

# A Walk Down Main Street

A Community Conversation on a Sustainable Commercial Corridor

Presented by Go Green Skokie





# WELCOME TO MAIN STREET

Imagine taking a walk down Main Street on a pleasant summer morning just to see what's happening. The day's events include a dance recital outside Tana Dance studio. Nearby children are playing on a climbing structure. Friends, families, and neighbors enjoy coffee and pastries from a local coffee shop or a visiting food truck. Blooming flowers fill the air with their fragrance wafting in a gentle breeze.

This isn't our experience today. But these visions were shared by 22 local participants of a walk and charrette, a design and brainstorming session, on a Sunday afternoon in October 2022.

## THE MEETUP

Go Green Skokie invited local residents and stakeholders to share a community conversation about sustainable development along this under performing commercial area. We asked them to share their experiences, indulge in the possibilities, and consider the opportunities to reimagine this neighborhood corridor. Goals include leveraging Smart Growth Principles to create a distinct sense of place, cultivate community, and support thriving locally owned and operated businesses.

## THE WALK

We started with a guided walk along Main Street to observe the existing conditions and become familiar with the properties. We saw many buildings with vacant storefronts and wide, under-utilized plazas. Some participants reminisced about a lost era of Main Street, while others were quick to imagine new possibilities.

Zoning challenges, parking guidelines, and development requirements created confusion about who is responsible for maintaining these plaza spaces. The original intentions of these spaces were unclear and without consistent guidance they fell into disrepair.

Many participants recalled visiting Main Street fondly. Shops, businesses, and gathering spaces abounded. A lost era of riding bikes, visiting the shops, and gathering together was deeply missed. These participants wanted to regain that community center.

Still others were quick to imagine new possibilities: fill vacant storefronts with art from local school children, park food trucks on the plazas, break up the pavement to create more green space with trees and planters, change the zoning to build mixed-used structures like townhomes above commercial spaces, and, from our youngest participants, "More ice cream!"

The hunger for community was strong. Participants wanted to see a thriving commercial corridor along Main Street.

## THE CHARRETTE

After the walk, participants gathered at Tana Dance Studio for the design charrette. We broke the group into three teams. Each team had a map of the Main Street commercial corridor, markers, pens, and their ideas. Over the next hour, we created imaginative sketches of what we envision for the future. At the end of the charrette, each team presented their ideas to the larger group. Ideas ranged from specific businesses, features that create a sense of place, ways to calm traffic, pop-ups, tactical urbanism, and events to build community. We discussed current barriers and future challenges to development.

The event ended with a renewed sense that an engaged community can support a vibrant commercial district along Main Street.



Vacant store fronts with wide, unused, concrete plazas

# VISIONS FOR MAIN STREET



## A CLEAR, BRANDED IDENTITY

- A grand attraction or a simple sign over the street, something distinctive
- An international/multicultural identity to mirror the surrounding community

## AREAS FOR CASUAL, SPONTANEOUS GATHERING

- Attractive benches, game tables, and other public furniture
- Green space, planters, places for rest

## FAMILY-FRIENDLY WITH A VARIETY OF OPTIONS FOR ALL AGES

- A climbing sculpture
- A cafe where retired residents can sit together and talk during the day
- An after-school hangout

## COMPLEMENTARY BUSINESSES

- A restaurant/cafe and co-working space
- Live/work spaces
- Business services/incubator
- Shared studio and gallery spaces

## MIXED USES: RESIDENTIAL/COMMERCIAL

- Retail/Residential
- Business incubator/Shared commercial space
- Services/Offices
- Live/Work
- A restaurant or food court with multiple vendors, rotating which is “featured” in the walk-up window
- Outside restaurant and store spaces
- Food trucks

“We just want somewhere we can meet up with a friend!”

“We used to ride our bicycles down here and gather at the bakery. It was a place to come to. I miss that Main Street.”

