A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PANEL REPORT

# Devon Avenue Corridor

## Lincolnwood and Chicago, IL

September 10-11, 2013

Urban Land Institute
Chicago

Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

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## Introduction

The Village of Lincolnwood and the City of Chicago engaged the Urban Land Institute (ULI), through the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, to provide recommendations for redevelopment of a six-block span on Devon Avenue, between McCormick Boulevard to the east and Lincoln Avenue to the west (Figure 1). The inter-jurisdictional Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) was held September 10-11, 2013.

Positioned on the northern border of Chicago, Lincolnwood is a diverse community surrounded by vibrant ethnic neighborhoods. More than half of its approximately 12,000 residents speak a language other than English at home. Its population is mostly upper-middle-class and aging, and many residents hope to age in place as they have lived in Lincolnwood for decades.

Along most of its eastern boundary, the Village is bordered by the North Shore Channel, a man-made canal that is navigable by boat or canoe. The Channel, completed in 1909, along with the nearby railway, spurred initial development in the area, and the Village was incorporated in 1911 with 359 residents. Today the Channel is part of a larger Chicago River Corridor Development Plan and features bike and walking trails that draw residents from across the region. The Channel also forms a natural habitat for a variety of wildlife and migrating birds.

## Challenges Facing the Devon Avenue Corridor

The focus of the TAP, a six-block corridor on Devon Avenue, was once a vibrant stretch of retail which has declined in recent years. Two long-time retail businesses that were a main draw for the area — Smart Jewelers and Avenue Fashions—departed two years ago, following their customer base north. Their departure has left a void and drained significant energy from the strip, making it hard to attract new retail. Currently, more than 25% of the storefronts in the corridor are vacant. A new business that was slated for the highly visible northwest corner of Devon

Figure 1: Devon Avenue Corridor Study Area

and McCormick has halted construction midstream because of financing issues, leaving the impression that retail in the area is struggling.

**The area, many feel, lacks an identity or brand, and as one community resident put it, "it's a forgotten part of town: unappealing and unattractive."**

Contributing to this perception is the lack of a unified streetscape on the north and south sides of Devon Avenue. Devon Avenue is the dividing line between Lincolnwood and Chicago, and national chains such as Home Depot and other large retail stores have located on the Chicago side (south side) of the street. These businesses do not always front Devon Avenue and have large surface parking lots, creating a different sense of scale than on the north side of the street.

The businesses on the Lincolnwood side of Devon, in contrast, are in smaller buildings built in a mix of architectural styles, and directly front the sidewalk. Many of these storefronts are currently occupied by small, independently owned businesses ranging from a check-cashing outlet to a real estate office. Most businesses on the Lincolnwood side rely on on-street parking for their customers. Ironically, as many noted, the retail on the Chicago-side is more suburban in character than the actual suburban side of the street.

Another challenge in the corridor is pedestrian and bike safety. In the study area, Devon Avenue is a heavily trafficked stretch of four lanes carrying high-speed traffic. The panel found the Corridor to be highly auto-centric, but with limited parking options and few pedestrian amenities to ensure safe crossings. Lincolnwood and Chicago officials as well as local residents regard pedestrian safety as a big concern, especially near the Post Office, which attracts significant foot traffic.

Home Depot on the Chicago (south) side of Devon Avenue

Storefronts on the Lincolnwood (north) side of Devon Avenue

Devon Avenue lacks pedestrian crosswalks in the study area

## The TAP Process and Framing Questions

The Village's vision for the corridor is a dynamic, safe, and attractive commercial district that provides various goods and services that complement the residential neighborhood immediately to the north. A vibrant commercial district and enhanced streetscape, the Village hopes, will also help establish an attractive gateway into the Village. Recognizing the importance of collaboration, the Village of Lincolnwood partnered with the City of Chicago to jointly sponsor this TAP. By coordinating efforts across jurisdictional lines the Village hopes to create a cohesive identity for the area.

The Village of Lincolnwood and the City of Chicago identified several complementary questions and issues that they hoped the TAP could address. These are:

1. What is the market for commercial redevelopment in the corridor? If commercial market demand is limited, what are other uses that could be successful in the corridor?

2. Would streetscaping have an impact on the viability of development? What impact would pedestrian and median improvements have? What type of streetscaping would be most valuable?

3. How can the corridor take advantage of nearby transportation assets such as the North Shore Channel Trail, PACE, and CTA bus routes? What opportunities are there for connections to Sauganash and Weber Spur trails across Devon Avenue?

4. What is the plan for the site at the northeast corner of Devon and McCormick (immediately adjacent to the study area)?

