>  |
| The Panel’s Charge .....                         | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>Summary of Major Recommendations</b> .....    | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>Problem Statement</b> .....                   | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Village Presentations</b> .....               | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Resident Comments</b> .....                   | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>Final Presentation to the Community</b> ..... | <b>7</b>  |
| Framework .....                                  | <b>7</b>  |
| Managing the Floodway and Floodplain .....       | <b>10</b> |
| Setting in Place Major Design Elements .....     | <b>11</b> |
| Improving Infrastructure .....                   | <b>13</b> |
| Funding Sources .....                            | <b>15</b> |
| Next Steps and Beyond .....                      | <b>16</b> |

## **ULI Chicago**

ULI Chicago, a District Council of the Urban Land Institute, has more than 1,200 members in the Chicagoland area who come together to find solutions and build consensus around land-use and development challenges. The Urban Land Institute’s mission is to provide responsible leadership in the use of land in order to enhance the total environment.

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## **Campaign for Sensible Growth**

The Campaign for Sensible Growth is a coalition of government, civic and business organizations promoting strategies to enhance the economic vitality of the greater Chicago region while preserving open space, minimizing the need for costly new infrastructure and improving the livability of communities. More than 200 organizations and 1,000 individuals are members of the Campaign, including the Metropolitan Planning Council and ULI Chicago.

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# Executive Summary

## The Backdrop

Located about a half-hour train ride from downtown Chicago, the southwest suburb of Midlothian, Ill. initially grew up nearly a century ago around the Midlothian Country Club and the Rock Island Railroad train station. Named after Sir Walter Scott's book, "The Heart of Midlothian," about a township in Scotland where the game of golf originated, the Country Club's golf course created a heritage the town continues to honor.

The commercial area around the train station became a magnet for area farmers and residents, as well as a connection to the private rail connection to the country club. The streetscapes developed with a pedestrian-oriented emphasis: lot sizes were small, and most businesses were family-owned, with buildings adjacent to the sidewalk and abutting one another, and available angled parking more than adequate for the number of automobiles back then.

However, as suburbs became automobile-oriented after World War II, the central retail district eroded, hampered by the lack of parking and shallow lots. The town's commercial activity spread out along the major arterials of 147th Street

and Pulaski Road, which intersect a few blocks west of the train station. Auto parts stores and used car lots now proliferate where dry cleaners, bakeries, and shoe stores once thrived, and today residents would like to see both more attractive streetscapes and more convenience businesses.

Housing development exploded during the 1960s and most homes reflect the brick ranch style popular at the time. Prices typically fall in the \$150,000 to \$200,000 range in most of the village, but are closer to \$300,000 and up on the west end of town, which has newer, larger homes. Midlothian has remained a relatively stable, moderate to middle-income community, while some neighboring suburbs have declined. The 2000 Census shows a population of 14,315, with a median household income of \$50,000 and median house value of \$114,800. Most residents have a high school diploma (85.4 percent), but fewer hold bachelor's degrees (14.4 percent).

Today, most Midlothian residents do their major shopping in nearby suburbs such as Crestwood and Tinley Park, but would prefer to be able to shop closer to home. The train station continues to serve as a magnet for commuters from sur-

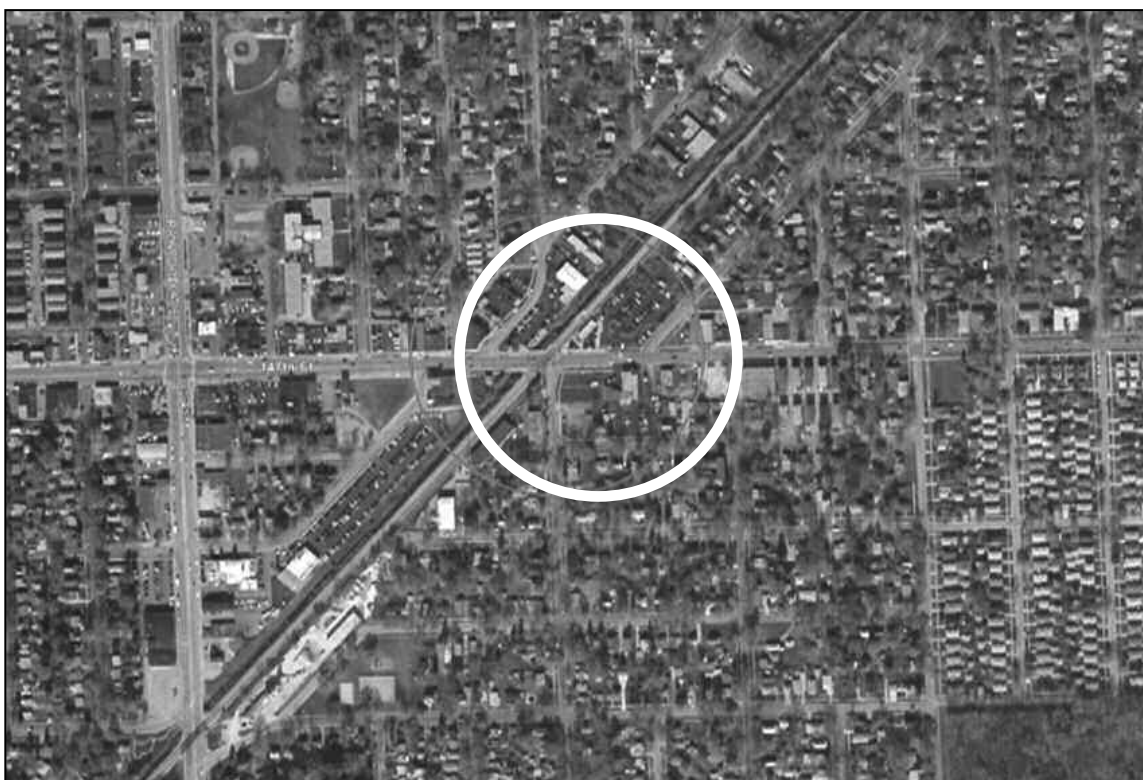


Figure 1 The project focused on 147th Street near Pulaski Avenue in southwest suburban Midlothian.



**Figure 2** *The landscape along Midlothian Creek can be improved dramatically to provide an amenity for downtown.*

rounding communities, with 40 percent of riders coming in from neighboring towns, due both to the lower fare structure in the Midlothian zone and the fact that the express train leaves from Midlothian. The station currently has 680 parking spaces, and commuter rail operator Metra believes it could accommodate more riders with additional parking and adjacent development. Both 147th Street and Pulaski Road carry more than 20,000 cars per day, a critical factor in attracting retail development, and the area is well-served by interstate highways.

Village leaders have spent the past several years exploring the possibility of reviving the town center as a pedestrian friendly retail district, with a more distinct sense of place. They want to attract mixed-use development of housing and retail that would provide greater options, particularly for young people and retirees seeking homes. One of the key goals of the village's comprehensive plan, adopted in 2001, is to create a village center Business District near the train station. The plan contemplates all uses: retail and offices, government, education, recreation, and transportation services within the study area, from 145th Street to 149th Street north to south, and from Millard Avenue to Karlov Avenue east to west.

