

V. OAK FOREST METRA STATION SUB-AREA

During the development of the community-wide Comprehensive Plan, the City has placed an emphasis on a “sub-area” immediately surrounding the Oak Forest Metra Station. This location is the primary gateway location into the City from the east (off of I-57) and serves as the cross-roads of the two regional arterials that traverse the City, 159th Street (U.S. Route 6) and Cicero Avenue (IL Route 50). In addition to being located at a major nexus of vehicular travel patterns for the City, Metra Rock Island District commuter rail service and Pace suburban bus routes converge within this area.

While opportunities for community input in the early stages of the planning process were designed to solicit input on issues and opportunities community-wide, many comments received addressed the sub-area in particular. Enhancing the function and appearance of this area is clearly a high priority for City residents, who see improvements in the sub-area as having significant potential to enhance both the quality of life and the image of Oak Forest. Community input indicates that residents of Oak Forest, and those living west of Central Avenue in particular, tend to travel west to Oak Park Avenue in Tinley Park to experience a pedestrian-friendly “downtown” environment; encouraging a similar environment in Oak Forest will provide an opportunity for residents to have a similar experience closer to home.

For planning purposes, the Oak Forest Metra Station Sub-Area has been roughly defined as the area located within one-quarter mile of the Oak Forest Metra Station. Properties within this radius are considered to be within an easy walking distance of the Metra Station, and most likely to be directly influenced by potential changes within the immediate station area. This chapter provides an introduction to existing conditions and planning opportunities in the sub-area, which will serve as the basis for planning and policy recommendations to follow in subsequent steps of the planning process.

A view looking northwest across the 159 and Cicero intersection, toward the existing Oak Forest Metra Station parking lot and community gateway feature.



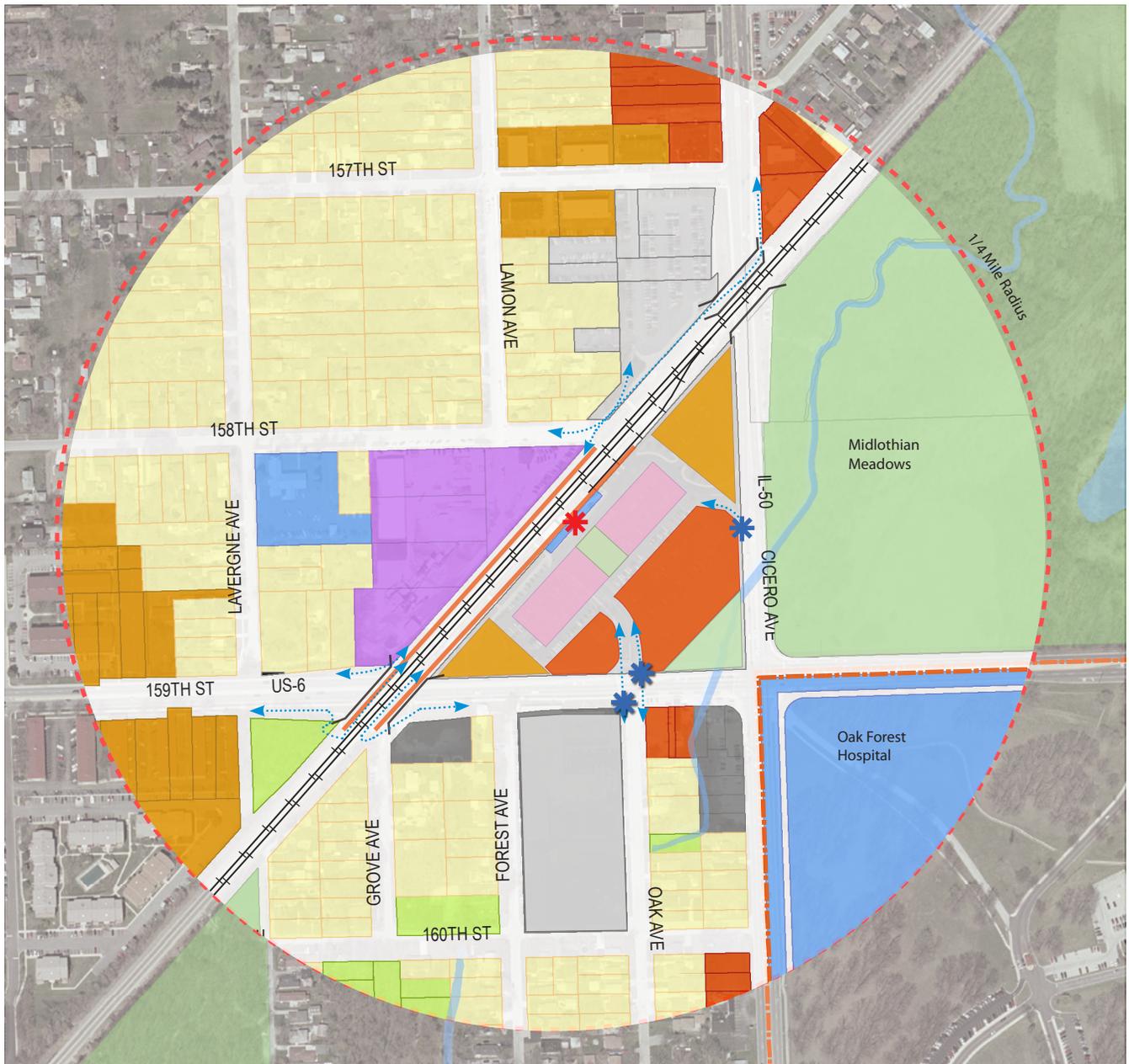
Figure 19: Sub-Area Planning Conditions highlights several of the following key physical features of the 159th Street and Cicero Avenue Metra Station Sub-Area:

