

CENTRAL AREA PLAN PHASE 2 | FOCUS GROUP MEETING SUMMARIES

September 2024

Overview

During Phase 2 of the Central Area Plan Update (CAP), the CAP team facilitated three virtual focus groups in late August with a total of 77 participants. Each focus group centered on 3 specific pillars of the plan:

- Focus Group #1: Arts + Entertainment | Lifelong Learning | Public Health + Safety (8/28/24)
- Focus Group #2: Transportation + Infrastructure | Environment, Climate + Energy | Public Health Safety (8/28/24)
- Focus Group #3: Housing + Neighborhoods | Land Use | Economic Development (8/29/24)

The focus groups followed a structured format, beginning with a presentation that summarized the progress made in Phase 1 and the current focus on turning the shared vision into actionable steps in Phase 2. Participants then engaged in individual work time to review draft strategies and actions, followed by a voting exercise through Menti to prioritize two actions per strategy. Breakout sessions were then held to identify any missing strategies or actions. Finally, a report-out was given to the larger group, allowing all participants to hear a brief recap of all breakout discussions.

The following sections summarize the key themes that emerged from each focus group, complemented by an interactive Proxi map shared with participants following the discussions.

Focus Group #1: Arts + Entertainment / Lifelong Learning / Public Health + Safety

08.28.2024 (9:00-10:30AM)

Important Meeting Links

Menti Export (PDF): [LINK](#)

Interactive Proxi Map: [LINK](#)

List of Participants:

Nora Gainer, Art Institute
Robin Schnur, Art Institute
Juan Díes, Sones de Mexico Ensemble
Terrell Johnson, Chicago Philharmonic
Bonnie McDonald, Landmarks Illinois
Philip Bahar, Chicago Humanities Festival
Roche Schulfer, Goodman Theatre
Emily Hallock, Field Museum
Kitchie Bakken, Columbia College
Ann Kalayil, Columbia College
Joan Pomaranc, AIA Chicago
Melanie Wang, DCASE
Amanda Carlson, DCASE
David Baker, DePaul University
Rodney Matthews, Entertainment Community Fund
Suzanne Wychocki, Entertainment Community Fund
Daniel Arnow, Entertainment Community Fund
Tamecka Sandifer
Jennifer Clark, Loyola University
Ian Spula, Chicago Architecture Center
Jennifer Kunde, Northwestern University

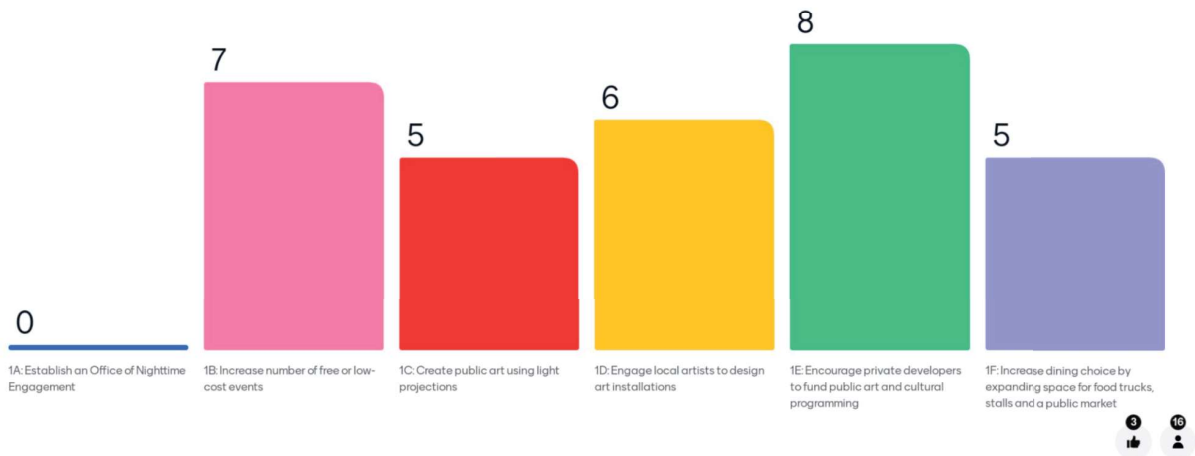
Menti Survey Results: Top Priorities

Arts + Entertainment

- **Create a vibrant 24/7 downtown**
 - Encourage private developers as part of the entitlement process to fund public art and cultural programming for proposed projects.
 - Increase number of free or low-cost events in underutilized areas of downtown on weekends and evenings (like Chicago Loop Alliance's ACTIVATE).

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Arts + Entertainment Strategy #1: Create a vibrant 24/7 downtown



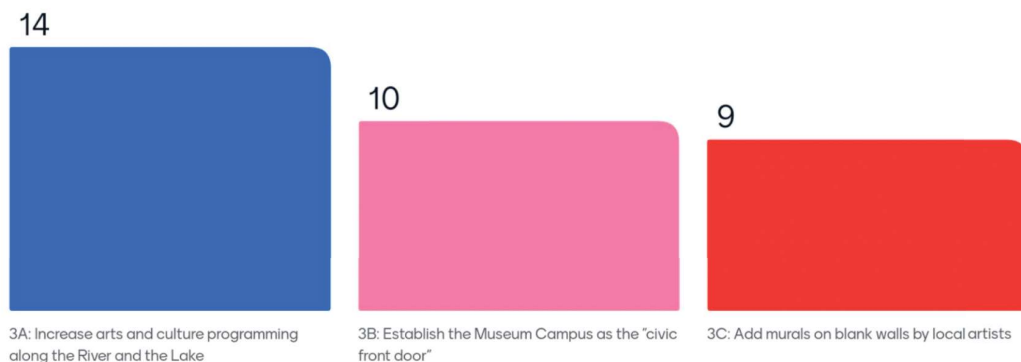
- **Re-energize iconic streets**
 - Reimagine Michigan Avenue as a modern retail, entertainment, mixed-use district with high-quality public spaces.
 - Establish flexible festival streets via streetscape improvements such as retractable bollards to enable year-round programming on portions of streets like State St., LaSalle St., and other downtown locations.

Arts + Entertainment Strategy #2: *Re-energize iconic streets*



- **Enhance active public spaces and repurpose underutilized spaces for arts and culture**
 - Increase arts and culture programming along the River and the Lake (like Theater on the Lake).
 - Establish the Museum Campus as the “civic front door” of Chicago and create a world class lakefront experience.

