

Calumet Park Developer Panel Report

Regional Transportation Authority
June 9, 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.



Existing gateway to Calumet Park that has potential for unique placemaking

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 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 Calumet Park was selected to participate in a panel after applying to the Community Planning program in 2019.

The panel was held on the morning of June 9, 2021, at the Calumet Park Emergency Communication Center. On the day of the event, Village representatives gave a presentation to panelists on recent planning and development activities before taking them on a tour of the opportunity site that the Village has identified for potential redevelopment. The following were in attendance.

Village of Calumet Park

Ronald Denson – Mayor

Teri Raney - Clerk's Office & Economic Development

Jonathan Shaw – Director of Parks & Recreation

Lorraine Cobb-Toney – Finance Department

Lynn Peters – Finance Department

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

Michael Horsting, AICP - Manager, Local Planning, RTA

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

Molly Ekerdt – Vice President, Housing Project Management, POAH

Lennox Jackson – Owner, Urban Equities Inc.

Juan Villafañe – AIA, LEED AP BD+C, Partner, Krueck-Sexton Partners

Kelly Conolly – Associate, Sam Schwartz

Adrian Diaz, Planning Intern, Local Planning, RTA

Graphics by **Victoria Kurlander**, Strategic Communications Intern, RTA



Panelists touring and discussing the potential of the opportunity site on June 9, 2021

BACKGROUND

Demographics

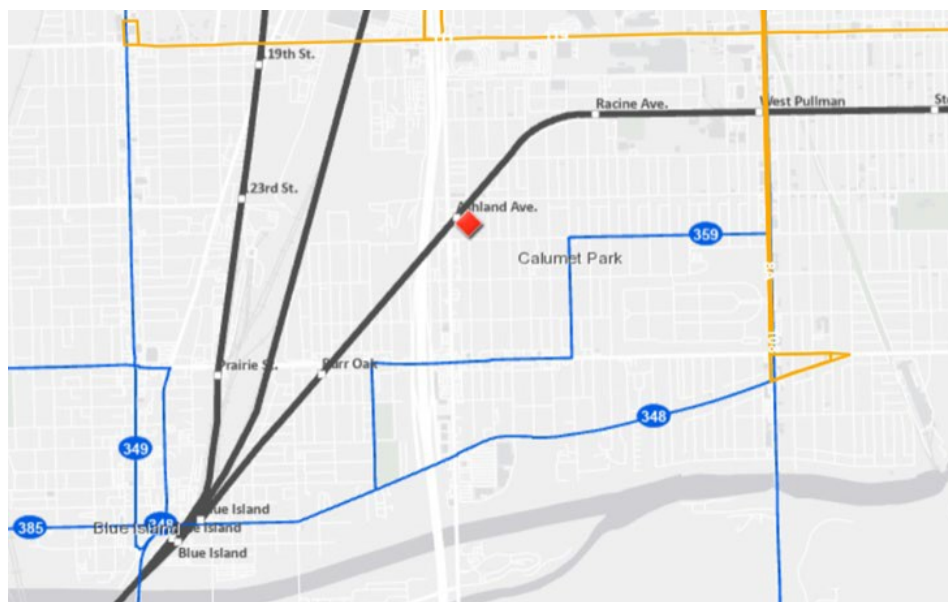
Calumet Park is a suburb of roughly 8,000 residents, located in southern Cook County, 18 miles from Downtown Chicago. Calumet Park is an established inner-ring suburb and is predominantly residential with walkable neighborhoods. The village has two commercial corridors, the 127th Street corridor, and the Ashland Avenue corridor. Both corridors are auto-oriented and businesses generally provide parking. The population of Calumet Park is predominantly Black, with residents who are Black accounting for 86.9 percent of the community's population and has not changed significantly since the 2000 census. The median age of residents trends several years older than Cook County (36.6) and the region (32.7) at 41.5.

