

# Jefferson Park Developer Panel Report

Regional Transportation Authority  
September 22, 2021



## 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.



Left, Panelists outside the Jefferson Park Metra Station.



Right, Jefferson Park Transit Center.

## 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 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 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 in a community. The Chicago Community Area of Jefferson Park was selected to participate in a panel after applying to the Community Planning program in 2019. The panel was held on June 16, 2021.

### Jefferson Park Developer Discussion Panel Participants:

#### Chicago Community Area – Jefferson Park

Alderman James M. Gardiner – 45<sup>th</sup> Ward

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

Swasti Shah – AICP, LEED AP, Director of Community Engagement, ULI Chicago

Heather Mullins – AICP, Division Manager, Local Planning & Program Management, RTA

Michael Horsting – AICP, Manager, Local Planning, RTA

Jason Koehn – President, Albion Residential

Andrew Yule – Vice President of Development, Albion Residential

Matthew T. Nix – Principal, Reva Development

Paul Alessandro – Hartshorne Plunkard Architecture



Left, Panelists touring Wilson Park.



Right, Panelists walking on the corner of Milwaukee and Lawrence.

## BACKGROUND

### Demographics

Jefferson Park is a neighborhood of roughly 26,000 residents, located in the northwest portion of the City of Chicago, approximately 9 miles from Downtown. Jefferson Park is an established, growing, and walkable neighborhood centered on commercial corridors surrounded by residential areas. The neighborhood is bisected in two by the Kennedy Expressway which provides access to the rest of the region. Milwaukee Avenue and Elston Avenue host the largest concentration of businesses; however, some businesses can also be found interspersed between housing on Northwest Avenue and Higgins Avenue. These corridors are generally pedestrian-friendly, but maintain an auto-oriented appearance, due to the prevalence of curb-cuts, surface parking lots, and some drive-thru businesses.

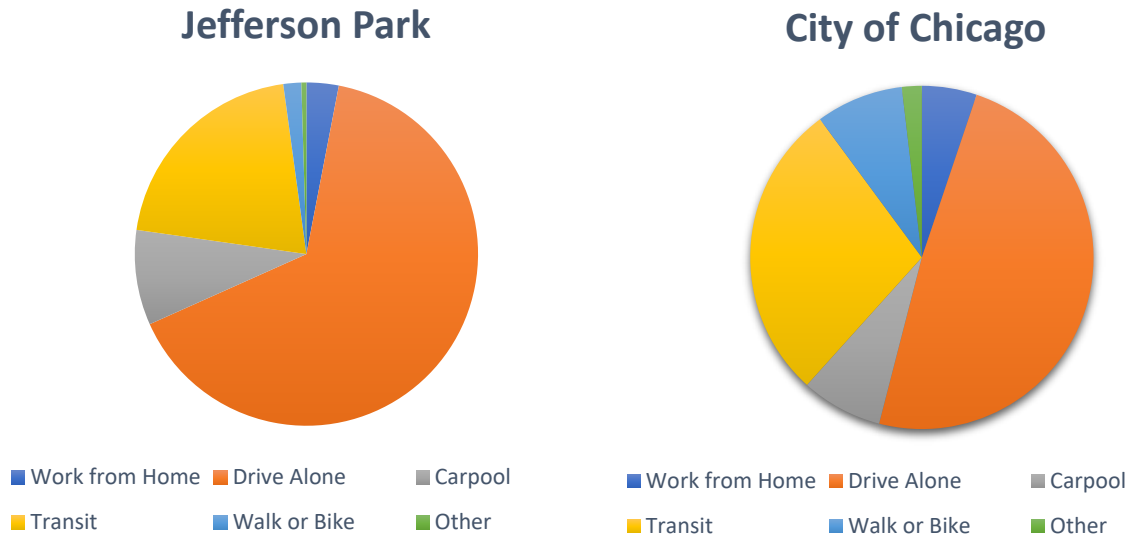
Jefferson Park's population declined slightly between 2000 and 2010 but between 2010 and 2020, the neighborhood has seen steady population growth. The median age of residents trends a few years older than the City of Chicago (34.6) and Cook County (37.5) at 40.2, while the average median household income is significantly higher in Jefferson Park than the City of Chicago and Cook County, being \$76,694 for Jefferson Park, \$58,247 for Chicago, and \$64,660 for Cook County. Most of the housing stock was built before 1970, with 43.1 percent constructed between 1940 and 1969, and 39.4 percent constructed before 1940. Single-family