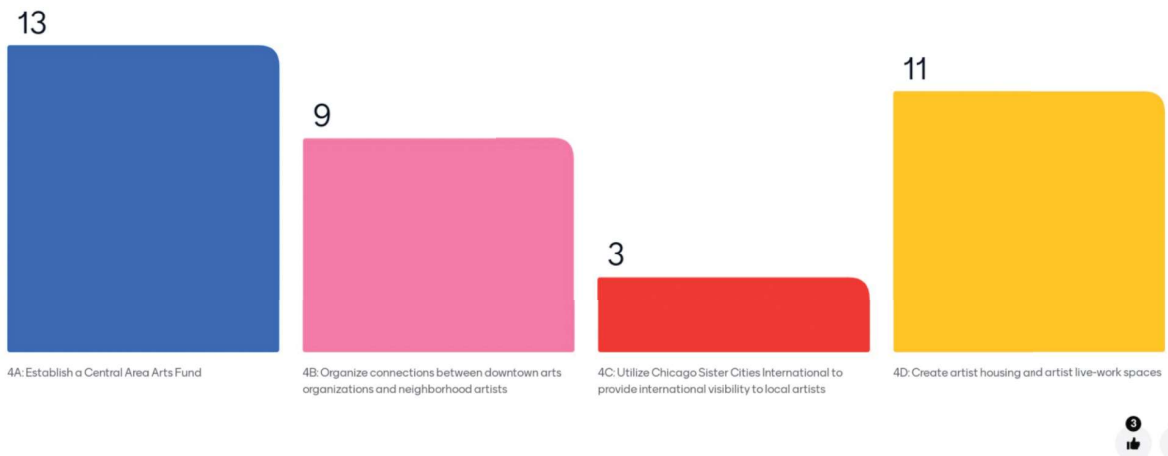
Arts + Entertainment #3: *Enhance active public spaces and repurpose underutilized spaces for arts and culture*



- **Cultivate and build capacity for a stronger art scene**
 - Establish a Central Area Arts Fund with a dedicated funding stream (like Albuquerque or Philadelphia).
 - Create artist housing and artist live-work spaces to encourage creatives to locate downtown.

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Arts + Entertainment Strategy #4: *Cultivate and build capacity for a stronger art scene*



Lifelong Learning

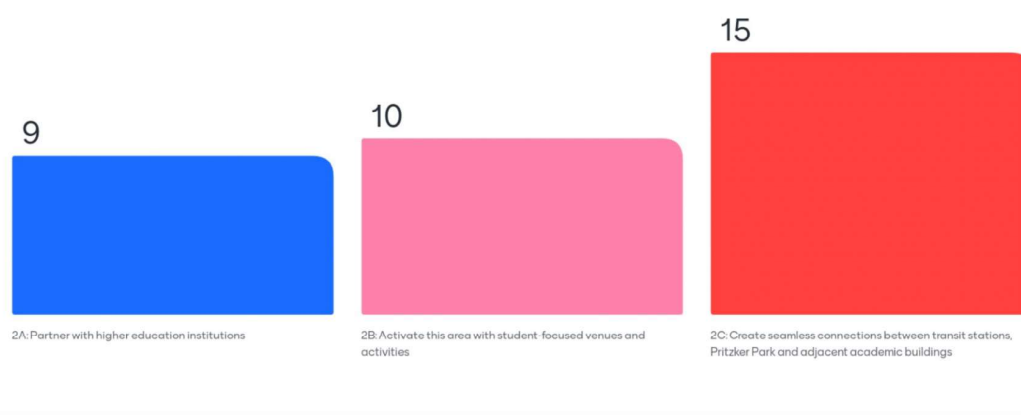
- **Establish downtown as an urban classroom and reimagine Museum Campus**
 - Expand educational programs and year-round, indoor and outdoor activities at museums to serve people of all ages.
 - Develop a unified welcome center and branding strategy for the Museum Campus.

Lifelong Learning Strategy #1: *Establish downtown as an urban classroom and reimagine Museum Campus*



- **Create a cohesive urban campus in the South Loop and around Pritzker Park**
 - Create seamless connections between transit stations, Pritzker Park and adjacent academic buildings to better leverage this area as a central gathering place.
 - Activate this area with student-focused venues and activities and pop-ups such as food and drink vendors.

Lifelong Learning Strategy #2: *Create a cohesive urban campus in the South Loop and around Pritzker Park*



- **Make downtown a hub for after-school and youth programming**
 - Expand and promote existing programs like After School Matters and YOUmedia.
 - Focus on Harold Washington Library Center as a destination learning hub catering to all-ages and offering learning in all its forms.

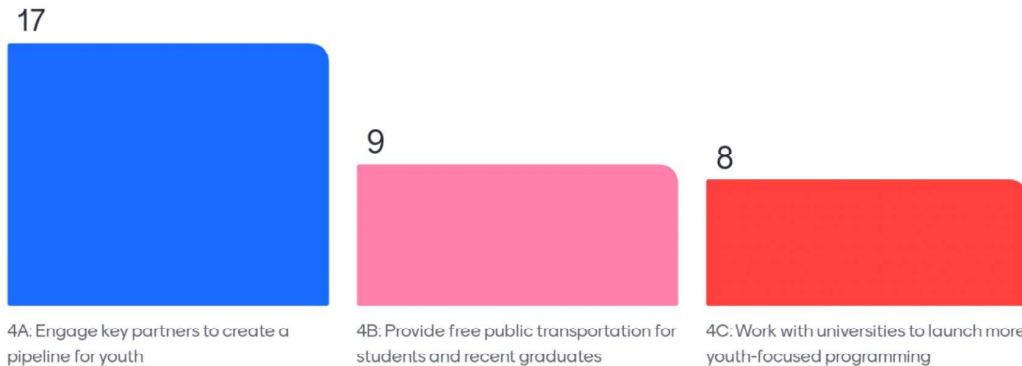
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Lifelong Learning Strategy #3: *Make downtown a hub for after-school and youth programming*



- **Connect youth from neighborhoods across Chicago to private-sector career opportunities in the downtown**
 - Engage key partners from government, the private sector and academia to create a pipeline for youth throughout Chicago to access professional development opportunities within the Central Area through higher education, apprenticeships and internships.
 - Provide free public transportation for students and recent graduates.

