



Neighborhood Updates Master Plan With Changing Chicago in Mind

BY JEN KINNEY | MARCH 3, 2017



The Flat Iron Arts Building, at the intersection of Milwaukee, Damen and North avenues in Chicago (Photo by David Hilowitz via Flickr)

Since at least the 1950s, when a highway construction project displaced thousands of residents, the Chicago neighborhoods of Wicker Park and Bucktown have been shaped by transportation networks. Adjacent neighborhoods are uniquely transit rich, sporting access to the Kennedy Expressway, the Blue Line rapid transit and two regional rail lines. Milwaukee Avenue, which cuts through the heart of Wicker Park, is one of Chicago's most biked thoroughfares.

Most recently, the **606, an elevated rail line turned bike path and linear park**, has been contributing to neighborhood change in an area already experiencing rapid development. So much so that the Wicker Park Bucktown Special Services Area (Chicago's version of business improvement districts) recently released **a new master plan**, despite completing its last planning process just seven years ago.

With rents rising, development pressure increasing and a growing demand for multimodal links among the neighborhood's many transportation assets, WPB's new plan highlights how much has changed since 2009, both in the neighborhood and in the broader conversation about livable cities.

"Since our last master plan in 2009, I think urban planning in all cities has progressed, to the point where things that were groundbreaking in our 2009 master plan are being implemented in our city and cities all around," says Brent Norsman, WPB SSA commission chair. He points to the 606, which was a pipe dream when the first plan was published and yet. **(It opened to the public in 2015.)** The WPB SSA was also pushing for pedestrian plazas and colored street furniture, plans that stood little chance under former Mayor Richard M. Daley, who favored black street furniture.

Today, says Norsman, it's a different story. Chicago has since adopted Vision Zero, installed over 100 miles of protected bike lanes and **embraced transit-oriented development**. When Norsman recently talked to the city about installing bumpouts and additional crosswalks to **improve pedestrian safety**, staff had already spoken to aldermen and reported they might be able to make it happen this year.

"That would have been radical just a few years ago," he says.

The new plan calls for a variety of improvements to the pedestrian and bike landscapes, including a consistent protected bike lane on Milwaukee Avenue, one of the city's most popular cycle routes. Despite demand, "there's really not enough room to do everything," says Scott Goldstein of Teska Associates, a Chicago urban planning and design firm that consulted on the plan. At public meetings, the firm used a scale model of Milwaukee Avenue to let residents take a stab at designing the street themselves, eliminating parking and adding bike lanes as they saw fit.

In three locations throughout the neighborhood, Milwaukee Avenue crosses two other major streets at a diagonal, creating six-corner intersections where transit entrances and retail development are also clustered.

"They're difficult because they're obviously high traffic, but we want to create a more balanced approach to all users of the intersection [including pedestrians and cyclists], and carve out more meaningful public space in those areas," says Norsman. The plan shows a sketch of a redesigned intersection with extended curbs to create sitting areas, make crossing shorter and slow down cars.



EXISTING INTERSECTION NORTH, MILWAUKEE AND DAMEN

- Difficult for Pedestrians to Cross*
- Long Crossing Distances*
- Conflicts Between Pedestrians, Bikes, Cars and Trucks*



PROPOSED INTERSECTION NORTH, MILWAUKEE AND DAMEN

- Reduce Crossing Distance*
- Add Curb Bump-Outs*
- Mark / Maintain High Visibility Crosswalks*
- Convert Slip-Lane to Ped-Space*
- Investigate Eliminating Some Turning Movements*
- Bike Improvements at Intersections
(bike boxes and bike lanes up to the intersection)*

That same intersection, at Damen and North avenues, is the heart of Wicker Park’s high-rent retail district. Norsman says an increase in national chains like Toms Shoes has some residents worried about the future of local, independently owned shops, which are experiencing rising rents.

“That’s been a big concern: How do we maintain the eclecticism of our community,” says Norsman. But he says the higher-rent tenants attract foot traffic for all the stores, and that other shops can move to the lower-rent corridors that remain in other parts of the neighborhood. The non-binding plan includes some mechanisms to preserve affordable retail rents — encouraging landlords to give short-term leases to artists, or creating a financing program to attract small businesses for example — but Norsman concedes, “It’s hard to get building owners to not take that high rent that’s staring them in the face.”

Wicker Park has long had a strong market and rising rents. Follow 606 to the west, to the neighborhoods of South Logan Square and Humboldt Park, and the concerns shift from rising commercial rents to rising housing prices.

“This trail really connects the predominantly white neighborhoods of Wicker Park, Bucktown with the predominantly Latino neighborhoods of Humboldt Park and South Logan Square,” says Geoff Smith of the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University. “You start at the far east [in Wicker Park] and go all the way west, it’s almost like a continuum in terms of the changes you might see from a higher income to a lower income spectrum.”

That made the western half of the 606 **vulnerable to displacement and gentrification**. While single-family housing prices on the eastern half of the 606 rose by 113.4 percent, on the western half they rose by 139.7 percent. **According to a recent study by Smith**, people living within one-fifth mile of the 606

on the west side are paying a 22.3 percent premium to do so, whereas those on the east side are paying none.

That's in part because the western half experienced more foreclosures during the housing crisis, and thus most development today is driven by investors who snapped up homes at bargain prices. Smith says that factor and others should have identified South Logan Square and Humboldt Park as neighborhoods vulnerable to rapid gentrification. If they had been, perhaps programs to increase homeownership or invest in affordable housing might have been adopted sooner.

On the east side, in Wicker Park and Bucktown, where housing prices were already much higher, there may still be time to stabilize retail rents. The proposals in the plan are not binding, but in contrast to the 2009 plan, local organizations and aldermen have adopted different parts of the plan to steward. One section includes voluntary design guidelines for new development.

“We think it will make it easier for developers to know in advance what the community wants to see,” says Goldstein, including better public spaces. “That the health of the businesses depends on the pedestrian environment, that really became clear in the process,” he continues.

Proposals in the plan would also better connect different transit modes, from the 606 to the underpass at the Clybourn Metra Station. Just outside the SSA boundaries and providing connections to both downtown and northern suburbs, the station is “a pretty big asset for our neighborhood that is somewhat underutilized,” says Norsman. The plan calls for working with CDOT to add lighting, artwork, better wayfinding, and safer pedestrian and cyclist infrastructure.

BECOME A NEXT CITY MEMBER TODAY

Jen Kinney is a freelance writer and documentary photographer. Her work has also appeared in Satellite Magazine, High Country News online, and the Anchorage Press. See her work at jakinney.com.

 **FOLLOW JEN**  **EMAIL JEN**

TAGS: URBAN PLANNING, CHICAGO, COMMUNITY-ENGAGED DESIGN