dwelling units (attached and detached) comprise just over 50 percent of the total housing stock in the community compared to the City of Chicago where they comprise 25.9 percent of the total housing stock. Conversely, buildings of 5 units or greater are underrepresented in Jefferson Park at 15.9 percent in contrast to 41.1 percent in the City of Chicago.

### Current Transit Service

Jefferson Park residents are well-served by transit with Metra’s Union Pacific Northwest, CTA’s Blue Line and 11 CTA and Pace bus routes all coming together at the Jefferson Park Transit Center. The Center also serves as the terminus of Pace Bus’s new arterial rapid transit Milwaukee Pulse line. This new service connects Jefferson Park to the Golf Mill Mall in Niles and is forecasted to increase ridership on the Milwaukee corridor by 33 percent. The Jefferson Park Transit Center is one of the busiest transit hubs in the Chicago region serving approximately 14,000 CTA, Pace, and Metra riders every weekday. The Jefferson Park Transit Center is the third busiest Blue Line station outside the Loop and the fourth of seven stations in the city along the Metra UP-NW line. Despite high transit use, driving alone to work (65.3 percent) is higher in Jefferson Park when compared to the City of Chicago (48.8 percent) and fewer people in Jefferson Park utilize public transportation or other active transportation modes in their daily commute than in the City of Chicago, with 22.3 percent of commuters utilizing transit, walking, or biking to work from Jefferson Park in comparison to 36.4 percent in the rest of the City of Chicago. This can be partly attributed to the more residential character of the neighborhood and its relative distance from regional job centers.

### Transportation Modes in Jefferson Park compared to Chicago



## Planning Initiatives and Projects

In late 2018, the City of Chicago and the 45th Ward, with technical assistance from the RTA, completed the [Jefferson Park Station Area Master Plan](#). The Master Plan recommends improving transit access and increasing transit-supportive land uses around the Jefferson Park Transit Center. The Master Plan also provides insights on how areas surrounding the transit center can be improved, providing recommendations regarding community character, economic development, and transportation. Recommendations include improving pedestrian infrastructure around the Transit Center and attracting development to vacant and underutilized areas nearby. Jefferson Park has seen recent increases in developer interest with many projects proposed or under construction. Several hundred residential units and tens of thousands of square feet of retail are currently in the development process. Some noteworthy developments include the redevelopment of Jefferson Park Fire station, identified in the Master Plan as an opportunity site, into a mixed-use development with nine residential units and a restaurant occupying the ground-floor. Other projects include 192 residential units proposed for 4930 N Milwaukee Avenue with ground-level retail and direct access to the Jefferson Park Transit Center.



Left, Jefferson Park Transit Center offering Metra, Pace, and CTA service.



Right, 91 bus headed north up Milwaukee Ave. towards the terminus, Jefferson Park Transit Center.

## Study Area

The study area includes the general area three to four blocks west and south of the Transit Center, with particular focus on four sites located along Milwaukee Avenue within walking distance of the Jefferson Park Transit Center. The four sites in the study area include 4813 North Milwaukee Avenue (Former Woolworths site), 4777 North Milwaukee Avenue (Former CVS site), several parcels between 4746-4826 North Milwaukee Avenue, and a block between Ainslie Street and Lawrence Avenue that is divided North Lipps Avenue (Ainslie/Milwaukee/Lawrence/Lipps) that is largest site in the study area.

