

DTOP Sub Area Plan
Steering Committee Meeting
August 16, 2005, 6:30 p.m.
Oak Park Public Library

Present: Acting Chair Bob Tucker, Greg Marsey, Ray Johnson, Ilhan Avcioglu,
Doug Gilbert, Sonny Ginsberg, Colette Lueck, Rich Carollo, Steve Rouse,
Carolyn Saxton
Absent: Craig Failor, Lisa DiChiera
Village staff: Doug Kaarre, Jim Budrick

This meeting is designed to hear more from the public. There is a preference survey they are asking everyone to fill out which will be tabulated over the course of the meeting and the results will be discussed at the end of the meeting. The Committee discussed whether they should hire a consultant to do a building condition survey of the Colt Building and other buildings. Doug Gilbert described what a building condition survey does. While the Colt Building is the most critical to their discussion, there was consensus to do as much of the block as they could, especially 1145 Westgate. The Village is in negotiations with a retail consultant to analyze the retail viability of the Colt Building. Members of the Village Board and Village staff toured other suburban downtowns to see evidence of commercial building re-use.

Carolyn Saxton reviewed the rules and procedures for the meeting. People should sign in upon arrival and check the box if they wish to speak. They are limited to five minutes each. If they run out of time those signed up to speak can be first at the next meeting. Comments may also be submitted to the Committee in writing. Questions for Committee members will also be considered.

Mickey Baer, owner of A Matter of Style, provided a handout and spoke on behalf of the Marion Street Business Owners. This group was never consulted by Crandall Arambula. He organized a survey of those business owners. 74% of the owners are against opening the street, 21% are in support and 5% are neutral. They are concerned about the economic impact of construction; about safety if the newly opened street has no curbs; about an increase in theft and crime if the street is opened; and about the loss of open space. If the street must be opened, they recommend one-way southbound with curbs and wide sidewalks and no commercial traffic.

Mike Reust, 607 Belleforte, spoke against the opening of Marion Street. It is a unique space in Oak Park. However, the existing mall space needs design improvements and should better incorporate Westgate. It should have a more garden-like setting.

Christine Vernon, 7 Elizabeth Court, stated her disappointment in the turn-out. Her family has been very involved in Village issues. She is pleased that Mr. Antunovich wishes to work with everyone. She does not understand why the Village feels the need to purchase property downtown. We need a plan to bring shoppers to the mall.

Residents want to be consulted about changes. We need good planning. The code of conduct being presented to the public was offensive.

Pat Zubak, acting director of Downtown Oak Park, inquired about where the architectural survey could be viewed and if there were previous surveys.

Dr. Gene Reisinger, owner of 1122 Westgate, felt that it makes no sense to add traffic to Lake Street. He feels the black heritage that used to be on Westgate is important and should be recognized. The promenade in Halifax, Nova Scotia is beautiful and they have historical plaques. They should do something similar along Westgate to recognize the black community, the Baptist Church, and the Blue Parrot Tea Room. Also, the Christian Medical Society of America used to reside in his building. They used to send missionaries all over the world. That should be recognized as well. He also wants to save his building too.

Kieran (K. J.) Phelan, owner of the Rocking Horse building, spoke recommending opening Marion Street halfway between Westgate and North Blvd. and improve the mall to the north. Don't allow left turns onto Marion from Westgate. They need more retail downtown and they are missing a golden opportunity if they don't redevelop Westgate.

Jim Kelly, 1043 S. Harvey, spoke that he has worked downtown for many years. He's ambivalent about what to do with the Marion Street mall. If it remains a mall it needs a lot of work. Regarding 1145 Westgate, he doesn't understand why it is designated as significant. The interior is modern and it is the worst office building.

Tony Munno, 1035 Woodbine, is the owner of 1111 Westgate. He knows that the architectural survey is incorrect regarding his building. It was built in 1947, not 1931. The second floor was added in the 1950s and looks the same today. It was originally a furniture store. It's a fine building but is not historic in his opinion. It is an investment. He supports redeveloping Westgate. They would lose a great opportunity if they don't develop. The street may look good on the outside but there aren't a lot of people on the street. Those properties should pay more taxes. It should be a gateway. Things can't stay the same.

Rosalind Larsen stated that she learned a lot about historic preservation in Oak Park. She owns an old house. When one building gets fixed up others follow. She advocates maintaining and enhancing the historic feel of downtown. It would help attract tourists.