ULI Chicago convened a panel of experts to provide technical assistance to the Village and the City by developing realistic, implementable strategies to address the issues along Devon Avenue. The ten-member panel met over two days and included experts from a variety of fields including transportation planning, real estate redevelopment, sustainable design, and, landscape design. The panel was chaired by John Mays, a lawyer specializing in real estate development at Gould & Ratner, LLP, a mid-sized Chicago law firm.

To prepare for the panel, all panelists reviewed detailed background briefing material in advance. During the two day panel, the panelists toured the study area, heard from City of Chicago and Village of Lincolnwood representatives, and met with 40 area stakeholders, including residents and business owners. Using this information, the panelists worked together to develop several near term and longer term strategies to rejuvenate the study area.

## Key Recommendations

The Village has several strengths to capitalize on, including its location, diverse demographics, high median income, strong retail base, and good fiscal health. However, socio-economic realities, including an aging population and the existence of retail elsewhere in the Village that competes with the corridor, limit the potential of the study area. Further, within the corridor, smaller lots, limited parking, and a small buffer area (alleyway) with the single-family residential neighborhoods, create challenging conditions for retail.

**To restore vitality to the corridor, the Village must adapt to demographic changes, the changing retail landscape they usher in, as well as the physical constraints of the corridor. Additionally, the Village and the City must continue to collaborate to ensure that future developments and improvements create a more cohesive and a safer experience for all users along the corridor.**

The panel's recommendations to address the questions posed by the Village and the City, focus on:

- **Redevelopment Opportunities,**
- **Transportation Improvements - Safety and Access, and**
- **Streetscape Enhancements**

## Redevelopment Opportunities

**1. Focus Redevelopment Efforts on Key Sites**
The panel recommends focusing on key sites that have the most development potential and can re-energize the rest of the corridor (Figure 2). These sites include:
A: Northwest corner of Devon Avenue and McCormick Boulevard,
B: Northwest corner of Lincoln and Devon Avenues,
C: Whistler's Restaurant,
D: Vacant lot on Drake Avenue
E: Vacant MovieTheater Site