The village has a number of assets that bolster a bold vision. First, several large parcels of village-owned land, available land, and underutilized land exist within close walking distance of the train station. Second, the village has strong leadership and a committed citizenry. Third, it has undertaken a

number of planning and market studies that all signal a green light. Finally, the market is embracing mixed-use development and greater housing choices beyond single-family homes.

Still, Midlothian faces a number of unique issues in bringing about such a transformation. Much of the area between the train station and Pulaski Road has been designated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) either a floodplain (which allows for development if appropriate measures are undertaken) or a floodway (which allows for virtually no development). Thanks to reservoirs built upstream on the Midlothian Creek, the area has not had a major flood in nearly a half-century, and village leaders vigorously dispute the designation of a floodway – but would have to invest heavily in engineering studies of their own to have the decision overturned.

Beyond the environmental issues are challenges of land assembly. While the village owns much of the land on south 147th Street east of the train tracks, additional land would be needed to create a bustling village center; yet much of the land in the area is composed of small lots, making assembly difficult.

### **The Panel's Charge**

Midlothian officials have engaged a number of outside entities to evaluate how their town center development should pro-

ceed, with considerations paid to enhancing the feeling of community, aesthetic quality, and everyday shopping convenience needs. The Chicago-based urban planning consulting firm Camiros Ltd. completed a comprehensive plan in 2000, along with village center, bikeway, and streetscape plans. The village has built on these efforts by seeking a Regional Technical Assistance Project (RTAP) grant from the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA). The village has used the RTA grant to retain Chicago-based consultant URS, Inc. to lead a number of planning activities for the village center. In February 2005, the URS team began to collect data, interview key people in the community, conduct a visual preference survey, and outline the basics of the area. URS' team includes Business Districts, Inc., which completed an updated market study and analyzed Midlothian's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

Village officials asked the Urban Land Institute (ULI) Chicago and Campaign for Sensible Growth to organize a panel of experts to make recommendations as an integral part of the URS-staffed process. A two-day Technical Assistance Panel (TAP), convened on June 16 and 17, 2005, brought together developers, an architect, lawyers, environmental planners and engineers, and consultants to consider the town's potential and challenges. The TAP members reviewed detailed briefing books, met with village officials and residents, toured the village by bus, and debated the issues at hand before presenting recommendations to officials and residents on the afternoon of June 17.

The panel was asked to consider the most logical and productive configuration and uses of the village center area, focusing on three sub-areas: the potentially more walkable, transit-oriented area near the train station that could result in mixed-use development; the auto-dependent stretches along Pulaski and 147th; and the residential areas along the thoroughfares. Village leaders hoped to gain recommendations on site improvement guidelines, major types and locations of commercial uses, the best location for a village government and services campus within the village center, and traffic patterns for vehicles and pedestrians, as well as linkages between the three sub-areas.

Panel members also were asked to consider how Midlothian can attract quality developers to implement the plans, based on information about the community's finances and market

demands. The panel was asked what construction is possible in the floodplain areas and what actions the community should take, if any, to try to revise the floodplain and floodway designations. The TAP also was asked to prioritize its recommended actions. During the two-day session, Mayor Thomas Murawski repeatedly asked panel members to consider and present new and bold ideas.

With the ULI recommendations in hand, the village and URS are moving forward with the remainder of the RTAP process: prepare a concept village center Enhancement Plan, devise implementation strategies, prepare a final report including design guidelines, host a developer summit to gain insights about developers' needs and preferences, and explore development possibilities in the area. This work is expected to be completed by November 2005.

### Summary of Major Recommendations

The panel recommended that, Midlothian should begin by building east of the railroad tracks, while it continues to pursue strategies to redevelop the floodplain area west of the tracks. The village can start redevelopment by pursuing discussions with First Midwest Bank and the Merlin Muffler shop to better utilize their key sites.

Although the east side of the tracks has less land available for a full-scale redevelopment, the village needs to gain some momentum and enthusiasm among residents. Mid-to long-term, the village should work to remediate its water problems on the west side of the tracks and redevelop that area as well. Both activities can proceed concurrently, but it is likely that buildings will be able to go up quicker on the east side.

*A listing of the panel's major recommendations can be found at the end of the full report.*

To manage the floodway and floodplain, the village could challenge the federal government's floodway study, but that would require extensive engineering analysis. Other options are to create a bypass and underground storage (for \$4 to \$5 million) or divert Midlothian Creek into the Pulaski storm sewer (for \$2 million, and only if the sewer could handle the volume). Permits would be required from numerous state and local agencies, while state agencies could supply either grants or a cost-sharing arrangement.

To set in place major design elements, the panel recommended moving forward with sites east of the railway, and working with property owners and developers to build mid-

rise residential, mixed-income rental housing, and more pedestrian and commuter-oriented retail (Figure 5). The village also should try to swap land with Metra to consolidate parking and add space, rehabilitate the Kreis building immediately west of the tracks on the north side of 147th, and rebuild the Village Hall on its existing site because it is not in the floodplain. Mid- to long-term, the village should develop the “west triangle” of 147th, Pulaski and the tracks, if and when it becomes feasible (Figure 6).

Needed infrastructure improvements include continuous sidewalks and better crosswalk markings for pedestrians along 147th and Pulaski; better bicycle, pedestrian and disabled access to the Metra train station; a median along 147th for pedestrian refuge; left-turn lanes; bicycle connections to neighboring Oak Forest along Midlothian Creek, as well as a new path along the Natalie Creek.

Financing options could include a tax increment financing (TIF) district or a sales tax rebate agreement to attract developers; land swaps; Special Service Area bonds; an overlay zoning district for higher-density development; and Cook County tax incentives or federal New Market Tax Credits for commercial components.

In summing up the recommended next steps, panel chair Kristina Dalman, a partner at Gardner Carton & Douglas LLP, suggested four top-tier, short-term agenda items: develop high-density housing east of the tracks and south of 147th Street, redevelop the Kreis Building as a gateway to downtown, redevelop the Village Hall at its current location, and

create a TIF district so the village can “pay as you go” for improvements.

“People are ready to see something happen,” Dalman said. “It doesn’t have to be big.” To do so, once the URS study and developer summit are completed, village leaders will need to track grant deadlines and engage consultants to help market redevelopment sites. In the longer term, the village should explore the possibility of remediating the floodway and building west of the tracks, but understand that that will be more complex, long-term undertaking.

## Problem Statement

Technical Assistance Panels (TAPs) are two-day sessions jointly sponsored by ULI Chicago and the Campaign for Sensible Growth. ULI members, who bring myriad expertise in such fields as real estate development, urban planning, law, engineering, and environmental advocacy, come together to provide recommendations to answer a set of questions related to land use and development.

The selected community creates a problem statement that lays out the key questions, and panelists spend time before the TAP familiarizing themselves with a history of the community, current issues, demographics, and any prior or ongoing analysis. Panelists schedule meetings with village officials and residents, examine and discuss the issues, and make recommendations at a public meeting the two-day panel.