Jon Hale, 226 S. Scoville, stated that the Crandall Arambula plan helps conceptualize the superblock issues. The plan challenges us to alleviate traffic and provide more retail to create a new street. Many people who support the plan do support historic preservation, but there's a trade-off. To advocate historic preservation without addressing these issues is to impair changes. It's a similar trade-off on Marion Street. Crandall Arambula's conception of Marion was a European feel, mixed pedestrian-car zone without curbs, meandering. They weren't advocating a regular street. They also proposed adding additional public space at the south end.

Roger Cameron, owner of the Prairie Bread Kitchen, stated that he doesn't understand why 1145 Westgate is significant. That is a key building to be demolished in order to follow the parking plan. He is also disappointed in the turnout. Both his tenants are in favor of opening Marion Street in some way. Either way, there is something wrong on Marion that needs to be fixed. Some of the fear is that the businesses would not make it through construction. Conceptually, Marion would work if it were offices. It doesn't work for retail. They need more parking, but it has to work and be connected to Marion.

Marge Epstein, stated that she was troubled by last week's historic survey presentation and troubled by this evening's comments to maintain historic preservation downtown. Downtown has a lot of potential but is incredibly sloppy. It seems like a lot of people don't want change. A lot of the storefronts are ugly. It is time for change.

Lynn Kamenitsa, 226 S. Scoville, stated that the superblock is bigger than Marion and Westgate and is part of the whole downtown plan. It also talks about traffic and parking as well as retail. No one has mentioned Station Street. They need Station Street as a gateway and to help relieve congestion on Lake. Westgate is a dead-end place which needs revitalization. It doesn't seem like a safe place. She's sympathetic to historic preservation but she was shocked at the historic rankings on Westgate. They look like buildings that had facades put on them. She likes the green space on Marion Street but it needs to become a vibrant space. They do need more parking, but it needs to be connected to the retail. The Oak Park Avenue Garage is well-connected to the retail.

Mike Fox, president of Downtown Oak Park and employee of R.P. Fox & Associates. DTOP does not yet have a position on opening Marion Street, though they did endorse the CA plan as it exists. His personal opinion is to open Marion Street. It would be a benefit to their tenants. It would provide greater stability and greater choice for new tenants. Many tenants want to be by vehicular traffic. They see it as a positive, whether it is or not. Some stores on Marion do struggle. Crandall Arambula states that there is an immediate positive impact from opening a closed street. Hinsdale and Lake Forest have dynamite demographics and Oak Park has to compete with Oak Brook and the Brickyard Mall.

Rose Meyer, resident of Holley Court Terrace, stated that she often surveys the residents of the building. The residents of Holley Court Terrace are very concerned about Oak Park. They are not opposed to new development but also want to enjoy a quality of life. They are against the idea that progress can only happen one way. It takes more thinking and planning than unlimited density and traffic. Nashville and Birmingham are having the same issues. Oak Park has a quality of life and architectural history. People have come from Europe to see Frank Lloyd Wright. You can't just say old buildings and old people. You can't just tear it apart without thoughtful planning. We should take advantage of the small-town feeling.

Eileen Fein, 1046 S. Kenilworth, stated that she wanted to share her perception of the Westgate and Marion vicinity since she doesn't live in the area. She visited the area

and was shocked at the deterioration. Westgate is inappropriate in Oak Park. They are anything but historic. Those facades do not project the feeling of Oak Park. There is nothing to save that is important to the Village. It was mainly vacant. She didn't know a number of stores there because she doesn't go there. We should move ahead with development.

Kathryn Jonas stated that they have sunk \$80 million in downtown Oak Park and it's a shame that it is not being maintained. The Village doesn't pay attention to it. Westgate could be a beautiful area, but we have lost our sense of history and beauty. Many new, dense out-of-scale developments have been approved that threaten the historic character of downtown. They should consider the Main Street program to get a mix of national and small businesses like Forest Park. There should be better outreach to small merchants and property owners to participate. A few major property owners make the decisions. Consider holding outdoor meetings. There has been little demolition on Oak Park Avenue. She recommends the Steering Committee tour the same towns with the National Trust that the Village staff did. She also urges them to tour the subarea with Frank Lipo, Frank Heitzman or Mike Iversen who have substantial knowledge. She doesn't understand why the Shops of Oak Park are included in this conversation. Please consider linking downtown to the Avenue/Lake and S. Marion business districts.

Gene Armstrong, owner of 1111 South Blvd., stated that he doesn't agree with Kathryn Jonas. He doesn't want to compare Oak Park to Europe or Lake Forest. We should pay homage to our architectural heritage. Tourism is important to our economy. However, don't be held hostage to the historic preservationist. Exercise judgment when considering their views. Beware of the "preserve everything at all costs" approach. They once wanted to preserve his house on Grove, the old bus barn. Preservationists have done a wonderful job, but you have to separate what's important. Listen to those who work, shop and own property downtown. Take a tour, visit business owners. It's important to take input from the community. Hear as many different ideas as possible. Don't study, talk and plan it to death. Change is the only constant. Do something.

Joe Antunovich stated that he owns a architecture/planning firm in Chicago and lives in Evanston, but is an adopted Oak Parker because he's been to so many meetings here. He is the immediate past chair of Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois. You can blend new development with historic buildings. You have an incredible opportunity to do something special downtown. To celebrate the past and revisit the old ways that worked – living above retail. We need to decide which of the buildings we're going to save. We can't save them all. It will leave no development sites left. The new development should have open space, celebrate the pedestrian and park 500-600 cars. Traffic on Lake Street needs to be improved. He believes that Marion Street should be open. Westgate should be connected to Marion. It also needs to be user friendly. There will be difficult choices. The one-way proposals on North and South Blvd. are wonderful. He's volunteering here on his own time. They can create an incredible sense of place. They should study adding floors to the Shops of Oak Park. Station Street is a great idea. We need to get to a point to start sketching ideas. He'll volunteer to doing that.

Red Griffin discussed how Frank Lloyd Wright understood tradition and built on it. They should take lessons from Unity Temple. He said that architecture could lead the way to a better culture. He built on principle, not precedent. We're also competing with our heritage. Oak Park is becoming more and more urban. Wright made a statement that democracy-based scale had a place in an urban world. We need to take up the challenge in downtown Oak Park. We need to have a vision. People lived here to get away from problems of the city. We need to show that we can keep some of those values. Downtown is the unfinished part of the Village.

The Downtown Architectural Survey can be obtained at Village Hall, at the Library, and on the Village web site www.oak-park.us. Doug Gilbert explained why the HPC ranked 1145 Westgate as significant. They felt that the façade design was in keeping with the Tudor style along the street.

While the public comments were taking place, the preference surveys were being tallied. The results of the survey from tonight's attendance give an idea of the opinions of the crowd:

- A "Station Street" providing a new north-south circulation road parallel to and in between Marion and Harlem should be created.
Agree = 18, Disagree = 14, Neutral = 14.
- Marion Street should be opened to vehicles from North Blvd. to Lake Street.
Agree = 26, Disagree = 14, Neutral = 6
- Marion Street should be opened to vehicles from North Blvd. to Westgate.
Agree = 19, Disagree = 15, Neutral = 10
- The Colt Building (1125-35 Lake/1144-50 Westgate) should be preserved and restored as part of a redevelopment project or plan.
Agree = 15, Disagree = 14, Neutral = 18
- The 1145 Westgate building should be preserved and restored as part of a redevelopment project or plan.
Agree = 15, Disagree = 17, Neutral = 13
- Buildings designated as historically significant for landmark eligibility should be preserved.
Agree = 29, Disagree = 3, Neutral = 14
- Buildings designated as having historical merit but are not landmark eligible should be preserved.
Agree = 10, Disagree = 15, Neutral = 18
- The number of parking spaces in the Superblock needs to be increased.
Agree = 39, Disagree = 1, Neutral = 5
- One way streets should be incorporated to improve traffic flow.
Agree = 24, Disagree = 2, Neutral = 19
- One way streets should be avoided.
Agree = 3, Disagree = 24, Neutral = 18

The meeting next week will begin at 6:30 p.m. and will be a tour of Lake, Marion and Westgate streets, as well as the Colt Building, 1145 Westgate and other buildings to be determined. They will meet in front of the Colt Building on Westgate. Minutes of the first three meetings will be available by next week's meeting.

Adjourn at 8:45 p.m.

Minutes prepared by Doug Kaarre