The sites in the study area do not share a single zoning classification, the existing zoning classifications are B1-2, B3-1, B3-2, and C1-3. B1-2 zoning class permits ground-level retail with dwelling units above, B3-1 and B3-2 zoning classes allow for larger retail and service sites only differing in building standards, and the C1-3 zoning class can accommodate a broad range of small-scale businesses. The former Woolworths and CVS sites are currently vacant and occupy 0.19 acres and 0.24 acres, respectively. The parcels located on the west side of Milwaukee Avenue include five vacant spaces that have the potential for in-fill development.

The Ainslie/Milwaukee/Lawrence/Lipps block is located adjacent to the former Woolworths and occupies approximately 5 acres. The site includes parking lots and is recognized in the Jefferson Park Station Area Plan as a key redevelopment site. The site is envisioned to be redeveloped into a large mixed-use development with a winter garden and pedestrian pathways.



Map of Study Area in relation to the Transit Center.

## Recommendations

Several overarching recommendations for maximizing development potential emerged during the panel's discussion.

Jefferson Park has several advantages when it comes to attracting development. The neighborhood is strategically located within the Chicago region and remains an attractive choice for families, especially where one income-earner works in Downtown Chicago and the other works in the suburbs. As redevelopment continues in other neighborhoods further south along the Blue Line, Jefferson Park will see continued developer interest, perhaps as a neighborhood with added affordability compared to its neighbors closer to the Loop. Demand to live in Jefferson Park is strong as evidenced by the hundreds of units currently in the development pipeline and the potential to add hundreds more. There are, however, additional opportunities to fully capitalize on the neighborhood's excellent location while remaining in line with the vision set forth in the Jefferson Park Station Area Plan.

### 1. Identify and Activate a Key Block

Choose one block to focus the attraction of future development. Identify the block that best represents the heart of the Jefferson Park community and make improvements that will establish it as a place residents want to go and to where future development can be attracted. Improvements should include widening the sidewalks, improving pedestrian crossings at intersections, installing pedestrian-scale lighting or festival lighting, and activating vacant building storefronts. Additional improvements could include planting trees along the street for added shade, installing light pole banners, and allowing the block to be activated for public gatherings and festivals. Such improvements will enhance the appeal of the corridor, improve the block's perception by residents and attract potential investors who may want to redevelop vacant or underutilized parcels along the block.

### 2. Increase development surrounding the Transit Center

- a. Allowing for the economics of development opportunities in the blocks most adjacent to the transit center will result in the population density needed to create demand for added retail, restaurants, and nightlife for all area residents. Consideration should be given to developments that are 10 – 15 stories in height with limited amenities that provide residential alternatives to high-end rentals. Limit ground level retail to strategic locations only and encourage other ground-



level uses that increase a sense of “eyes on the street.” This could be accomplished by encouraging the extension of lobbies at the first floor or providing common areas on the first floor for community space or instructional uses. Doing so will further attract potential new residential development opportunities while preserving existing, vacant retail space for future revitalization, and maintaining an engaging walking environment for pedestrians. Enough vacant retail space already exists within the study area that can absorb demands for added commercial and retail caused by an increase in residents.

- b. Engage with developers of already approved developments that have not broken ground to determine if there are shared issues preventing the construction of the developments. Work with these developers to identify their needs and search for ways to realize development already approved for Jefferson Park. Consider asking the developers to install “coming soon” signs at these sites to get neighbors excited about the new development and to let them know what is happening at the vacant site, but also to hold the developers accountable for constructing their projects.
- c. Review new developments to ensure they follow design guidelines and incorporate good design features. Design guidelines can inform development proposals to help reinforce the community character of Jefferson Park.



The corner of Milwaukee and Laramie, already showing placemaking in action.