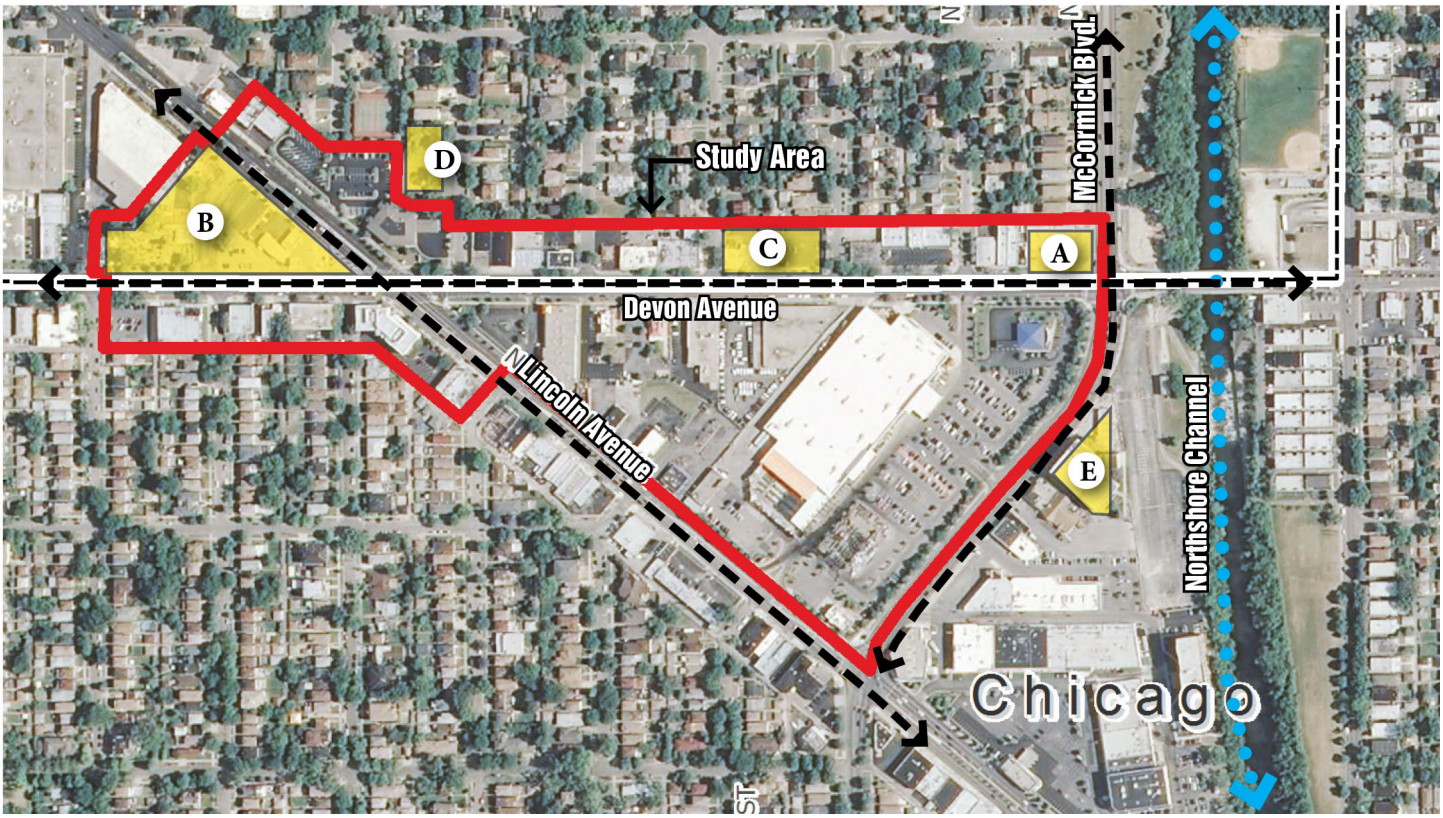


Figure 2: Key Redevelopment Opportunities

**Site A: Northwest corner of Devon and McCormick.**
This 21,300 square feet parcel, as a key bookend to the corridor and with strong potential for redevelopment, should be a primary, and immediate, focus for the Village. If the current tenant is unable to complete construction and start operations in a timely fashion, Lincolnwood should recruit another business for this location. The site and the currency exchange to its west are under the same ownership and could be assembled for redevelopment. Because of its high visibility, the panel recommends a retail focus for this location. A developer could use Tax Increment Financing (TIF) proceeds to renovate or rebuild.

Construction remains halted on the site at the NW corner of Devon and McCormick

**Site B: Northwest corner of Lincoln and Devon Avenues.** This 2.9 acre site, which forms the other bookend of the study area, consists of three parcels currently occupied by a Shell gas station, miniature golf, and a parking lot, as well as a Village-owned street that could be vacated.

As an assembled site with one owner, this corner is another attractive option for redevelopment. TIF status would be particularly helpful for redevelopment. Because of the need to assemble the parcel, vacate the street and potentially complete an environmental clean-up, this site should be viewed as a longer-term redevelopment opportunity.

Northwest corner of Devon and Lincoln Avenues is currently under-utilized

**Site C: Whistler's Restaurant.** Located between Kimball and Trumbull Avenues, Whistler's is a key redevelopment site because of its size (28,800 square feet), large parking area (70 spaces), and single ownership. By upgrading the existing restaurant, or redeveloping it as a new destination-oriented single or multiple tenant restaurant, this site can become a big draw on Devon Avenue. A new or upgraded restaurant could potentially attract many more people to the area, increasing the customer base for other nearby businesses.

Whistler's has the large on-site surface parking lot on the north side of Devon

**Site D: Vacant lot on Drake between Devon and Arthur Avenues.** This 26,400 square feet site, which is privately owned and has been vacant for more than 50 years, is a prime residential development opportunity, and should be included in any TIF district that is established for the Devon Corridor. The lot, which is zoned R-4, could be developed as townhomes or market-rate senior housing. It could also be developed as usable open space. If developed, this property would generate additional tax revenue for the TIF.

Vacant private property on Drake Avenue

**Site E: Vacant Movie Theater Site.** Although not within the immediate study area, the vacant movie theater site at the southeast corner of McCormick and Devon, offers another significant redevelopment opportunity. Because the site is located in Chicago, Lincolnwood should collaborate with the City of Chicago including the 50th Ward Alderman's office, to incorporate the site as an important component of the future plans for the overall area. If redeveloped, a retail use similar to Walgreens could be appropriate for this site.

## Transportation Improvements - Safety and Access

The Devon corridor is a heavily trafficked span. However, it also has the potential to be a walkable, inviting stretch, with certain safety improvements. While motorists are important, so too are pedestrians. The visible activity that a highly walkable street filled with pedestrians encourages, sends a signal that the area is a good place to shop and linger.

A unique feature of the area is its Orthodox Jewish community, which is forbidden to drive on the Sabbath. Therefore, there is a built-in walking community already, which with some encouragement via high-quality design, could be convinced to abandon their cars and walk on other days of the week as well. In addition, people are coming from other parts of the region to use the trails along the North Shore Channel. Once completed, the Saugansh Trail and the Weber Spur Trail along with the existing North Shore Channel Trail, will form a strong regional bike network, a significant portion of which will traverse through Lincolnwood. Improving bike and pedestrian access to the Devon corridor from these trails would encourage additional visitors.

Creating opportunities for people to "trip-chain"—park and shop in two or more places—makes for a more vibrant area, as does the seamless integration of public transit. Encouraging a more walkable area also reduces the need for additional parking, because customers can park once and walk between shops.