- The City is currently in negotiations with RSC & Associates to develop a major transit-oriented development on the triangular parcel currently occupied by the commuter parking lot at 159th and Cicero. This “Gateway TOD” redevelopment has received preliminary plan approval, and is therefore generally reflected in Figure 10. The project will likely serve as a catalyst for further improvements within the sub-area and extending along the adjacent commercial corridors, and will establish the level of quality expected for redevelopment projects to the north, west and south that could follow. As indicated in Figure 19, the project will consist of two mixed use structures flanking a new Metra Station, with commercial outlots next to the arterials of 159th and Cicero. Plaza spaces at the corner and in front of the new Metra Station are anticipated. A later phase of the project is proposed to include two condominium buildings next to the mixed use structures.
- Existing land uses surrounding the Gateway TOD site include the following:
 - Immediately across 159th Street to the south, the former Arbor Park school site and several frontage parcels are currently vacant. Because it is expected that the commuter parking to be displaced by the Gateway TOD development will be accommodated on the former Arbor Park school site, it has been indicated as a parking lot. A low density single family neighborhood is located behind the commercially zoned frontage along 159th and Cicero in this area.
 - East of the Gateway TOD site, the Midlothian Meadows Forest Preserve and Oak Forest Hospital form a natural green edge; the hospital is located in unincorporated Cook County and is well off the roadway on a significant wooded site. While it is not expected that changes will occur on the forest preserve property, the County may be considering selling some of the existing hospital property for development.
 - North of the Gateway TOD site, a mix of commercial uses and commuter parking lots exist along Cicero in the first two blocks north of the Metra Rock Island District Line tracks.
 - Northwest of the Gateway TOD site, the Wille Brothers concrete plant is located against the railroad tracks across from the station, accessed via 158th Street and Lamont Avenue.



