Revitalizing a Neighborhood Commercial Corridor: A Plan for Elmwood Park’s Diversey Avenue
Participating Organizations

UIC
Department of Urban Planning and Policy
College of Urban Planning & Public Affairs

UIC Credits
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May 9, 2013

Over the course of the last 16 weeks, I have had the distinct pleasure of working with the very talented master’s degree candidates in Urban Planning and Policy who developed this revitalization plan for the Diversey Avenue business corridor in Elwood Park. The plan document that follows is the product of a graduate planning studio at the University of Illinois at Chicago. During this past semester, the students have been studying principles, tools and examples of business corridor revitalization and applying their studies to the specific issues facing the Village of Elwood Park.

The ideas, strategies and work contained in this plan are entirely those of the student authors. The students undertook a detailed study of conditions in the corridor, identified the most critical issues involved in revitalization efforts and developed detailed, implementable strategies to promote better performance in the corridors.

The students met with Village officials in January for a tour of Elwood Park and to discuss the history and vision for the community. In February, Village leaders attended a workshop at UIC to review the students’ analyses of critical issues facing the business corridors. In April, another workshop was held with Village stakeholders at UIC to review and comment on the students’ draft revitalization strategies. The following revitalization plan reflects the students’ research, analysis and the feedback gathered through the planning process.

On behalf of the students and the UIC Department of Urban Planning and Policy, I would like to thank the officials and staff of the Village of Elwood Park for providing the time and information needed for a strong course, in particular Peter Silvestri, Paul Volpe, James Parenti and Marcello Gulotta who graciously contributed their time to support the course. I would also like to thank Jonathan Zivojnovic and the entire Mont Clare Elwood Park Chamber of Commerce for their support and assistance.

The course that made this plan possible is the 10th in a series of classes devoted to assisting Chicago area communities with commercial corridor revitalization planning. As a part of UIC’s mission, studio courses are offered with the participation of municipal and neighborhood partners to address pressing local planning needs. For more about the College of Urban Planning and Policy, please visit http://www.uic.edu/cuppa/

Sincerely,

T. Abraham Lentner
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Executive Summary

The plan for Diversey Avenue presented here represents an attempt to provide a direction for a commercial district that has, up until now, developed haphazardly without a coherent vision. While it is a valuable part of the community, the strip has seemingly drifted with new construction undertaken on an ad hoc basis with no clear idea of what the community wanted Diversey to be.

Presented with a vision of the strip as a family-friendly, neighborhood-scale gathering place, reflecting the culture of the people making up the community, the planning team has sought to create an Elmwood Park for Elmwood Park-ers. While Grand and North Avenues are fantastic locations with many unique amenities, by their very nature they are oriented toward drawing others into Elmwood Park from beyond its borders. Diversey, while it certainly will attract others to the community, will first and foremost be about creating a gathering place for Elmwood Park’s residents.

After receiving input from the community as to what they want Diversey Avenue to be, the planning team conducted an exhaustive analysis of the physical and economic conditions on Diversey today. The team reviewed the existing urban form, current business mix, vacancy and rent data on available properties, a regional economic analysis, and the regulatory environment in Elmwood Park. Based on these findings, the planning team identified particular issues that required attention to attain the vision set for Diversey by the community.

Solutions for these issues were devised and presented to business and civic leaders in Elmwood Park in April 2013. Based on the feedback received from this meeting, the planning team identified four major strategies to pursue:

• Create a central commercial and recreational gathering place for the community at Diversey and 74th Ave.;
• Encourage the adaptive reuse of residential structures in the corridor for commercial use;
• Actively recruit and retain small, professional, and neighborhood-serving businesses to open and relocate on Diversey;
• Implement a marketing plan and schedule of events to take place on Diversey to both attract visitors from elsewhere but also to celebrate the unique community spirit in Elmwood Park.

The plan includes a description of the issues on Diversey today that drove these recommendations and an expanded exploration of each of these solutions individually. Impact and implementation are also discussed to ensure that these plans are actionable and not merely a community ‘wish list.’

The planning team would like to thank the Elmwood Park community for all of their help in crafting this document.

Thank you.

The Diversey Team
Aerial Images from 1939 (above) and 2013 (below). The study area is delineated inside the red box.
Existing Conditions:
COMMUNITY

Located ten miles west of Chicago’s Loop, Elmwood Park was originally incorporated as a Village in 1914.

As it stands, Elmwood Park, was once open prairie space with rich black soil that sat at the southeastern section of Leyden Township between Chicago and the Des Plaines River. Native Americans made tools and constructed mounds along the river’s bluffs until the mid-19th Century. But in the 1840’s American farmers settled the area, which was then known as Orison, Illinois. As time progressed, the Chicago & Pacific Railroads laid track in Leyden Township during the 1870’s. The tracks themselves still run diagonally across the township along “Old Army Trail,” or what is today’s Grand Avenue where the train station at 75th Avenue is still in use. Local speculators bought many of the smaller farms and subdivided the land for residential development. As farming gave way to home construction, Orison became known as Elmwood Park around the turn of the 20th Century.

Local landowners were instrumental in extending the Grand Avenue streetcar line west of Harlem Avenue to 72nd Court in 1905. They understood that transportation was key to land development, and farmland and open prairie soon became rows of streets improved by public lighting, water infrastructure, and modern sewers. Mr. Merritt Marwood, a descendent from one of the first settlers in the area, served as the Village’s first mayor.

Elmwood Park experienced its greatest boom in population between 1920 and 1928. During this boom, new churches, a village hall, and a school were erected to serve the expanding municipality. Westwood, a 245 acre subdivision developed by John Mills and Sons Construction Company, contained 1,679 residential lots and 146 commercial sites. The Circle Parkway, a diversion from the standard grid just north of Grand Avenue, provided space for village functions as well as retail space.