Median household income has declined since 2010 from \$53,945 to \$47,974, which is significantly lower than Cook County at \$62,088 and the region at \$70,444. Approximately 94 percent of the housing stock was built before the year 2000, and 57.1 percent of the housing stock is owner-occupied, which is a higher percentage than Cook County at 51 percent and comparable to the region.

Current Transit Service

Calumet Park residents have transit access from Metra commuter rail service, Pace bus, and CTA bus service. Metra Electric – Blue Island Branch connects downtown Chicago and Blue Island, bisecting the Village from northeast to southwest. The Ashland Avenue station is within Village limits, located near the boundary with the City of Chicago and the Burr Oak station is located south of the Village limits in the City of Blue Island. The Village is served by 14 inbound trains and 13 outbound trains each weekday. Despite having regular Metra service between the years 2016 and 2018, daily boardings declined 13 percent at the Ashland Avenue station and 24 percent at the Burr Oak station.

Calumet Park is served by three Pace fixed-route bus lines: #348, #352, and #359. These routes provide access to destinations within the Village and connect the Village to other south suburban communities and the CTA Red line at 95th/Dan Ryan. Calumet Park is also served by two CTA fixed-route bus lines #8A and #108, which run on Calumet Park's eastern boundary on South Halsted Street and connect Calumet Park to the CTA Red Line station at 95th/Dan Ryan. The CTA and Pace bus routes which service Calumet Park serve over 9,000 riders each day.



Existing transit service in Calumet Park

Planning Initiatives and Projects

Calumet Park has completed several planning initiatives to foster economic growth and promote transit-oriented development (TOD). In December of 2020, Calumet Park adopted the Calumet Park Comprehensive Plan. This plan identifies strategies that build off the strengths of the Village today and provides a focus on economic growth balanced with conservancy of the Village's assets. The Comprehensive Plan outlines a vision for the Ashland Avenue (Triangle Site) site that promotes diverse housing options around the Ashland Avenue Metra Station and a community gathering space. The lot is located north of 124th Street, east of Ashland Avenue, west of Laflin Street, and south of the Metra Electric tracks. The lot also borders the West Pullman neighborhood of the City of Chicago, to the north. The lot is owned by the Village of Calumet Park and was formerly home to a mobile home park. The redevelopment sought for this space to be mixed-use with 120 to 180 unit townhomes or apartments ranging from two to four stories. The Comprehensive Plan also envisions some retail space that will serve the commuters using the station and the surrounding neighborhoods. To attract this type of development the Comprehensive Plan recommends rezoning the Triangle Site from C2 – General Commercial to R2— Multiple Family Residential District. This reclassification will allow the development of moderate density apartment-style, multi-family development or townhouse development. The Triangle Site is the most important of several significant development sites in Calumet Park. The Village's success with this site will help leverage its plan to develop new infill housing, parks and shopping across the Village.