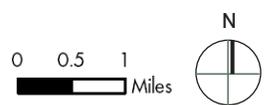
FIGURE 19

SUB-AREA PLANNING CONDITIONS



Land Uses

- | | | | | | |
|---|---------------------------|---|----------------------|---|---|
|  | Single Family Residential |  | Industrial |  | Metra Station (relocated) |
|  | Multi-Family Residential |  | Parks and Open Space |  | Metra Platform |
|  | Institutional |  | Public Parking |  | Pedestrian routes to/from train station |
|  | Commercial |  | Vacant Building/Land |  | Pace Bus Stops |
|  | Mixed Use |  | Metra R.I.D. Line | | |



- West along 159th Street, multi-family and single family residential uses are found in the first two blocks west of the railroad tracks.
- The Metra Station facility consists of a utilitarian brick structure located south of the railroad tracks, which accommodates a ticket agent office and a heated waiting room. Both the inbound and outbound platforms extend northeast and southwest from the station building. At their southwestern end, they extend over 159th Street. Pedestrians can cross the railroad tracks at an at-grade pedestrian crosswalk located in proximity to the station building. Platforms are also utilitarian, paved in asphalt and edged with chain link fencing. Simple pole-mounted light fixtures illuminate the platforms. In Figure 19, the station is shown relocated slightly to the northeast, to be located "on axis" in the symmetrical layout of the Gateway TOD plan. It is expected that a new station facility and platform upgrades will be completed as part of the Gateway TOD project.
- Pace routes along both 159th and Cicero stop adjacent to the Gateway TOD site. Passengers transferring to Metra alight from the buses at the curb and walk through the parking lot to reach the Metra platforms.
- Access features in the sub-area generally consist of the following:
 - Vehicle access to the commuter parking lot consists of one curb cut on 159th and one curb cut on Cicero. The Gateway TOD plan presumes a similar access strategy, with one curb cut along each side of the development.
 - Extending north along Cicero, commercial businesses have curb cut access to off-street parking, while the commuter parking lot directly north of the station is accessed from 157th Street.
 - Commercial lots south of the Gateway TOD site have curb cut access, but due to the grade separation of 159th and the railroad tracks there are no curb cuts onto 159th Street between Oak Avenue and LeClaire Avenue.
 - There are sidewalks present along both 159th (west of Cicero) and along Cicero (north of 159th). These sidewalks extend under the railroad tracks at both underpasses. A ramp and stairs connect the 159th Street sidewalks with the Metra platform above. However, along the north side of 159th and both sides of Cicero (north to 157th), sidewalks are located directly adjacent to the curb with no parkway zone, resulting in a rather hostile walking environment adjacent to these heavily traveled roadways. Sidewalks are generally not present in the adjacent



The existing utilitarian station building is proposed to be replaced with a new station as part of the "Gateway TOD" development.



Typical pedestrian crosswalk and sidewalk conditions at the 159 and Cicero intersection.



single family neighborhoods to the south, west and north.