Population expanded again after World War II, increasing from 13,689 in 1940 to 18,801 a decade later. The village built a high school and a new reservoir to accommodate this growth. Elmer Conti was elected the first village president in 1953, after Elmwood Park adopted a village manager system. A civic center was built on the Circle Parkway in the 1970’s, and a new library was completed nearby in 2002.

As of the census of 2000, there were 25,405 people, 9,858 households, and 6,525 families residing within the Village’s borders. As such, the population density for the area grew to 13,328 people per square mile with the total landmass of the municipality taking up 1.91 square miles. The racial makeup of the village was 91.54% White, 0.52% African American, 0.18% Native American, 2.09% Asian, 0.03% Pacific Islander, 3.31% from other races, and 2.34% from two or more races – with Hispanic or Latino of any race registering at 11.01% of the population.

According to familial breakdown of the area: (1) 29.5% of Elmwood Park’s households had children under the age of 18 living with them, (2) 49.6% were married couples...
living together, (3) 12.4% had a female householder with no husband present, (4) 33.8% were non-families, (5) 29.2% of all households were made up of individuals, and (6) 13.1% had someone living alone who was 65 years of age or older.

The median income for a household in the village was $47,315, and the median income for a family was $58,358. Males had a median income of $40,634 versus $28,667 for females. The per capita income for the village was $22,526. About 3.6% of families and 5.2% of the population were below the poverty line, including 5.3% of those under age 18 and 6.5% of age 65 or over.

Given Elmwood Park’s rich history, its current demographic make-up, and with new leadership and a motivated Village staff, Elmwood Park is poised to become one of Chicago’s strongest residential suburbs – offering quality shopping options, a no-stress commute to one of the nation’s busiest business districts, housing stock that is above par for the area.
EXISTING CONDITIONS

Urban Form
Diversey Avenue’s urban form in Elmwood Park reinforces the notion of the strip as an unplanned commercial area.

There are a few points which stand out in particular:
1. Building orientation to the street alternates from block to block with no obvious rationale;
2. It is difficult to discern building use by size, orientation, or location within corridor;
3. Some multi-unit residential structures are obvious based on size and provision of parking in/around the building;
4. Few locations present obvious alterations of the built fabric – the notable exception being removed street in front of the school;
5. Diagonal parking has been added on a number of side streets in locations where there are multi-unit residential buildings;
6. Harlem Ave. at the east end of the corridor has the shape typical of a modern, auto-oriented commercial district;
7. Building fabric is remarkably intact with few instances of vacant lots. New infill has also been generally of a similar character to the rest of the neighborhood.

The most obvious dissimilarity is in the difficulty of reading the strip as an obvious commercial area. Given its unplanned nature and generous mixing of residential structures and uses with commercial uses, it is difficult to pick up any kind of node along the strip. There are no places that obviously read, from the perspective of the built form, as a central location of activity. The bookends of the school and park at the west end and Harlem Ave. at the east provide brackets in which to read the form but within those brackets, context clues are scarce. Angled parking on side streets provide some hint as to higher density residential, but no such clues exist for the commercial uses on the street. Moreover, the mixture of commercial uses among the residential structures facing Diversey further muddles the reading of the built form.

Going forward, this implies a slightly different reading of the commercial strip than it might for Grand Ave. for instance. As discussed in class, commercial strips represent long, continuous forms with varying levels of commercial intensity. For Diversey, the reading may require looking to the lower intensity spaces of the strip rather than high volume locations. Relative readings of the term ‘node’ and others will be needed to conceptualize the lower intensity nature of commercial activity on Diversey.

Street Sections
The street section on Diversey Ave. differs from the section found on commercial strips elsewhere in Elmwood Park.

A few things in particular stand out:
1. The geometry of the street layout on Diversey is remarkably consistent. Whereas Grand Ave. had numerous lane alignments and widths, there is little to no variation in lane alignments throughout the corridor. This makes for an easily legible experience of the street from both driver and pedestrian points of view.
2. The primary form of diversity among street sections on Diversey is the type of building frontage. The most typical arrangement is Section C [see page 8], where buildings on both sides of the street are further removed from the street right-of-way by a small yard/lawn area. There were some instances where one side of the street had a setback building facing a building directly against the street right-of-way [Section A] and very few instances of two buildings directly against the right-of-way [Section B].
3. The street itself is rather narrow – only about 38’.
   This impacts potential treatments in a few ways:
   a. Vehicle speeds are already kept in check by the narrowness of the street;
   b. There is not a huge volume of room to work with on the street. However, the planted parkway areas along the roadside could present design opportunities;
   c. Physical/social connection across the street is very possible given the short physical distance and low vehicle speeds.

4. On-street parking is available [unmetered] almost as a rule throughout the extent of the project. This
makes for easy access to businesses on the street but also for psychological protection of pedestrians on the sidewalk who are physically removed from moving traffic by the barrier of parked cars. However, the availability of parking should not be considered as a carte blanche to disregard future parking needs. If the street were to develop substantial new commercial/office uses, parking needs beyond on-street facilities may need to be considered.
Street section showing typical proportions of right-of-way and setback

SECTION A - SIDEWALK FRONTAGE + SETBACK

SECTION B - BOTH SIDEWALK FRONTAGE

SECTION C - BOTH SETBACK
EXISTING CONDITIONS

Economics & Real Estate
The existing economic environment of Elmwood Park was analyzed using retail sales tax data as well as retail gaps and leakage factors and commercial vacancy rates and rents in the village and along Diversey.