**With some effort, the six-block stretch of Devon could be a "complete" street—a street attractive to all users.**

**1. Improve Pedestrian Safety**

A key element in any plan to attract more pedestrians is to improve safety. Two of the most frequent comments from residents were that the area does not have a cohesive look and that the lack of pedestrian crossings was dangerous. This latter concern was confirmed by looking at accident data, which shows higher incidences of pedestrian and bicycle accidents in the study area, compared to the other segments of Devon Avenue. (Figure 3)

To transform this auto-oriented stretch of Devon into a "complete" street, Lincolnwood and Chicago should work together to develop a shared vision for the corridor. Also because the Illinois Department of

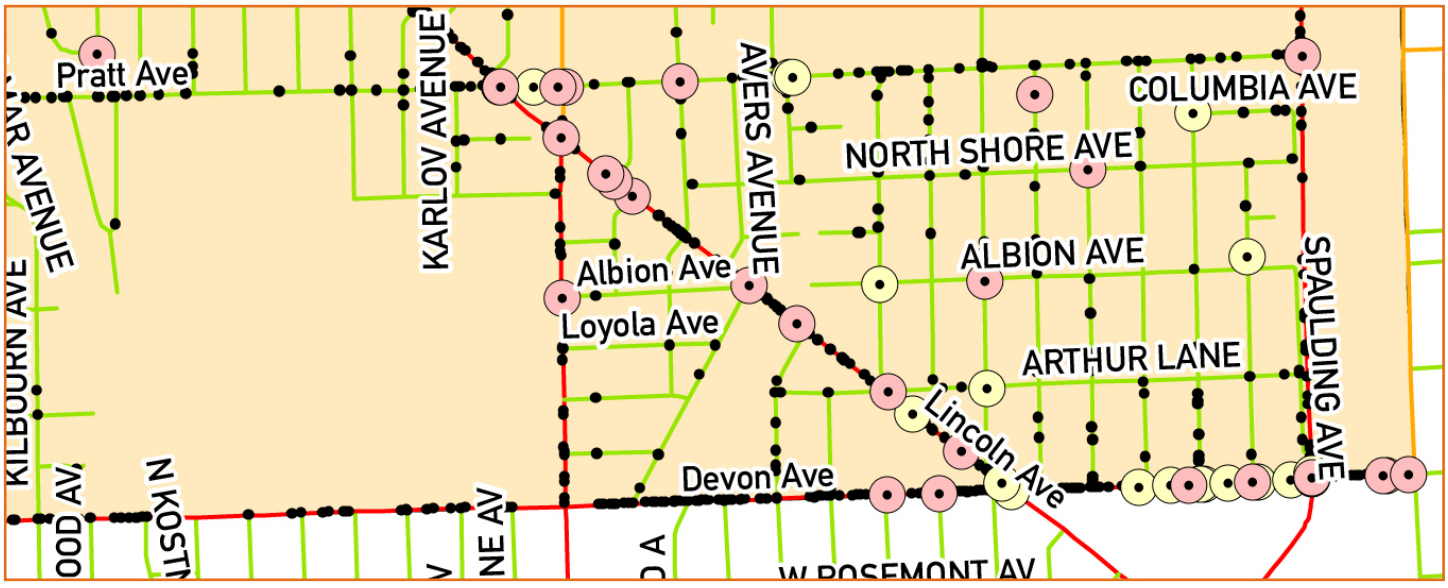


Figure 3: Study Area Crash Map
Prepared by Active Transportation Alliance, Source: IDOT 2006-2011

Transportation (IDOT) has jurisdiction over Devon Avenue, Lincolnwood and Chicago should jointly approach IDOT to make safety improvements. Features such as refuge islands, curb bump-outs, and improved sidewalks, will certainly help.

**Create refuge Islands.**Pedestrian safety can be improved by creating a median with pedestrian refuge islands. This allows people to cross halfway and then safely pause before crossing the other half of the street.

**Add pedestrian crosswalks.** The panel recommends installing a crosswalk with pedestrian-activated flashing beacons near the Post Office at Devon and Kimball. The beacons signal to drivers that a pedestrian is about to cross. Although a signal at the intersection is the best option for safety, it is also the most expensive.

**Create Curb Bump-outs.**The panel also recommends curb bump-outs at intersections with residential streets. Bump-outs shorten the distance from one side of the street to the other for pedestrians, making their passage safer.

**Complete Sidewalks.** The Village should complete the missing sidewalk between Lincoln and Hamlin streets, and should maintain continuous sidewalks along Devon.