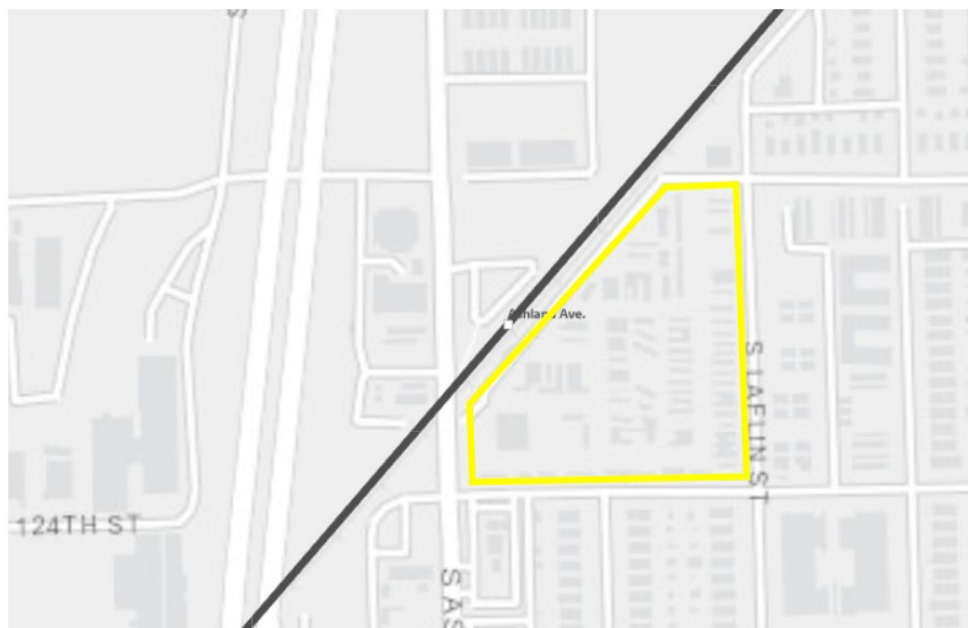
Pace Suburban Bus and the Chicago Transit Authority are collaborating to improve bus service on the South Halsted Street Corridor that will positively impact the 13,000 transit customers who utilize the Corridor daily. Proposed enhancements include dedicated bus-only lanes, queue jumps and traffic signal optimization at key intersections, and transit prioritization, aimed to speed transit travel time and make using transit more attractive to area residents. Included in the project are updated bus stations with enhanced passenger amenities, including a new station proposed for 124th Street. In January 2021, Cook County launched the Fair Transit South Cook pilot which reduced fares on the Metra Electric line by 50 percent for the next three years. Any rider within the pilot period will pay the reduced fare rates, with Cook County reimbursing Metra the difference.

The Village is partnering with the RTA through the RTA's Access to Transit program on two separate projects to improve access for pedestrians and people using bicycles to and from the Ashland Avenue Station. The first set of improvements will include 2,050 linear feet of new and

improved sidewalks, two new pedestrian crosswalks, and a covered bike shelter at the Metra station. The new sidewalks will be on both sides of 124th Street between Laflin Street and Ashland Avenue and on the east side of Ashland Avenue from 124th to north of the Metra Station. This project is currently in engineering stages and is anticipated to be completed by the end of 2021. The second project is the development of a bike boulevard on 124th Street between Ashland Avenue and South Halsted Street. The project will connect the Metra station to the proposed South Halsted Corridor bus station on 124th Street and will feature pavement markings and signage to prioritize bicycle use along the corridor. Pending funding, the project will commence Phase II engineering in 2022.

STUDY AREA

The study area is a 6-acre lot of vacant land located adjacent to the Ashland Avenue Metra Station that is zoned C-2 – General Commercial. The surrounding area is comprised of multi-family residential buildings to the east, detached single-family dwelling units to the south, and an auto-oriented commercial corridor along Ashland Avenue. The lot is within walking distance of several area attractions including Burr Oak Elementary School and the Calumet Park Community Center. The site is located within an IRS-designated Qualified Opportunity Zone (QOZ), allowing investors to defer taxes on some eligible gains, allowing for lowered return on investment while having the project remain profitable. The purpose of QOZs is to spur economic development in low-income communities while providing tax investments to investors.



Triangle Site

Over the next few decades, the shortage of workforce housing units within Cook County is projected to increase. Because this site is located directly adjacent to Chicago, is walkable to a transit station, and is easily accessible to highways and regional job centers, it can be a desirable place to live. Prime development opportunities like the Triangle Site are disappearing throughout the Chicago region and the site will only grow in desirability as the stock of workforce housing units decline throughout the region and affordability worsens.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

The site has the benefit of being in a highly accessible and visible area near many current and future amenities in Calumet Park. There are, however, additional opportunities to fully capitalize on the site's large size and excellent location while remaining in line with the Village's identity as a bedroom community and history as a regional gateway.