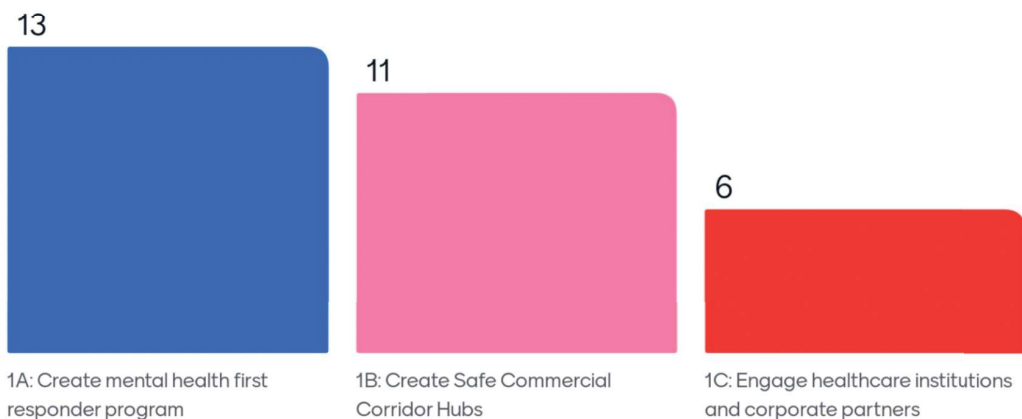
Lifelong Learning Strategy #4: *Connect youth from neighborhoods across Chicago to private-sector career opportunities in the downtown*



Public Health + Safety

- **Improve access to health and support services**
 - Create a mental health first responder program.
 - Create Safe Commercial Corridor Hubs that connect residents to a range of city services like health, police and family and support services (like Washington DC)

Public Health + Safety Strategy #1: *Improve access to health and support services*

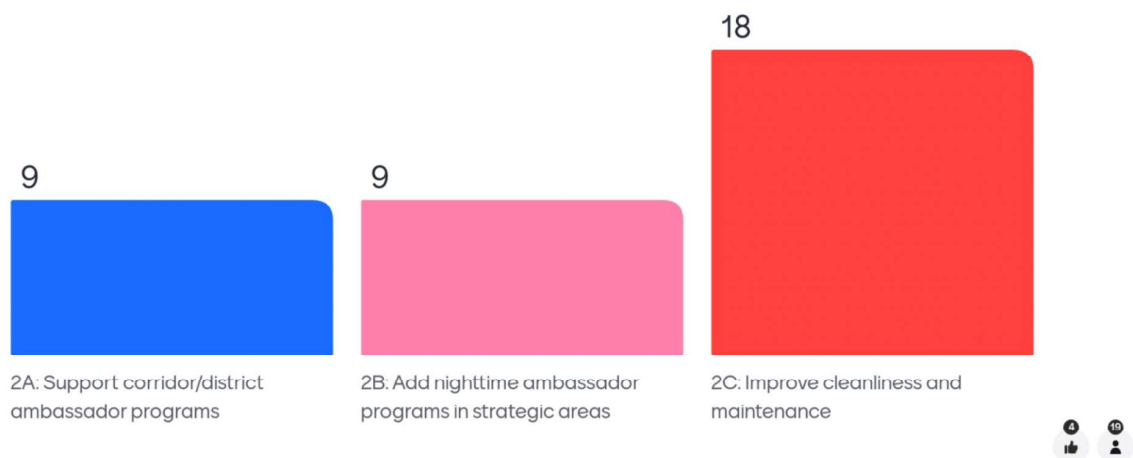


- **Increase perception of safety**

- Improve cleanliness and maintenance of the public realm and public transportation facilities.
- Support corridor/district ambassador programs to provide a safe, clean and friendly pedestrian experience.
- Add nighttime ambassador programs in strategic areas.

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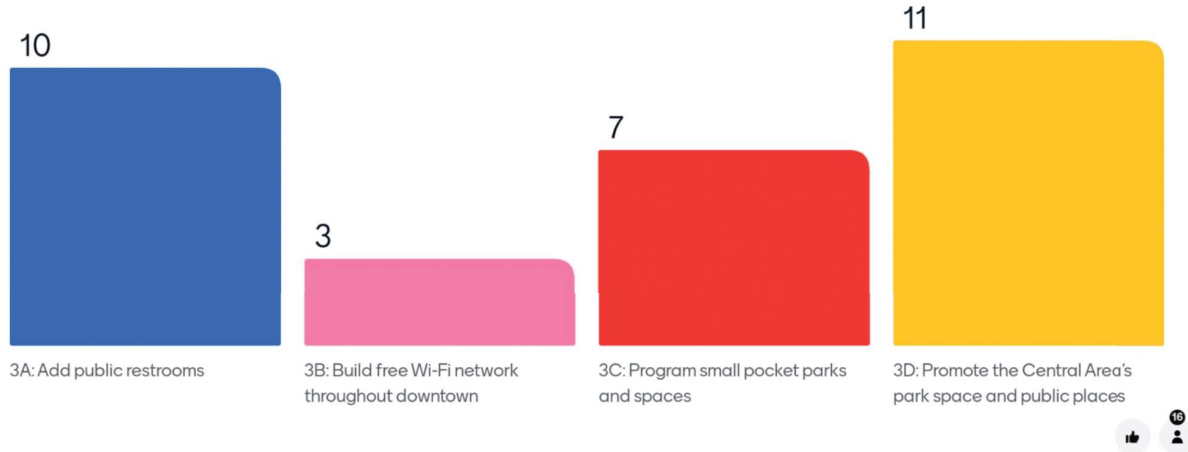
Public Health + Safety Strategy #2: *Increase perception of safety*



- **Improve “Third Places” throughout downtown**

- Promote the Central Area’s more than 900 acres of park space and public places such as the Harold Washington Library and the Chinatown Branch Library as places to spend time outside of home and work.
- Add public restrooms (like Portland Loo).

Public Health + Safety Strategy #3: *Improve "Third Places" throughout downtown*



Breakouts: Key Takeaways + Themes

Arts + Entertainment

- **Promoting Vibrancy in Downtown**
 - Invest in transportation, public spaces, and amenities to enhance the downtown experience at all hours.
 - Expand and promote arts, culture, and entertainment options to attract visitors and residents.
 - Create a downtown experience that extends beyond traditional business hours.
- **Public Spaces and Infrastructure**
 - Enhance Grant Park and Millennium Park, making them more welcoming and accessible.
 - Improve east-west connectivity in Grant Park and consider bike safety.
 - Modernize buses and improve train service, especially at later hours.
- **Economic Development**
 - Promote downtown businesses, especially restaurants and theaters.
 - Explore funding opportunities through dedicated revenue streams and corporate partnerships.
- **Arts as a Catalyst**
 - Develop new large-scale art installations like the Bean and expand existing cultural activities such as the Taste of Chicago in downtown. Consider a central location for a catalytic project.
 - Use arts and culture to bridge divides, promote understanding, and create social connections.
 - Invest in the sustainability and growth of existing arts organizations.
 - Provide opportunities for young people to engage with or work in arts and culture.
- **Affordable Housing for Artists**
 - Create housing options that support the arts community. Incentivize private developers to include artist spaces.
 - Offer temporary accommodations for visiting artists, encouraging hotels to allocate spaces.

