

Brookfield – Congress Park Developer Panel Report

Regional Transportation Authority
February 2022



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BROOKFIELD



Chicago

INTRODUCTION

Since 1998, the RTA’s Community Planning program has provided funding and technical assistance for transit-oriented planning and implementation initiatives with local partners throughout the six-county service area. The goal is to foster the growth of sustainable, equitable, walkable, and transit-friendly communities around transit assets by encouraging transit-supportive land uses and infrastructure. The program aids local economic development by increasing equitable access to employment centers and amenities to serve the constantly evolving needs of our diverse population.

The Community Planning program continues to be an important tool in the region for implementing transit-oriented development (TOD). Throughout the 23-year history of the program, the RTA has collaborated on 219 projects and invested over \$22 million in federal, local, and RTA funds. Collaborating partners include the RTA Service Boards (CTA, Metra, and Pace), all six county governments within the service area, several councils of mayors, and over 175 local governments.

Through its support for transit-oriented planning throughout the region, the Community Planning program builds on the strength of our transit network to promote more sustainable and livable communities that deliver value on our transit investments for both local partners and the Service Boards.

TOD DEVELOPER DISCUSSION PANELS

One important element of the Community Planning program is the focus on projects and activities that implement completed planning studies, including Developer Discussion Panels. The RTA partners with the Urban Land Institute (ULI) Chicago, a professional organization of real estate and land use experts, to connect local governments with development professionals in order to facilitate practical discussions on the market potential of opportunity sites. These half-day events are intended for those municipalities that have completed a TOD or similar plan but need additional assistance in drawing transit-supportive projects within their study areas. The panels involve local government staff engaging with development experts to discuss potential strategies to effectively revitalize key parcels of land. The Village of Brookfield (the Village) was selected to participate in a panel after applying to the Community Planning

program in 2020. The Village had also completed a Developer Discussion Panel focused on downtown Brookfield and the Brookfield Metra station in 2018.

The panel was held on Thursday, December 16, 2021 at the Brookfield Village Hall. Following a presentation by Village staff regarding recent planning and development activities, panel attendees took part in a site visit to the opportunity site that the Village had identified for potential redevelopment. The following people were in attendance:

Village of Brookfield

Emily Egan – Director of Community Development

Stevie Ferrari – Director of Parks and Recreation

A. George Issakoo – Assistant Village Manager

Cindy Klima – Economic Development Consultant

Kendra Kuehlem – Village Planner

Tim Wiberg – Village Manager

Urban Land Institute (ULI) and the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA)

Todd Berlinghof – Partner; Hamilton Partners

Terri Haymaker – Program Manager, ULI-Chicago

Michael Horsting, AICP – Manager, Local Planning; RTA

John Lynch – Director; Oak Park Economic Development Corporation

Janet Protas – Senior Vice President – Multi-Family; Conor Commercial Real Estate

Michael Thanasouras – Managing Director; SVN Commercial Real Estate Advisors

Alex Waltz – Senior Planner; RTA



Developer Discussion Panel at the Brookfield Village Hall, December 16, 2021

BACKGROUND

Demographics

The Village of Brookfield is a suburb in western Cook County, about 13 miles from downtown Chicago. In 2020, the Village had roughly 19,400 residents. Widely known for being the home of the Brookfield Zoo (located near the intersection of 31st Street and 1st Avenue), the Village attracts visitors from the region and beyond. Brookfield has a predominantly residential character, with walkable neighborhoods comprised of historic bungalows, a common housing type in the Village. Brookfield has several commercial districts, most notably Downtown (near the Brookfield Metra station) and the Eight Corners district, located a half-mile northwest of Downtown. While these districts are traditional, pedestrian-oriented business districts, Ogden

Avenue and 47th Street are auto-oriented corridors where businesses provide off-street parking for patrons.

