

# CENTRAL AVENUE

Technical Assistance Panel **REPORT**

Creating Austin's "Main Street"

CHICAGO, IL

**APRIL 2023**



**Chicago**

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ON THE COVER: Austin Town Hall Park and Cultural Center

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Community gatherings to celebrate implementation milestones for Austin's Quality-of-Life Plan, "Austin Forward. Together."

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[Austin Coming Together \(ACT\)](#) is dedicated to providing backbone support for a 50+ network of non-profit, faith-based, public, and private entities. ACT facilitates collaboration to achieve more, together. This approach is called collective impact.

ACT serves Austin by leveraging consistent community engagement to focus on these strategic imperatives:

- Continuous improvement of human services
- Attracting public and private investment through community organizing and planning
- Building capacity for policy change

ACT is the designated lead agency—the local community-based organization—for Austin's first Quality-of-Life Plan called Austin Forward. Together. This plan, prepared with the support of LISC Chicago, was released in 2018. Revitalizing Central Avenue and establishing it as Austin's "Main Street," is a focal project of Austin Forward. Together.

## Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP)

Created in 2005, [Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning \(CMAP\)](#) is the award-winning regional planning organization for the northeastern Illinois counties of Cook, DuPage, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry, and Will.

The agency and its partners developed and are now implementing ON TO 2050, a long-range plan to help the 7 counties and 284 communities of northeastern Illinois implement strategies that address transportation, housing, economic development, open space, the environment, and other quality-of-life issues.

The Central Avenue Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) is sponsored through CMAP's local technical assistance program. This program supports communities by offering planning and implementation assistance, providing interagency expertise, leverage the region's transit network, and building local government capacity. This work aligns with the comprehensive plan for the region, ON TO 2050. This TAP is part of a broader technical assistance project that CMAP is doing with ACT to advance the vision for Central Avenue as articulated in the Austin Forward. Together plan. The study area for the CMAP plan for Central Avenue extends from North Avenue on the north to just below the I-290 viaduct on the south.

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Public art in the POPFIT park at the northeast corner of Central and Madison.

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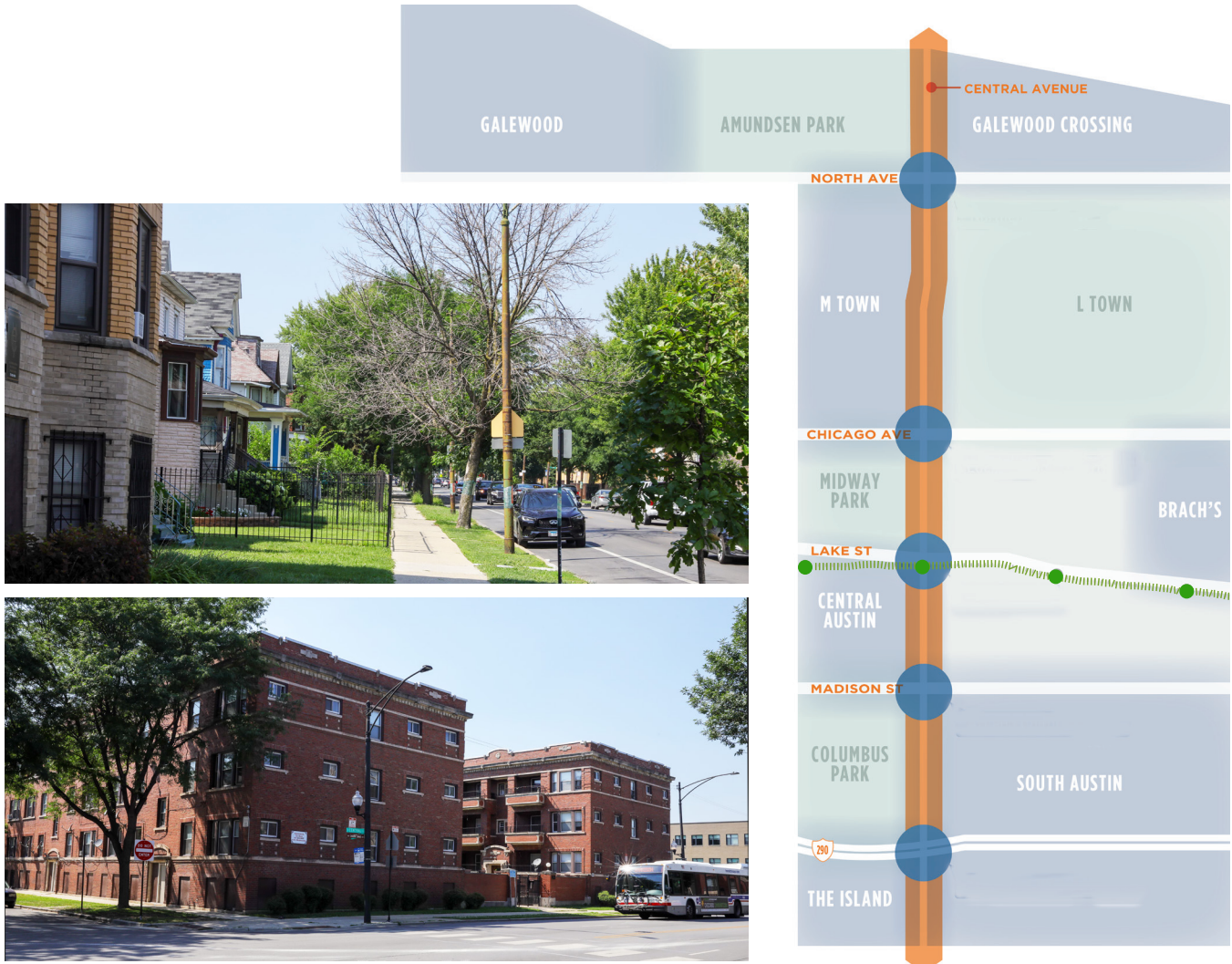
# INTRODUCTION

## The Central Avenue Corridor

Central Avenue is the ideal connector for Chicago's Austin neighborhood. A wide, primarily residential street, with beautiful Victorian style single-family homes, 2-flats, and apartment buildings, Central Avenue runs through the entire length of Austin linking its east-west commercial corridors (Figure 1). The Green Line L train along Lake Avenue with stations at half-

mile intervals, including on Central and Lake, provides easy transit access to other west-side neighborhoods and downtown Chicago. Interstate Highway 290 with access ramps off Central Avenue, connects the neighborhood to the region's highway system.