## WALKABLE/BIKEABLE, HUMAN SCALE

- Large, painted pedestrian crossing zones as a pedestrian refuge, extended curbs
- Furniture - benches, tables
- Greenery, shade
- Holiday lights, lights across the street
- Bike/micro mobility share station
- Bike racks
- Bus line with sheltered bus stops
- An art competition to generate public art/murals
- Traffic calming



# ELEMENTS FOR TRANSFORMATION

## SMART GROWTH PRINCIPLES FROM OTHER COMMUNITIES

- Planters
- Public art (climbing sculpture)
- Lights – holiday lights, lights across the street
- Street furniture – benches, tables
- Gateway treatments—Branding/Identity
- Traffic calming – signaled cross walks, painted crosswalks, curb extensions, midblock pinch points, median refuge islands
- Walk up services and food windows
- Food trucks and pop-up stores
- Divvy station/bike share
- Sheltered bus stops



Planters and public art in Lincoln Square



Benches and tables for the community to gather



Gateway treatment in Fulton Market



A local Skokie food business on wheels



Walk-up services and public art



Example of a Divvy station or shared bike hub



Public planter in Humbolt Park



Example of a covered bus stop



# CHALLENGES

## BARRIERS TO CHANGE

- Lack of clarity about ownership & use of spaces in front of stores
- Dated/broken facades and store fronts – and lack of information about available resources
- Current property configuration
- Taxes
- Zoning and onerous building restrictions
- Aging/obsolete buildings
- Approval process with high up-front cost and without clearly defined criteria / benchmark

## THOUGHTS FROM OUR PARTICIPANTS

“We have to come up with a parking study and architectural drawings and the whole package all at once, even if the project is going to be rejected just based on the parking. A small entrepreneur or not for profit can only afford to do that once, but they can’t get any guidance from the Village ahead of time on whether approval is likely at the end of all that.”

“I’d like to put something out front on the concrete, but when I called the Village to ask if it’s allowed, they kept forwarding me around from one department to another and I didn’t have time to follow up.”

“The taxes and operating costs are so high, and after Covid, a potential tenant gave up in fear that taxes will go up still further due to closures caused by the pandemic.”

“You can park any time of the day or night on Main Street, but businesses are being stopped before they can start by the parking requirements. Parking may be a problem one day, but if it is, that will mean we’ve already succeeded.”

“I tried to put a multistory building in but they required an elevator and lots of parking and I couldn’t afford it.”



Guided walk along Main Street

“Our storefront window was broken and it took us months to be able to afford to fix it, and no one offered any help. We have been here for 30 years and we have never received a dime of help. During Covid we saw people all around us getting aid, but because we are family owners it doesn’t count as payroll and we didn’t get anything.”



# ACTION ITEMS

## OPPORTUNITIES

- Underutilized paved spaces in front of stores
- Healthy adjacent residential community
- Desire from neighbors for an area with some identity and a sense of place

## IMMEDIATE INTERVENTIONS

- Monthly events that feature food trucks, music, collaboration from local vendors and business owners
- Market lights/string lights, planters, benches, bike parking and other lower-cost street elements for immediate activation
- Pop up art installations and murals
- Display kids art in empty storefronts
- Business networking events to share knowledge and resources about programming that already exists and is underutilized.
- Mural/Art competition in conjunction with the Fine Arts Commission

"Walking along Main Street is brutal. There's no relief from the sun. No benches or shade."



Empty storefronts ripe for reinvigoration

"Our family would unequivocally support a coffee shop and dessert shop."

"I've thought for a long time that there's such an opportunity for Main Street to be such a cute area with lots of great boutiques, cafes, etc. I've never understood why it's so dead."

"More ice cream!"



Participants in the charrette

## LONG-TERM INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

- Area market study
- Streetscape improvement plan with subsequent investments
- Proactive zoning changes – neighborhood mixed use
- Proactive business development assistance for small businesses
- Streamlined project review processes with pre-submission consultations
- Reduce or eliminate parking requirements
- Increase density and raise height limitations to allow multi-story development
- Ombudsman for local businesses
- Encourage participation in the local chamber – business to business networking.
- Area design guidelines and recommendations from the Village



# CONCLUSION



A couple of enthusiastic participants ready to share their ideas

## WHAT IS COFFEE?

“A place to come together. We go to Starbucks because there isn’t anything else.”

"I would LOVE for that corridor to become a place that we can spend a whole day during the summer - things for the kids to do, a lot of outdoor dining."