Retail Sales
Municipal sales tax data was used to analyze the retail sales performance of Elmwood Park. The majority of retail sales in Elmwood Park in 2012 were in the Food industry, likely as a result of Caputo’s, followed by Drugs and Miscellaneous Retail. These two categories account for half of the village’s sales. Conversely, Apparel sales were so low that they did not register as a percentage and manufacturing was similarly low at 0.1% and Lumber, Building, and Hardware made up 0.8%.

Elmwood Park’s retail sales ranged from $120 million to $150 million between 2000 and 2012. The recession caused a drop in 2008 and 2009 but the village is rebounding strongly, based on retail sales increases each year since 2010.

For the purposes of this comparison, peer communities were chosen based on similarities in demographics and market profiles and a relatively distant geographic location. Alternatively, competitors are communities that Elmwood Park wishes to emulate and are close in proximity. The percent change in retail sales in all communities was compared to determine how Elmwood Park is faring.

In general, Elmwood Park’s retail sales have moved in the same direction as both the peer and competitor communities, with each experiencing losses or gains in the most of the same years. These trends hold true for all of the last five years, with more variation seen in the early 2000’s. This is likely a result of the strong recession forces that impacted all economies in recent years. Between 2001 and 2005, there was a slight recession but the differences in direction suggest that a wider variety of forces were at play among the communities. Unfortunately, it is not possible to know whether the communities will return to pre-recession patterns or if a new pattern will emerge as the economy continues to stabilize but the similar trends in recent years may work to Elmwood Park’s favor if the village can make itself more competitive as businesses thrive once again.

Retail sales performance in Elmwood Park has compared favorably with its peers between 2001 and 2011, with the village outperforming its peer communities in all years except 2003 and 2008. In all other years, Elmwood Park experienced higher growth or smaller declines in total retail sales compared to its peers. Overall, Elmwood Park appears to be strong amongst its peers, having experienced similar trends in retail sales changes but with a better showing.

In comparison to its competitor communities, Elmwood Park fared relatively well. Although the competitors outperformed Elmwood Park in the majority of the 11 years studied, it was a slim majority with the competitor communities performing better in six years and Elmwood Park performing better in five. Although there
are many more pieces to the puzzle than just retail sales trends, they do shine a positive light on Elmwood Park’s competitiveness and strength relative to communities that are have a more established reputation.

Overall, these trends suggest that the retail market in Elmwood Park is relatively strong, making it competitive and supportive of revitalization efforts. However, there remain larger questions as to whether Elmwood Park’s infrastructure, commercial space, available land, and overall market will appeal to growing businesses.

Retail Leakage and Gap
According to ESRI’s Retail MarketPlace Profile produced in October 2012, the area within a five minute drive time of Conti Circle has an overall retail gap of $171.6 million for a leakage factor of 26.8 out of 100. The five minute drive time covers the entire northern half of Elmwood Park, which is the primary market for businesses along Diversey Avenue, as well as much of the southern half and past the north and east boundaries of the village. This means that $171.6 million of purchasing is being lost in the corridor’s market area. The majority of these sales are in retail trade compared to food and drink.

Broken down by industry, the largest retail gaps are in General Merchandise Stores followed by Food Services and Drinking Places and Gasoline Stations. The industries with the highest leakage factors are Clothing and Clothing Accessories Stores, General Merchandise Stores, and Building Materials, Garden Equipment, and Supply Stores. The only industry with a surplus within a five minute drive time of Conti Circle is Motor Vehicle and Parts Dealers.
Evaluation of Commercial Real Estate Rents and Vacancy

Field research conducted in February 2013 provides a detailed picture of the commercial real estate environment in Elmwood Park and Diversey Avenue. In the first quarter of 2013, and the overall average asking rent in Elmwood Park was $13.21 per square foot with a median of $14.00 (see table). Average asking rents for smaller commercial spaces of under 4,000 square feet were higher at $17.56 and larger spaces of 4,000 square feet and above saw lower rents at $7.13. Median rents showed the same patterns but to a greater extreme. The most recent rates available for the Chicago region from CBRE are from the fourth quarter of 2012 and show a higher regional average rent at $16.65. The average range in the Western Suburbs was from $13.08 to $18.40; again, above the overall average for Elmwood Park.

At the same time, the vacancy rate in Elmwood Park was 9.15%, a rate that, while on the high side, is not terrible. The Chicago regional rate was slightly lower at 8.7% in the fourth quarter of 2011. Additionally, Elmwood Park’s vacancy rate was more than double CBRE’s rate of 4.5% for the Western Suburbs, which is very low.

Overall, asking rents in Elmwood Park are lower and vacancy rates higher than the Chicago region and, even more so, than the Western Suburbs. It is likely that the underlying causes of these trends include a number of older, functionally obsolete buildings that do not meet the requirements of modern retailers. Such spaces are therefore in need of upgrading, which may increase the asking rents and potentially hurt revitalization efforts by reducing the pool of potential businesses able to rent the space.

Diversey Avenue had one vacant space out of fourteen storefronts for a vacancy rate of 7.1% in February 2013. That space was being advertised at a rent of $12 per square foot. However, at that time there were two spaces rented to election campaigns that have since completed and may be vacant as well, for a total of up to three vacancies.

At the same time, the vacancy rate in Elmwood Park was...
Commercial Storefronts on Diversey Avenue

There is a range of commercial space on Diversey Avenue in terms of size and age.
CRITICAL ISSUES

After evaluating the existing conditions of Diversey Avenue, the planning team identified six critical issues.

Issue 1: Lack of identity

Presently, Diversey Avenue does not have a discernible identity. The corridor does not have any physical characteristics that identify it, either in terms of signage and banners or historic architecture. Additionally, the area does not have reputation within Elmwood Park and the business mix does not form a cohesive draw.

Solution: Follow a business development strategy to create an identifiable neighborhood commercial corridor.