Central Avenue is also the location for many attractions including the iconic Austin Town Hall Park and Cultural Center and the newly renovated Kehrein Center for the Arts. At the south end of the corridor, the stately



Central Avenue in Austin is lined with different types and styles of residential ranging from Victorian-style single-family homes and 2-flats (top) to multi-family apartments (bottom).

Figure 1. The Central Avenue corridor in Chicago's Austin neighborhood.

Base Map Source: Austin Quality of Life Plan.



Columbus Park draws visitors from near and far to its golf course, tranquil lagoons, and Spanish style refectory.

Central Avenue has enormous potential to build on these assets and support needed economic development in Austin, but obstacles remain to achieving that goal. Parts of the corridor feel unappealing and even unsafe because of vacant storefronts, buildings deteriorating due to deferred maintenance, and rusted viaducts under the L train tracks. Additionally, amenities such as coffee shops and restaurants that would draw visitors to the commercial nodes on and near Central Avenue, are largely missing. Residents have to leave the neighborhood to shop and access most services resulting in a "leakage" of retail dollars from Austin. A 2020 market study estimated that Austin residents spend more than \$175 million annually outside the community on retail, dining, groceries, health, and personal care<sup>1</sup>.

A revitalized Central Avenue, with stronger linkages between Austin's many assets and its east-west

<sup>1</sup> City of Chicago and Chicago Central Area Committee. The Soul City Corridor; Development Framework: Chicago Avenue in Austin. August 2020.



Spanish style refectory and lagoons in Columbus Park located at the southern edge of the study corridor.

commercial corridors, can help reverse this trend. Enhancing walkability and drawing more people to destinations within Austin will strengthen and expand the customer base for area businesses. Dining, shopping, and arts and entertainment destinations could flourish on Chicago Avenue and Lake and Madison Streets, attracting residents and visitors alike. To achieve this, Austin's community leaders will need to work collaboratively with public and private partners to make strategic investments in public infrastructure, prioritize opportunities for economic advancement of area residents and businesses, and create a unique environment reflective of Austin's history and heritage.



The Austin Town Hall Park, located just north of Lake Street on Central Avenue, is a focal point for the Austin community.



Green Line L stop at Central and Lake provides easy access to downtown Chicago and other west-side neighborhoods.

## The Austin Community

Austin, located on Chicago's West Side (Figure 2), is geographically, the second largest of the 77 community areas in the City. Founded in 1865 as Austinville, Austin flourished as a residential community with beautiful homes and tree-lined streets and was annexed into the City of Chicago in 1899. Some of Austin's great assets, including its landmarked homes, the Town Hall, and Columbus Park, date back to this time.

Today, Austin is home to more than 96,500 residents, making it the third largest community area in Chicago in terms of population. Nearly 80 percent of Austin residents identify as Black and 15% identify as Hispanic. Austin has a higher percentage of family households (61% of all households) compared to Chicago as a whole (53%). However, the median annual household income in Austin at \$33,515 is only 58% of the citywide average of \$58,247<sup>1</sup>. Austin's economic challenges today stem from decades of disinvestment. For example, starting in the 1930s, racist lending policies such as redlining made it exceedingly difficult for people of color to secure mortgage loans in neighborhoods like Austin denying them homeownership and associated wealth-building opportunities. But recent years have seen Austin reinvigorated with community-led planning and a surge of new investments. Key initiatives are presented here.

### Community Plans

**Austin's Quality-of-Life Plan: Austin Forward Together. (AFT).** Created by and for the community, Austin Forward Together. is a plan for Austin's renaissance. The plan was prepared over a period of 20 months with the support of LISC Chicago and adopted by the community in 2018. The plan provides 23 strategies and 84 actions to address 7 issues areas including community narrative, education, housing, youth empowerment, economic development, public safety, and civic engagement. Revitalizing

<sup>1</sup> Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. Austin Community Data Snapshot. August 2021.

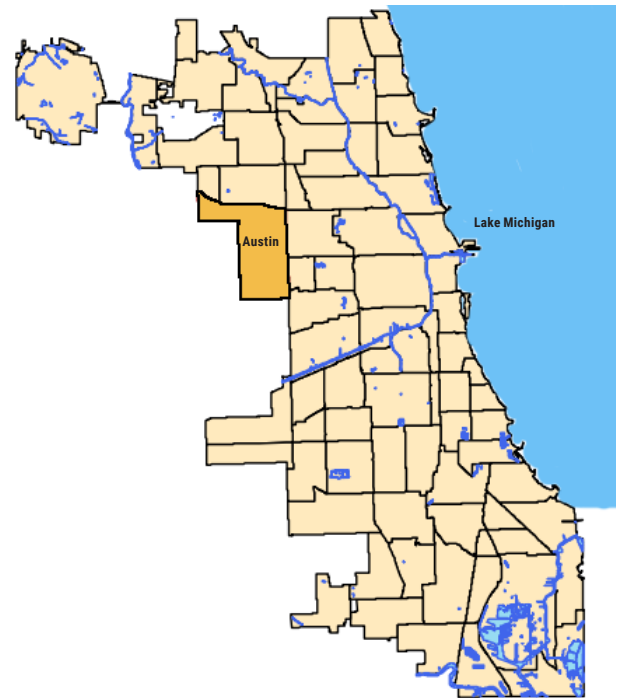


Figure 2. Austin, located on the West Side, is the second largest community area in Chicago in terms of land area.

