



**For Immediate Release:** 03.04.03

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Proposals Sought for Development of Village-Owned Property on Lake Street

Experienced developers are about to be asked to present ideas for the nearly 35,000 square feet of publicly owned property that fronts along the 1100 block of Lake Street in the heart of Oak Park's downtown business district.

The formal Request for Proposals (RFP), scheduled to be issued Wednesday, seeks concepts for the former Maple Furrier store and adjacent metered parking lot as well as the Drechsler Building, a structure with historic significance that development proposals will be required to preserve.

In addition to incorporating the Drechsler Building into the project design, proposals also must create a pedestrian and vehicle right-of-way between Lake Street and the Holley Court Garage. Access to the garage and an open, inviting walkway are key components of the Village's long-term plan to keep the downtown pedestrian-oriented and linked to the multi-modal mass transit hub on North Boulevard.

RFP responses are due at Village Hall by 5 p.m., May 2.

"The Village Board has spent many, many hours preparing to take the steps necessary to transform this property into something that will further enhance the vitality of the downtown area," said Village President Joanne E. Trapani. "Clearly, the time is right to act. The momentum and interest created by the new retail development just to our west has made our downtown very desirable for investment. We need to act while the interest is high.

"Of course, issuing an RFP is just the first step. Once we see what the possibilities may be, we will be eager to work with the community to craft a development approach that will be in keeping with residents' long-term vision for the downtown area and build something that will be of lasting value to the entire Village."

Much of Oak Park's downtown commercial property poses difficult challenges for development, especially the very narrow, deep lots that have limited street frontage considered so vital by today's retailers, according to Village Development Director Michael Chen. The parcels included in the RFP, for example, are about 200 feet deep, but when combined offer more than 180 feet of Lake Street frontage.

“Today’s retailers demand street frontage – particularly in a pedestrian-oriented area like our downtown,” he said. “By taking advantage of opportunities to buy adjacent properties in desirable locations, the Village is able to assemble parcels to make a larger, more functional site. Together these particular parcels should appeal to the type of retailer that can greatly enhance shopping opportunities in the community and have a significant positive impact on both property and sales taxes.”

Chen said proposers will need considerable imagination and experience to meet the RFP requirements. In addition to maintaining the historic value of the Drechsler Building, concepts must be consistent with the existing streetscape, incorporate features that would encourage foot traffic along the pedestrian walkway and expand the types of goods and services available in our downtown. Proposers also must demonstrate the financial ability to transform their concepts into reality, he said.

Developers are fairly free to propose what they think will best work, including incorporating residential and/or office space at upper levels. Since the parcels are in a transit overlay zoning district, any development proposal must have retail along much of its street-level frontage.

Calling the RFP a prudent first step to gauge the seriousness of investment interest in the downtown area, Trustee Carolyn Hodge-West, chair of the Village Board’s Economic Development Committee, said all proposals will be carefully considered and discussed with the community before any recommendations would be made to pursue an agreement with any specific developer.

“As the process unfolds, we will reach out to the community and encourage residents to actively participate in determining which, if any, of the responses will best add to the quality of life in the Village,” she said.

To review a copy of the RFP, contact the Development Services Department at 708.358.5640.

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