

# OAK PARK OAK LEAVES

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## Residents give input on Downtown TIF planning

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By Cheri Bentrup, Staff Writer

Keeping Oak Park's historical character and improving pedestrian walkways and traffic are key concerns residents voiced at the first public session to create a master plan for the Downtown Oak Park tax increment financing district.

After an hourlong presentation by village consultants, more than 100 audience members last Wednesday separated into small groups to list their top three issues and concerns with the Downtown TIF.

The TIF district incorporates most of the commercial area along Lake Street from Harlem Avenue to East Avenue, north to Ontario Street and south to Pleasant Street.



"We need traffic patterns that really work," said Rose Meyer, a resident of the 1100 block of Ontario Street, of an issue raised in her group discussion. "We need to preserve the historic flavor of Oak Park. We are throwing it away with density and height and everything that does not preserve it."

Bob Loro, owner of Loro Auto Works at 1029 South Blvd., agreed.

"We don't want to lose the flavor of the neighborhoods," he said, adding that his group would like to see a public gathering place in the Downtown area.

Jim Kelly of the 1000 block of South Harvey Avenue said Oak Park needs "a wow factor. When people enter Oak Park, they (should) go, 'Wow.'" The walking environment for pedestrians along Lake Street needs to be improved, he added.

"We want something charming. Something you can't find anywhere else, unique stores," said Adriana Kopecka, owner of The Rocking Horse at 119 N. Marion St.

The Marion pedestrian mall should not be opened to vehicle traffic, but does need a facelift, she said. "We'd like to see it more of a park with nice shops."

Consultants George Crandall and Don Arambula of Crandall Arambula of Portland, Ore., spoke prior to the small group discussions. Crandall said his firm's job is to update Oak Park's earlier plans.

"Certainly parking and traffic is a huge issue," he said. "You have a wonderful historical character here. The trick is to maintain it and enhance it if we can."

"We're sensitive to your historic preservation issues," he said.

An overriding goal of the plan is to improve quality of life in Oak Park, Crandall said.

"Without the quality of life component, economic development serves no one. They go hand in hand," he said.

Crandall said Oak Park should consider improving the railroad underpasses to make them more inviting and pedestrian friendly.

In addition to future public meetings, planned for Sept. 22, Nov. 10 and one in January or February 2005, Crandall said his firm will create a ballot with various design plans on which residents can comment.

"The people who are generally happy don't say anything," Crandall said about public meetings. "What we hear at meetings and what we find when we tally the ballots are two different things."

Arambula showed slides of the Downtown TIF district, pointing out initial areas the firm has targeted for improvement or change.

He described Harlem Avenue as "highway like" because of its heavy traffic load. Both Oak Park and River Forest would benefit by improving Harlem's pedestrian crossings to better connect Downtown Oak Park and the River Forest Town Center.

"People want to get from one side to another," Arambula said.

Sidewalks are too narrow and several stores don't have entrances from the Harlem side, he said.

Development on Lake Street between Harlem and Forest Avenue seems to have been accomplished piecemeal, he said. The village planters shield pedestrians from vehicles on Lake Street, but take up space for on-street parking that shoppers could use, he said. Mirrored glass on some buildings is not pedestrian-friendly, he said, and the patchwork of pavers along the sidewalk is a concern.

"Do you want consistency to give it a sense of calmness?" Arambula said.

The Marion Street pedestrian mall, though more active than many pedestrian malls, also is a concern, Arambula said. Residents need to decide if they want the street to remain closed.

Arambula said the Lake Theater is a wonderful asset because it brings people into Downtown.

Farther east, Arambula said, he and Crandall "walked right by Unity Temple because it wasn't obvious to us." Attractions need to be better identified to bring in tourists, he said.

The parking garage near Oak Park Avenue fits nicely into the neighborhood, but Oak Park Avenue south of the railroad tracks, he said, "we suspect is a leftover piece. We need to figure out how to strengthen this area." The TIF district incorporates Oak Park Avenue south to Pleasant Street.

Residents asked whether Crandall Arambula would recommend a moratorium on development until the new plan is completed.

"We do not like to stop anything that has momentum," Crandall responded. However, he said, his firm will be looking at proposed developments in the TIF district.

Crandall said the firm also will recommend whether the TIF should be terminated or continued.

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