

VI. ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Throughout the planning process to-date, community input has been quite consistent with regard to key concerns and community planning priorities. Overall, the community has expressed a willingness to think in a long-range fashion about its future, to be open to change as the community and its surrounding region continue to evolve, and to establish a “road map” for the implementation of key planning priorities.

In the recent community-wide survey, 84% of survey respondents indicated that they are at least “satisfied” with their quality of life. However, fully one-third of respondents indicated that their quality of life was at least “somewhat worse” than it was five years ago. The comprehensive planning process provides a unique opportunity to hone in on the issues that residents consider most troublesome, in order to establish clear policies and implementation strategies to pro-actively address them in the coming years.

Community assets, issues and opportunities that have been identified through public input, field surveys or other research activities to-date are summarized below in general categories, for ease of reference. These considerations will form the basis for the development of a community vision and planning goals in the next step of the planning process.

Key Community Assets

- A family-oriented community with a small-town character
- A strong sense of community with long-term residents
- Multi-generational, with children returning to raise their families
- Good City services and leadership
- Less congested and “commercialized” than neighboring communities
- Housing still affordable, with diverse options available
- Access to regional destinations via Metra and expressways
- Transportation options available (auto, Metra, Pace)
- Excellent schools and community facilities/programs (library, parks, etc.)
- Nearby Forest Preserve amenities (trails and golf course)
- An abundance of open space
- Strong institutions and churches
- A strong Chamber of Commerce
- A large industrial park



Key Planning Issues

Land Use and Development

- Oak Forest has no “center” or “downtown”
- Commercial corridors are a “hodge-podge” now; need to be revitalized (159th and Cicero in particular)
- Limited annexation opportunities for commercial, and limited sites for larger-scale commercial development
- Need to increase and diversify retail offerings
- So much development in surrounding communities is underway; what is left to capture?
- Boarded-up buildings are a deterrent
- Many remaining vacant parcels have environmental constraints
- Existing housing is becoming outdated
- A lack of “move up” housing options; causes some to leave town
- Some housing areas are dense and congested
- Lower-income areas are very concentrated
- Appearance of multi-family properties rated as “poor” by 24% in community survey
- Buyers of new condominiums and townhomes will be price sensitive due to existing housing values
- Convenient access to Metra and expressways is key for new condominium developments

Community Character and Identity / Urban Design

- The appearance of main corridors detracts from the overall community image
- Oak Forest doesn’t have a “high-end” or “vital” image, which deters developers and businesses
- Will new development fit the context of the community?
- Remain a moderate-income community
- Disconnect between areas east and west of Central Avenue (shopping patterns)
- City divided between east/west, north/south; hard to move between
- Some subdivisions/neighborhoods are very isolated; difficult to move between them or into the center
- Safety and security are a concern; they weren’t before
- Poor appearance of rear lot lines (especially along Central and 157th)
- Maintenance of sidewalks and parkways is insufficient in some areas

Access and Circulation

- Links to and between off-street trails are needed (especially for children’s safety)
- Sidewalks missing in several areas
- Commercial corridors are not “walkable” even where sidewalks exist
- Difficult to walk between public uses along Central Avenue



- Need better pedestrian and bicycle connections between residential neighborhoods
- Traffic increasing on arterials
- Traffic backs up on Central near schools at pick-up/drop-off times
- Speed limit on 159th deters potential shoppers
- Consider the potential impacts of extending 171st Street west to Harlem (being considered by Tinley Park)
- Parking lots hard to get in and out of (especially on Cicero)
- Commuter parking demand is expected to increase; how accommodate more spaces?
- Student parking lot at the high school is an unimproved gravel lot; student parking spills over onto nearby streets

Community Facilities and Services

- A new Metra Station is needed
- Maintain and expand open space
- Lack of “open gym” facilities for older youths
- Increasing demand for bilingual services
- School district lines artificially separate the City
- Maintenance in County areas is insufficient
- Forest Preserve District does not maintain creeks and waterways on their property; causes flooding problems for 2nd Ward residents
- Sidewalk maintenance rated as “poor” by 29% in community survey
- Ongoing need for infrastructure renewal, especially as redevelopment occurs
- Need for upgrades to streets, curbs, gutters and sidewalks
- Insufficient street lighting in some areas
- Respond to findings of water system and storm water management studies (both ongoing)
- Accommodate a new salt storage facility, and possibly a new water tower
- Water supply is unreliable in some areas- south of 167th and east of Cicero near 153rd, in particular
- Need for fire station upgrades and a third fire station
- Need for increased police patrols