Base Map Source: *City of Chicago Community Areas Mapbook*, Copyright © June 2015, City of Chicago.

Central Avenue is identified as a focal project in AFT. Austin Coming Together (ACT) has been leading implementation efforts; more information on the AFT plan and implementation progress is available [here](#).

**The Soul City Corridor Plan.** Released in August 2020, this is a framework plan to guide public and private investment along Chicago Avenue in Austin to create economic opportunities for neighborhood residents and promoting Black culture, arts, entertainment, and entrepreneurship. As part of this plan, the Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT) is installing new streetscape with wider sidewalks, improved bike lanes, new streetlights, and public art including gateway features, between Austin Boulevard and Cicero Avenue.

### Projects

**Kehrein Center for the Arts (KCA).** The KCA, opened in May 2019, is a state-of-the-art 900-seat story-telling theater, art gallery, and community gathering place in the heart of Austin. Financial assistance from the State

of Illinois and a grant from the City's Neighborhood Opportunity Fund helped finance the \$5 million renovation of the long-shuttered historic auditorium at Washington Boulevard and Central Avenue.

**BUILD Campus.** BUILD (Broader Urban Involvement & Leadership Development), a leading violence prevention and youth development organization headquartered in Austin, opened its renovated and expanded campus in Spring 2023 at the corner of Laramie Avenue and Harrison Street in South Austin. The center has art and music studios, woodshop, gym, garden, kitchen, and a cafe, and provides counseling services and programs to provide a safe, engaging environment for local youth. The new BUILD center includes resources such as affordable workspaces for the larger community.

**North Austin Community Center (NACC).** The NACC opened in Spring 2023 on Laramie Avenue in north Austin with a mission of providing equitable access to sports, education, and holistic wellness services to Austin and larger Westside residents. This 150,000 square foot professional level facility built at a cost of over \$30 million, is anchored by three non-profit organizations with deep roots in the Austin community—By the Hand Club, Grace & Peace Church, and Intentional Sports. It has a host of amenities including Chicago's only FIFA regulation indoor turf arena. NACC offers 100 hours of free activities weekly for area residents and serves 400 K-12 kids in after-school programs.

**The Aspire Center for Workforce Innovation.** Austin Coming Together in partnership with the Westside Health Authority, is redeveloping the former Emmet Elementary School building at the corner of Madison and Central Avenue into a workforce development center with the goal of transforming career trajectories and enhancing economic opportunities for area residents. Expected to be completed in 2025, the Aspire Center will include training in advanced manufacturing jobs, a business incubator, a national retail banking branch, and a financial opportunity center to support Austin's budding entrepreneurs. Other planned amenities include a cafe, a rooftop community



PHOTO CREDIT: LBBA ARCHITECTS

BUILD's new center for youth and community.

gathering space, and a Federally Qualified Health Center to provide wrap-around healthcare services for area residents.

#### **Former Laramie State Bank Building Redevelopment.**

Oak Park Regional Housing Center is redeveloping the former Laramie Bank building at the corner of Laramie and Chicago Avenues. The nearly \$50 million project will renovate the bank building, which has been vacant since 2012, with commercial uses, including blues museum, bank branch, café, and business incubator. The historic terracotta exterior designed in the art-deco style will be restored, and approx. 20,000 square-feet of adjacent land will be redeveloped with a mixed-income, multi-story rental residential building.



PHOTO CREDIT: VIA FLICKR BY YOOPERANN

The former Laramie Bank building.

# THE TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL

Austin's community leaders released a Quality-of-Life Plan in 2018 called Austin Forward. Together, to guide the future development of the neighborhood. The plan identified strengthening Central Avenue, located in the heart of the neighborhood, as a focal project for Austin's economic development. Recognizing the need to generate additional ideas for this strategic corridor, Austin Coming Together (ACT) in partnership with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) invited the Urban Land Institute Chicago District Council (ULI Chicago) to conduct a Technical Assistance Panel (TAP). ACT and CMAP identified the segment of Central Avenue from Madison Street to Chicago Avenue as the study area for the TAP to build on the momentum of recent and proposed developments.

On April 18-19, 2023, ULI Chicago convened a TAP to answer the questions posed in the scope of work and

develop recommendations for repositioning Central Avenue as Austin's Main Street. The panel brought together 12 industry professionals with expertise in various aspects of real estate including urban design, planning, development, finance, transportation, and community-building.

In advance of the TAP, panelists reviewed extensive briefing materials that included socio-economic data for the corridor and existing plans and initiatives underway. During the TAP, panelists also took a bus tour of Central Avenue and the adjoining commercial corridors on Chicago Avenue, Lake Street and Madison Street, and interviewed community stakeholders including business and property owners, residents, and civic leaders. The panelists worked collaboratively over the two TAP days to develop the recommendations presented in this report.



ULI Chicago Central Avenue Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) members convened at the newly opened North Austin Community Center (NACC) for the 2-day TAP.

# SCOPE OF WORK

The panel was charged with answering the following questions posed by Austin Coming Together and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning for the stretch of Central Avenue from Madison Street to Chicago Avenue:

## 1. Development Opportunities

- What are opportunities to build on existing assets, recently completed projects, and planned developments to attract new commercial and retail investment to the corridor?
- What kinds of retail/commercial uses are missing and would best serve residents?
- What kinds of businesses would best fit the available vacant buildings and land?

## 2. Public Realm

- What kinds of public realm improvements would enhance business attraction efforts?
- What kinds of district identity and branding would enhance each of the three commercial nodes (Chicago Avenue, Lake Street, and Madison Street)?