Mid-block crosswalks and curb bump outs allow pedestrians to cross safely

A landscaped "end-cap" for on-street parking enhances safety and appearance

**2. Create Bike Lanes**

The Panel recommends adding a bike lane, both to slow traffic and to increase transportation options in the corridor. Making Devon Avenue bike-friendly will make the bike trail along the Channel more accessible from the proposed Saugansh and Weber Spur trails, further strengthening the regional bike network.

Bike lanes increase transportation options

**3. Improve Parking Options**

The panel recommends that the Village consider creating angled parking on residential streets at intersections with Devon. Angled parking will significantly increase the amount of parking in the area and is likely to work within the existing street width. The Village could also approach MB Bank to share some of the parking in the large bank lot with area businesses, especially during the evening, when the bank is closed, but the other businesses are open. Additionally, the Village should create end-caps for street parking to enhance pedestrian safety.

A detailed engineering study will be needed to develop a new "complete street" design for Devon Avenue. However, based on preliminary roadway measurements provided by the Village of Lincolnwood, Devon Avenue is approximately 60 feet wide from curb to curb in the study area, which is sufficient to incorporate many of the safety recommendations. Over a longer term, by reconstructing curbs and redesigning the entire right-of-way, which is almost 100 feet, Devon Avenue can be transformed into a street that is safe and attractive for all users. Figure 4 presents a roadway cross-section concept developed by the Active Transportation Alliance which illustrates several pedestrian and bike safety features recommended for Devon Avenue.

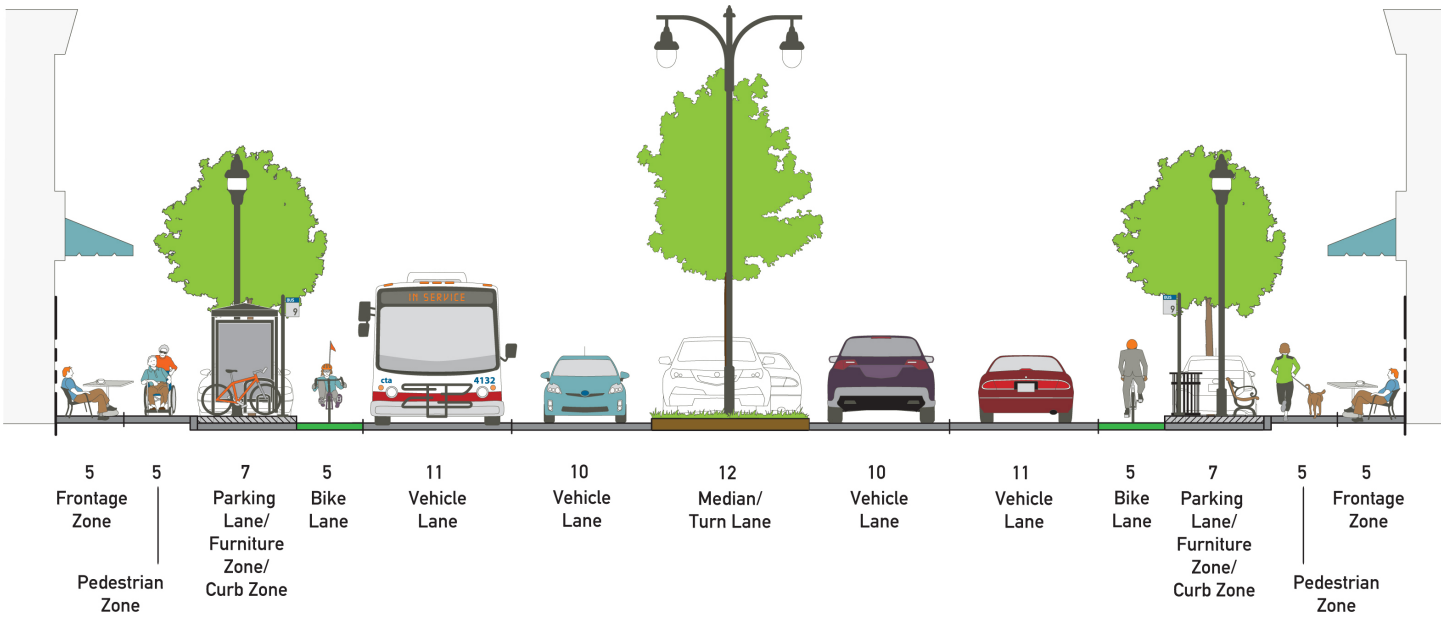


Figure 4: Typical Cross-Section for a Urban Commercial Mixed Use Boulevard
Source: Complete Streets, Complete Networks Design Manual by the Active Transportation Alliance

## Streetscape Enhancements

**An improved streetscape along Devon Avenue can help build enthusiasm for the area and signal visually that the area is rejuvenated.As one resident said, "The worst case outcome is to do nothing."**

To improve the look and feel of the corridor, the corridor should be tied into the North Shore Channel and trail on the east, and Lincoln Avenue on the west side. To make shoppers feel welcome and engaged in the shopping experience, the panel suggests several beautification strategies, some immediate, others short-term, as well as longer-term plans. The panel feels strongly that the investment in landscaping and beautification would reap dividends in increased shoppers, and several features could greatly improve safety. Furthermore, streetscape is an essential investment if private developers are to show any interest.