Economic Development / Implementation

- Stem “leakage” of commercial revenue to other communities
- Need to reduce homeowner tax burden
- Address business retention issues; why do some businesses not succeed?
- Competition from Will County for commercial/industrial development
- Address tendency for residents west of Central to travel west to shop
- Appropriate codes not in place to get desired development patterns



- Stronger design standards and PUD requirements are needed
- Zoning map clarifications are needed

Key Planning Opportunities

Land Use and Development

- Build upon the “Gateway TOD” project as a catalyst for further commercial corridor reinvestment
- Redevelop the Wille Brothers site with a more appropriate use near the Metra Station, and potentially phase out other industrial uses located near residential areas
- Prioritize Cicero Avenue revitalization both north and south of 159th, addressing lot depth limitations
- Capitalize on Oak Forest’s accessibility and status as the third largest suburb in the area to increase commercial opportunities
- Pursue mixed use development, but not “piecemeal” here and there
- Create clusters of commercial, with restaurants and retail near each other and shared parking
- Key target business types will include: restaurants (up-scale, open for dinner), variety stores, miscellaneous retail, clothing and accessories, professional services, banks and day care centers
- Three major commercial redevelopment sites afford opportunities for larger-scale projects (Gateway TOD site, OakFest site and 167th/Cicero)
- Consider strategic annexation and boundary agreements to clarify and “clean up” City boundary
- Consider potential annexation of part(s) of Oak Forest Hospital site, should the County consider selling portions of the facility for development
- Conserve and enhance the character of single family neighborhoods
- Encourage reinvestment in single family homes
- Protect single family residential areas near commercial areas with appropriate buffering techniques
- Provide varied housing alternatives, including rental housing
- Utilize “crime-free rental” program to stabilize existing rental housing areas (ongoing)
- Condominiums, townhomes and senior housing are needed and marketable in Oak Forest

Community Character and Identity / Urban Design

- Build on the existing community character; don’t try to change it
- Maintain strong sense of community commitment
- Don’t become too “commercialized”
- Embrace increasing community diversity and proactively address emerging needs



- Support more community-side events and activities to draw residents together, including sports programs not tied to school district boundaries
- Establish an visual “theme” for continuity along main corridors
- Establish a high quality image with gateway features
- “Raise the bar” with the design of new development; an improved image leads to an improved business environment
- Use natural features as visual assets
- Create gathering space(s) for the community, potentially including water features and/or public art
- Enhance public area landscaping (streetscape, medians, public parking lots, etc.)
- Require significant landscaping at new developments
- Require high quality architectural design at new developments

Access and Circulation

- Build a new, high quality Metra Station as part of a new community “center”
- Improve the “walkability” of commercial corridors (including reducing curb cuts)
- Consolidate access to commercial properties to aid in traffic flow and safety
- Improve connections to commercial areas from neighborhoods (including via pedestrian and bicycle)
- Improve mobility between neighborhoods and across arterials
- Provide convenient parking to support businesses, but in a pedestrian-friendly way
- Accommodate access via all modes of transportation
- Better coordinate Metra and Pace services
- Expand local public transit options, especially demand-responsive services (senior mobility, rush hour service to Metra, etc.)
- Incorporate increased commuter parking capacity, resulting in increased support of local businesses
- Expand trail connections within the City and to existing paths at the City’s periphery, ensuring that trails are suitable for equestrian use in appropriate locations
- Pursue pending bike path improvements at Central Avenue and at 15th Street

Community Facilities and Services

- Maintain and enhance relationships between City and other service providers, including the Forest Preserve District and Bremen Township
- Consider alternatives for a larger, more centrally located senior center
- Develop a collaborative response to growing diversity and the increasing need for bi-lingual services/programs



- Support family-oriented and cultural facilities/programs
- Improve Central Avenue to tie nearby facilities together
- Provide plazas and seating areas adjacent to commercial uses, linked effectively to encourage their use
- Consider alternatives to accommodate a pool facility and/or skate park
- Work cooperatively with the Public Library to support potential future facility improvements, including a potential satellite facility near the Metra Station

Economic Development / Implementation

- 93% of community survey respondents said to aggressively pursue more business development
- Residents will be loyal local shoppers if they have adequate local choices
- Adjust codes to support desired development pattern(s) and quality
- Pursue strong enforcement of City codes to alleviate over-crowding in some multi-family and single family areas
- Establish a marketing strategy to draw in outsiders as shoppers in Oak Forest
- Proactively work to retain and assist existing businesses, including marketing of available incentive programs
- Work cooperatively with the Chamber to market development opportunities and available incentives to developers