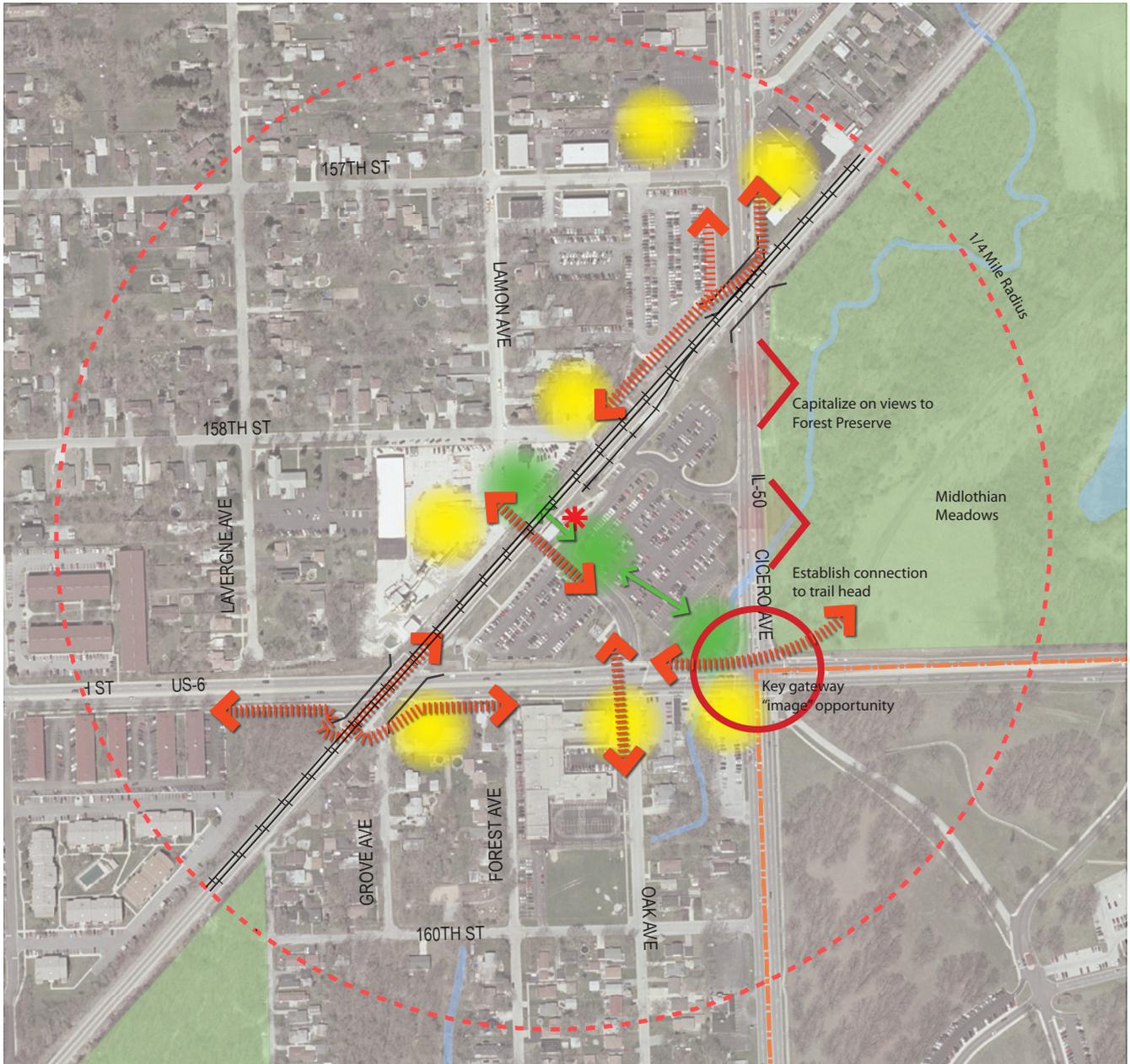
- A pedestrian bridge located adjacent to the railroad bridge extends over Cicero, providing a grade separated connection to the east side of Cicero.
- A paved bicycle trail in Midlothian Meadows Forest Preserve terminates at the northeast corner of 159th and Cicero. Bicyclists can then utilize a sidewalk on the east side of Cicero, adjacent to the Oak Forest Hospital, to travel south and connect to a trailhead at 163rd Street and Cicero.
- Parking in the sub-area consists of the following:
 - 1,049 existing commuter spaces are provided at the Oak Forest Metra Station, with approximately half north of the tracks and half south of the tracks, which are nearly fully utilized. One parking lot is located east of Cicero just north of Waverly, and can be accessed via the pedestrian bridge over Cicero.
 - As part of the Gateway TOD project, it is expected that the parking lot south of the tracks will be relocated to the former Arbor Park Middle School site, recently purchased by the City for this purpose. Any additional spaces needed to replace current capacity will be accommodated either on the Gateway TOD site or by expanding and/or reconfiguring the parking lot directly north of the tracks.
 - Currently, parking to serve commercial uses and multi-family residential uses is accommodated in off-street parking lots or at side streets along 159th and Cicero. On-street parking is not permitted on these major arterials due to heavy traffic volumes.
- Streetscape plans have been developed by the Village Engineer to replace streetlights along 159th and Cicero through the City, utilizing grant money that has been secured. In addition, the City plans to place decorative pavers in the parkway zone along Cicero Avenue during 2007. Phase I of the streetscape project will include Cicero Avenue from 154th Street south to the railroad viaduct.