50th Ward Alderman, Debra Silverstein, reported that Devon Avenue just east of the study area will undergo major streetscaping starting in 2014. With funding from an established TIF district and the State of Illinois, Devon Avenue from Kedzie Avenue to Leavitt Street in Chicago, will see new street lighting, wider sidewalks with decorative pavers, trees, benches, new crosswalks and community identifiers, among other improvements. To remain an attractive draw for shoppers and service seekers, the panel recommends that Lincolnwood focus on improving its own streetscape along Devon Avenue, drawing from the existing Streetscape Plan adopted by the Village for Lincoln Avenue. In addition to aligning with the design elements of Lincoln Avenue, key elements of the new streetscape should include public art and public spaces (Figures 5a and 5b). More specifically, the panel recommends that the Village do the following:

**1. Clean up the Area**
Encourage current building owners to invest in their own properties to make them more attractive for leasing. In addition, have the Village Public Works Department do an immediate clean-up, focusing on sidewalks, trash, weeds, and other eyesores.

**2. Create Gateways**
The panel recommends focusing on the corner of Devon and McCormick as the gateway into the Village from the south and the east, and the corner of Devon and Lincoln as a gateway to the north and west. The panel recommends creating gateways as a way to visually bring attention to the transition into the Village and to slow traffic, giving drivers a reason to pause and look around.

The panel further recommends creating a gateway green space on the empty lot owned by the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District (MWRD), on the east side of McCormick. Because MWRD's preference is to create and maintain developed open space along the Channel, the panel proposes creating a public space that could also be used for a farmer's market or local food trucks. The area is tied directly to the bike trails, which can encourage bikers to stop and explore the Village.

**3. Install Public Art**
The MWRD lot could be the beginning of several public art displays throughout the Devon corridor, which can be used as an element of continuity in the streetscape. Art is already on display along the bike paths, and there are many nonprofit and commercial organizations anxious to support public art installations. Some of the art could also be functional, such as bike racks or a bus stop. The panel recommends that the art installations begin on the northeast corner of Devon and McCormick, and continue down Devon.