With regard to demographics, 2020 Census data indicates that the Village has a higher median age (39.4) than both Cook County (36.8) and the region overall (37.5). Median income in the Village (\$82,435) is also higher than both Cook County and the region (\$64,660 and \$73,572, respectively). The overwhelming majority of the housing stock in the Village was built before 1970, with 33.8% built before 1940 and 47.7% built between 1940 and 1969. Only 2.9% and 15.6% of the housing stock in the Village was built in 2000 or later or between 1970 and 1999, respectively. Village staff have also noted that there has been a recent increase in the number of young families moving to Brookfield.

Transit Service

Brookfield's transit service is comprised of Metra commuter rail and Pace bus service. Metra's BNSF line, which connects downtown Chicago and Aurora, bisects the Village from east to west and includes three stations within the Village limits. The Congress Park station is located near the western boundary of the Village near Ogden Avenue, the Brookfield station is located at Prairie Avenue in downtown Brookfield, and the Hollywood station is located near the eastern boundary of the Village, roughly a half-mile south of the Brookfield Zoo.

Brookfield is also served by two Pace fixed route buses, #302 and #331. They provide access to destinations within the Village such as the zoo, Eight Corners and downtown, and various other transportation and commercial destinations.

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, weekday ridership at the Congress Park station had been increasing steadily, with boardings and alightings reaching close to or above 350 per day, respectively, in 2018. Weekday and Saturday ridership on Pace route #302 increased slightly between 2018 and 2019 but overall, ridership on this route had been decreasing since 2011. Before the start of the pandemic, the primary modes of access to the Congress Park station were also changing. 88% of riders walked to the station in 1999, with this value dropping to 51% by 2018. Conversely, the percent of riders driving alone to the station was increasing steadily between 1999 and 2018, with 0% of riders driving alone to the station in 1999, compared to 35% of riders in 2018.

Planning & Development Projects

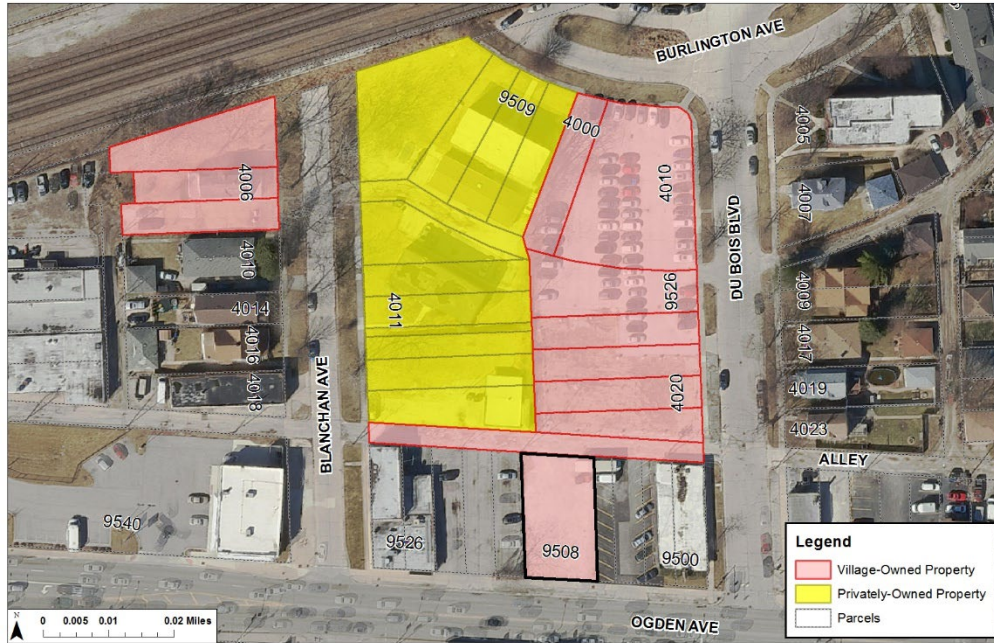
Brookfield has completed several planning initiatives in the past that promote TOD. In 2018, the Village updated its Comprehensive Plan, which conveys a long-term vision for the community and serves as a policy guide for development over the next 20 years. Specific to the opportunity site at issue for the panel discussion, the area between the Congress Park Metra station and Ogden Avenue is included in the station area zoning district and is identified as an area for redevelopment. The Village is also currently in the process of developing a corridor plan for Ogden Avenue (called “Energize Ogden”), which aims to analyze the development opportunities that were described in the Comprehensive Plan. The Village hopes that the plan will lead to a greater understanding of the development potential of various sites, appropriate uses, necessary roadway and infrastructure improvements, and challenges to encouraging development along this corridor. In addition, the Village installed covered bike parking in 2018 at both the Congress Park station and the Brookfield station with funding assistance from the RTA’s Access to Transit Program.