The TAPs provide progress toward both the Campaign’s sensible growth goals and ULI Chicago members’ desire to give back to local communities by providing their planning and development expertise. On average, the Campaign and ULI Chicago conduct three TAPs each year. In 2005, ULI and the Campaign also conducted TAPs for the Peterson Pulaski Industrial Corridor and Andersonville/North Clark area in the City of Chicago.

The panel that met in the Village of Midlothian on June 16 and 17, 2005, addressed the following questions:

1. What should be the configuration and uses of the downtown area, divided into three sub-areas: the auto-oriented intersection of Pulaski Road and 147th Street, the potentially more walkable area near the train station, and the surrounding residential areas?



**Figure 3** A good example of walking paths lies just southwest of Pulaski Road and 147th Streets.

2. What should be the major design elements for these areas, including site improvement guidelines and site setbacks?
3. What should be the major types and locations of commercial uses?
4. Where should the government services campus be located?
5. How should pedestrian and vehicular traffic be routed among these three areas, and what linkages should be created?
6. How can Midlothian attract quality developers with plans compatible with the village's, and what financial options, public-private partnerships, and public actions should the village consider?
7. How can the community address the floodplain designation, what construction is possible, and what actions can and should the community take to revise the designation?

## Village Presentations

On the first day, the panel heard presentations and held discussions with Mayor Thomas Murawski and Village Trustee Terrence Stephens, as well as consultants Richard Wilson of URS and Bridget Lane of Business Districts, Inc. (BDI). Murawski, who has served for 20 years and is in his sixth term, invited the panel to “help Midlothian become whatever it can be.” He asked panel members, “Please don’t make us a Naperville or an Orland Park or a ‘whatever’. We’re not those places.” Stephens said a 1998 comprehensive plan had helped to focus the village’s direction and noted that residents are mostly satisfied with the town but would like to see some improvements in the downtown area.

Panel chair Kristina Dalman, partner with the Chicago law firm of Gardner, Carton & Douglas, said the charge of the panel is to provide the community with specifics about what should happen in the town center to provide a sense of place near the Metra station. “It’s not our purpose to create a vision for the village – that has gone on,” she said. Dalman noted that the Midlothian TAP would differ from other TAPs because it would be folded into the ongoing comprehensive planning process. The panel would add value to that URS led process, because “we can provide good advice on environmental planning, plus the retail and residential market,” she said.

Wilson described the planning process to date. URS has completed a resident visual preference survey to “spur debate

and get people talking” and undertaken data collection and an updated market study, he said. Upon receiving input from the panel, URS will create a concept plan, draw up implementation strategies, and hold a developer summit. The process will conclude by the end of 2005. Wilson said that Midlothian, like many communities that developed in the 1950s and 1960s, grew around automobile traffic, and he doesn’t expect it will become a downtown of old. But, he asked rhetorically, “Couldn’t it have some amenities?”

URS is thinking broadly. “There was a bit of hesitation to think about the big ideas [in the past],” Wilson said, acknowledging that the shallow lot depths and land assembly issues will not be easy to overcome. Regarding the floodplain, Wilson challenged the panel to think about design techniques that would allow development, or another way to program the area, using the floodplain as green space.

URS brought in BDI to focus on the market assessment. BDI’s Lane said her firm had studied comparable communities located about one-half hour from downtown Chicago. She noted that Midlothian has such assets as the last train stop before the fare jumps, traffic counts of more than 20,000 cars per day on both 147th and Pulaski, a young population that includes 6,800 households with incomes over \$75,000. “Don’t shoot low,” she encouraged village leaders and the panel, adding that Midlothian will provide a great case study of the potential to redevelop “30-minute-commute towns” so regional development need not continue to push ever-outward.

In answer to questions from panel members, Mayor Murawski noted that the village offers affordability for first-time homebuyers, as well as opportunities for people looking for their second or third home and empty-nesters. It also offers more retail than some distressed communities to the east. Murawski said residents who participated in the visual preference survey seemed comfortable with three- to four-story developments. “What’s going to be acceptable to the village is what’s going to be acceptable to the developer market – but the 22-story building is not going to happen,” he said. The mayor encouraged the panel to push back as needed on the village’s vision. “Think out of the box,” Murawski said. “As you all know, if visions don’t change, they die.”

Taking the panel on a bus ride through town, Stephens said Midlothian derives “good income” from its many auto dealerships but that when sales are down, village coffers feel the pinch. Residents traditionally have resisted taxes but have



**Figure 4** A new Metra station provides an anchor for an expanded village center.

passed referenda for the schools, library and park district after two or three tries, Stephens foresees similar support for downtown redevelopment. “We’d better go to the voters and say, ‘Here’s what we need the money for,’” Stephens said. “When you put something in front of them that makes sense, they’ll go for it.”

During the tour, the panel saw the varied, piecemeal housing developments that exploded in the 1960s. The brick veneer one-to-one-and-a-half-story structures average \$184,000 in cost, with prices closer to \$300,000 for newer, larger homes near the country club. The town provides housing for everyone except seniors – only housing who Stephens thought might be included in town center plans. Currently, some commercial buildings near the town center contain vacancies, while most residents grocery shop outside of town, Stephens said.

## Resident Comments

Panel members met with several groups of citizens, business owners, and other stakeholders to hear their perspectives on the issues Midlothian faces and the village’s best options for moving forward.

The first group included the village’s fire and police chiefs and public works superintendent, who discussed Midlothian’s infrastructure needs. The fire chief said he would like a new station closer to the west end of town, and would need a ladder truck if any buildings above two stories are constructed. Common crime problems include shoplifting and “sporadic” auto thefts, the police chief said, and he believes most residents feel safe in the community. The public works superintendent spoke of the need for a water tower and a reconstructed water main along east 147th Street before any new construction takes place. “People in this town would love to shop Midlothian,” he added. “People support the successful businesses we do have. People are dying for [places to shop].”

The second group of interviewees included a Metra representative, village staff member, and third person who is a resident, teacher and Chamber of Commerce member. The mayor’s assistant described Midlothian as being family-centered, like “Mayberry,” and added that “we want to maintain that sense.” She said residents are becoming impatient with planning, but believes they would support tax increases to pay for town center redevelopment implementation. The resident/teacher said the area’s schools are running out of space, and the town needs more youth programs. According to the Metra representative, the parking lots in Midlothian fill



to 98 percent capacity, well above the 85 to 90 percent that usually spurs Metra to seek a new lot. However, he said parking decks (structured parking) are prohibitively expensive, around four times the cost of a surface lot.

The third group included a resident and two former residents who still own businesses in Midlothian. The current resident said the town's traffic is typical, adding that she does her grocery shopping in town to avoid the congestion in nearby areas. "It's exciting to see all the energy" around the train station, but added that, "there is no downtown." A Realtor said children commonly grow up and stay in Midlothian. Modest housing appreciation of seven to twelve percent attracts first-time buyers from elsewhere, but the market for empty-nesters and seniors remains underserved. "I've always called Midlothian the best-kept secret on the Southwest Side," he said. Even so, he added, houses priced in the mid to upper \$100,000s usually sell within a couple of weeks.