Issue 2: Lack of awareness

Besides the lack of physical characteristics that distinguish Diversey Avenue from most of the streets in Elmwood Park, there is also a lack of awareness of the potential attractions of Diversey among the residents in the larger area. However Diversey Avenue does have to potential to become a place of attraction.

Solution: Develop a marketing strategy that creates festivals to enhance the public awareness of Diversey Avenue.

Issue 3: No center

For a commercial corridor to be successful, the center of the corridor is crucial. Presently there are only less than fifteen properties that conduct commercial activities on Diversey Avenue. These properties are small scale and scattered. There is not a place that can be considered the center of Diversey Avenue.

Solution: Undertake a catalyst project that can create a center for the Diversey Avenue.

Issue 4: Nothing to draw visitors along the corridor

The average distance between properties that conduct commercial activities on Diversey Avenue is about 217 feet. The commercial properties are disconnected and currently there is nothing on the street that can draw pedestrians to walk along the corridor and discover the next store.

Solution: Install public and sidewalk arts along the Diversey Avenue.

Issue 5: Residential Character

The predominant use of the properties on the Diversey Avenue is residential. This results in a strong residential character of Diversey Avenue, which is not the character a commercial corridor should present.

Solution: Increase commercial uses on Diversey Avenue through conversions and new construction.

Issue 6: Traffic & parking needs from revitalization

Provide sufficient parking is one of the keys to the success of the commercial revitalization. With the increased commercial activities from the revitalization efforts, new traffic and parking needs on the Diversey Avenue should also be counted in the revitalization strategy.

Solution: Include sufficient parking in new commercial developments.
VISION

Diversey Avenue will be an active, family-friendly strip of Elmwood Park that focuses on serving the neighborhood and acts as a destination for recreation and leisure. Residents of Elmwood Park and the surrounding area will be drawn to this center route through the Village for year-round activities to dine and play together.

Principles:
1. Distinguish an identity for Diversey Avenue
2. Build on neighborhood assets
3. Create a gathering place
**Recommendation:**

**PHYSICAL INTERVENTION**

**Critical Issue:** No Center; Nothing to draw visitors along the corridor.

To address the issue of a lack of center on Diversey, the planning team has adopted the ‘woonerf’ concept to redesign the street with an eye toward creating a definitive anchor point linking the existing commercial areas. Translated literally as ‘living yard,’ the design is a physical embodiment of the concept of ‘shared space’ – human-scale streets that do not benefit any particular transportation mode over another. The emphasis is on using human interaction like eye contact to navigate streets. Slowing automobile traffic and making for a more pleasant environment for pedestrians especially, these have been implemented across Europe and are making their way to the United States.

The proposed design consists of two major pieces; first, the new street alignment. In this case, a 1 block stretch of Diversey containing the entire block from N. 74th Ave. to N. 73rd Ct. will be realigned removing both parking lanes. The narrowed travel portion of the street will shift south, creating an expanded space on the north side of the street. For one block on either side (west to 74th Ct. and east to 73rd Ave.), the street will shift to line up with the narrowed portion. Additionally, the road will be raised to the same level as the parkway on either side. In place of the curb definition, bollards will be used to define driving space.

The second major concept uses this new space. A new structure could be built in place of the two existing apartment buildings current occupying the parcel. With the realigned street, the building face could be brought south, making it visible up and down the corridor. On the currently vacant portion of the parcel, the north of Diversey of 74th Ave. will be brought down to Diversey in the form of an open plaza. The alley running parallel to Diversey to the north between 74th Ave. and 73rd Ct. will be closed to make the connection seamless.
Elmwood Park Commercial Corridor Revitalization Plan

Existing (top) and proposed (bottom) street sections

Early exploration plan for the ‘woonerf’ concept
This proposal encapsulates Phase 1 of the major design intervention and addresses the problem of disconnected nodes of activity. For one, inserting a new commercial building fronting a public plaza should create some activity in its own right. Additionally, by pushing the building up into the newly vacated public right-of-way, it becomes visible up and down the street, encouraging exploration from either end of the corridor.

The streetscaping could be continued in a future Phase 2 to extend the entire length of Diversey when funds became available. While the aggressive realignment contained within this first shared space segment may not be replicated elsewhere, new treatments could be applied on the rest of Diversey to ensure a uniform physical environment. Ideally, any future phase would also include funds for upgrading of the existing park on 74th as well.
New Structure at Diversey and 74th Ave.

Designed to fully take advantage of the new plaza space created at Diversey and 74th, the planning team envisions the new structure as a mixture of commercial and retail space.

As mentioned above, by purchasing and removing two existing apartment buildings, the commercial building could be built directly up to the new plaza space. These pieces should, ideally, reinforce one another. Visitors to the plaza space will patronize businesses while businesses can utilize the plaza space as an outdoor extension of their businesses (as in the photo below).

The building as envisioned now would be roughly 18,000 square feet in total - 8,000 square feet of restaurant space and 10,000 square feet of leasable retail space. 8,000 square feet of restaurant space should provide enough area for two adequately sized restaurants while the 10,000 square feet of retail space should bring an entirely new component to the Diversey market.

An exploration of financing options for the structure is included in the Implementation section below.

The planning team understands that an 18,000 square foot building presents a significant expansion of the retail market on Diversey and that it may present a challenge in terms of finding private market buyers. Should this prove to be the case, the village can explore other options such as adjusting the total size of the structure, the mix of restaurant and retail space, or the programming of the structure.

If the village is serious about returning Conti Circle to its former role as public open space, the community uses currently occupying that space could prove an excellent match for the scale and intensity of use envisioned at Diversey & 74th.
Existing plan of proposed plaza and construction project

Proposed changes at site.
Rendering of plaza and new construction.