A covered pedestrian bridge provides a grade separated connection over Cicero Avenue adjacent to the Metra RID Line bridge. Narrow sidewalks directly adjacent to the curb extend under the bridges along Cicero.

Figure 20: Sub-Area Planning Opportunities highlights several key planning considerations, which will form the basis for the development of physical plans and planning policies for the 159th Street and Cicero Avenue Metra Station Sub-Area. These considerations include the following:





Legend

-  Metra Station (relocated)
-  Key Pedestrian and Bicycle Connections
-  Key Open Space/Plaza Opportunities
-  TOD Potential Sites
-  Metra R.I.D. Line



- Building upon the Gateway TOD project, explore opportunities to expand transit-oriented redevelopment opportunities to the north, west and south, in areas most visible and readily accessible to Metra and Pace transit amenities. These opportunities might include redevelopment of properties fronting 159th and Cicero, the Wille Brothers industrial facility, and other properties closest to the north commuter platforms.
- Establish a consistent design treatment for any future redevelopment occurring at the southwest corner of 159th and Cicero, to strengthen the “gateway” character of the intersection.
- Explore strategies to protect and enhance the character of adjacent single family residential areas, while improving pedestrian access from these areas to the Metra Station and nearby commercial and open space uses.
- Establish a network of plazas and open spaces that provide pedestrian continuity throughout the area, establish a linkage across the railroad tracks, provide a venue for community events, and provide a major visual feature at 159th and Cicero.
- Integrate the new Metra Station facility and platforms into the area, both visually and functionally. This will include placing the new station in a location central to the Gateway TOD site and establishing a visual connection through the site to the corner of 159th and Cicero.
- Build upon the “multi-modal” potential of the area by facilitating vehicle access, pedestrian and bicycle movement, Pace bus access and Pace transfers to Metra (including potential route adjustments to bring Pace buses directly to the Metra Station drop-off area).
- Upon re-evaluation by Metra of projected demand for new commuter parking in the next twenty years, investigate alternatives to accommodate increased commuter parking capacity as redevelopment occurs.
- Investigate ways to improve the pedestrian environment along 159th and Cicero, and to facilitate pedestrian crossing of major arterials, while establishing visually coordinated streetscape treatments at both corridors.
- Capitalize on the attractive views west into the Midlothian Meadows Forest Preserve and the Oak Forest Hospital property.
- Discuss opportunities for commercial development on portions of the Oak Forest Hospital property with Cook County, to ensure mutual benefits.
- Establish a stronger connection with the existing bicycle trail at Midlothian Meadows and trails further south along Cicero.



VI. ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Throughout the planning process to-date, community input has been quite consistent with regard to key concerns and community planning priorities. Overall, the community has expressed a willingness to think in a long-range fashion about its future, to be open to change as the community and its surrounding region continue to evolve, and to establish a “road map” for the implementation of key planning priorities.

In the recent community-wide survey, 84% of survey respondents indicated that they are at least “satisfied” with their quality of life. However, fully one-third of respondents indicated that their quality of life was at least “somewhat worse” than it was five years ago. The comprehensive planning process provides a unique opportunity to hone in on the issues that residents consider most troublesome, in order to establish clear policies and implementation strategies to pro-actively address them in the coming years.

Community assets, issues and opportunities that have been identified through public input, field surveys or other research activities to-date are summarized below in general categories, for ease of reference. These considerations will form the basis for the development of a community vision and planning goals in the next step of the planning process.

Key Community Assets

- A family-oriented community with a small-town character
- A strong sense of community with long-term residents
- Multi-generational, with children returning to raise their families
- Good City services and leadership
- Less congested and “commercialized” than neighboring communities
- Housing still affordable, with diverse options available
- Access to regional destinations via Metra and expressways
- Transportation options available (auto, Metra, Pace)
- Excellent schools and community facilities/programs (library, parks, etc.)
- Nearby Forest Preserve amenities (trails and golf course)
- An abundance of open space
- Strong institutions and churches
- A strong Chamber of Commerce
- A large industrial park

