

Planning effort for commercial streets starts small but thinks big

Civic groups are leading the effort that connects private-sector experts with local chambers of commerce.

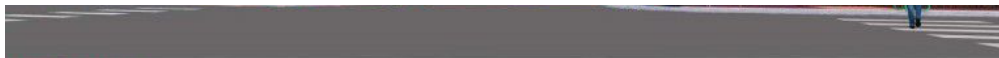
By **David Roeder** on March 2, 2020 5:00 am



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PROPOSED FUTURE CONDITION

The current intersection of Austin Boulevard and Chicago Avenue and a proposed design to make it a western gateway. | Chicago Central Area Committee

Mayor Lori Lightfoot has gotten attention with her plan to steer city investments into 10 neighborhoods on the South and West sides, spending \$250 million over three years to spur business activity and enhance quality of life. “Invest South/West” is her branding for the effort, something that in one way or another most Chicago mayors trot out to show they care about the neighborhoods, even if they jump first when downtown calls.

The advantage of Lightfoot's approach is its focus. It sends a message to the city bureaucracy about where to prioritize public improvements. In comparison, the strategies for former Mayors Richard M. Daley and Rahm Emanuel were scattershot. Some things worked, others didn't, and accountability, particularly with tax-increment financing, was hard to come by.

Lightfoot's program invites its own problems. Can it keep the emphasis on 10 neighborhoods despite politics and legitimate needs elsewhere? Can she bring other governments to heel, such as the transit agencies and the Park District, so that their capital spending aligns with her priorities?

Chicago Enterprise

It might help to start in small ways and with actionable goals. The mayor and her planning commissioner, Maurice Cox, would do well to look at a hyper-local effort spearheaded by the Chicago Central Area Committee and World Business Chicago that is limited but bold in design.

Last year, the two business-oriented groups joined forces to connect civic-minded people in real-estate development, architecture and related disciplines with community chambers of commerce. They zeroed in on

two-block stretches of five commercial streets in neighborhoods that need investment. In some cases, the ambitions grew beyond the two blocks. They looked at 26th Street in Little Village, Chicago Avenue in Austin, 51st Street in Washington Park, 61st Street bordering Washington Park and West Woodlawn and 71st Street in South Shore. Each working group published its initial report in February, available at <http://www.ccac.org/corridor-revitalization-initiative/>.





Like any good private investor, they performed due diligence, examining the zoning and the condition of the properties, considered the anchor institutions such as schools, churches and cultural centers that are nearby, and gauged what residents want their areas to become.

Participants, drawn from the membership rolls of the central area committee, included representatives of the firms John Buck, Ernst & Young, Fifield, Draper & Kramer, Sterling Bay, Perkins and Will, and many others.

The central area committee has shaped plans for the downtown region since 1956 but for years was moribund. It's revitalized in recent years with younger members taking a fresh look at urban issues. The group's chairman, Gregory Hummel, a partner at the law firm Bryan Cave

Leighton Paisner, said the planning effort was an outgrowth of a report the group issued last spring that called for bridging the wealth gap between downtown and struggling neighborhoods. It emphasized that public-private partnerships could help make the connection.

Hummel said each working group got pro bono help from market experts and about \$75,000 in technical assistance from participating firms. "We wanted to concentrate on some blocks where we could activate projects relatively soon. That's something the [planning] commissioner is interested in," he said. Hummel added that he'd "love to bolt onto" the neighborhood investment plan of Lightfoot.



Perhaps it's not a problem that only one of the five targeted streets — Chicago Avenue — is within one of the 10 areas the mayor has

highlighted. The Austin group's report said its biggest issue is that the residents go over to Oak Park to spend their money. It calls for rebranding the stretch from Central to Austin as Soul City and turning vacant land into community gardens and spaces for farmers' markets.

Of the rest of the corridors, 26th Street is faring the best economically, becoming the busiest retail stretch in any Chicago neighborhood. But its report said too many properties are blighted.

The reports from the South Side offered different ideas on blight and beautification. The 71st Street team touched on the "broken windows" theory of urban decay. "The 71st Corridor is not filled with broken windows, nor anti-social behavior nor civil disorder - but it does give the appearance of disinvestment with many vacant storefronts. Some of the occupied buildings and storefronts have very defensive facades with roll-down gates, boarded-up windows and small windows, so you cannot see inside," it said. Some property owners have no fiscal incentive to fix storefronts and rent them, the team concluded.

The underlying theory is that if you renovate problem properties, others start investing and, who knows, maybe people start feeling better about where they are. It's not flashy or conducive to mayoral groundbreaking ceremonies, but it's the kind of change that makes a city more livable.