Rendering of plaza and new construction.
Recommendation: OPEN SPACE AND PUBLIC ART

Critical Issue: Nothing to draw visitors along the corridor

The distance between establishments along Diversey makes it unclear that there is more to see and experience along the corridor. Standing at one business, one cannot see what next thing might be along the way. Diversey needs something that draws people further down, something that catches their eye first and then their interest.

The three parks along Diversey will act to draw people along to area businesses and recreation when connected in an interesting way through abstract, public art. The current park near the intersection of 74th Ave and Diversey should be extended to abut Diversey as outlined in the previous section. At this park, the “center” of Diversey will be established in the form of a large metal circle and could be renamed as “Center Park”. The other parks will continue on this abstract and geometric theme first established at Center Park, by having Mills or “Corner” Park signified by a large metal corner-shaped sculpture. Further, Triangle Park will be represented by a large metal triangle.

To ensure that pedestrians along Diversey know that there is more to see they must be drawn. The abstractness of the geometric sculptures will serve to inspire interest and could be used in the future in campaigns for the Diversey corridor. As a lesson in art interpretation, local art students could annually develop a story behind the meaning of the objects or apply temporary decoration and attract even further interest. The sidewalk can be embossed with corollary metal art that references the art standing at the parks and guides both adults and children to the next landmark.

Through staff-time investment and a request for public art, the Village of Elmwood Park could make Diversey a street that people want to visit and linger along from neighborhood sandwich shops to neighborhood parks.
Recommendation:
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Critical Issue: Lack of identity

The following recommendations will address the critical issues facing the economic revitalization of Diversey Avenue by setting out a business development strategy, increasing commercial space, and using promotional activities to draw people to the area.

Business Development Strategy

The business development strategy for Diversey Avenue will help to define the corridor and create an identity for the area. The strategy builds on the corridor’s existing strengths, such as its walkability and proximity to schools and parks. It focuses on creating a corridor that is home to unique, mostly independent businesses that are family-friendly and draw nearby residents on evenings and weekends. Such commercial corridors have been successful in other communities, such as St. Paul, Minnesota’s Grand Avenue (see box).

The existing commercial space and street character calls for small businesses that will benefit from low rents. The low traffic volume requires that they create their own draw by appealing to specific audiences, such as unique craft stores selling specific supplies, or that will draw in nearby residents as well as the school children attending nearby Mills Elementary. Such businesses could sell vintage or resale clothing, shoes, baked goods, sporting goods, comic books, and more.

The demand for such businesses is exemplified by retail gap and leakage factors. The corridor’s market area as defined by a five minute drive time of Conti Circle shows leakage factors for all of these retail sectors at between 40 and 100 (see figure). The retail gap totals nearly $31 million (see figure).

Targeted business retention and attraction will be necessary to develop Diversey into a more vibrant corridor. This will require staff time on the part of a proposed economic development position due to the fact that Elmwood Park currently lacks such a staff member at the municipal level.

Retention

The businesses that currently exist on Diversey Avenue fit with the plan for the corridor. Efforts should be made to work with the existing business and property owners to upgrade building facades and signage to make the area more aesthetically pleasing. These same individuals should be involved in changes to the street form, such as the removal or planting of trees.

Attraction

Elmwood Park should work to attract both entrepreneurs and existing businesses to the Diversey corridor. The area provides a good opportunity for new business owners to get started in smaller spaces with low rents. Many of the targeted business types are within reach of a new business owner as well. Existing resources such as regional business schools and small business development centers can be used to locate individuals interested in opening up a new business.
St. Paul’s Grand Avenue
Grand Avenue in St. Paul, Minnesota has been transformed over the past four decades from a disinvested neighborhood corridor to one of the best shopping districts in the Twin Cities metro area known for its unique businesses and pleasant shopping atmosphere. The corridor features commercial nodes near major street intersections that are interspersed with multifamily residential. Commercial spaces are typically small and located in either historic storefronts or formerly residential properties. Additional parking was added in the rear and accessible through alleys in order to maintain pedestrian-friendliness. Revitalization was driven by local business leaders and neighborhood organizations that rebranded the area, specifically maintained the mix of commercial and residential uses, and created a neighborhood newspaper to promote the area. The area’s festival, Grand Old Days, attracts large crowds every summer.

Staff should also target existing businesses interested in opening a second location or perhaps smaller regional chains due to the low likelihood of attracting major chains to the corridor as a result of the low traffic volume and small spaces. Businesses that are thriving on similar corridors in other parts of the metro area are prime targets as are those operating in Elmwood Park that may see more success on Diversey, as was the case for Lolo’s Sub Shop.

Existing resources in Elmwood Park for such outreach include the chamber of commerce and, for restaurants, those already in operation on North Avenue. Trade shows and industry groups are also excellent resources for both independent and small chains. Some possibilities include the Chicago Area Retail Bakers Association, the National Sporting Goods Association, and the National Association of Resale and Thrift Shops.

Additional resources exist for supporting independent and locally owned businesses. In Chicago, there is Local First Chicago, which currently does not list any local businesses in Elmwood Park. The national-level Business Alliance for Local Living Economies is another option for information on supporting and growing local businesses.
Facade Improvement Program
Facade improvements will help to update the look of Diversey Avenue’s businesses and create a more aesthetically pleasing environment. The village has previously operated such a program, so reviving it should not pose too much difficulty. Property and/or business owners should be able to apply for grants of up to $10,000 for upgrades, which would be covered by funds from the SSA [see Implementation section]. A review of the current façade improvement program should be done to make it robust and specific enough to apply to the higher cost improvements for conversions, which are discussed in the next section.