In 2017, the Village completed its Zoning Modernization project with assistance from the RTA, which established transit-supportive form-based code for the three Metra station areas. The new zoning allows for greater density in TOD areas, streamlines the development process, and promotes a pedestrian-friendly built environment. Although the Brookfield Metra station area is not the subject of this report, several projects near the Brookfield station have either been approved, begun construction, or have been completed in recent years. Notably, these projects include the Linda Sokol Francis Brookfield Public Library, 3704 Grand Boulevard (a 17-unit mixed use apartment), 727 Sunnyside Avenue (a 9-unit apartment building), and 8845 Burlington Ave (a 14-unit apartment building).

STUDY AREA

The study area and opportunity sites discussed in the panel are adjacent to the Congress Park Metra station, located at the intersection of DuBois Boulevard and Burlington Avenue. The study area is comprised of parcels under both Village ownership and private ownership, with an approximate area of 2.2 acres. The study area is connected to Ogden Avenue, which carries approximately 26,000 vehicles per day, and provides links to regional arterials such as US 45 and IL 171. The study area is subject to Station Area district zoning requirements, which allow for high-density, pedestrian-oriented, and mixed-use development. Parcels in the study area

are either zoned SA 5 (allows residential mixed-use development between two to six stories) or SA 3 (allows commercial uses and developments of one to three stories).



Map of Study Area Created by Village of Brookfield Staff



Google Street View Image of Study Area and Development Opportunity Advertising Signage

RECOMMENDATIONS

The developer panel discussion generated a variety of recommendations that can generally be separated into three groups: change the timing of development in the study area, prime the study area for future development, and promote developer-friendly programs and zoning changes. Although the panelists were able to develop actionable recommendations for Village staff, the panelists reached consensus that the type and scale of development sought by the Village in the study area would likely not materialize in the near future. This is evidenced by the similar projects previously proposed, which have not progressed. The panelists noted that developers would likely be apprehensive about pursuing a 4-5 story mixed-use development with ground floor retail in the study area because of a lack of access to walkable destinations from the site, the limited community amenities nearby, the study area’s smaller parcel sizes, and site access concerns caused by the tracks to the north, which act as a barrier. The panelists stated that commercial developers generally seek to locate retail developments (specifically big box, national retail) near other commercial buildings and that the absence of adjacent commercial development may be a deterrent for developers. The panelists added that prospective renters seeking to rent both market-rate and affordable units in the area would likely want to be in a location that allows them to walk to restaurants, bars, and other commercial uses.



Developer Discussion Panel Participants During Site Visit to Study Area, December 16, 2021

As a point of comparison, the panelists highlighted that nearby La Grange has more walkable areas than the study area and the presence of destinations within walking distance has contributed to a greater intensity of mixed-use development there. The panelists also opined that rental units in the study area would require substantial subsidies that would fill the gap between development costs and current market rents in the area in order to entice developers to pursue development at the site. Generally, the panelists believed that in order for the site to be successful, more time and resources must be spent bolstering the surrounding area to create an appealing development context that is inviting, offers access to walkable destinations, and defines the study area as a “place to arrive.”