## Final Presentation to the Community

The panel spent a full working day discussing what they had heard from village leaders and other participants and applying their expertise to the local issues. About 50 people gathered for the panel's final presentation at the end of the second day. They heard recommendations on how the village should manage the floodway and floodplain, set major design elements in place, improve infrastructure, and finance the town center redevelopment.

### Framework

Panel chair Kristina Dalman began the presentation by setting an overall framework for the recommendations. She said the panel worked to provide what is now a "very linear, auto-dominated village" with a better sense of place; considered which parcels would work best as the location for a town center; thought through the transit-oriented redevelopment, including what would be the best uses around the train station; examined what would be the best mix of residential, retail and mixed-use; and measured the impact of the floodway and floodplain.

"Is the designation appropriate? Does it really flood?"

Dalman said, is a "threshold issue that drives where redevelopment will occur. How does it affect or limit what redevelopment is possible?"

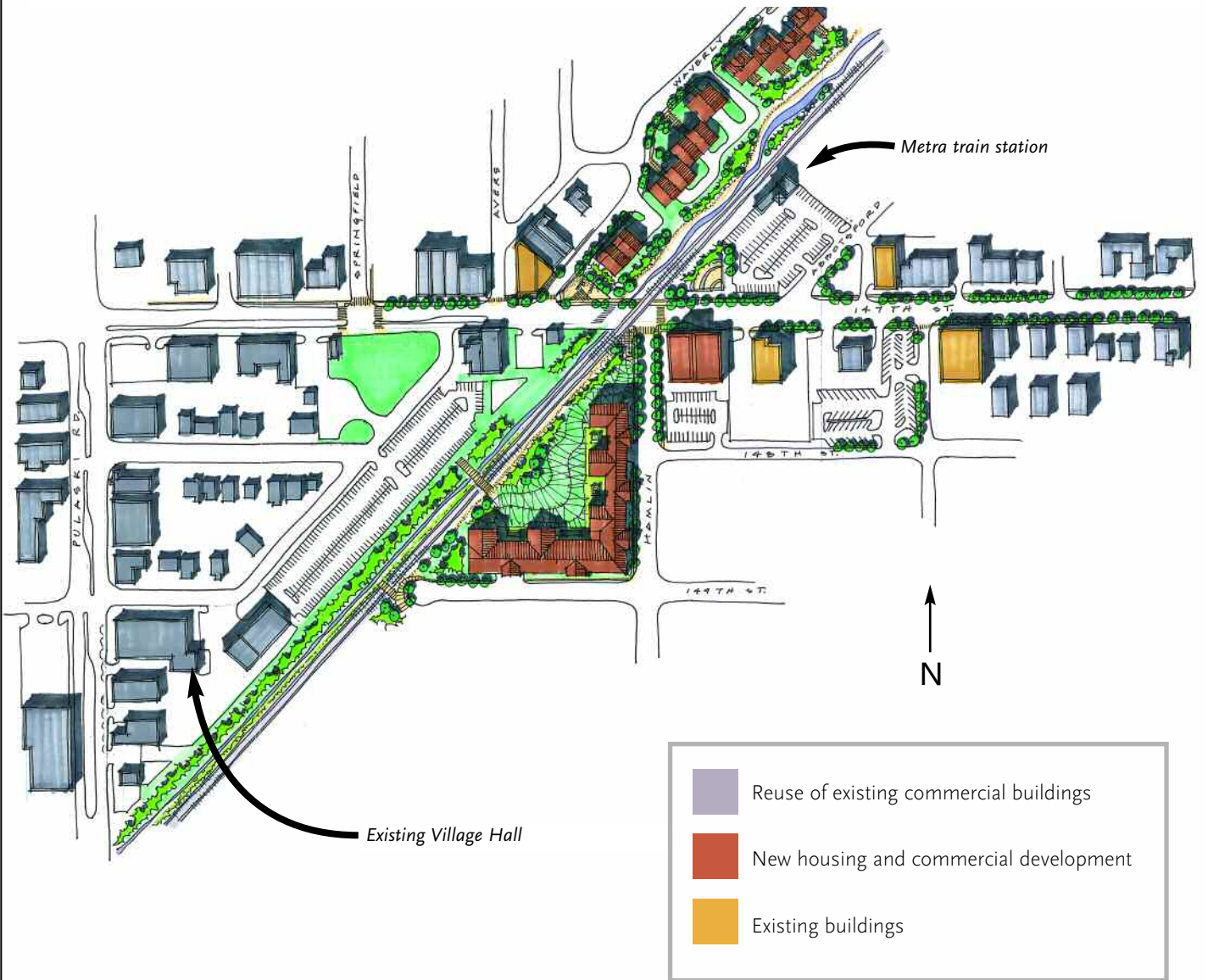
Midlothian has several assets from which to draw as it moves forward, Dalman said. The village enjoys strong leadership, "both politically as well as from its civil servants and appointed officials," and an unusual level of multi-generational community pride and involvement. Midlothian has stable and appreciating land values, which comes with the trade-off that larger parcels of land for downtown projects might be tough to assemble. The village also has a young population and good schools. Relatively low real estate taxes are welcomed by residents but leave the village with modest coffers, while a strong sales tax base is perhaps too dependent on auto-related businesses and could use diversification. Midlothian boasts major green spaces at its gateways that could provide "neat opportunities to link into the village core," Dalman said.

Panel member Arlan Juhl presented the broad-scale plan outline. "We looked at the floodplain issues," he said, and there "may be opportunities to revise the maps and construct around the floodplain." But given the time and expense that would require, he added, "you simply have to find other things to do in the meantime." Accordingly, the panel recommended the village begin working on the east side of the tracks, where construction can start today, swapping land where possible with Metra and auto-related uses like Merlin Muffler, as well as a portion of the parking lot at the First Midwest Bank, which it may not need.

Simultaneously, Midlothian should begin investigating how to handle its water issues and then, mid to long-term, work to redevelop the west side. To create a sense of place, Juhl said the village should clean up Midlothian Creek to make it "more of an amenity to downtown. The creek itself can become a focal point." Other elements that could help create that sense of place would include pedestrian friendly streets, compact development, way-finding signage, and an embrace of diversity among different cultures in the community, he said.

Panel member Michael LaRue presented the rationale for the plan, explaining that the village should phase in redevelopment, beginning on the east side because it will be the most cost-efficient. Implementation, he added, will create momentum. "Success today will lead to more," he said. By undertaking visible, obvious changes, "the tougher things become easier to get your arms around. People see things happening. It probably makes no sense until you put it all together. You have too many moving parts."