## OUR THOUGHTS

- Outdated and restrictive zoning and building requirements inhibit new opportunities
- There is expressed skepticism and discouragement for an area that has been underserved
- Commitment and enthusiasm from newer businesses is strong and there is a desire to contribute to the vitality of the area
- There are numerous opportunities to reimagine Main Street

## OUR COMMUNITY IS WHAT WE MAKE IT

Building vital, engaging, and healthy community spaces is no mystery. Humanity has been doing it for thousands of years. Our walk revealed the character of the street, its constraints and opportunities. Our charrette identified elements and strategies to revitalize the area, including revisions in land use and building regulations, programs and activities, and business initiatives.

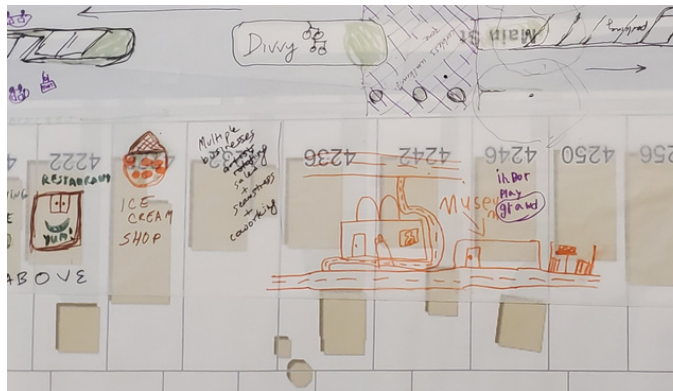
We want a village government that fosters a relationship with its community. We want to be forward thinking and strategic about some of the barriers that are preventing smaller commercial or community development from flourishing on Main Street. And we want to evaluate those barriers in a clear and fair-minded way that feels accessible to people who have an idea for a new business and want to know where to start.



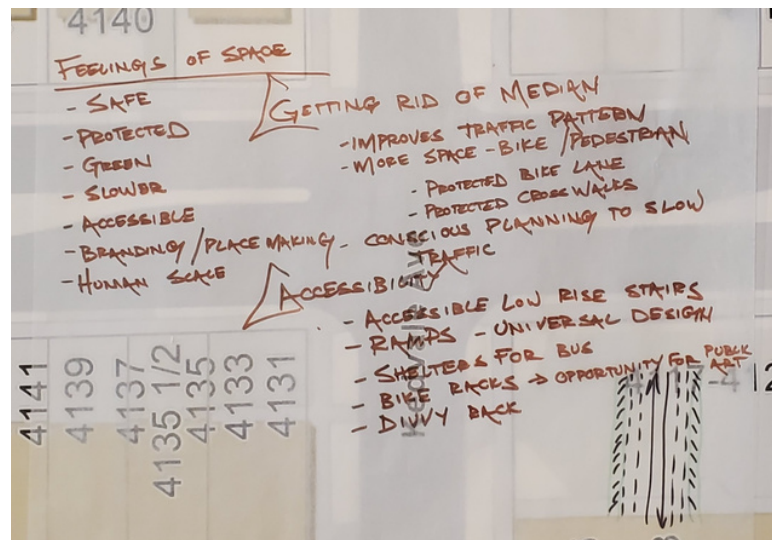
# SKETCHES FROM THE CHARRETTE



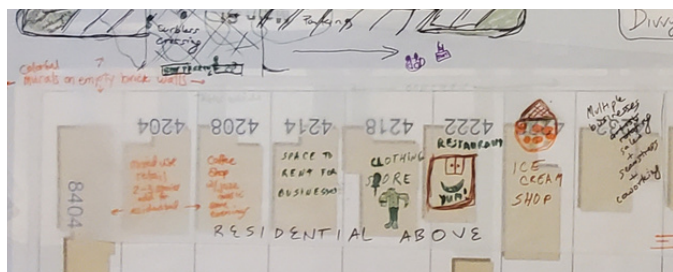
Team #1 imagined slowed traffic, thriving businesses, renewed parking strategies, mixed-use spaces, public art, and of course, ice cream!



Detail from of Team #1



Team #2 brainstormed ways to feel safer and more protected while walking along Main Street. These ideas included features of universal and accessible design, a focus on cycling, transportation, and place-making.



Detail from of Team #1