### 3. Brand and Market Jefferson Park

- a. Work with the Jefferson Park Chamber of Commerce and other community stakeholders to create a sense of place with a nighttime presence, that showcases Jefferson Park's community identity. Decorative banners, branding, murals, expanding outdoor dining, wayfinding, street art and pedestrian scale street lighting build a sense of place in Jefferson Park. Programming can include farmer's markets, classes, art displays, and community events like games and festivals. Promote the image of Jefferson Park as a distinct community to work, live, and play, with opportunities for everyone from young couples to families to seniors as was suggested in the Jefferson Park Station Area Master Plan. Doing so can boost the visibility of Jefferson Park and increase its appeal to new residents.
- b. Improve recognition of unique area landmarks such as the Copernicus Center, Jefferson Memorial Park, and the Jefferson Park Masonic Temple by continuing to publicize the history and architecture of these buildings through wayfinding, plaques, and social media. Work with the CTA to install public art at the Jefferson Park Transit Center that references these building and other historically significant buildings which can improve visibility to thousands of riders each day. In addition to the historic buildings, inventory the considerable stock of vintage buildings that add to the neighborhood's charm and character and identify resources to help maintain and improve them.



Left, Murals lining the sidewalks of Jefferson Park.



Right, Historical architecture on Milwaukee and Gale.

- c. Improve and expand the Veterans Memorial, which is currently located in a traffic island, the memorial should be moved slightly to the south to a more inviting space that pays respect to veterans while also providing more public space to greet residents and visitors coming from the Transit Center across Milwaukee Avenue.



The Veterans Memorial at the intersection of North Milwaukee Ave. and W. Higgins Ave.

#### **4. Increase efforts towards maintaining a clean neighborhood**

Having a clean neighborhood core is critical to maintaining its attractiveness for residents and future developers. Providing regular street cleaning and sidewalk cleanings to eliminate the build-up of trash can improve the resident experience. Resident volunteers using brooms, trash bags, and shovels can be enlisted to clean major thoroughfares once a month. This can reinforce the neighborhood identity and create a sense of pride in residents. Visitors will remember their experience and return if they notice clean streets and sidewalks, trash in proper receptacles, and if they had an overall pleasant walking experience. Hold developers accountable by requiring them to maintain attractive signage about their future project in a professional manner and to keep the development site clear of trash. An example of this is the “Coming Soon” sign on the northeast corner of Milwaukee Ave and Veterans Place which is poorly constructed and not maintained.

## 5. Encourage façade improvements

Support façade improvements of older storefronts located on Milwaukee Avenue with a focus on the maintenance, modernization, renewal of the corridor, and encouraging the temporary use of storefront windows in vacant buildings for the display of artwork or public messaging. Improving the façades of historic buildings is key in maintaining the unique charm of the area. Existing financial resources such as Chicago's [Small Business Improvement Fund](#), [the current TIF](#), [New Markets Tax Credit](#), [Class 7\(a\), 7\(b\), 7\(c\) property tax incentives](#) can be utilized for façade revitalization. Private grant opportunities that exist through organizations such as the [Ford Foundation](#) and [JPMorgan fund](#) should be explored for viability. Additionally, the RTA maintains a [list](#) of municipal funding opportunities for transit-oriented development. [Chapter 3, Strategy 1.2](#) of the Jefferson Park Station Area Plan describes in detail existing funding opportunities and strategies for the adaptive reuse of vacant storefronts and buildings through interior space renovations and historically sensitive additions. When combined, these efforts will improve the aesthetics of the corridor and make it more attractive for new development.

## CONCLUSION

As a desirable Chicago neighborhood with many assets such as its ample and convenient transit access, its advantageous proximity to major highways, and its unique cultural heritage, Jefferson Park has many strengths that it can leverage to provide additional benefits to its residents. Jefferson Park has already taken vital steps towards improving its development potential by adopting the Jefferson Park Station Area Plan and signaling to developers that it is open to redevelopment. By redeveloping the key sites outlined in the Plan and following the five main recommendations, Jefferson Park can increase the desirability for new development, attract new amenities for residents and improve the attractiveness of the neighborhood for residents and visitors.



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