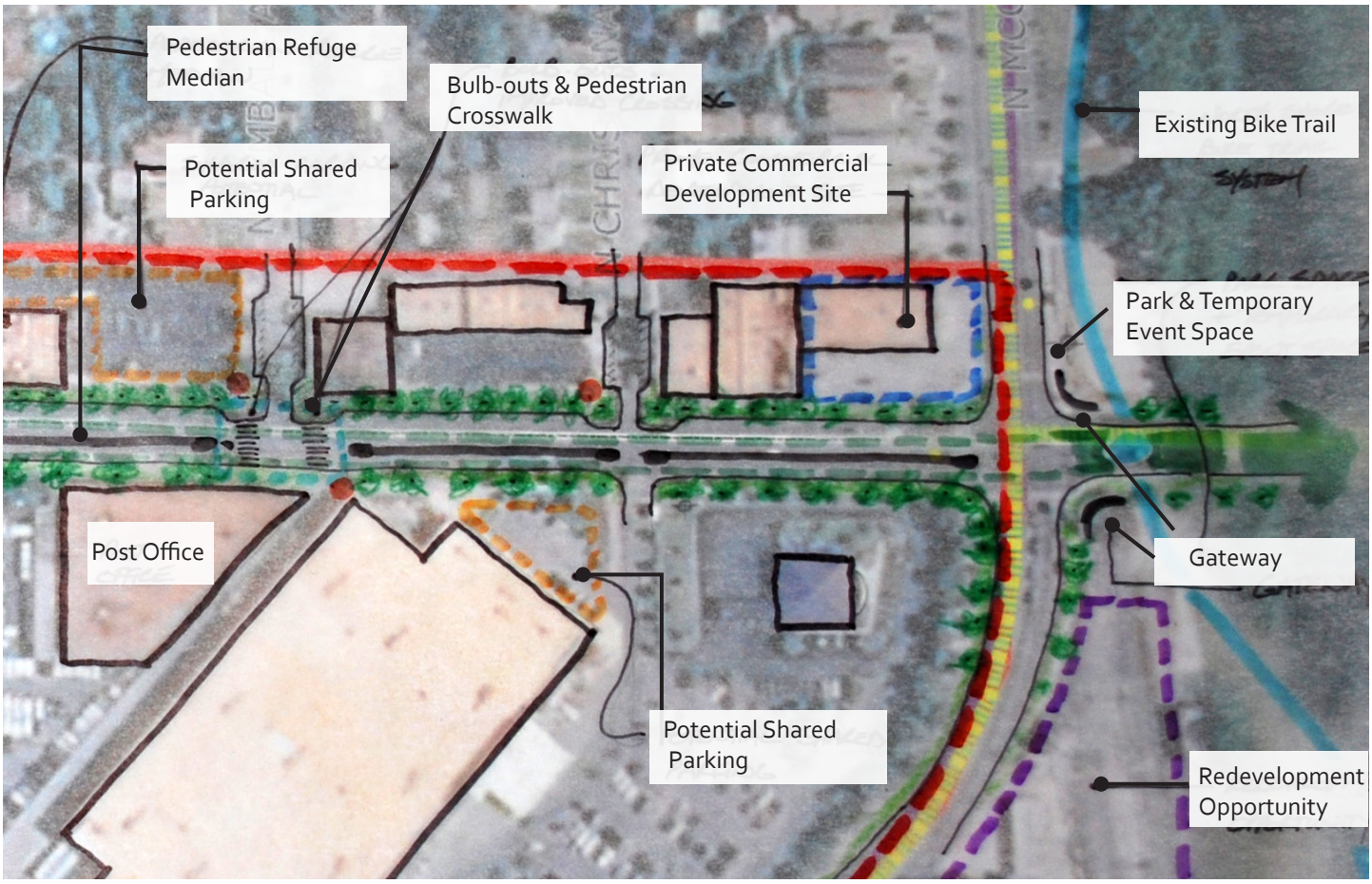


Figure 5a: Redevelopment Sketch for the eastern portion of the study area prepared during the two day panel