## 3. Implementation Strategies

- What actions can the Special Service Area (SSA 72 Austin Village) entity, Austin Coming Together (ACT), and other community stakeholder groups take to enhance these efforts?
- What kinds of research or information does Austin need to be well equipped to carry out this work?
- What kinds of additional resources and partnerships should Austin be seeking to carry out this work?

# PANEL FINDINGS

The ULI Chicago panel, in addition to reviewing extensive briefing materials, toured the study corridor and met with approximately 40 community members during the two TAP days, to develop a deeper understanding of opportunities and challenges for Central Avenue and the larger Austin community. These observations and conversations, summarized as panel findings, are a key input into the panel's recommendations development process.

## Unmet Demand for Services & Amenities

Community stakeholders identified a lack of services and amenities such as full-service grocery stores, banks, coffee shops, and sit-down restaurants in Austin and especially in the vicinity of Central Avenue as a significant challenge. There are few destinations for



residents to walk to, places where they can get a cup of coffee or get-together with friends. People leave the neighborhood frequently to access basic services. Consequently, Austin loses a lot of retail, dining, and health spending to nearby neighborhoods, including the Village of Oak Park.

## Lack of Consistent Pedestrian Appeal & Safety

Residents don't view Central Avenue as an inviting walking environment for many reasons:

- Even though it's primarily residential, Central Avenue is wide with fast-moving traffic, making it less pedestrian-friendly.
- Buildings suffering from deferred maintenance, vacancies at key nodes such as the former Corcoran grocery store building at Central and Lake, and rusty, dimly lit viaducts under the train tracks further detract from the pedestrian experience.



Vacant storefronts and dimly lit, rusty viaducts under the L tracks diminish the pedestrian experience along Central Avenue.

- Lack of actual and perceived safety is also a deterrent to walking. Besides the uninviting viaducts, negative activity in areas such as the liquor store at Lake and Central, was seen as problematic.

Therefore, most residents choose to drive or take the bus to access destinations along Central Avenue instead of walking.

## High Unemployment, Limited Skill-building Opportunities

As of 2019, Austin had an unemployment rate of 12.6 percent compared to a citywide average of 8.1 percent. Community members emphasized the tremendous need for workforce training.

## Need for Branding & Marketing

Negative coverage often overwhelms the positive happenings in Austin. Even area residents are sometimes unaware of different community building events, including the farmers' market, Taste of Chicago, outdoor art festivals, and a 5K run held in the neighborhood. Better marketing and a coordinated branding strategy can help increase participation in these events creating positive experiences for people and helping shift the narrative in Austin.

## Development Considerations

The following considerations will be key when evaluating new development opportunities in Austin:

### **Development Should Not Result in Displacement.**

New development, both commercial and residential, should create opportunities for existing neighborhood residents and businesses, instead of displacing them. Creating equitable opportunities should be a key guiding factor for all new developments.

**Residential Stabilization.** Rising costs and limited incomes have resulted in many residents and property owners deferring maintenance on their aging buildings. Financial assistance to help lower-income residents make health and safety improvements so they can continue to stay in their homes will provide stability to residents and the overall neighborhood.

### **Focus Commercial Development Within Key Nodes.**

The residential character of Central Avenue limits its potential for attracting new commercial development. However, opportunities exist along the neighborhood's east-west commercial corridors, Chicago Avenue, Lake Street, and Madison Street, especially where they intersect with Central Avenue. Encouraging businesses to locate within these key nodes and corridors will help create stronger business districts within Austin.

PHOTO CREDIT: AUSTIN COMING TOGETHER



PHOTO CREDIT: AUSTIN COMING TOGETHER



Events such as the annual 5K run through Austin's streets lined with historic buildings and the weekly farmer's market in the Austin Town Hall Park offer great opportunities to showcase the neighborhood's unique assets.

PHOTO CREDIT: AUSTIN COMING TOGETHER



The mural near Central and Lake L station was installed in 2017 as part of Oak Park Area Arts Council's "Off the Wall" annual summer internship program for local youth. Approximately twenty youth from Austin and neighboring Oak Park worked over three weeks under the guidance of professional artist, Carolyn Elaine, to design and install the mural which is inspired by the hopes and aspirations of area residents.



# PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS

Central Avenue has the potential to become Austin’s “Main Street,” an attractive, walkable street that links the community’s green spaces, historic sites, civic assets, and commercial corridors, to create a thriving, interconnected neighborhood with access to amenities and economic opportunities for all.

ULI Chicago’s recommendations to help achieve this vision for Central Avenue and the larger Austin community, are organized around three main ideas:

- 1. Public Realm.** Creating an attractive, safe public realm for residents and visitors that helps unlock the neighborhood’s development potential. Public realm consists of publicly owned and accessible spaces such as street right-of-way, alleyways, plazas, and parks and open spaces.
- 2. Development.** Encouraging development that enhances quality of life and increases opportunities.
- 3. Implementation.** Building community support and partnerships, identifying funding sources, and other resources to advance community priorities.

**Extend the focus area south to Interstate 290 (I-290).** Recognizing that Central Avenue has important assets south of Madison Avenue that should be included in the economic development strategy for the corridor and the larger Austin community, the panel recommends extending the focus area for Central Avenue south to I-290.

Columbus Park, near the Central Avenue exit on I-290, is a historic 135-acre park with well-used athletic fields, a beautiful Spanish-style refectory popular for weddings, and a 9-hole golf course that draws visitors from many surrounding communities. Columbus Park and I-290 are both potential gateways that can draw visitors into Austin’s revitalized commercial and cultural hubs farther north. Therefore, the panel’s recommendations presented here are for Central Avenue from I-290 to Chicago Avenue.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

The following principles, reflective of the priorities expressed by community stakeholders during the TAP process, guided the panel’s recommendations development process:

- Foster a sense of community pride and community awareness.
- Highlight and elevate locally and city-wide the assets and activities occurring in the community.
- Connect residents to the existing spaces, landmarks, and public assets within Austin.
- Recapture economic power and activity within Austin.
- Enhance connectivity between major east-west corridors and north-south corridors in the neighborhood.
- Coordinate planning efforts being undertaken by community stakeholders with City departments and other public sector agencies.