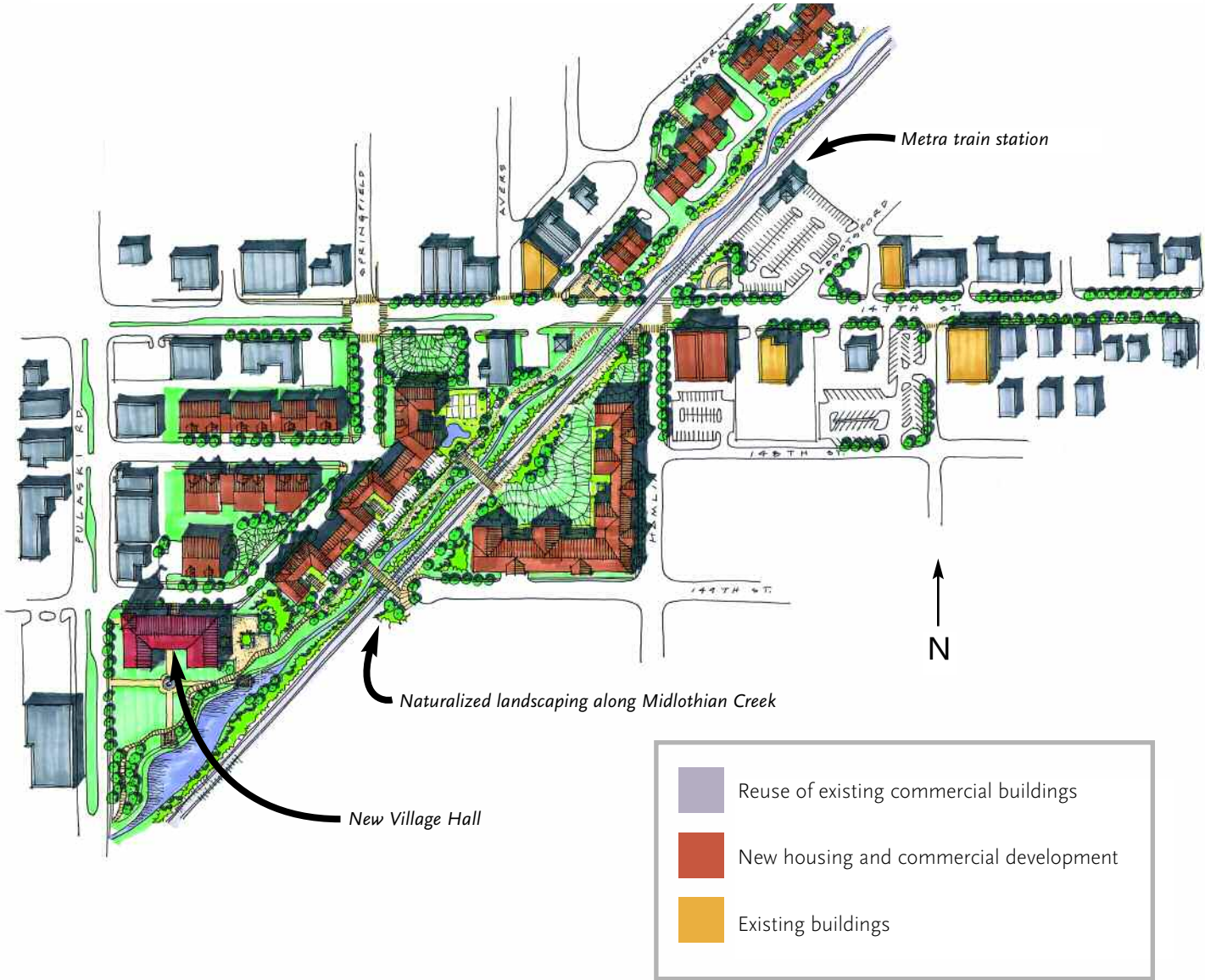
## Redeveloping Midlothian's Village Center: Phase 2 Recommendations



DRAWING BY PETER SCHLOSSMAN

**Figure 5** In the first phase, new housing and commercial development can be built east of the tracks without the need for multiple environmental permits to build on the floodplain and floodway.

# Redeveloping Midlothian's Village Center: Future Phases



DRAWING BY PETER SCHLOSSMAN

**Figures 6** In future phases new housing and commercial development can be developed on both sides of the rail tracks while naturalizing Midlothian Creek.

In making its recommendations, he said the panel would be “throwing out some concepts” that village leaders will need to investigate further to determine whether certain challenges, such as stormwater resources and land acquisition, can, in fact, be solved as panel members surmised. He emphasized that a two-day panel could not possibly think through all of the issues, some of which might take two years of study. For example, land acquisition will require multiple purchases from homeowners and small businesses, LaRue said. “They may or may not want to sell and relocate.”

### **Managing the Floodway and Floodplain**

Juhl began delving into specific recommendations by addressing the water-related issues the village faces in its town center area and various options for addressing them.

He started by defining the two terms: when an area is designated a floodway, the most restrictive definition, it means that new construction is limited only to “appropriate uses;” parking is limited to areas with less than one-foot depth of water because anything more than that damages cars; permits are required by IDNR’s Office of Water Resources (OWR); and requirements for engineering and implementation are quite restrictive. “It’s a very confining classification,” Juhl said.

In a *floodplain*, by contrast, construction is allowable as long as any loss of land that stores water is compensated at one-and-a-half times the rate of the loss, and the lowest habitable floor sits at one foot above the base flood elevation. This requires only a local permit. “The fringe is more developable,” Juhl said, possibly including such features as parking lots or a picnic pavilion. [See map, page 4, for where the designations exist in downtown Midlothian.]

Should the village challenge the floodway designation? Juhl pointed out that both the state and Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) have approved and adopted the current floodway study, and any challenge would require extensive engineering analysis. “We expect you would spend several hundred thousand dollars, and it’s not going to happen in the next year or two,” Juhl said. In addition, the pending Cook County topographical survey might expand the floodplain designation to new lands, which the village would then have to incorporate into its planning. “It’s a double-edged sword,” he said. “It’s a serious decision. It’s certainly a good one to talk about. You need to think it through.”

Long-term options for remediating the floodway could include a bypass and underground storage beneath the Metra parking lot, or a diversion of Midlothian Creek’s flood waters into the Pulaski storm sewer. The former would cost somewhere between \$4 and \$5 million to install a bypass pipe from 149th to 147th for about 1,200 feet. “That’s expensive, but can be physically done,” Juhl said.

The 2,000-foot diversion into the storm sewer at 149th, which flows into the Cal Sag Channel, would cost closer to \$2 million, but would depend upon the sewer’s ability to handle the additional storage, Juhl said. “We haven’t looked at the capacity of that facility,” he said. “Whether or not you can do that has to be further investigated.”

A veritable alphabet soup of federal, state and local agencies would need to sign off on any of the options, Juhl said. “There are several entities that look over your shoulders and my shoulders when we want to do work in the floodway,” he said. These include the Illinois Department of Natural Resources – Office of Water Resources (IDNR-OWR); U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for a 404 permit; Illinois Environmental Protection Agency for water quality certification and sign off on threatened and endangered species; Will-South Cook Soil and Water Conservation District for sediment and erosion planning; Metropolitan Water Reclamation District (MWRD); DNR Illinois for a stormwater permit; Historic Preservation Agency, Cook County Highway Department; and Midlothian itself for a stormwater permit. The process would be daunting.

The village can access funding for floodway improvements from some of the same agencies, Juhl said. Grants are available from the Illinois EPA’s Section 319 Water Quality funds and state Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity’s Community Development Assistance and Business Development Public Infrastructure programs. “These are grant programs the village should be looking into,” he said. Potential cost-sharing partners include the MWRD Stormwater Program, which is under development, as well as IDNR-OWR for flood-damage reduction, which Juhl said the village is less likely to obtain.

