



CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The project area for the Harlem Avenue Corridor Plan runs from 63rd Street on the north to I-80 on the south. It runs through the following communities: Bedford Park, Bridgeview, Burbank, Chicago Ridge, Oak Lawn, Orland Park, Palos Heights, Palos Hills, Tinley Park, and Worth, as well as a portion of the Forest Preserve of Cook County.

CORRIDOR CONTEXT

Harlem Avenue is a major commercial corridor through the southwest suburbs of Chicago. The Corridor is destined to retain this function in the future, and in addition to being a major north-south transportation corridor will continue to serve the commercial, employment, and recreational needs of the surrounding communities and region.

Harlem Avenue is a marked State Highway managed by the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT), with daily traffic that averages over 40,000 vehicles per day in some portions of the Corridor. This makes it one of the busiest arterial roadways in the region. This level of roadway usage means that the Corridor is an attractive location for commercial uses, but also leads to challenges in keeping the roadway network along Harlem Avenue functioning at a high level.

Roadway operations improvements need to be balanced with other transportation users in the Corridor. Harlem Avenue is served by two Pace bus routes and nearby Metra commuter rail stations at Chicago Ridge, Palos Heights, Tinley Park and Worth. Toyota Park is also served by Pace express bus service from the Chicago Transit Authority's (CTA) Orange Line. However, transit service throughout the Corridor would benefit from improved connectivity and more frequent service. In addition, there are significant needs for an improved environment for non-motorized transportation uses (e.g., pedestrians, cyclists) along the Corridor, including additional pedestrian amenities, improved sidewalk conditions and more streetscape continuity.

CORRIDOR VISION & GOALS

The vision for the future of Harlem Avenue is to function as a street safe for travel by all modes of transportation and safe for all users, regardless of age and ability. This "Complete Streets" approach balances the needs of all users of the roadway and focuses on the development of a complete transportation network. For Harlem Avenue to be used as a "complete street," improvements should be developed that embrace all users, including not only autos and trucks, but also transit service, pedestrians and bicyclists. As part of an overall transportation network, individual roadways do not have to function as all things to all people, but can provide a specific role within the network. This network approach helps to balance the needs of various users.

As presented in the *Existing Conditions Report*, the project goal is to develop a comprehensive corridor plan that unites the corridor, its activities and character to make it a more highly-functioning transportation corridor and activity center for the southwest suburbs. This planning project is designed to complement, not supersede, the existing plans of the communities and transportation agencies. Specific transportation planning objectives for the Corridor include:

- Planning for the corridor needs to balance the context of the local community with the travel characteristics of the roadway and the land uses served.
- Solutions for roadway and intersection congestion are needed to mitigate congestion and improve safety, but need to be balanced with needs for pedestrian and transit access. Efficiency for all modes of travel should be maximized to the greatest extent possible without creating negative impacts on other modes.
- Transit service should provide a convenient connection to key activity centers along the Corridor; be linked with other transit and non-motorized uses; and correspond with community plans for development.
- Pedestrian crossings should be safe and comfortable for all users, regardless of age and ability. Provisions for pedestrians to cross the street should be located at all cross streets with signalized intersections, and all cross streets with bus routes.



COMMUNITY INPUT

Targeted public input and comment for the Harlem Avenue Corridor Plan was solicited via online surveys that were publicized through press articles, flyers distributed to the municipalities, community presentations, and via email to stakeholders who had registered on the project website.

The public survey on transportation issues was online from mid-November 2010 through January 2011, and there were 170 responses to the survey. Another online survey on urban design and development was online during April and May 2011, and garnered 59 responses. Although the surveys were not scientific, results from each of these surveys provided valuable input about public perceptions, and was used to inform the transportation planning process.

WHAT DO RESPONDENTS THINK ABOUT THE ROADWAY?

When presented with a variety of improvement types, respondents prioritized improved speed along the corridor and improved connections to shopping areas as their top two priorities.

When asked to characterize the level of roadway congestion around certain intersections, the areas around I-55, I-294, and 159th Street were most commonly listed as “high,” while congestion around I-80 was typically listed as “severe.” Numerous respondents also commented on congestion at other specific intersections along the breadth of the Corridor, and traffic flow in the Corridor in general was most frequently rated as “poor.” Attributes such as pavement condition, safety, signage, access to businesses and access to interstates were typically rated as “average.”

WHAT DO RESPONDENTS THINK ABOUT PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION?

Transit users arrived at their primary public transportation service by all modes, but most frequently drove. Very few transfer from one service to another in the course of their trips.

The most frequently used service among respondents who use transit is the Metra Rock Island Service, boarding in Tinley Park at 80th Avenue. In response to a question about whether current public transportation service on the Corridor meets rider needs, 54% of respondents said “yes.” Reasons that other respondents replied “no” varied, but included comments about frequency and speed of bus service, ease of connection between services, lack of stops or route coverage, where they would board, character of stations/amenities, lack of information on how to use transit to reach destinations, and preference for driving.

WHAT DO RESPONDENTS THINK ABOUT NON-MOTORIZED TRANSPORTATION?

The majority of survey respondents never walk or bicycle on Harlem Avenue, nor bring their bicycles on transit along the Corridor. A slight majority do not currently use recreational walking or bicycle trails.

Regarding the non-motorized infrastructure on the Corridor, many respondents commented unfavorably on the condition and continuity of sidewalks along the corridor as an impediment to walking safely or efficiently.