# 1. Public Realm Recommendations

## 1A. Establish Central Avenue as a spine of community hubs reinforced by a “necklace” of open space, civic assets, and historic sites.

Many community assets, including parks, schools, the public library, and historic buildings are located along and near Central Avenue presenting an opportunity to create a "necklace" or series of connected community hubs where people can enjoy different services and activities (Figure 3). The panel recommends creating an inviting street environment with comfortable sidewalks, streetlights, shade trees, and wayfinding to draw people between destinations within the community hubs, adding to neighborhood vibrancy and boosting area businesses.



Austin Public Library, located north of Austin Town Hall.



Kehrein Center for the Arts (KCA), a 900-seat state-of-the-art performing arts center, located off Central on Washington Street.



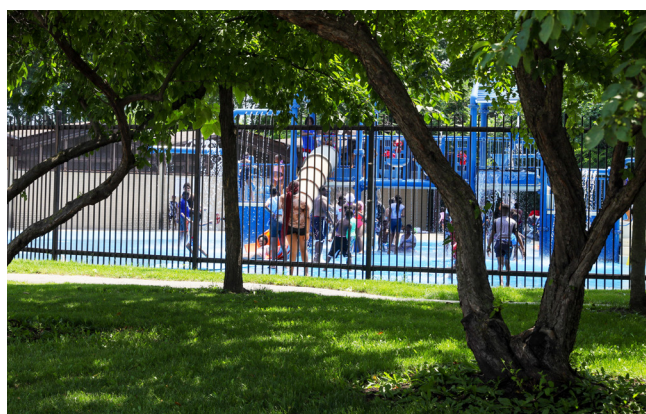
Homes along Midway Park, a designated National Register Historic District just west of Central Avenue.



POPFIT, a fitness themed public park at the corner of Central and Madison.



Columbus Park lagoons.



Water playground in Austin Park.



Figure 3. An inviting street environment on Central Avenue with coordinated wayfinding elements, such as special pavers and signage, can help reinforce it as the spine of the Austin community that links its green spaces, main activity hubs, and residential neighborhoods, creating a "necklace" of community assets.

## 1B. Amplify and Celebrate Austin's Historic Sites & Cultural Heritage

Austin has a rich history reflected in its historic sites which should be an integral part of the future vision for Central Avenue. Columbus Park, a beautiful natural respite with winding pathways and lagoons designed by the renowned landscape architect Jens Jensen, has anchored the southern end of the corridor since 1920. Modeled after Philadelphia's Independence Hall, the Austin Town Hall was constructed in 1929 at Central and Lake illustrating the significance and independence of the Austin community. Just west of the Town Hall, stately Queen Anne and Prairie style homes along Midway Park designed by some of Chicago's most illustrious architects, are part of a designated National Register historic district.

Installing a coordinated wayfinding system with maps, place markers, and interpretive signage can create a unique experience steeped in the neighborhood's rich history and culture, attracting both visitors and residents.



PHOTO CREDIT: ALEX SHANSKY

Interpretive signage with QR codes can allow visitors as well as area residents to learn about the rich history of Austin.

## 1C. Enhance Connectivity of the Central Avenue Corridor

Central Avenue is well-positioned to be a connector in the Austin community linking historic sites, community assets like transit stops, parks, and schools, and east-west commercial corridors. To improve access along Central Avenue and create a more interconnected Austin, the panel recommends the following:

### Improve Pedestrian Safety and Comfort

**Intersection Enhancements.** Central Avenue is primarily a residential street but two fast-moving lanes of traffic in each direction can make it difficult for pedestrians to navigate it safely, especially at busy intersections. Installing traffic calming measures, such as planted pedestrian bump-outs and special pavers



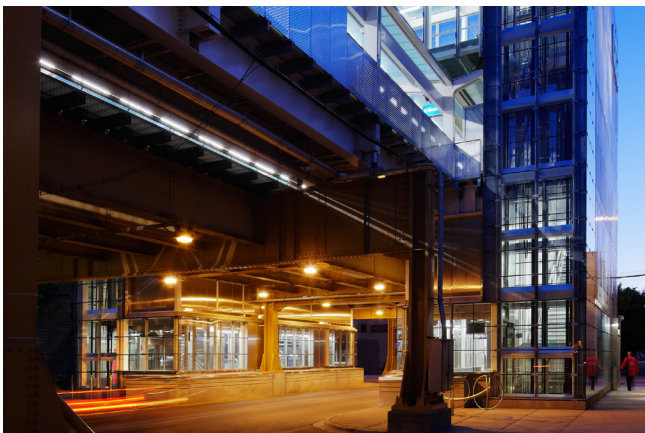
Intersection improvements such as corner bumpouts and paved crosswalks can slow down traffic making Central Avenue more pedestrian-friendly.



Well-located Divvy bike-share stations and designated bike lanes will improve accessibility within Austin.

or raised crosswalks at key crossings, can significantly enhance pedestrian safety, especially for children, the elderly, and others with restricted mobility.

**Viaduct Enhancements.** Improving the rusty viaducts under the Green Line tracks at Central Avenue and other north-south streets is another key step in encouraging people from adjoining neighborhoods to walk to destinations along and near Central Avenue. Currently, the dimly lit viaducts don't feel safe and are perceived as barriers to accessing the L station or crossing north or south by many in the community. Cleaning up the viaducts, adding better lighting, and replacing peeling paint/ graffiti with murals or art installations by local artists, can help change that perception and create a beautiful gateway into Austin for L riders.