Although many Midlothian residents have not seen the village flood in nearly half a century, they could at some point in the future, Juhl concluded. “Does it really flood? You haven’t seen a flood in a long time,” he said. “When we get eight-and-a-half inches in 24 hours, classified as a ‘100-year storm,’

we believe it will go over the top of the creek banks and flood the designated area.”

The village also could proceed with developable areas in the floodplain, and opt to not build in the floodway, unless the maps are changed at a future date. A village greening effort incorporating the creek into the floodplain could successfully create a sense of place for the village center, combined with the Village Hall and some retail development in the floodplain, and more intensive development east of the track and north of 147th Street.

### Setting in Place Major Design Elements

LaRue walked village leaders and others through the major design elements the panel contemplated. Since a two-day session would not be nearly enough to solve the water remediation issue, LaRue said he would talk about what to do in the meantime, and then what to do if the floodway area is reduced or eliminated. First and foremost, he discussed placing pedestrian friendly land uses surrounding the train station. With both housing and places to buy staples such as milk and bread, or to drop off dry cleaning, different types of families could live, shop and commute within two blocks of home.

The “east triangle,” east of the railway and south of 147th, is not big enough to create one major project, but is an “impactful area of development that clearly announces itself and is the center of the community,” LaRue said (Figure 5). He added that with multi-family housing, it could support retail and help redevelop an area that’s currently underuti-

lized. He suggested placing approximately 75 units in a four-story building close to the railroad tracks and set back from 147th, with prices ranging from \$155,000 to \$200,000. The village could work with some of the existing owners of the land (such as US Bank) to redevelop their property, avoiding large public expenses of acquiring the land.

The area also could support new-construction mixed-income rental, about 20 percent of which would be affordable, LaRue said. “It would be great to have families with \$50,000 incomes living downtown.”

To add to its land bank east of the tracks, LaRue recommended the village work on a land swap with Metra to consolidate parking and, longer-term, to build structured parking. He urged village leaders to provide additional spaces that will help create a critical mass of people for mixed-use sites. “Because some of these [land] parts can move around, Metra becomes an important consideration. They’re going to be reasonably happy campers, and a lot of planning options can be considered.” Parking lots can be built west of the tracks in floodplain areas, where other uses cannot, he added.

Along 147th east of the railway, LaRue suggested freeing up street frontage for more retail by redeveloping certain properties. The village could find out whether US Bank’s structure and/or parking lot might be larger than the bank needs, leading to frontage opportunities, and whether the muffler shop, which “practically begs” to be elsewhere, might be willing to swap land. Along that stretch, the village could try to add such uses as a healthcare center that could include immediate care, wellness services, and a health club.



Figure 7 The Kreis building presents a wonderful opportunity for reuse in the village center.

West of the railway, the rehabilitation of the vacant-but-attractive Kreis Building would help to jumpstart the area with ground floor retail and restaurant and professional offices on the second floor. LaRue pointed out the village could explore the historic preservation benefit opportunities. “It’s a great building,” he said. “There’s no reason it can’t continue to be.” North of the Kreis, along the railroad tracks, the village could try to attract a townhouse development of roughly 10 units, depending upon land availability. Enhancing the creek would provide a visual amenity for these new residents, a “nice feature in their backyard,” he said.



**Figures 8** *Decorative medians help break up wide streets and make them more pedestrian friendly.*

Then, south of 147th – with the remediation issues handled and land purchased – the village would have approximately seven to seven-and-a-half acres in the “west triangle” on which to build, once setbacks are accounted for and assuming the CVS pharmacy stays where it is, LaRue said. This could include 75 to 100 condo units over commuter and resi-

dential parking, price at around \$180,000, and 40 to 50 townhomes at around \$200,000. The design should be sensitive to the visual scale, with lower buildings closest to the street, and taller buildings – which could be four to five stories if set back sufficiently – closer to the tracks. Such a development would be scaled appropriately to the rest of the community, said LaRue, “If you do that, you have an opportunity to create that sense of place. You can walk in,” he added.

A modernized Village Hall and campus could serve as an anchor for the “west triangle” that’s targeted long-term for redevelopment (Figure 6). The hall currently is outside the floodway, meaning that project could be shorter-term, while the Public Works Department could be relocated away from the vil-

lage center since “it’s a backroom operation,” said LaRue. Then, environmentally sensitive areas nearby could be landscaped with appropriate areas made available for parking. Such a move could create “something that really says, ‘This is our downtown. This is a pretty place to be. This is a comfortable place to be,’” said LaRue. An alternative option could be



**Figures 9** *Heavy engineering solutions reduce the water quality and attractiveness of natural waterways.*



**Figures 10** The panel recommended improving the natural systems of Natalie Creek and for the adjacent St. Christopher Catholic School to “adopt” the creek by using it as an educational tool.

Panel member Jim Kaplan, managing principal for James Kaplan Companies, Inc., said the village likely would not see much in the way of new and different uses, rather “relocation and replication” of existing uses including additional restaurants and “a few more services. You’re not going to see a downtown of old. It’s going to be of a convenience nature.” But, LaRue added, “We’re not just talking about moving the deck chairs around.” The village should encourage its existing operators to upgrade what they’re doing. “Success brings success,” he said. “Upgrades bring upgrades.”

to locate Village Hall along the south side of 147th across from the train station, he added.

Within a few blocks of the train station, the 147th Street corridor could be developed with convenience and pedestrian-oriented retail targeting commuters – but not wholly dependent upon them, LaRue said. “The train ... is not going to support any full-time retail,” he said. But if commuters “are exposed every day or three days per week to this community” that will generate “top of mind awareness.” He added: “They’ll tell neighbors, ‘Hey, I just saw the greatest place. I didn’t even know it existed.’” Uses could include a sandwich and coffee shop, ice cream store, newsstand, dry cleaner, convenience electronics like Radio Shack, a packaging and mailing store like UPS, a fitness center like Curves, a neighborhood restaurant/diner, and a shoe repair shop.

Along Pulaski Road, LaRue suggested continuing with auto-oriented retail, by which he meant both auto services and other types of establishments customers typically drive to, such as Dunkin’ Donuts and other fast-food options. LaRue suggested that most redevelopment uses should be convenience-oriented, such as restaurants, with relatively small floor plans of 1,500 to 2,500 square feet, he said. No desire or probability exists of attracting a big-box retailer, such as a grocery store, even on the seven-and-a-half acre site west of the tracks, since it would take up essentially the entire area. “That would destroy downtown, not to mention what it does to [locally owned grocer] Family Pride,” LaRue said.

### Improving Infrastructure

The new and reconfigured uses for various town center parcels will create a need for a number of infrastructure improvements, said panel member and transportation engineer Ronald A. Shimizu. Challenges include a dangerous pedestrian environment; turning conflicts at the entrances and exits of the Metra lots, as well as at the intersection of 147th and Pulaski Road; travel speeds well above the posted 30 miles-per-hour limit; lack of easy bicycle access; and insufficient signage demarcating the downtown area. “Many of you know the situation trying to cross 147th Street [on foot],”



**Figures 11** Sidewalks should be added to improve the environment for pedestrians.



**Figures 12** Better landscaping and design can improve pedestrian between parking lots and the Metra train station along Midlothian Creek.

Shimizu said, adding, “It would be nice to have signage announcing that you’re entering the town center area, to give it a sense of place.”

To improve the environment for pedestrians, the panel recommended filling in missing sections of sidewalks to create a continuous path along 147th and Pulaski, which Shimizu said would be “easy improvements to make.” Brighter crosswalk markings would make motorists more aware of them, adding to safety, while curb extensions and bulbouts at major intersections on 147th Street would reduce the crossing distance, Shimizu said. Streetscape enhancements such as trees, plantings, and pedestrian-scale lighting – at closer intervals and lower heights – would make the overall ambience more conducive to a nice evening stroll, he advised. Village leaders could build on excellent local examples such as Hansen Commons on Pulaski Road, (along the rail line) and Midlothian Creek, where a winding path and greenspace abut the creek. “That’s nicely done in terms of providing a pedestrian-friendly environment,” Shimizu said.

To improve traffic flow in the town center, the panel recommended adding a median along 147th Street to provide for left-turn lanes. Shimizu noted that also would give refuge to pedestrians and further improve their safety. “You can stop in the middle. You’re protected,” he said. He also suggested performing a traffic analysis to extend Springfield south of 147th Street, to replacing Prairie Avenue for primary parking

access to the Metra station, which would make turning easier. Finally, Shimizu said, the village should perform another traffic analysis regarding additional signals at 147th and the Metra station.

To improve access to public transportation, the panel suggested the village make the Metra pedestrian bridge handicapped-accessible with a ramp. Pace bus shelters at the Metra station, on eastbound 147th Street and at the intersection of 147th and Pulaski Road, would provide a convenience for transit riders who are transferring. Bike lockers at the train station would add to riders’ safety and security, Shimizu said, while additional paths would boost access to the station.

The panel suggested connecting the bikeway to Oak Forest along Midlothian Creek – for example, from the Metra station southward –

while also creating a bicycle path along Natalie Creek. To make those pathways more pleasant to ride or walk along, the panel recommended cleaning up the creek. They also asked if St. Christopher School, adjacent to the creek, might want to adopt and monitor a portion of the creek as a student project.

Shimizu quickly touched on a number of considerations the panel discussed with regard to parking, access, neighborhood connectivity, and site design. To improve access, the panel recommended the village consider whether: convenient connections are provided to other uses on and off-site; the site’s street pattern connects wherever practical to adjacent developments; street design encourages slower traffic in key pedestrian zones; pedestrian connections are required within parking lots; and curb cuts along streets in the station area are restricted in number and frequency.

When it comes to parking requirements, Shimizu noted that transit-oriented design often conflicts with many typical zoning ordinance requirements for parking. Since Midlothian is rewriting its zoning code, it could reduce those requirements by 20 percent, for example, given the lowered dependence on cars. The village also should think about whether it should: specify parking maximums; encourage structured parking rather than surface lots; require parking to be located on the side or the rear of buildings; require secure and convenient



bicycle parking; require on- or off-street parking within an eighth mile; and allow – and possibly encourage – shared parking. A mixture of these strategies will be necessary for the village to build a “strong sense of place.” Without these innovative changes, buildings will be spread apart, separated by large parking lots, creating hostile pedestrian environments.

vide direct pedestrian connections – especially along Pulaski Road and 147th Street – between transit, mixed land uses, and surrounding areas. The panel recommended the village consider whether: site plan requirements allow for greater density over time; trees are required to shelter streets and sidewalks; adequate and safe levels of pedestrian-scale lighting are required; incentives are available to develop significant parks, plazas and other public open spaces; buildings

and parks are organized to provide focal points and orientation; pedestrian routes are buffered from fast-moving traffic and parking expanses; and carefully sited buildings or natural features terminate street vistas.

### Funding Sources

Of panel’s thoughts on how to fund its recommendations on environmental remediation, residential and retail development, and infrastructure improvements, LaRue said, “It always comes down to that, doesn’t it?” He added, “We did attempt to throw out some numbers that are relatively current or near-term-future price points for housing.”



**Figures 13** Local stores along 147th Street can be enhanced with new streetscapes including lighting and street furniture to encourage people to spend more time downtown.

To encourage neighborhood connectivity, the panel recommended the village consider whether: proposed street patterns should be based on a grid; blocks would average less than 600 feet in length and less than 1,800 feet in perimeter; cul-de-sacs should be discouraged or prohibited; streets will provide access and balanced design for all modes of transportation; streets designated as primary pedestrian routes will have different standards than others; sidewalks are required along street frontages; unconventional roadway geometries are provided to calm traffic; and curb radii and street widths are minimized. The bottom line is: can residents or employees safely and conveniently walk or bicycle to a store, post office, park, café, or bank?

With regard to site design, Shimizu suggested that village leaders also consider whether sites should be required to pro-

The panelists developed very rough estimates on the costs to redevelop the more desirable “west triangle” bounded by 147th Street, Pulaski Road and the railroad tracks: \$2.5 million for the land acquisition of 18 to 20 homes, assuming owners are willing to sell; \$1 million for commercial properties, with the same caveat; and another \$3 to \$5 million for water-related engineering projects. Without a huge infusion of cash, LaRue said, “[water engineering projects] aren’t going to work.”

To attract developers, LaRue suggested creating a tax-increment financing (TIF) district that would revert back after about 10 years, striking a sales tax agreement with business owners, and retaining a commercial real estate specialist to assist in marketing to the developer community. This could be done through such means as the International Council for Shopping Centers Alliance program, along with direct devel-

oper recruitment. “You’ve got to market it like anything else. This is a sales job,” he said, requiring “somebody well-connected, who has a good Rolodex.”

To help create larger parcels for development, the village should consider public-private partnerships where Midlothian would trade village-owned land for key commercial parcels. The village also could create a Special Service Area and issue Special Service Area bonds. Another option is to establish an overlay zone for higher-density development as part of the new zoning ordinance that would affect just the town center area. Once the housing development is in place, Cook County tax incentives could help with the development economics, providing a 50-percent reduction for 10 years for the commercial components under certain classifications. “That can make a significant difference for a developer,” LaRue said. Federal New Market Tax Credits could provide equity dollars for a for-profit redevelopment effort.

Myriad federal, state and local sources can provide transportation funding, Shimizu said. The federal Surface Transportation Program is the most common source of funding for highway improvements, although dollars also are available through the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality program, and Transportation and Community System Preservation Pilot Program.

At the state level, the legislature must pass a new bill to match the federal funding at varying levels – 20 and 50 percent, depending on the project, Shimizu said. A replacement program for the expired Illinois FIRST, a five-year infrastructure funding program passed in 1999, also would be helpful, he said. Current programs that could aid in financing the Transportation Enhancement Program and transit funding through the Illinois Department of Transportation is Division of Intermodal and Public Transportation. Locally, Midlothian could levy vehicle registration fees or a motor fuel tax, or create a district to add revenue for use in redevelopment of the town center.

### **Next Steps – and Beyond**

Dalman closed the presentation by framing the short-and long-term steps Midlothian must work through to move forward with its village center plan. Once the URS study process is complete, the village should hold a developer summit and work with the International Council of Shopping Centers, where, she said, “60 to 70 percent of deals are conceptualized. You need to work proactively,” she emphasized.

“Everybody wants the same sales tax revenue.” Village staffers, with help from consultants, must familiarize themselves with various grant deadlines, as well as market redevelopment sites. “Unfortunately, [developers] don’t always find you,” she said. “The village must act directly, pairing up and going to talk to developers and retailers.”

The village needs to “implement, implement, implement,” Dalman stressed. “This is what we heard in the community interviews. People are ready to see something happen. It doesn’t have to be big.” In the short run, village leaders should create a “pay-as-you-go” TIF to jump-start development, redevelop Village Hall at its current location, redevelop the beloved Kreis Building as a gateway to the village center, and create a housing development with some density in the “east triangle (because) you’re going to need residents to bring the retail.” Longer term, Midlothian will need to grapple with the floodway issue, and then possibly consider how best to redevelop the “west triangle” with mixed uses.

“We thank you again for letting us come to your village,” Dalman said. “We hope to see good things when we come back to Midlothian in the next few years.”

Mayor Murawski thanked the panel for its presentation and said he was particularly intrigued by the ideas presented on potentially diverting Midlothian Creek to remediate the floodplain. “That’s an out-of-the-box solution that’s worth further exploration,” he said. “You came up with some concepts that, frankly, I find intriguing. You will be hearing from us. This relationship will not end today.”

“This is great. It really helps us get our minds around [the issues],” echoed URS’ Wilson. The partners are poised to begin to work on the next steps.

# Panel Recommendations

## Managing the Floodway and Floodplain

- Understand the constraints: The more restrictive floodway designation limits new construction to “appropriate” uses, such as parking and managed open space, and requires state permits, while the floodplain designation allows for building with caveats and does not require nearly as extensive permits.
- Consider long-term options such as creating a water bypass and underground storage at a cost of roughly \$4 to \$5 million, or diverting Midlothian Creek into the Pulaski storm sewer, for approximately \$2 million. It’s unclear whether the sewer could handle the volume of such a diversion.
- Seek grants from either the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency or Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. Pursue cost-sharing opportunities with the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District or Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

## Setting Major Design Elements in Place

- Create what’s possible east of the railway, which could include mid-rise residential over covered parking and/or new construction mixed-income rental housing on side streets, and more pedestrian- and commuter-oriented retail, such as sandwich shops, dry cleaners, or a medical/wellness center on 147th Street.
- Swap land with Metra to consolidate parking and add spaces, and, in the longer term, consider structured parking.
- Develop the “west triangle” if and when it becomes feasible, with condos over parking, townhouses, and well-designed environmental amenities along the creek and through the floodway.
- Rehabilitate the Kreis Building just west of the train station and on the north side of 147th Street with ground-floor retail or restaurant, and professional offices above.
- Develop townhomes along the train tracks immediately to the north. The building is not in the floodplain and is an important symbol for many in the community.
- Rebuild the Village Hall and consider keeping it in place (outside the floodway) as a potential anchor for development west of the tracks. Other site alternatives are on the east side of the tracks along 147th Street or near the current location in the “west triangle.”
- Keep the Pulaski corridor as a magnet for auto-oriented retail.

## Improving Infrastructure

- Create continuous sidewalks and improved crosswalk markings to improve pedestrian access along the major arterials of 147th Street and Pulaski Road. On 147th Street, add trees, plantings, lighting, and curb extensions.
- Improve transit access by making the Metra pedestrian bridge handicapped-accessible, build bus shelters at the Metra station and along major arterials, and add bike paths and lockers at the train station.
- Improve traffic flow by adding a left-turn lane and a median along 147th Street for pedestrian refuge, and undertake traffic analysis to improve access to Metra parking lots.
- Improve bicycle access by connecting the bikeway to Oak Forest along Midlothian Creek and create a Natalie Creek bicycle path.
- Remediate Midlothian and Natalie creeks to make them amenities for the area and inquire if St. Christopher School might want to adopt and monitor them.

## Funding Sources

- Understand the challenges: Changes envisioned in redeveloping the west side could run \$4 million for land acquisition – if homeowners and businesses are willing to sell – and another \$3 to \$5 million for environmental remediation.
- Attract developers through means such as a tax increment financing (TIF) district or a sales tax rebate agreement.
- Utilize Cook County tax incentives and Federal New Market Tax Credits to enhance the viability of commercial development.
- Seek federal, state and local sources to fund transportation improvements, including the federal Surface Transportation Program.
- Promote the commercial aspects of development and retain a real estate specialist.
- Trade village-owned land for key commercial parcels, issue Special Service Area bonds, and/or create an overlay zoning district for higher-density development.

## **ULI Chicago and Campaign for Sensible Growth Panel Members**

Kristina Dalman

Partner

Gardner Carton & Douglas LLP, *Chicago*

*(Ms. Dalman has joined KB Homes since the completion of the panel)*

Mark Buschman

Vice President – Development and Construction

Buschman Homes LLC, *Gurnee, Ill.*

Alex Dmyterko

Partner

Dmyterko and Wright Partners, *Oak Brook, Ill.*

Arlan Juhl

Division Manager

IDNR Water Resources, *Springfield, Ill.*

James Kaplan

Managing Principal

James Kaplan Companies, Inc., *Glenview, Ill.*

Valerie Kretchmer

President

Valerie S. Kretchmer Associates Inc., *Evanston, Ill.*

Michael LaRue

President

LaRue Associates, *Highland Park, Ill.*

Patrick Moran

Partner

Sonnenschein, Nath and Rosenthal LLP, *Chicago*

Ronald A. Shimizu

Senior Vice President

Parsons Brinckerhoff Quade & Douglas, Inc., *Chicago*

Peter Schlossman

Architect

Loebel Schlossman Hackl, *Chicago*

Kay Whitlock

Vice President

Christopher B. Burke Engineering Ltd., *Rosemont, Ill.*

## **Sponsor Representatives**

Thomas Murawski

Village President

Village of Midlothian

Terry Stephens

Village Trustee

Village of Midlothian

## **ULI and Campaign for Sensible Growth Participants**

Scott Goldstein

Chair

ULI Chicago Public Policy Committee

Vice President of Policy & Planning

Metropolitan Planning Council, *Chicago*

Ellen Shubart

Manager

Campaign for Sensible Growth, *Chicago*

Cindy McSherry

District Council Coordinator

ULI Chicago, *Chicago*

Kristi DeLaurentiis

South Suburban Coordinator

Metropolitan Planning Council, *Chicago*



### **Campaign for Sensible Growth**

25 East Washington Street

Suite 1600

Chicago, IL 60602

Phone: 312.922.5616

Fax: 312.922.5619

[www.growingsensibly.org](http://www.growingsensibly.org)

# **ULI Chicago**

A district council of the Urban Land Institute

### **Urban Land Institute Chicago**

1700 West Irving Park Road

Suite 208

Chicago, IL 60613

Phone: 773.549.4972

Fax: 773.472.3076

[www.chicago.uli.org](http://www.chicago.uli.org)