Economic Development Coordinator
The proposed economic development recommendations require a significant amount of staff time to coordinate business development, inventory homes for conversion to commercial properties, review the public art RFPs, and to work with the festival promotion firm. It is estimated that a 0.33 time staff member would be needed. The position could either be part-time or a full-time staff member with additional duties, such as overseeing economic development in Elmwood Park as a whole.

Business Development Resources
Entrepreneurship
• Small Business Development Center Search Tool: http://ienconnect.com/directory

Industry Groups
• Chicago Area Retail Bakers Association: http://www.carba.com/
• National Sporting Goods Association: http://www.nsga.org
• National Association of Resale and Thrift Shops: http://www.narts.org
• Comic Book Industry Alliance: http://www.thecbia.com

Local Ownership
• Local First Chicago: http://www.localfirstchicago.org
• Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE): http://bealocalist.org
Recommendation:
RESIDENTIAL TO COMMERCIAL CONVERSIONS

Critical Issue: Lack of identity; Residential character; Nothing to draw visitors along the corridor.

Land Use and Conversions
The majority of the land uses along the corridor are single-family and multi-family residential, with park space with commercial establishments sprinkled amongst these uses. In order to increase the number of businesses on Diversey, the current mixed-use zoning in place along Diversey will need to be 1.) taken advantage of and 2.) extended to support residential to commercial conversions. There are few vacant parcels available for building new commercial or mixed used developments, so it becomes apparent to build on the existing housing stock.

The majority of the housing stock on the frontage of Diversey is multi-family with their first levels built below grade. Converting these buildings to mixed-use or to commercial would be extremely difficult and costly due to the below-grade nature of the architecture of the building. The MU-1 mixed-use overlay district along Diversey should be extended further west to Triangle Park (77th Ave) as well as further north and south so as to capture more of the housing stock that can more viably be converted to commercial or mixed use.

Additionally, Elmwood Park staff should invest time in creating a database of properties within the MU-1 overlay that can feasibly be converted to commercial. Staff should reach out to property owners, especially those selling, to educate them on the options of listing their home not only with residential but also commercial brokers. This provides another outlet to see successful conversions.

Proposed special service area with zoning designations.
Design Guidelines and Façade Improvement Program
Elmwood Park should establish clear design guidelines that are particular to the conversions of residential to commercial conversions along the Diversey MU-1 overlay district. The new guidelines should be flexible on setback requirements so as to apply new commercial-looking facades, a good example being from Tinley Park, IL and their conversion of a small single-family home to a quaint Italian bistro in their downtown [photo on previous page].

Keeping Costs Down
The cost of converting a residence to business can vary. In order to keep taxes low for these prospective business owners, the Village of Elmwood Park could promote and encourage the use of Cook County’s Class 2 Assessment which offers businesses with at least a 1000 square-foot apartment attached to be eligible for a reduction of up to 60% in property tax.

Bungalows as Business
The housing stock on the west side of Diversey includes many high-quality bungalows and single-family residences that could be converted to showcase their unique attributes by way of becoming a business. As the Chicagoland area is famous for bungalows, Elmwood Park could use their stock as an attraction for home interior or bungalow landscaping. Area-wide bungalow owners would be drawn to Diversey for inspiration on home improvement.

Recommendation: 
MARKETING & ‘FESTIVAL DRIVE’

Critical Issue: Lack of identity; Lack of awareness

Marketing Elmwood Park’s Diversey Corridor is crucial to the success of this plan. Before specific tactics and strategies are discussed, this proposal highly recommends that the Village of Elmwood Park should retain the services of a local for-profit, marketing and promotional company to oversee any phase of the implementation plan. Numerous vendors have expertise in the areas of executing street festivals and getting their clients exposure in local news publications, including firms like: Impact365 (www.impact365.com) or Big Buzz Idea Group (www.bigbuzzideagroup.com). But moving forward, the marketing plan for Diversey Avenue’s Corridor Plan will fall in line with the following phases of implementation: (1) Rebranding, (2) Market Analysis, (3) Festival Infrastructure, and (4) Paid Media.

Rebranding: The Creation of Festival Drive
Before physical space is transformed, the Village of Elmwood Park needs to commit to the idea of creating a “Festival Drive” along the Diversey Avenue Corridor. As a whole, the Village is making strides towards this end, including the installation of the Elmwood Park sculpture/sign on Grand and Harlem Avenues. Yet the major buy-in for this strategy comes first from the Village administration for its willingness to close Diversey Avenue from vehicular traffic – paving way for festival space – on a consistent basis. Secondly, the municipality’s local residents must support the plan with respect to the proposed changes to weekend traffic flow, future parking considerations, and their willingness to accept outside visitors from outside the community to come into their mostly residential space.

Once these ideas are accepted by both groups of stakeholders, then construction can begin – starting with the expansion of Center Park, its proposed new building construction, the creation of the “woonerf,” street resurfacing, the installation of outdoor electrical outlets and uniform outdoor tent structures for festival vendors, and signage along the route.
A selection of possible Festival Drive “logos” is included at right. But once a “logo” or slogan is adopted, the Village needs to ensure maximum exposure coordinated across online, radio, and print mediums, as well as being embedded within the physical design of the space. These efforts will result in a “place-making” activity that will leverage the newly created landmark at the “woonerf” location and the social/economic node present at the newly constructed building at 74th Court every time the Corridor is shut down for festival space [below].

In total, the Elmwood Park administration should commit at least five years towards a dedicated marketing plan and allocate a minimum budget of $15,000 for these purposed plans. The source of this funding can be distributed from the purposed Special Service Area (SSA) contained within this plan. Without this level of commitment, a true impact analysis of the “Festival Drive” marketing plan cannot be ascertained over time.
Market Analysis: When and Where are Festivals Happening?