Clean and bright viaducts at the Argyle L station (top) and Morgan Street L station (bottom) help create a safe and welcoming environment for pedestrians.

### Improve Micro-Mobility

To make it easier to access different destinations within Austin without relying on an automobile, the panel recommends adding Divvy bike and scooter stations along Central Avenue, near the Green Line stop and other locations farther north and south and building protected bike lanes. Making it easier for visitors and residents to access different parts of Austin will also help drive traffic to business districts on Chicago Avenue and Lake and Madison Streets.

### Implement Traffic Signal-Timing Improvements

Synchronize traffic signals along Central Avenue to facilitate smoother traffic flow. Consider incorporating protected left turn signals at busy intersections such as Lake Street and Madison Street to reduce bottlenecks.

### Reopen the Central Avenue Blue Line Station

The Blue Line L train runs along I-290 on the southern edge of the study corridor, but the Central Avenue station was closed in the early 1970s, reducing access for a significant portion of the Austin neighborhood. The closest Blue Line stops are now nearly a mile away in either direction. Reopening the Central Avenue Blue Line station would restore access to the heart of the Austin community connecting it to important job centers such as the Illinois Medical District. The panel recommends working with the Chicago Department of Transportation (CDOT) and the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) to analyze the feasibility of reopening the station including the impact of access ramps to and from I-290.



PHOTO CREDIT: KLYDE WARREN PARK

Curbless street as in the Fountain Square in downtown Evanston (top) can create a "flex space" allowing the street to transform into a public plaza for special events such as farmer's markets (middle) or food truck rallies (bottom).

Art installations, such as murals by local artists in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago (top), gateway features such as in Chicago's Chinatown (middle), and colorful, flexible seating (bottom) can help create a sense of place and an inviting environment for residents and visitors to gather.

## 1D. Establish Central and Lake as the Main Community Hub or “Austin’s Town Center”

With the Green Line El station on one side and the iconic Austin Town Hall Park and Cultural Center on the other, the Central Avenue and Lake Street intersection is already a significant activity hub on Central Avenue. The panel recommends building on the strength of these existing assets and implementing creative, tactical streetscape improvements to establish Central and Lake as the main community hub for daily needs as well as a place for special events and celebrations.

Improving the viaduct under the train tracks (as outlined earlier in Recommendation 3a), is a key first step in transforming the Central and Lake intersection from a perceived barrier into a place for community. To further break through that barrier, a block of Corcoran Place/ Lake Street on either side of Central Avenue could be occasionally closed to traffic to host events like farmers markets, arts fairs, or street festivals in conjunction with the Town Hall Park. Redesigning these roadway sections as curbsless “flex streets” with public art installations, gateway signage, and colorful street furniture could redefine the area.

The Austin Town Hall, located immediately north, is the natural focal point for the new hub and perfectly positioned to serve as a gateway to the surrounding commercial districts. Signage at the train station could direct people to the town hall to access maps and information on points of interest in Austin. Regular and well publicized programming at the Austin Town Hall itself could attract more visitors to the area. The visual appeal of this iconic site could also be enhanced with public art installations, decorative lighting, and landscaping.

In addition to enhancing the public realm, strengthening the commercial core at Central and Lake by filling vacant storefronts and supporting existing businesses to meet community needs, is key to establishing a

vibrant town center. More detailed recommendations on strengthening the commercial core at Central and Lake and establishing it as Austin’s Town Center or Central Hub are presented in the Development Recommendations section.



Austin Town Hall Park and Cultural Center.

## 2. Development Recommendations

### 2A. Create a Vibrant Commercial Node at Central and Lake

Enhancing the public realm through streetscaping, wayfinding and signage, and programming (as outlined in Public Realm Recommendation 1D), and creating a vibrant commercial node are both key components of establishing Central and Lake as Austin's Town Center or Central Hub. The panel recommends the following strategies for commercial development:

#### Improve Safety

The perception of safety is essential for establishing a thriving commercial hub. Many community members mentioned safety concerns with groups loitering near the liquor store. In addition to working with the store owner and maintaining police presence as necessary, the panel recommends encouraging an established nonprofit organization or an elected official to set up offices near the intersection. Positive activity and more eyes on the street can help deter negative activity such as loitering and alleviate safety concerns.

#### Activate Vacant Storefronts, Encourage Food-oriented Businesses

Healthy food options, both full-service grocery stores and sit-down restaurants, are lacking in Austin; the

Central Avenue and Lake Street intersection is a prime location to meet this unmet demand. The former Corcoran grocery store building, which is currently vacant, can be an opportunity for attracting food-oriented businesses. In the short-term, the space could support "pop-up" food vendors. In the longer-term, besides a grocery store, potential uses could include a nonprofit commercial kitchen to support the expansion of home-based food businesses, a culinary training facility, a coffee shop/ restaurant, or a co-working space.

Food truck festivals that shut down a block of Lake Street on either side of Central present another opportunity to bring new food options and excitement to the area in the near term. With coordinated music or arts programming in the Austin Town Hall Park, the event could attract visitors from outside the neighborhood as well.

### 2B. Connect to East-West Commercial Corridors

There is a significant unmet demand for retail and dining establishments in Austin. According to a market analysis<sup>1</sup>, Austin loses more than \$175 million annually in retail and dining spending to nearby communities. Central Avenue can play a key role in improving access

<sup>1</sup> City of Chicago and Chicago Central Area Committee. The Soul City Corridor; Development Framework: Chicago Avenue in Austin. August 2020.