Change the Timing of Development in the Study Area

One of the overarching recommendations generated by the panel was that Village staff should shift their focus away from facilitating development in the study area in the near term and instead place more emphasis on developing sites in the downtown and Eight Corners districts. Given that Brookfield has economic development goals and opportunities throughout the Village, the panelists recommended that the Village should not unintentionally spread their efforts too broadly, and instead, concentrate their efforts more narrowly and directly on a few key priority projects. Those priority sites could thereby serve as catalysts for other village-wide development sites and the study area in particular. Considering the panelists’ opinion that large, multi-family developments would be difficult for developers to deliver in the study area, the panelists suggested that Village staff build on the strength of Brookfield’s downtown (**shown in the image on p. 9**) and aim to attract development that contributes to a build-out of the downtown and Eight Corners districts. Once the most desirable sites in the Village have been developed, the panelists believed that developers would be more interested in pursuing development in the study area. In addition, delaying development in the study area while seeking to attract development to more desirable sites would also allow the Village to validate the development market interest in Brookfield and provide the Village with additional data regarding the market potential for mixed-use development in the Village. While the Village should focus its resources on other priority development sites in the downtown, if a commercial development project were presented to the Village which meets the study area goals, Village staff should consider moving forward with the project.



Grand Boulevard in Downtown Brookfield at the intersection of Prairie Avenue, Brookfield Avenue, and Fairview Avenue, looking northwest

While the mixed-use redevelopment project envisioned by the Village is not feasible at this time, the panelists did consider one scenario for the study area, which could serve to address a challenge facing one of the local, nearby businesses. The Village shared the example of the Galloping Ghost gaming business, which is located on Ogden Avenue and is currently spread across multiple buildings and several disjointed blocks. The panelists envisioned how a new, consolidated, single facility in the study area could improve the customer experience for Galloping Ghost patrons and facilitate improved business operations. Additionally, because the Galloping Ghost doesn't serve their own food or beverage, the panelists noted that locating the Galloping Ghost adjacent to the newly redeveloped Imperial Oak Brewing pub could activate the study area as a community destination. Furthermore, the panelists recommended that Village staff broaden the set of potential uses they are considering for the study area, including health/wellness, medical, entertainment, and open space. The panelists stated that if the Village wanted to consider a destination or family entertainment venue, including ideas such as a splash pad or an e-sports center, the Village should consider hiring a consultant to examine the feasibility of these potential uses.

Prime the Study Area for Future Development

Building off the recommendation to delay development of the subject site, the panelists recommended that Village staff prime the area for future development by constructing civic improvements that enhance the appeal of pursuing development in the study area. These improvements could take the form of streetscape enhancements, façade rehabilitation, or gateway signage. To that end, the panelists recommended that the Village implement the recommendations from the Energize Ogden plan, which aims to enrich the pedestrian experience on Ogden Avenue by improving building facades, enhancing sidewalk facilities, addressing access management concerns, and outlining a series of implementation steps that can incrementally improve the vibrancy of the corridor.



Google Street View Images of Ogden Avenue Streetscaping (left) and Broadway Avenue Streetscaping (right)

More specifically, the Village could work with IDOT (who has jurisdiction over Ogden Avenue) to modify the mountable curb that currently exists such that drivers would not be encouraged to park on the sidewalk. Together, these streetscape improvements could help to attract new and revitalized businesses along the corridor. The panelists also suggested that Village staff work to build on the existing gateway signage on Ogden Avenue at the Village’s western border to create a more inviting and appealing entrance to the community. In addition, the panelists recommended that the Village activate the study area by holding short-term pop-up events that encourage residents and visitors to come to the study area, which may help establish the site as a destination of importance within the Village. The Village could also construct a temporary green space in the study area that could serve as a venue for such events and help to catalyze activity in the area. Activating the space with short-term activities and open space could help residents envision how the study area can serve as a community asset in the long term while also creating a clean and enjoyable site in the short-term.



Eads Maine Street Bash Pop-Up Event in Eads, Colorado. Source: [The Denver Post](#)

Promote Developer-Friendly Programs and Recent Zoning Changes

Although Brookfield recently implemented zoning changes through their Zoning Modernization project and operates a Property Improvement Program that provides financial assistance for façade enhancements and landscaping, the panelists noted that such legislative changes and business-friendly programs are not widely known among the development community. The panelists offered the following recommendations regarding how the Village could promote these legislative changes and programs:

- The panelists suggested that Village staff be more proactive in approaching business owners regarding the Property Improvement Program. To that end, the Village could hire an architect to generate façade improvement cost estimates and develop renderings of proposed building improvements. The Village could then bring such renderings and cost estimates to business owners to gauge their interest in making the improvements.

Doing so for an entire block could help to improve the streetscape in a comprehensive and systematic manner. The panelists recommended that this approach be applied specifically to Ogden Avenue to prime the study area for future development.

- Furthermore, the panelists recommended that the Village consider modifying the \$20,000 maximum funding match currently called for by the program and instead pay the first \$20,000 in improvements, with business owners covering the rest of the cost. The panelists believed that given the current market uncertainty, business owners might be more enthusiastic about pursuing façade and landscaping improvements if the Village were to assume a greater role in financing the improvements as opposed to asking business owners to match the Village’s contribution.
- The panelists also recommended that the Village approach developers to inform them about the zoning changes enacted in 2017. The panelists believed that developers would find the Village’s zoning to be appealing given that the Zoning Modernization project resulted in changes that allow mixed-use, high-density development by right in portions of the Village near transit stations.
 - To identify small-scale developers that may be interested in pursuing projects in the Village, Village staff could work with the Urban Land Institute and attend a regional ICSC event (Innovating Commerce Serving Communities, formerly known as the International Council of Shopping Centers).
 - In addition, the Village could launch an advertising campaign to inform developers that Brookfield is actively seeking development and has a zoning code that offers appealing opportunities for prospective developers.
 - The Village could consider partnering with brokers to help advertise development opportunities in the Village.
 - As part of this campaign, the Village could promote what Village staff believe to be Brookfield’s strengths: schools, a wealth of activities offered by the Village’s Parks and Recreation Department, natural open spaces, parks, sustainable culture, and ease of transportation to Chicago.
- The Village could also create a developer toolbox that could be posted on the Village’s website and otherwise distributed to prospective developers. The toolbox could include informational material that promotes available development sites, describes municipal incentives for development, explains the zoning changes enacted in 2017, outline the Village’s streamlined approval process, and generally conveys Brookfield’s openness to development.

CONCLUSION

As an established suburban community with notable amenities like convenient transit access to downtown Chicago, walkable neighborhoods with historic housing stock, and numerous recreational and community programming options, Brookfield has clear strengths to build on when it comes to attracting new development and growing its population.

Although the Village’s desired development at the subject site may not be immediately viable, the recommendations in this report can help Village staff build on the Village’s strengths and continue to foster a development-friendly environment. By changing the timing of development at the subject site, priming the area for future development via civic improvements, and promoting the developer-friendly conditions in the Village, Village staff could catalyze additional investment in the Village’s strongest areas (ex. Downtown and Eight Corners) and enhance the walkability of Ogden Avenue while simultaneously improving the appeal of developing the subject site in the manner sought by Village staff.



DEDICATION

The RTA and the Village of Brookfield dedicate this report to Kendra Kuehlem, Brookfield Village Planner, who participated in this developer discussion panel and passed away, Friday, February 4, 2022 in Brookfield, IL as the result of a train accident. She served this project with eagerness and cheer, and her contributions were instrumental to this report. She is remembered fondly by her colleagues and those that had the privilege of working with her.



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