This plan recommends that the Village use interns to develop a calendar of Chicagoland festivals for the entire calendar year and cross reference it for almanac weather conditions overtime. Once this product is developed, Elmwood Park can strategically create their Festival schedule on open event days, during opportunities that make sense geographically across the region, and giving weather considerations their proper due in order to ensure maximum market share of festival dollars that are spent any given year.

Yet with an initial understanding of Chicagoland’s festival schedule, the Diversey Avenue planning team recommends taking advantage of the lack of social/community festivals planned during the Fall and Winter months.

These events can take many forms, but we recommend considering: (1) a Hot Chocolate Festival, (2) a Pumpkin Festival, (3) a Homecoming Festival/Parade incorporating Conti Circle as a part of the parade route, and (4) a Winter Festival with a made-up/funny name that can generate earned media opportunities.

Festival Infrastructure: If you build it they will come

Beyond the detail that was contained within this plan with respect to the creation of the “woonerf” on Diversey Avenue’s right of way, the expansion of Center Park, the construction of the mixed-use building at 74th Court, and the street resurfacing for the entire Diversey Corridor, this plan also recommends installing outdoor electrical outlets and locations for temporary, coordinating, festival tents strategic along the expanse of the festival space. This will allow the Village to charge vendors a premium for weekend rental opportunities in addition to being able to attract some store owners that may not have the tools/equipment necessary to participate in a traditional street festival – thus increasing net-revenue.
for the space and opening up the number and type of vendors that could participate in Elmwood Park’s planned festivals.

Also, it may be a good touch to install new street signs above or below existing streets names with the “Festival Drive” logo for continuity of concept between advertisements and the physical space this plan is referring to.

**Paid Media:**

**Maximum Advertising Investment Until Diminishing Returns are Met**

Setting the strategic goal of developing metrics that are capable of factoring in the cost-benefit analysis of marketing investments is crucial. The contracted for-profit marketing company should be able to do this for the Village. Yet in all reality, Elmwood Park would need to develop a holistic marketing plan that taps into online, radio, television, social media, and print media outlets in a coordinated attempt to bring the new street improvements and scheduled festival programming to the social and economic decision making of the consumers of the larger Chicagoland market. In doing so, not only will Elmwood Park begin branding Diversey Avenue as the newly minted “Festival Drive,” but the Village will increase name recognition for the municipality as a whole – which could possess secondary benefits of more homeowners and more business owners from purchasing property or conducting commerce in the community.

In total, the more the public knows about Elmwood Park, its quality school options, it’s vibrant commercial activity, it’s close commute to Chicago’s city center, and it’s new “Festival Drive,” the more success the Village should have towards becoming the locale it envisions itself in becoming.
IMPLEMENTATION

**Special Service Area (SSA) for the Diversey Avenue Corridor**

A Special Service Area (SSA) is a taxing district that levies an additional tax on a specific area in order to support increased services for that area. The following is a breakdown on the proposed SSA:

**Organizational Lead.** The village government should take the lead on the proposal and managing the SSA as the new staff member would be employed by the village.

**Boundaries.** The area would include properties located within 150 to 175 feet of Diversey Avenue from Harlem Avenue on the east to 77th Avenue on the west.

**Services.** The SSA would cover staff salaries, facade improvement grants, and the costs of the winter festival.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Cost</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personnel</td>
<td>$17,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facade Improvement Grants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Winter Festival</td>
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<td>Tree Removal</td>
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<td>Admin Non-Personnel</td>
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<td>Loss Collection (Unpaid Taxes)</td>
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<td><strong>Total Cost</strong></td>
<td><strong>$100,000</strong></td>
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</table>

**Revenue.** The SSA should set an annual levy of $100,000, which would amount to a tax rate of 0.6%, or an additional tax of approximately $475 for a small commercial property on Diversey up to $2,000 for a larger commercial property.

**Design Guidelines**

The conversion of residential to commercial structures will be encouraged along Diversey as well as the parcels closest to Diversey on the side streets. The proposed MU-1 overlay outlines these parcels.

The design guidelines should maintain the character of the neighborhood. Conversions should not include additions in height above three stories, as the majority of buildings along Diversey are one or two stories. The design guidelines should establish that additions match the character of the materials of the current structure or that a new material will apply to the entire building. The goal is to eliminate the occurrence of ad-hoc additions that utilize different materials than the rest of the building.

Doors should be sturdy, commercial-style doors, so as to encourage patrons to enter as well as to differentiate the building from the residential structures nearby.

Signage should have no neon or flashing lights as this may disrupt neighbors and the feel of the neighborhood. Businesses should be allowed one yard sign up to 2.5 feet in height with a maximum face of 24 inches by 24 inches. This yard sign should not be permitted in the right of way. Additionally the business may have one sign on the face of their building, either flat against the façade or utilizing a projection sign that does not exceed a projection of 4 feet from the building.

The impact of this will be well-designed buildings that contribute to the character of the neighborhood but differentiate themselves so as to encourage business to flow to and from their establishment. The design guidelines will also make the building more marketable for the next business to enter, yet easy enough to convert the building back to residential should the need arise.

**Extension of MU-1 Overlay District to 77th Avenue**

The proposed extension of the MU-1 Overlay to 77th Avenue would provide more housing stock to viably be converted to commercial. This change would extend the district to include parcels that extend north and south from Diversey up to approximately 160 feet. These buildings are still visible from Diversey and with proper signage as established in the design guidelines, they would draw more people to the corridor. The bungalows on the west side of Diversey along the side streets of 76th Ave, 76th Ct., and 77th Ave include many well-maintained bungalows that have great potential to be used as businesses that cater to the bungalow housing market.