1. Hire a Development Consultant

- a. Because the Village does not maintain a Planning department, an independent Development Consultant can act on behalf of the Village, providing objective insight on developer discussions and in negotiating Redevelopment Agreements (RDA) between the Village and the chosen developer. Hiring a Development Consultant will ensure that future RDAs maximize the benefits of any development for the Village and will ensure the RDA respects the concepts envisioned in the 2020 Comprehensive Plan. A Development Consultant could also help apply for competitive funds and grant programs.
- b. Hiring a Development Consultant will increase municipal capacity, especially during this key time of redeveloping the subject parcel adjacent to the Ashland Metra station. Few prime development sites such as this one remains in the Chicago region so developing the best possible RDA to take advantage of the development potential of the site is critical. Doing so could lead to this site serving as a catalyst site for further development and as a template for other development projects throughout the Village.



The Ashland Avenue Station along the Blue Island Branch of the Metra Electric Line

2. Issue a Request for Proposals (RFP) to obtain development alternatives

- a. An RFP is a document that announces a project, describes it, and solicits bids from qualified contractors to complete it. It is considered a best practice and should be issued for the site. The RFP should include the type of development that is sought and outlines the bidding process and contract terms. RFPs are used by most government agencies to find the best possible contractor for a project. Calumet Park, or a consultant, would then be able to review all bids, the financial health of the bidders, and their ability to complete the project. Not issuing an RFP may fail to identify the best redevelopment for the site.
- b. Redevelopment of the site should maximize the number of dwelling units that can be offered. Currently, 120 to 180 units are sought for the project site, however, the site could potentially support much more. Increasing the number of dwelling units offered at the site can stimulate demand for transit service, which can ultimately lead to an improvement of commuter rail service, that would benefit the entire community. Increasing the number of dwelling units on the site can also support business attraction and retention, by providing surrounding businesses with a higher number of potential customers. Phasing the redevelopment of the site over many years can allow for it to provide as much as the market can absorb at any given time without oversaturating the local real estate market.
- c. An RFP is also a means by which the Village can best leverage development goals outlined in the Comprehensive Plan for the site and other public benefits, such

as the reintegration of the street grid, future Metra station improvements, design guidelines, amount of commercial space, new sidewalks, and trees, and other pedestrian and bike infrastructure.

3. Increase Visibility and Development Success through Placemaking Efforts

- a. Working with Metra to rename the Metra station from Ashland Avenue to Calumet Park or to Calumet Park-Ashland Avenue would bring the station in tune with the names of other transit stations in the region named after the communities they serve. This would increase the visibility of Calumet Park and elevate its brand as separate from Chicago's. The station can also readily serve as a visual anchor point on the north side of the site.
- b. The site is near several notable landmarks (e.g., the Metra Electric – Substation, and the Pumping station) and within walking distance to parks, schools, and government buildings. Site development should multiply activity between all these separate attractors and landmarks. The site should include pedestrian-friendly design features such as placing parking in the rear of buildings, screening garbage cans, adding planters, providing street trees, minimizing curb-cuts, and other conflict points with pedestrians. This can create a more amenable pedestrian environment.



View of the Ashland Station from the Site and Metra tracks

- c. Ensure the site is developed in a manner that it becomes connected to the community and that the assets developed are viewed as community assets rather than private amenities only for new residents. This includes maintaining and expanding the existing pedestrian and street grid to provide clear pedestrian access to the station from all directions in the Village. Wayfinding that provides clear direction to points of interest, such as the park, the transit station, and/or historical markers that refer to the site's history. For example, the connection to Al Capone and to the 1933-1934 Century of Progress International Exposition, all which would further connect the site with the surrounding community.
- d. Packaging the development of the Triangle Site and making improvements to Ashland Avenue are key to the success of the Comprehensive Plan. Ashland Avenue is a 4-lane roadway but carries approximately 7,000 vehicles per day, suggesting the road is overbuilt for current traffic volume. Narrowing Ashland Avenue to include on-street parking, wider sidewalks, and street trees would slow traffic down and provide a clear signifier that one has arrived in Calumet Park. Because Ashland Avenue is a state highway, this would require partnering with the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT).
- e. The existing public works drum is an already existing gateway to Calumet Park. It can serve this purpose intentionally by simply cleaning and repainting the structure.
- f. When preparing the Triangle Site for development, existing materials on the site such as the concrete sidewalks can be demolished and reused on site as Gabion Walls. Since this will be reusing materials and only requires the addition of wire-mesh to retain it (avoiding the costs of a new concrete fence), these walls can be a cheap and easy way to effectively bring attention to the site and pay homage to its previous use.



A gabion wall is an affordable way to make a dramatic visual statement

- g. Village Hall's current location lacks visibility and is tucked-away within a residential area. Moving the municipal complex away from its current location and having it near the site will further improve visibility of the area. It will increase the attraction of the Metra station area as a center for community gathering and civic pride. It and will position the site as a desirable place to live, work, and shop by providing a pool of customers for local businesses on the corridor.

4. Advocacy

- a. Talking with elected officials (State Representatives, Senators, and Congressional Representatives) and educating them of the Village's vision for development are important techniques to secure funding for future projects. This can be accomplished by leveraging community stakeholders, such as the Chamber of Commerce, religious institutions, and residents to begin engaging with elected officials. Requests can be made to federal representatives for "community project funding," that can be used for transportation and other infrastructure projects, community programs, and other local initiatives. Community stakeholders should maintain regular communication with their elected officials.
- b. Advocacy does not need to be expensive or a departure from existing events and activities in the Village. Capitalize on Calumet Park's highly organized community by inviting regional representatives to community events. This will not only increase the community's visibility and bring attention to its needs, but it will also showcase the Village's most important asset: its passionate constituents. This will serve as a reminder to elected officials to remember Calumet Park and what they desire.
- c. Recognizing that Calumet Park exists at the heart of a highly fragmented and competitive region, cultivating regional partnerships with organizations like CMAP, the RTA, and the South Suburban Mayors & Managers Association (SSMMA) are imperative in gaining technical assistance. Calumet Park already has a history of engaging with regional organizations and must continue to prioritize this tradition.
- d. Present the Comprehensive Plan to the SSMMA and IDOT to inform them of the community's vision and identify future partnerships for projects. For example, collaborating with IDOT is necessary for any project related to state roads like Ashland Avenue. Monitor IDOT's Proposed Highway Improvement Program and begin working with IDOT and the SSMMA to prepare applications for transportation improvement projects such as an Ashland Avenue Road Diet for

Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program (CMAQ) or Surface Transportation Program (STP) funds.

- e. The Chicagoland Opportunity Zones Consortium is a local organization that facilitates connections through developer and municipal matchmaking, education, and technical support to attract opportunity zone investments that create quality jobs, build wealth, and promote equitable development throughout Cook County. The Village should partner with the Consortium for technical support in redeveloping the site. In addition to facilitating connections and technical support, the Consortium works with investors and project owners to connect them to applicable incentive opportunities such as the State of Illinois opportunity zones matching funds and prioritized investments in suburban Cook County Opportunity Zones.



Triangle Site at Ashland Metra station looking east

CONCLUSION

As a suburban community with several assets such as its proximity to regional job centers, great transit service, highway access, affordable housing stock, and organized community members, Calumet Park has the opportunity to build on its strengths and provide additional benefits to its residents. The Village has already taken vital steps towards improving its outlook by seeking to redevelop the Triangle Site. By redeveloping this key site with a focus on maximizing the number of dwelling units that can be sustained, maintaining, and expanding its connections to the surrounding neighborhoods, and capitalizing on its potential to serve as a regional gateway, it will set the tone for other developments that will follow.

To achieve this, the Village should hire a Development Consultant to review the RDA, issue an RFP, and cultivate a relationship with regional representatives to realize the vision outlined in the 2020 Comprehensive Plan. The recommendations provided in this report will augment the knowledge gained and guide Village leadership as they continue their efforts to develop the Triangle Site into a desirable transit-oriented community. Calumet Park is a stable, majority Black suburb and a proud working-class community where families raise their kids, foster community, and build wealth. Planning for the future to respond to regional transit, housing, and sustainability trends will only strengthen its position in the decades to come.



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