WHAT DO RESPONDENTS THINK ABOUT STREETScape?

Streetscape questions dealt with assessment of conditions and availability of street furnishings, and landscaping styles and preferences. When asked to characterize the condition of medians and parkway along the Corridor, the most frequent responses indicate the highest need for improvement in the area north of 95th Street, with the areas south commonly listed as “adequate.”

Questions pertaining to street furnishings (trash receptacles, benches, bike racks, bus shelters, etc.) indicated that respondents considered current conditions and quantity to be “Poor” but that it was an “important” category for future investment.

Responses to visual preference questions seem to suggest that respondents favor more traditional manicured or grassy landscaping. Improved bus shelters were perceived favorably (78% “yes”), but more intensive bus infrastructure including bus-only lanes was not (60% “no”).

A majority of respondents indicated that the recent streetscape and signage improvements in selected areas of the Corridor have had a positive impact. However, freeform comments conveyed that some respondents are frustrated with maintenance issues related to landscaping and the medians, and perceive these expenditures as unnecessary.

WHAT DO RESPONDENTS THINK ABOUT URBAN DESIGN?

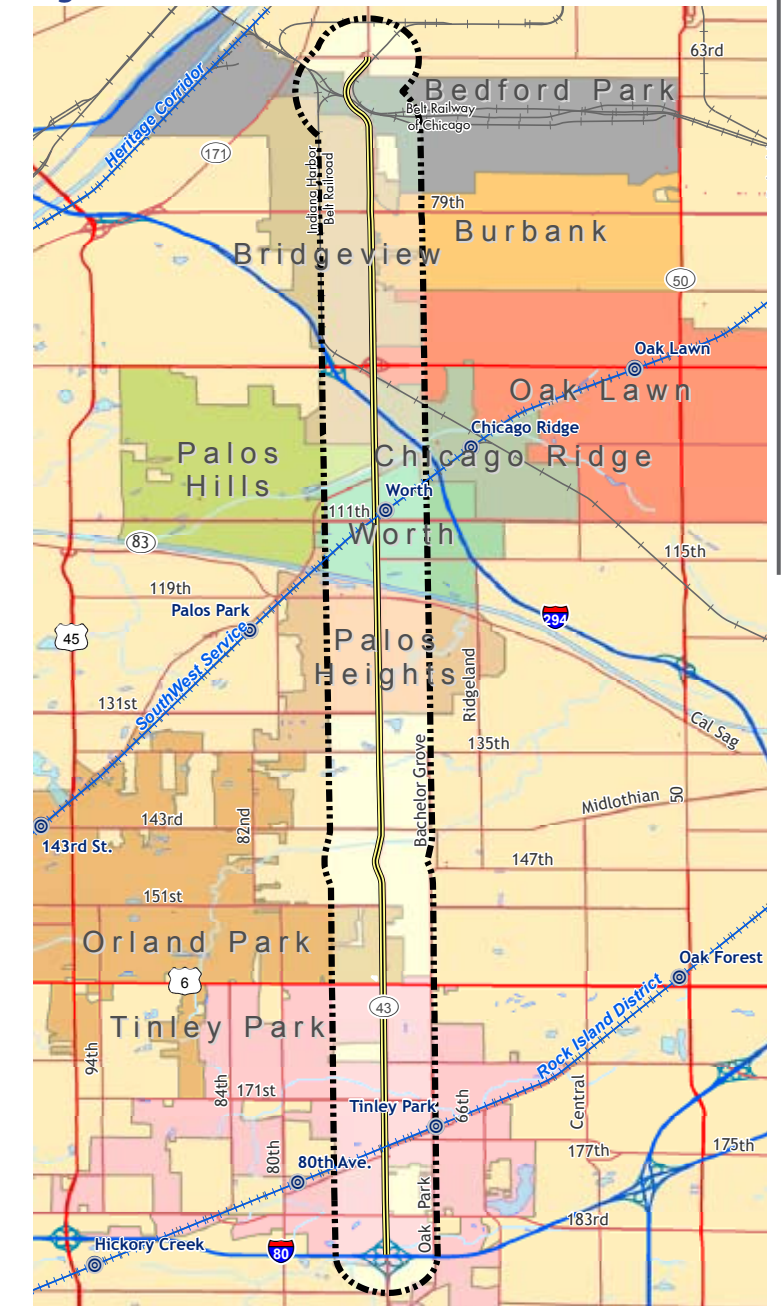
Urban design questions dealt with assessment of architectural style and layout / form of the built environment. When asked about form for new development, most respondents favored a typical suburban style of building and parking layout, although pedestrian and bicycle access was noted as important.

A high number of respondents (45%) noted that specific architectural style was not important as long as quality is good. Freeform comments included notes about not making the development environment so strict as to drive away potential new businesses. There were also comments about how poor design can have a negative impact on the surrounding areas.

WHAT DO RESPONDENTS THINK ABOUT DEVELOPMENT?

Development questions asked for feedback on economic development priorities and on preferred development opportunities. When asked to comment on priorities, all categories (a range of economic development goals) were noted as “important.”

Figure 1-1. Harlem Corridor Communities



- The two categories most consistently reported as important were “Creating local jobs” and “Generating more property or sales tax revenues.”
- The two categories most commonly listed as not important were “More conveniently located municipal facilities / public services” and “More residential options convenient to transit and transportation.”