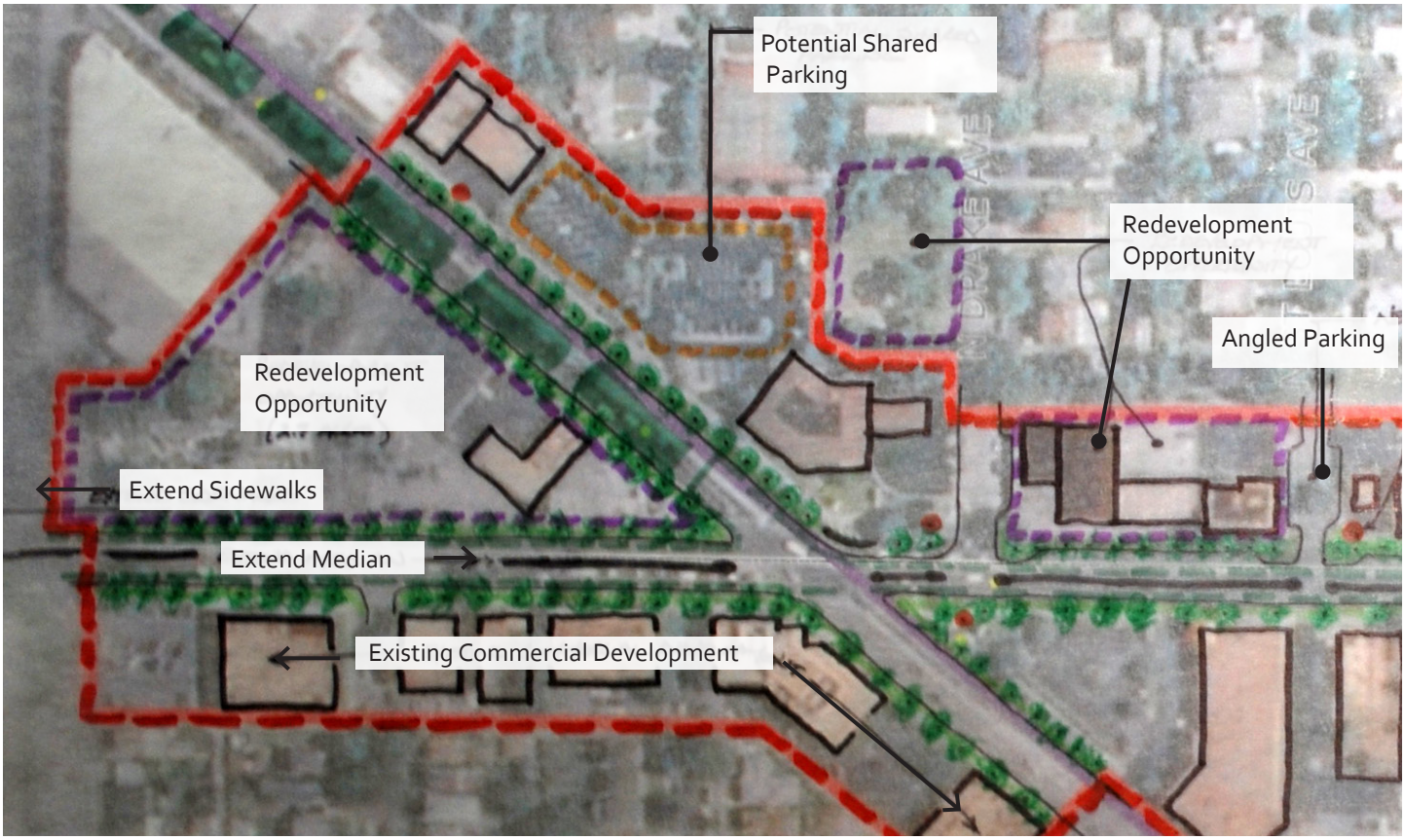


Figure 5b: Redevelopment Sketch for the western portion of the study area prepared during the two day panel

### 4. Create a Unified Corridor Design

Visual elements indicated in the Lincoln Avenue Streetscape Plan can be extended down into Devon Avenue. These elements include trees, benches, planter boxes, lighting, and signage. The elements should be placed on both sides of Devon, Lincolnwood and Chicago, to tie the street together visually.

Examples of Recommended Street Furnishings
Source: Lincoln Avenue Streetscape Plan, Village of Lincolnwood

## Financing the Improvements

The key to successful commercial/service redevelopment, the panel notes, will be to establish a Tax Increment Finance (TIF) district. TIF districts capture increases in property tax revenues in a specific area without changing the actual tax rate for property owners. Any increased tax revenue is held in a specific TIF fund, which is used to help finance improvements aimed at stimulating economic growth within the district. Village opponents of a TIF on Devon have argued that current taxing bodies, such as the school system, could lose revenue because under a TIF, their share of the property tax would be limited to the

equalized assessed value of the area at the time the TIF was approved. While the TIF district is in place, tax revenue from increased property values generated within the TIF boundaries go into the TIF fund and then are reinvested in that area.

Although acknowledging the community resistance to a TIF, the panel feels strongly that short of floating a bond, this form of financing is the best option to rejuvenate the area. A TIF would be a clear draw to real estate developers, whose investment can stem the deterioration of the corridor. Without a TIF, the area will continue to decline and with it, the overall tax base. Ultimately, the infrastructure improvements in the area will benefit the public, not the private developers, as some opponents to the TIF have worried.

In addition to a TIF, the panel encourages the Village to reach out to local businesses to support beautification efforts. Home Depot, for example, has already volunteered trees for the streetscape project. In addition, the Village could target $25,000 annually in Property Enhancement Program funding for four years for the Devon Corridor in the budget. The Property Enhancement Program is designed to provide an incentive to business owners to make improvements to their building's exterior or other property enhancement that will improve the appearance of a business district. The panel also encourages the Village to coordinate with the City of Chicago on beautification planning.

To finance the pedestrian- and bike-safety improvements, the panel recommends approaching IDOT for funds through its Highway Safety Improvements Program. Finally, the panel recommends timing the more major renovations along Devon to align with the eventual sewer repairs to be done by MWRD, as a way to "dig once," and save money.

## Conclusion

The panel recommends that the Village focus on improving the look and safety of the Devon Corridor as a gateway to the Village and to encourage a service use focus for the area with retail on key sites. The panel also identified options for funding the recommended upgrades and redevelopment efforts. Additionally, the panel has created a set of immediate and longer-term steps the Village can take to implement the recommendations presented in this report.

### Immediate Actions

- Establish a TIF, without which developer interest will wane.
- Send Village crews to clean up trash, weeds, and other eyesores along Devon.
- Address the issues at the languishing, highly visible site at the northwest corner of Devon/McCormick.
- Establish relationships with local business and land owners in the corridor; develop a database of information such as rents and vacancies that are critical to developers.
- Reach out to businesses for potential sponsorships of public art and streetscaping elements.
- Actively engage with MWRD for the post-remediation use of the site on the northeast corner of McCormick and Devon.
- Establish regular meetings with the Chicago alderman's office, and the City planning staff to build a strong relationship between the Village and the City.

### Longer-term Initiatives

- Establish a zoning overlay district with flexibility in use and density to entice redevelopment on key sites.
- Approach the entire street with a consistent visual design plan and provide incentives for current owners to upgrade their properties.
- Address safety as a part of street design. Partner with the City of Chicago to jointly approach IDOT regarding implementing pedestrian and bike safety improvements along Devon.
- Address parking issues including angled parking on side streets off Devon as a part of overall street design. Identify potential funders for the public art related recommendations.
- Work with owners of key sites to facilitate land assembly and/or redevelopment.

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