Lifelong Learning

- **Transportation**
 - Transportation is a significant barrier for young people and neighborhood schools to access downtown resources.

- Issues with transportation reliability, including the shortage of bus drivers, further hinder access to learning opportunities. Schools need reliable, cost-effective options to take students downtown.
 - Reduced transit costs during the school year, but not on weekends or summer, is challenging for students who travel downtown for work or school.
 - **Limited Funding**
 - Public funding is essential for supporting programs and initiatives but can be limited.
 - Explore public-private partnerships to help address funding gaps.
 - Universities often prioritize funding for their own students and may be reluctant to contribute to broader community initiatives.
 - **Public Safety**
 - Public safety concerns can deter individuals from visiting downtown.
 - Strategies to improve public safety are necessary to make downtown more welcoming and accessible.
 - **Collaboration and Partnerships**
 - Foster stronger partnerships across sectors and institutions to help address challenges and create more opportunities.
 - Consider other locations besides Harold Washington Library for out-of-school learning.
 - Successful models like the Apple-Northwestern partnership and the Chicago Learning Exchange demonstrate the effectiveness of collaboration between institutions.
 - **Accessibility and Inclusion**
 - Ensure that initiatives are accessible to all populations, including those with disabilities or from underserved communities.
 - Address location and cost barriers to improve accessibility.
-

Focus Group #2: Transportation + Infrastructure / Environment, Climate + Energy / Public Health + Safety

08.28.2024 2:00-3:30PM

Important Meeting Links

Menti Export (PDF): [LINK](#)

Interactive Proxi Map: [LINK](#)

List of Participants:

Michael Edwards, Chicago Loop Alliance

Teresa Fourcher, Amtrak

John Becker, Amtrak

Joan Pomaranc, AIA

Tamecka Sandifer

Ryan McCray, Sierra Club

Jeffrey Sriver, CDOT

Lindsey Frey, CDOT

Mary Lu Siedel, Friends of the Parks

Dave Graham, CDPH

Jason Wald, CTA

Quinn Kasal, CTA

Hugo Coronado, Metropolitan Planning Council

Audrey Wennink, Metropolitan Planning Council

Kate Thomas, Chicago Park District

Elizabeth Ginsberg, CMAP

David Kralik, Metra

Daniel Thomas, Metra

Michael Lange, Chicago Park District

Suzanne Mosher, Amtrak

Joe Shacter, Amtrak

Jim Wales

Jamie Ponce

Matthew Swalek, MOP

Menti Survey Results: Top Priorities

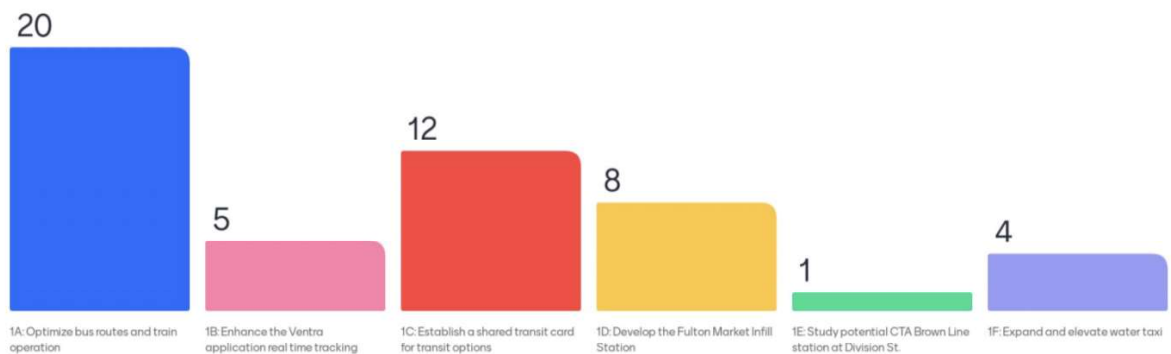
- **Transportation + Infrastructure**

- **Increase availability, consistency and ease of public transportation**

- Optimize bus routes and train operation for reliable, timely and frequent connections within the Central Area and to neighborhood destinations across the city.
- Establish a shared transit card for transit options to create a seamless user experience (CTA, Metra, Pace, Water Taxi, Divvy).

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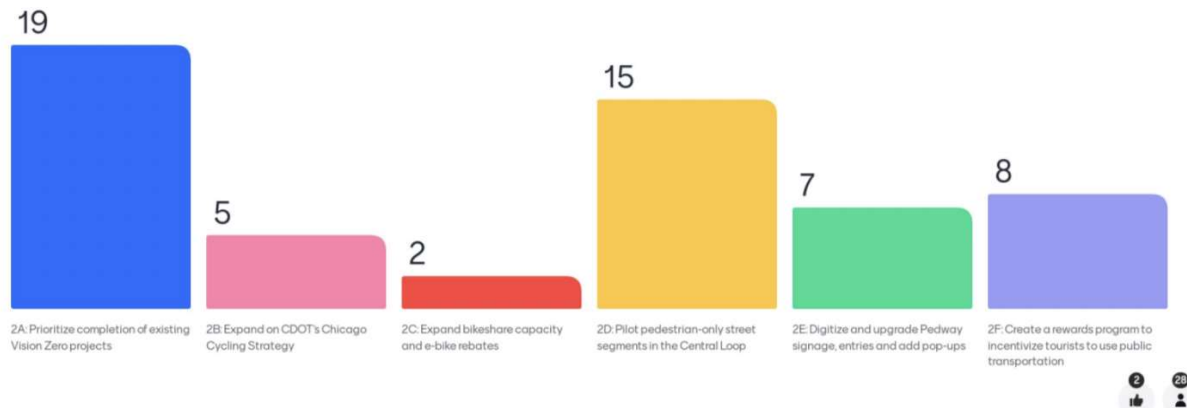
Transportation + Infrastructure Strategy #1: *Increase availability, consistency and ease of public transportation*



- **Enhance safety and comfort for pedestrians, cyclists and other active transportation users**

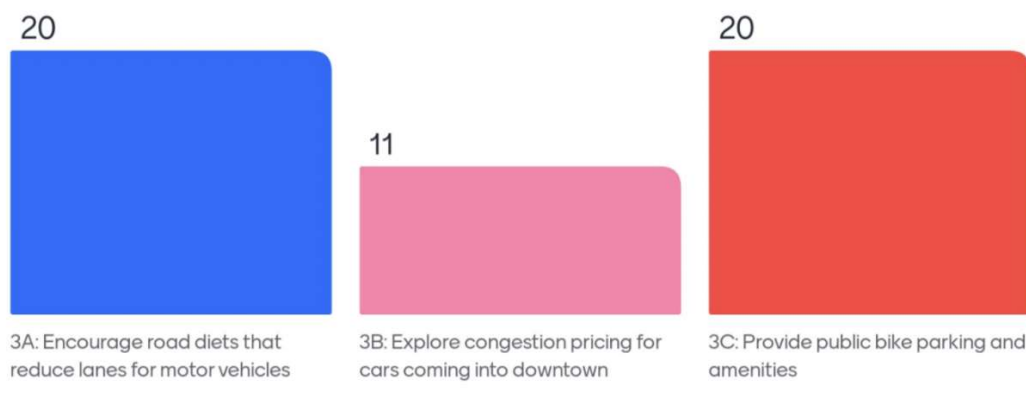
- Prioritize completion of existing Vision Zero projects identified on the high-injury network.
- Pilot pedestrian-only street segments in the Central Loop (like Monroe Street or Adams Street) that connect from the River to Millenium Park.

Transportation + Infrastructure Strategy #2: *Enhance safety and comfort for pedestrians, cyclists and other active transportation users*



- **Encourage mode-shift from cars to public transit and active transportation**
 - Encourage road diets that reduce lanes for motor vehicles and increase infrastructure for non-motorists.
 - Provide public bike parking and amenities.

Transportation + Infrastructure Strategy #3: *Encourage mode-shift from cars to public transit and active transportation*

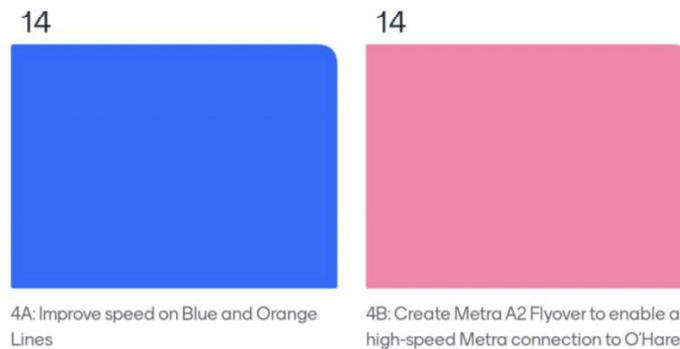


- **Improve public transit connections to Chicago airports**

- Provide public bike parking and amenities.
- Create Metra A2 Flyover to enable a high-speed Metra connection to O'Hare.

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Transportation + Infrastructure Strategy #4: *Improve public transit connections to Chicago airports*



- **Improve connectivity to the Museum Campus to make it easier for people from across the region to access its offerings**
 - Create a public transit link between Museum Campus, Metra commuter rail stations, Navy Pier, and other key destinations.
 - Increase pedestrian, bike and water-based connectivity.

Transportation + Infrastructure Strategy #5: Improve connectivity to the Museum Campus....

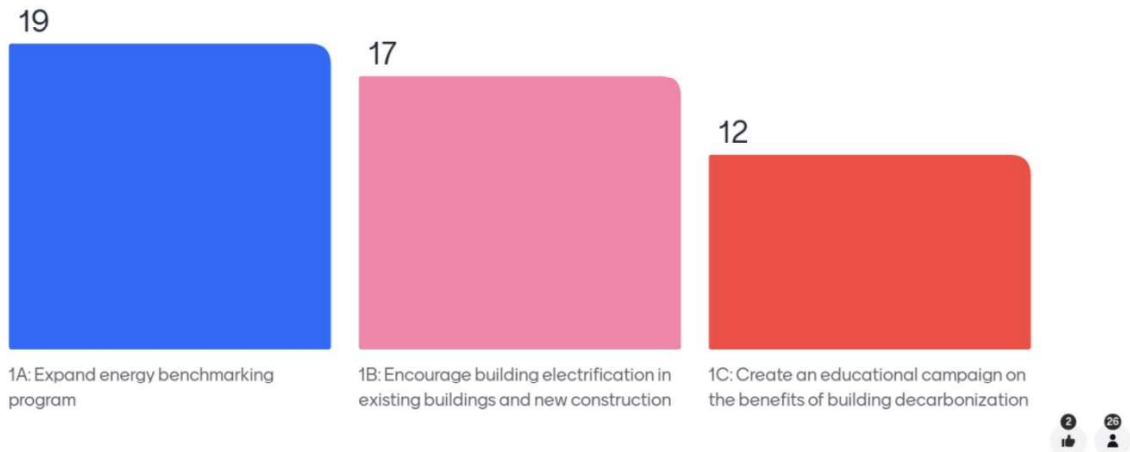


- **Environment, Climate + Energy**

- **Accelerate building decarbonization**

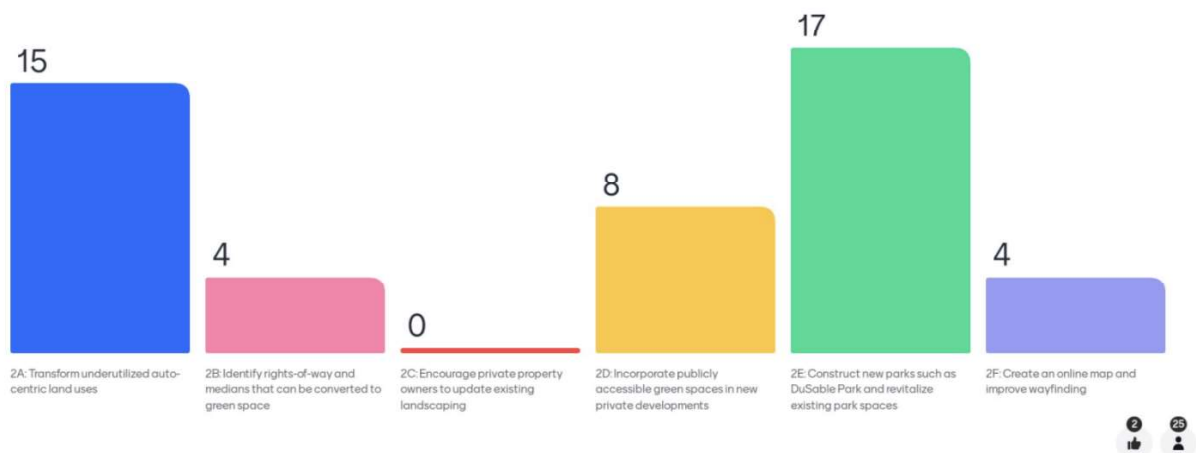
- Expand energy benchmarking program which currently requires owners of buildings larger than 50,000 square feet to report energy usage.
 - Encourage building electrification in existing buildings and new construction.

Environment, Climate + Energy Strategy #1: *Accelerate building decarbonization*



- **Maximize open space**
 - Construct new parks such as DuSable Park, revitalize existing park spaces and continue to enhance parks amenities and fieldhouses.
 - Transform underutilized auto-centric land uses such as parking lots into green spaces.

Environment, Climate + Energy Strategy #2: *Maximize open space*

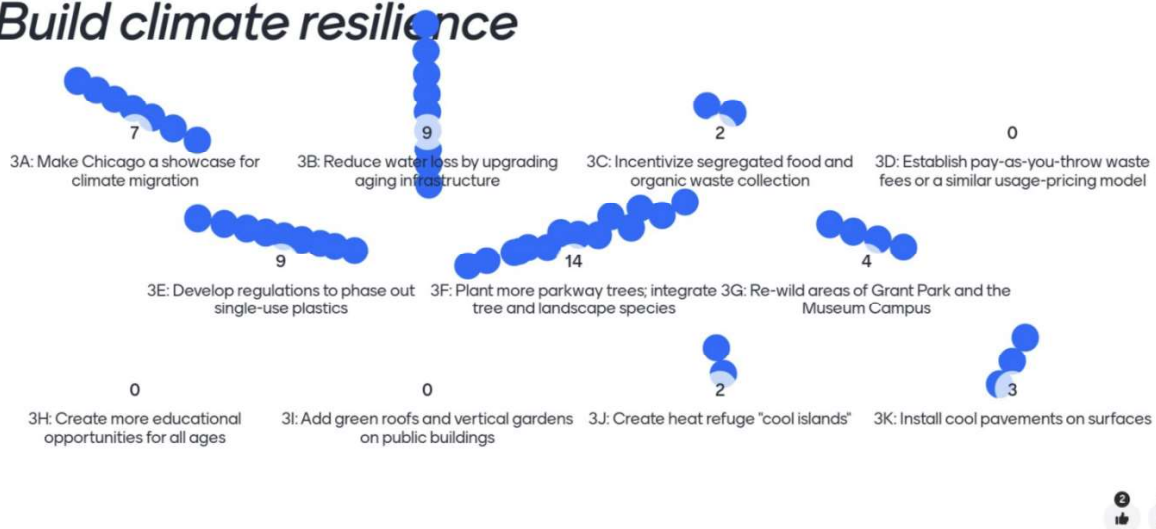


- **Build climate resilience**

- Plant more parkway trees; integrate tree and landscape species that clean pollutants.
- Reduce water loss by upgrading aging infrastructure and reduce outdoor water use, per CMAP's Water 2050 Plan.
- Develop regulations to phase out single-use plastics and other non-recyclable materials.

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Environment, Climate + Energy Strategy #3: *Build climate resilience*

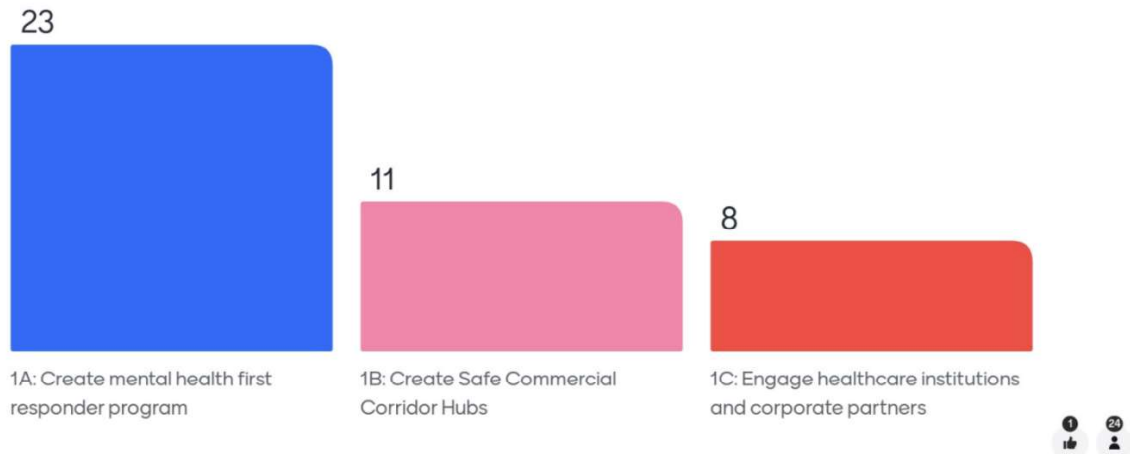


- **Public Health + Safety**

- **Improve access to health and support services**

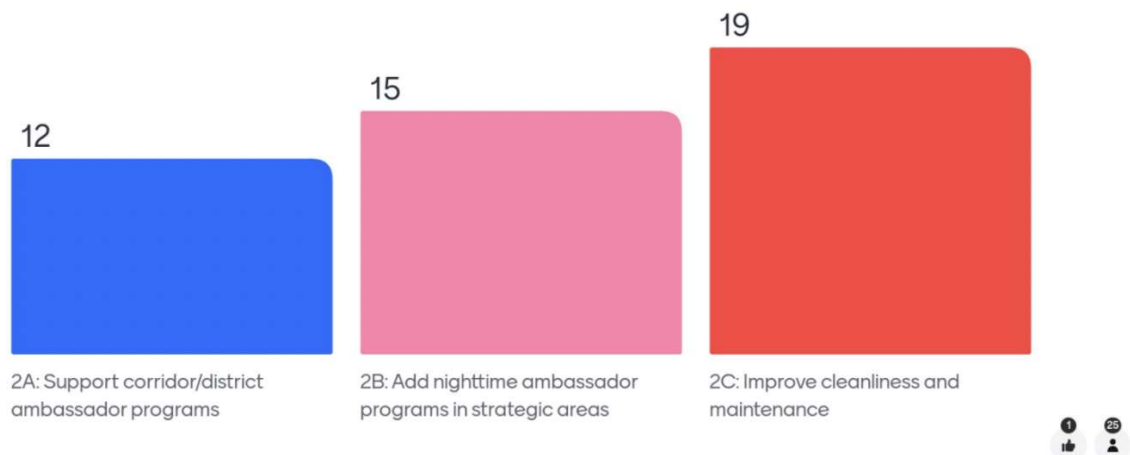
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Public Health + Safety Strategy #1: *Improve access to health and support services*



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Public Health + Safety Strategy #2: *Increase perception of safety*

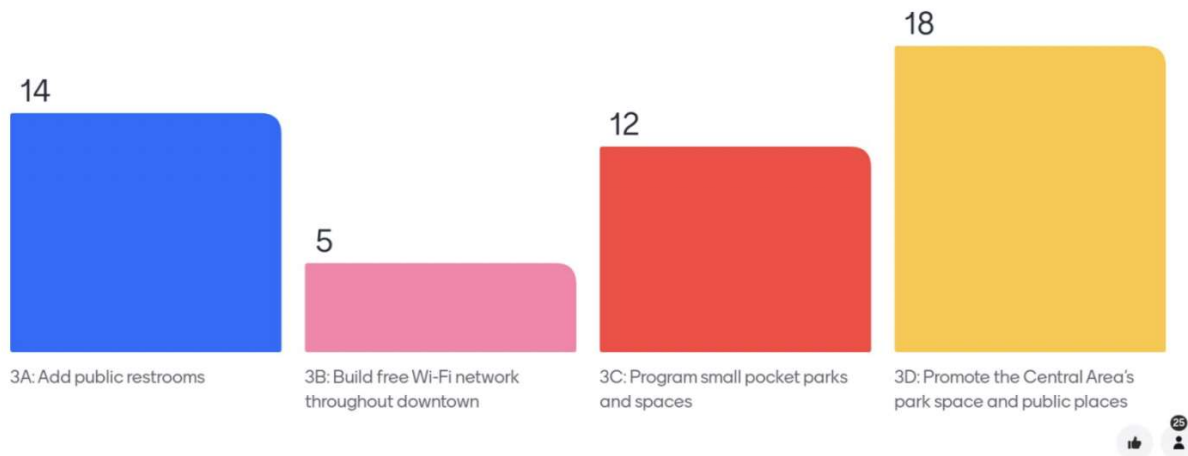


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Public Health + Safety Strategy #3: *Improve "Third Places" throughout downtown*



Breakouts: Key Takeaways + Themes

Transportation + Infrastructure

- **Prioritizing Public Transit**
 - Improve bus service by implementing dedicated bus lanes, improving reliability and frequency, and enforcing bus lane restrictions.
 - Ensure public transit is accessible for all users, including people with disabilities, students, and residents of underserved communities.
 - Focus on quick wins like improving bus stop amenities, signage, and curb management.
- **Multimodal Transportation Integration**
 - Look into strategies to improve connections between the Central Area and airports, factoring public transit and potential congestion impacts.
 - Develop a permanent and well-equipped intercity bus terminal, potentially by integrating with existing transportation hubs.
 - Encourage walking, biking, and other forms of active transportation through infrastructure improvements like protected bike lanes and pedestrian-friendly streets.
 - Explore strategies like de-incentivizing driving in the downtown area and creating centralized parking options, while considering the needs of residents who rely on cars. Consider improving bus service on DuSable Lake Shore Drive and reducing its footprint as an urban highway.
 - Prototype various transportation interventions (e.g., paint, street barricades, and protected bike lanes using jersey barriers) as a quick hit and to understand their community impacts before full implementation.
- **Public Perception and Safety**
 - Address safety concerns, particularly at stations like Roosevelt, by incorporating strategies such as increased security presence and improved lighting.
 - Develop strategies to improve public perception of safety and cleanliness on transit and in the Central Area. This could involve marketing efforts and station improvements to make transit more inviting and welcoming.
 - Integrate Vision Zero principles into all transportation planning efforts, prioritizing traffic calming and pedestrian safety.

Environment, Climate + Energy

- **Leveraging Environmental Assets**

- Utilize the Chicago River and other environmental assets to attract visitors, residents, and investment to all areas of the Central Area, not just the Loop.
 - Highlight environmental success through storytelling to grow tourism.
 - **Public Spaces and Amenities**
 - There was a strong consensus on the need for more and better-maintained public spaces and amenities, including parks, green spaces, and facilities like restrooms. Expanding parkways and tree plantings would serve as a quick-hit as well.
 - Improve investments in Grant Park, especially as the number of downtown residents has increased, including programming, wayfinding, and accessibility.
 - Support the development of new public spaces, including parks and soccer fields, in both downtown and neighborhood areas.
 - Secure dedicated funding for park maintenance, public space improvements, and other initiatives.
 - Consider opportunities for private sector contributions to public space improvements and beautification efforts.
 - Recently passed BID can help further environmental goals.
 - **Community Engagement and Education**
 - Educate the public about environmental initiatives, sustainability practices, and the benefits of the Central Area.
 - Foster collaborations between various organizations and stakeholders to achieve common goals.
 - **Public Health and Safety**
 - Address the perception of safety, while also working to improve actual safety measures.
 - Activate vacant spaces and use existing cultural spaces to create new types of third spaces.
 - Re-establish visitor information booths to provide guidance and support to visitors and residents.
-

Focus Group #3: Housing + Neighborhoods / Land Use / Economic Development

08.29.2024 (9:00-10:30AM)

Important Meeting Links

Menti Export (PDF): [LINK](#)

Interactive Proxi Map: [LINK](#)

List of Participants:

Gail Spreen, Streeterville Properties

Tess Green

James Turner, CIBC

Dave Kostelansky, Lake Shore Park Council

Andrew Stark, CHA

Ahlam Khouri, CHA

Michele Dreczynski, Near North Unity Program

Sam Martorina

Michael Lange, Chicago Park District

Carrie Dahlquist

Bonnie Sanchez-Carlson, Near South Planning Board

Quintin Primo, Capri Capital Partners

Paul David Wilson

Ron Chaille, Metropolis Condominium Association

Farzin Parang, BOMA

Kate Thomas, Chicago Park District

Rishab Mehan, CHA

La Verne Morris, Jury Think LLC

Vickie Lakes-Battle, IFF

Peter Levavi, Brinshore Development

Jonathan Snyder, North Branch Works

Kumar Kintala, UIC

William Tippens, Related Midwest

Jolene Salul, Revolve Community Development

Marcy Huttas, Old Town Merchants & Residents

Rob Johnson, BOMA

Kendra Parzen, Landmarks Illinois

Kimberly Bares, Magnificent Mile Association

Grant Uhlir, Gensler

Nik Haak, Shapack

Kenna Tunis, Chicago Loop Alliance

Michael Edwards, Chicago Loop Alliance

Menti Survey Results: Top Priorities

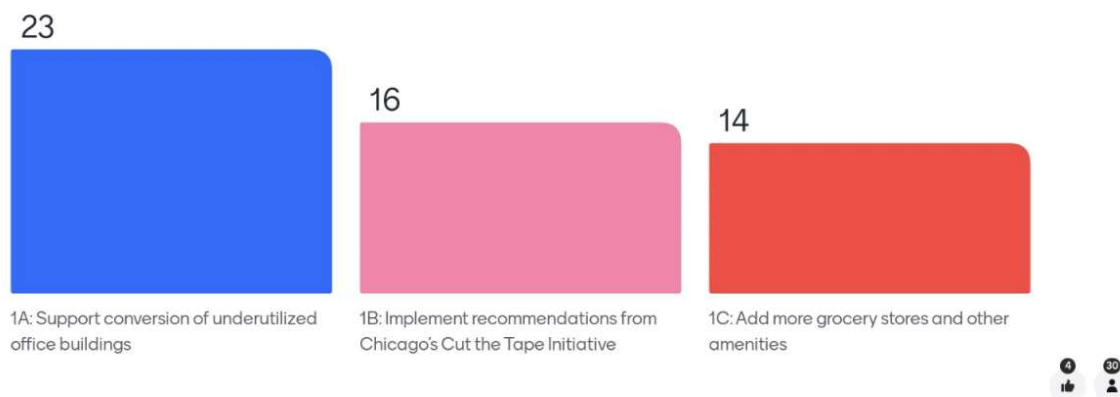
- **Housing + Neighborhoods**

- **Create a thriving neighborhood in the Central Loop**

- Support conversion of underutilized office buildings in downtown for other uses (such as along the LaSalle Street Corridor).
- Implement recommendations from Chicago's Cut the Tape initiative to streamline and expedite new housing and commercial development.

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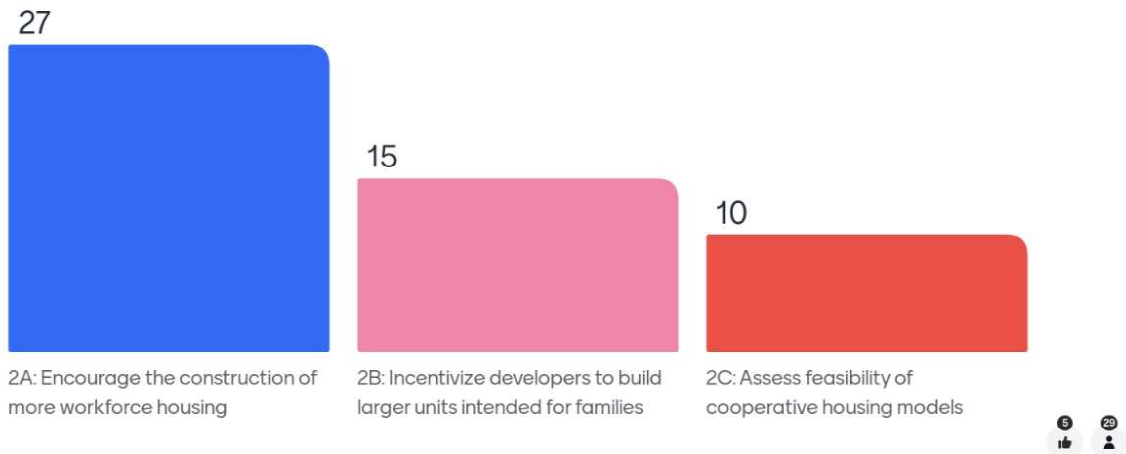
Housing + Neighborhoods Strategy #1: *Create a thriving neighborhood in the Central Loop*



- **Develop a more diverse mix of housing**

- Encourage the construction of more workforce housing at moderate income levels (i.e., 80% - 120% AMI).
- Incentivize developers to build larger units intended for families.

Housing + Neighborhoods Strategy #2: *Develop a more diverse mix of housing*



- **Expand access to permanent supportive housing**
 - Add resource hubs near highly supportive housing units to help achieve long-term housing stability (like London, Ontario).
 - Enhance programs to support affordable homeownership such as down-payment assistance and community land trusts.

Housing + Neighborhoods Strategy #3: *Expand access to permanent supportive housing*



- **Land Use**

- **Encourage conversion of obsolete office space to housing and other uses**
 - Reduce regulatory barriers as identified in Chicago's Cut the Tape Initiative.
 - Identify target building types and zones that are most suitable for conversion.

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Land Use Strategy #1: *Encourage conversion of obsolete office space to housing and other uses*



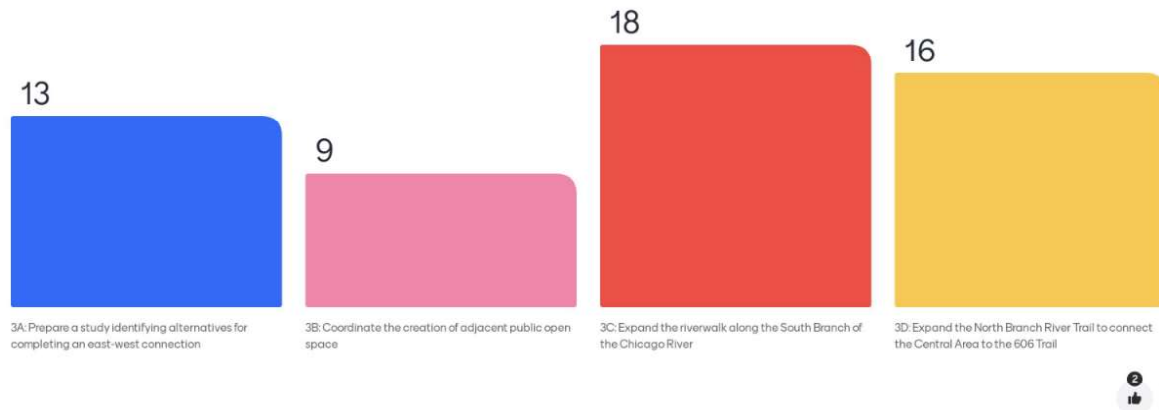
- **Facilitate redevelopment of opportunity sites and underutilized properties**
 - