

Introduction

In early 2010, the West Rogers Park Community Organization, the West Ridge Chamber of Commerce and the Rogers Park Business Alliance asked LISC MetroEdge to conduct an assessment of the commercial development potential of Western Ave in the West Rogers Park neighborhood. LISC MetroEdge is a program of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC). It works in urban markets nationwide assisting CDC's, local governments, developers and business associations to define their market potential and then develop and implement strategies to achieve that potential.

LISC MetroEdge's Retail Scan is based on an analysis of national and local data sets, and on-the-ground market assessments. The national data is provided by Nielsen Claritas, a major commercial market data provider typically used by retailers and private investors. Additional sources of data include the Federal Financial Institutions Examination Council (data on homeowners), the City of Chicago (building permits), the Chicago Police Department (crime data) and the State of Illinois (traffic counts). On-the-ground assessments include interviews with community leaders and organizations and multiple tours of the market. In addition, David Baum of Baum Realty toured the market with LISC MetroEdge staff and provided input on local and regional development strategies.

Summary of Core Market Assets

Good Market Demographics and Income

- Population of 64,495 is as large as many municipalities.
- Incomes are increasing in the community. The share of households earning middle income (\$50k) or above increased from 40% to 46% from 2000 to 2009. Households in this income group are also dense in the neighborhood on a per square mile basis, higher than both the City and Cook County.
- West Rogers Park has the 15th highest concentrated buying power in the City, out of 77 community areas, with \$247 million per square mile of concentrated buying power.
- Overall, in ten retail categories, West Rogers Park residents are spending 41% of their retail dollars outside the community. These are potential dollars that can be recaptured in the neighborhood in existing and new businesses.

West Rogers Park Trade Area

These data are based on the residential population within the boundaries of Howard St. on the north, Ridge Blvd. on the east, Peterson Ave. on the south, and Kedzie Ave. on the west. This is a convenience market trade area. People living in this area typically desire to stay within the area to find basic shopping goods and services like pharmacies, groceries, dry cleaners, auto repairs or hardware stores.

Neighborhood Support and Capacity

- The West Rogers Park community is interested in and participates in its growth and development through membership in community organizations and participation in community events.
- Organizations like the Rogers Park Business Alliance, West Ridge Chamber of Commerce, and West Rogers Park Community Organization individually operate active programs in the community (both commercial and residential) and provide a ready pool of expertise for implementing community vision.

Other Market Observations

- West Rogers Park is racially and ethnically diverse. People come from all over the region to participate in events and shop in stores targeted for specific groups. Devon Ave in particular is a retail destination bringing \$\$ and shoppers into the community.
- Several parks in the neighborhood (including on Western Ave) are assets that can be used to foster a sense of place.
- Violent and property crime rates are well below City averages.

Western Avenue Assessment

- Traffic can be an asset for retail and commercial development
 - High traffic counts are attractive to some businesses
 - As a major corridor, much of Chicago (City and Region) uses Western Ave on their way to and from destinations; and in the recent past came to Western as a destination for auto retail
- Overall the street is unattractive and many buildings suffer from neglect.
- The corridor is long, with nodes such as at Lunt and Devon where some limited retail density (walkable retail) can be assembled; while other spots have shopping centers, vacant lots, vacant retail spaces or abandoned auto dealerships.
- The design of Western Ave makes pedestrian oriented retail desired by the community difficult to achieve. Heavy traffic makes walking unsafe and unpleasant, and current spaces on the corridor recognize this – they are auto-oriented. They are also dispersed, further discouraging going from store to store on foot except at strip malls.
- Changing the character of Western Ave is more than a challenge of difficult spaces and heavy traffic, but also a challenge of design and function. The corridor was widened as recommended in the Burnham Plan of Chicago specifically so that it can carry the traffic volume it sustains today.
- The Western Ave bus is heavily used and valued by the community but does not fully serve neighborhood transportation needs.
- There are sufficient vacant lots and open spaces to meet the parking needs of any businesses opening on Western Ave.

Market Challenges

- Market demand within the neighborhood is strong but retail competition is also strong – the neighborhood is surrounded by shopping opportunities outside the community including retail districts in Andersonville and Evanston and suburban style shopping centers.
- Many businesses on Western Ave need some form of technical assistance and/or access to capital to make improvements inside (service, menus, appearance) and outside (storefront appearance)
- Resources for business assistance and corridor management are stretched; business owners on Western Avenue not organized and they do not seek available funds for store improvements.
- The Rogers Park Business Alliance, West Ridge Chamber of Commerce and West Rogers Park Community Organization are all capable organizations; however, they have little experience collaborating with each other.
- Some community retail goals are supported by market data, but will not be fully realized on Western Ave. Options for desired retail on alternate streets have not been well explored or profiled to date.
- West Rogers Park is impacted by foreclosures. The prevention and counseling strategies being implemented by community partners like Lakeside CDC are critical for maintaining community health.

Goals

Western Ave Goals

- A new plan for the street that puts vacant lots into productive use, especially vacant or abandoned auto dealerships
- A clean and neat street

Community Retail Goals

- Walkable community oriented retail with amenities like sit down restaurants and coffee shops
- Deeper retail mix on Western Ave with shops to create a shopping experience; e.g. enough diverse and dense retail to draw customers for a shopping experience.

Recommendations

Focus on Streets

- Complete the mapping of Western Ave noting occupied and unoccupied spaces/lots and the condition of each
 - Identify lots/spaces where a bit of clean up would make them more attractive to drivers or walkers
 - Identify where some community retail goals can be realized such as at Lunt or around Devon
- Begin to identify alternate streets in the community where desired retail can better fit
- Use this information to develop a block by block plan which identifies specific actions, focusing on what can be done in the next 12 months

Pursue Retail and Non-Retail Uses

Conduct primary and secondary research for new uses on Western Ave that fit the spaces and lots that exist on Western Ave now. Focus on uses that serve families, that require space and parking, and that take advantage of Western Ave's auto-orientation (e.g. services people are willing to drive to like health and education). Services and products that all consumers need or desire. Suggestions include:

- Entertainment
 - Event Space
 - Kids such as Monkey Joes
 - Test Kitchen
 - Pop up stores
- Pet Care, Grooming
- Transportation: Car charging, biodiesel, scooters, other next generation transportation
- Green sustainable businesses like garden center/green house
- Health Care
- Educational/Vocational
- Appliance and electronics
- Garden centers

Grow Neighborhood Partnerships

The Rogers Park Business Alliance, West Ridge Chamber of Commerce and West Rogers Park Community Organization should continue building out their new partnership by:

- Managing the next steps (above) including incorporation of volunteer participation
- Assigning clear roles among the staff and volunteers
- Continuing regular meetings and joint planning sessions