The impact of this would mean more buildings to viably
Proposed special service area with zoning designations.

be converted to residential and create destinations for neighborhood shopping. Additionally it opens up the potential to use the bungalows as a niche shopping area for bungalow interior decorating and landscaping which would not otherwise be encouraged with the current overlay.
Funding the Shared Space and plaza on Diversey

The upgrades to the park and streetscape on Diversey/74th can most effectively be paid for using general obligation bonds issued by the city. Cost estimates for the park and streetscape project are best guess approximations based on comparable projects completed elsewhere. Comparable projects were selected for their scope, scale, and the quality of the finished project desired for the Diversey & 74th site.

Included are cost estimates for two phases of work on Diversey reflecting the desires of the civic leadership to create a continuous streetscape on Diversey and not a new-Diversey/old-Diversey atmosphere. Phase 1 includes the park expansion at the corner and the share space street design on Diversey from 74th Ct. east to 73rd Ave. Phase 2 includes upgrades to the existing park on 74th as well as streetscaping on Diversey from 76th Ct. to 74th Ct. and 73rd Ave to Harlem Ave.

Other funding sources considered, including TIF and the proposed SSA included in this plan, were not practical for this particular use. Furthermore, as physical improvements to the public way, these fit the classic use of general obligation bonds. The following are rough calculations for costs for the streetscape and park.

The total cost of each phase breaks down as follows:
- **Phase 1** - Total Cost, $2,290,000.00
- **Phase 2A** - Total Cost, $1,860,000.00
- **Phase 2B** - Total Cost, $2,150,000.00

Schedule of cost estimates for streetscaping and plaza.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARK &amp; PLAZA</th>
<th>SQ FT</th>
<th>Price/SQ FT</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Phase I</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>Phase II - A</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Diversey (76th Ct. to 74th Ct.)</td>
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<td>Diversey (73rd Ave to Harlem Ave.)</td>
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<td><strong>SUBTOTAL</strong></td>
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Funding the New Restaurant & Retail Building

Financing the construction of the new structure at Diversey and 74th Ave. is less clear cut and provides the village with more options. There are two main options the city can pursue to get this structure built. In the first, if the city pursued a normal buy-demolish-build process using a construction loan for this structure only, the village would be required to substantially subsidize the building’s debt service. While this is not ideal, the planning team believes that as this is intended to be a catalyst project, this is not an unwarranted use of funds. Under this method, the subsidy would be between $250,000 to $300,000 per year.

Under an alternative approach however, the city could package this construction with a number of other projects and then use an alternative revenue bond. Amortized over a longer period (20 vs. 10 years) and likely at a better interest rate (3.5 vs. 4+%), the subsidy would start at just over one-tenth the subsidy required in the traditional construction loan approach. Necessary funding from the village would start at roughly $40,000 per year and decline from there.

It is the opinion of the planning team that, should a suitable suite of other projects be identified, the village should pursue the option of packaging a number of projects and use alternative revenue bonds, the second option described above.

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### New construction financing assumption estimates.

#### Traditional Construction Loan Method

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<tr>
<td>SQ FT</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Acquisition/Site Prep</td>
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<td>Interest Rate</td>
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**Operations**

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<th>Loan repayment</th>
<th>Subsidy</th>
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*Rising with Inflation

#### Traditional Construction Loan Method

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<tr>
<td>Vacancy/non-collection</td>
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<td>Interest Rate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Periods</td>
<td>20 years</td>
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**Operations**

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<td>20</td>
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<td>$88,100**</td>
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**Subsidy only required through Year 8**
IMPACT EVALUATION

The impact evaluation of some recommendations will be very straightforward while others will require more time and effort.

‘Shared Space’ Expanded Park and Plaza

Measuring the impact of a physical design intervention like the shared space arrangement proposed for Diversey and 74th can be difficult. However, by keeping in mind the issues the design was meant to address, one can create some, albeit imperfect, performance measures.

Intended to join disconnected commercial nodes by creating a central point of activity and attraction, the key measure will be how well it performs uniting the commercial corridor across Diversey. To this end, the proposed SSA will be key for tracking the impact of the shared space area.

First and foremost, the SSA should engage with both business owners and customers through surveys to try and determine how many customers are shopping the entire length of the street. A short survey distributed by businesses, perhaps incentivized with minor discounts for participating customers, could ask customers where and how they shop Diversey. Ideally, this could be done both before and after the park is expanded and the proposed structure built.

Second, the SSA should keep track of the plaza’s usage for both major events like festivals as well as on the average weekday. Measuring the impact of festivals is covered elsewhere in the plan, but for the purposes of the plaza attendance figures and number of participating vendors will be key metrics. Additionally, it would be ideal if the SSA could devote some resources to monitoring the usage of the plaza space in the day-to-day as well. Sales figures/occupancy for store fronts facing the plaza, counts of pedestrian activity, and citizen feedback would all be excellent starting points for evaluating the overall impact of the new plaza and expanded park.

Lastly, as the proposal for the street realignment is in some ways quite radical, careful monitoring of the traffic should also be considered. Vehicle counts, including not just volume but also speed, should be conducted for Diversey and impacted side streets (74th Ct. to 73rd Ave.). Surveys of crash data and parking usage would also be effective in evaluating performance.

Economic Development

The overall impact of the economic development recommendations can be evaluated in a number of ways. Positive impacts are expected to be shown through and increase in the number of commercial spaces, the maintenance or reduction of the vacancy rate for the corridor, and a reduction in retail gap and leakage factors within the five minute drive time analyzed above.

The impact of the festival schedule can be measured in terms of net profits for the village and the number of attendees. To the extent that it is possible to track where festival goers are coming from, it would also be helpful to track attendance numbers for Elmwood Park residents versus people from outside the village.