PHOTO CREDIT: JEFF FRIERBERG



PHOTO CREDIT: MCGINN PHOTOGRAPHY

Attracting food-oriented businesses in the vacant storefronts can activate the commercial nodes along Central Avenue while bringing needed services and amenities to the neighborhood. The "Alley," with regular activations featuring food and live music, is the centerpiece of Denver's Dairy Block micro-district, a vibrant community of retailers, chefs, creators, and cocktail crafters (left). Food-based businesses are an integral part of the tenant-mix at the Crosstown Concourse, a vertical urban village, in a redeveloped former Sears distribution center in Memphis (right).



to Austin's east-west commercial corridors, thereby expanding their customer base and potentially boosting business.

To facilitate that, in addition to streetscape and mobility improvements outlined under public realm recommendations, the panel recommends coordinating planning efforts within the Austin community so that different corridors can complement each other. For example, The Soul City Corridor Plan, released in 2020, provides a framework for economic development of Chicago Avenue between Austin Boulevard and Cicero Avenue. The "Soul City" designation for Chicago Avenue could be extended to the larger Austin community to include Central Avenue and Lake Sand Madison Street business corridors. The Austin African American Business Networking Association (AAABNA), as the organization leading the implementation of the Soul City Corridor Plan, could collaborate with community partners and businesses to develop a branding guidebook for Soul City businesses to create visual cohesion through signage, coordinated window displays and other design elements.

## 2C. Build Human Capital

An economic development plan for Central Avenue, Austin's Main Street, must include the community's

most important asset, its residents. The former Emmett School at the corner of Central and Madison is being redeveloped into the Aspire Center for Workforce Innovation. Expected to be completed in 2025, the Aspire Center will offer training in advanced manufacturing, entrepreneurial skills, and career development services, improving access to well-paying jobs and economic opportunity for Austin residents.

The panel recommends building on the momentum generated by the Aspire Center to create an "Upskilling Cluster" along Central Avenue with workforce training and career development opportunities in a variety of industries. The underutilized Austin High School building could be a potential training center location, and targeted industries could include hospitality, culinary arts, cosmetology, health, union trades, information technology, and transportation, distribution, and logistics (TDL). The Kehrein Center for the Arts could be a resource for area youth and residents interested in careers in the arts.

Workforce training to job pipelines could be strengthened by developing partnerships that create a direct pathway between program graduates and employers in nearby industrial corridors, the Illinois Medical District, and other job centers.



SOURCE: AUSTIN COMING TOGETHER

Lamar Johnson Collaborative

The former Emmet Elementary school at the corner of Central and Madison is being redeveloped into the Aspire Center for Workforce Innovation, which amongst other community amenities, will provide workforce training in advanced manufacturing and a business incubator.

## 2D. Support Surrounding Residential Neighborhoods

### Support for Homeowners

Many once-grand homes on Central Avenue and neighboring streets have fallen into disrepair over time. Reinvesting in the maintenance of these homes will help stabilize residential neighborhoods in Austin, make it easier for more residents to stay in their homes, and create a stronger foundation for economic development and growth of the community. In addition to improving health and safety conditions for residents, well-maintained properties help create a safe and welcoming street environment, which is beneficial for area businesses. The panel recommends the following strategies to support homeowners:

- Several financial assistance programs are available to help eligible homeowners make necessary home repairs (Table 1), but they can be confusing and difficult to access. Direct outreach to area residents and assistance with the application process can make it easier to access these resources.
- Taking advantage of property tax exemptions, such as the senior property tax freeze which "freezes" the property value for tax calculations for low-income seniors, can free up money that can be used for home repairs. Outreach programs to create awareness of these benefits would be valuable.
- To access federal tax credits for home repairs,



Home repair grants can help properties suffering from deferred maintenance.

especially of older, Victorian style homes on Central Avenue, the feasibility of expanding the Austin Historic District could be explored.

- Chicago's Additional Dwelling Units Ordinance, if expanded beyond the pilot zones into Austin, could provide another source of income for homeowners. The ordinance allows new housing units in attics, basements, and small detached buildings in backyards. Forgivable loans are available to low- and moderate-income homeowners to create these units, which can be rented out generating income for homeowners.

### Support for Multi-Family Apartments

Several apartment buildings on Central Avenue seem to be in poor repair. Active outreach to property owners, and collaborating with them and the City's building code enforcement team can help ensure the buildings are safe for tenants and create a positive street environment. In the case of non-responsive landlords, exploring acquisition and conversion to a co-op ownership model could provide housing stability and path to homeownership for residents.

### Live-Work Units

Some garden apartments or first floor units in multi-family buildings on Central Avenue could be well-suited for conversion into live-work spaces or shared maker spaces for building residents. These conversions could fill an existing gap and support aspiring entrepreneurs in Austin.



Live-work units and shared maker spaces can encourage and support entrepreneurship in the community.

### 3. Implementation Strategies

Transforming Central Avenue into a main street corridor that drives commercial development in the heart of Austin will require a coordinated effort by public and private sector players and dedicated neighborhood organizations, such as Austin Coming Together (ACT). The panel identified a three-pronged implementation strategy:

#### 3A. Coordinate Planning and Investment Strategy for Austin

Several large-scale planning and development initiatives, such as the Soul City Corridor Plan for Chicago Avenue, the Laramie Bank redevelopment on Chicago and Laramie, and the Aspire Center for Workforce Innovation on Central and Madison, are underway in Austin. Greater coordination will help ensure that these significant investments are synergistic and maximize their positive impact on the Austin community. The panel recommends creating a master plan that ties together current planning and development efforts; revisiting and updating the 2018 Quality-of-Life plan as needed, could help achieve

that. Additionally, community-wide design guidelines and a branding strategy for commercial development will help create a cohesive experience across Austin's commercial corridors.

#### 3B. Build and Strengthen Partnerships

Leverage the organizing strength of ACT and the broad base of community partners engaged in implementing the Quality-of-Life Plan, to create a network of public and private sector partners:

- City departments and sister agencies should be encouraged to join the issue area task forces working to implement the AFT plan. This will make it easier to leverage financial and other resources available through the City, County, and State for revitalizing Central Avenue and the larger Austin community. For example, for streetscape and transportation improvements, the Chicago Departments of Transportation, Streets and Sanitation, Planning and Development, and Cultural Affairs and Special Events, Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), and the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT), should all be engaged.

## TABLE 1: FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS FOR HOMEOWNERS

Chicago's Department of Housing offers several programs to help income-eligible homeowners in making repairs to their homes. Although frequently over-subscribed, these programs can be a significant financial resource for Austin's homeowners.

**Home Repair Program (HRP).** Formerly known as the Roof and Porch Repair Program, HRP provides grants to owner-occupants of 1-to-4-unit residential properties for roof or porch repairs. Households earning 80% or less than the Area Median Income (AMI) are eligible. In 2023, for a 4-person household, 80% of AMI is \$88,250/year.

**Emergency Heating Repair Program (EHRP).** EHRP provides service grants to assist owner-occupants of 1-to-4-unit properties with emergency heating system replacements or repairs during winter. Similar to HRP, households must earn 80% or less of AMI.

#### **Small Accessible Repairs for Seniors (SARFS).**

SARFS provides minor safety and accessibility improvements that help seniors remain in their homes. For example, installation of grab bars, lever faucets, door repairs, and smoke detectors. Owner and renter households over the age of 60 and earning 80% or less of AMI are eligible.

#### **Tax Increment Financing-Neighborhood Improvement (TIF-NIP).**

TIF-NIP provides home repair grants for 1-4 unit residences in certain TIF districts. Grants are primarily for exterior repairs, however, up to 30% of the grant may be used for health and safety related interior repairs. Homeowners earning up to 100% of the AMI are eligible. If household income is between 100 to 140% of AMI, homeowners must match the grant dollar for dollar.

- Private and non-profit sector partners should include multi-family property owners and managers, area employers, banks, corporate partners, small business support organizations including the Austin Chamber of Commerce and Austin African American Business Networking Association, and faith-based organizations.

### 3C. Compile Existing & Explore New Funding Streams

#### Compile Information on Available Funding Sources

Homeowners and small business owners need support to understand and access various funding programs available to them. ACT, and its network of public and private sector partners, can coordinate outreach and education efforts helping residents and business owners avail themselves of home improvement and business development grants and loans.

#### Tax Increment Financing (TIF)

TIF is a program that allocates future increases in property taxes from a designated area, or TIF district, to pay for improvements within that area. Currently, parts of the study corridor are under three different TIF districts—Austin Commercial TIF, Madison/Austin TIF, and Harrison/Central TIF (Figure 4). Coordinating plans for the three TIFs could make it easier to designate TIF funds to the highest priority projects in the neighborhood. The panel also recommends exploring expanding the Madison/Austin TIF designation to include all of Central Avenue.

#### Special Service Areas (SSAs)

An SSA is a property-taxing mechanism that can fund physical improvements and special services within a defined geographical area. Currently, the Austin Village SSA #72 or AV72 along Chicago Avenue is the only SSA in Austin (Figure 4). Managed by Westside Health Authority, AV72 raises approximately \$140,000/year through an additional tax on businesses within the SSA. It focuses on art, culture, and beautification of the street to enhance visitor experience and attract more customers to the area. Expanding Special Service Area

#72 to include additional commercial corridors and nodes, such as Central Avenue, Cicero Avenue, Chicago Avenue, Austin Boulevard, and Madison Street could provide a consistent funding source for streetscaping and activation programming throughout Austin. SSA #33 in Wicker Park and Bucktown neighborhoods could serve as a model for a larger SSA spanning multiple commercial corridors in one neighborhood.

#### Maintain and Grow Private Sector Investments

Achieving the Central Avenue corridor's full potential will also require private investment. Private corporations like BMO Harris Bank and non-profit, community-focused organizations such as United Way of Metro Chicago and Chicago Community Trust, are already investing in Austin. The panel recommends engaging and encouraging others to follow their lead, and invest in Austin's vision of a vibrant, healthy community with economic opportunities for all.



Figure 4. Tax Increment Financing (TIF) Districts and SSAs in and near the Central Avenue Corridor.

Map Source: Austin Quality of Life Plan, based on Chicago data portal.

# GETTING STARTED

The panel recommends these first steps to start transforming Central Avenue into a corridor of neighborhood pride and economic opportunity, repositioning it as Austin's Main Street:

- Begin to build visual cohesion and identity along Central Avenue with coordinated wayfinding and signage to draw in people driving east-west through the neighborhood or visiting specific destinations such as the golf course in Columbus Park.
- Establish Austin Town Hall as a destination and a neighborhood gateway through new wayfinding and signage elements. Develop self-guided tours that start at the Town Hall, make it the place to go to access information on Austin's history, places of interest, as well as current happenings.
- Create a master plan for Austin's main corridors to coordinate current and future investments and determine redevelopment priorities for remaining Tax Increment Financing (TIF) funds.
- Coordinate planning efforts with city departments and sister agencies; encourage them to join task forces working on implementing Austin's Quality-of-Life plan. Align Austin's plans with the priorities of the current administration for equitable economic development.
- Continue to work with community members and partners, including CMAP, to realize the future vision for Central Avenue.



SOURCE: AUSTIN COMING TOGETHER

The redevelopment of the former Emmet Elementary School into the Aspire Center for Workforce Innovation, financed in part by Madison/Austin TIF funds, broke ground in May 2023. The Center is expected to open in 2025.

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Many community stakeholders shared their experiences and ideas for Central Avenue with ULI Chicago by participating in group interviews and through other conversations during the TAP. Their contributions are essential to TAP process and have helped shape the Panel's recommendations presented in this report. Community participants include:

- |                  |                  |  |
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Columbus Park Refectory.



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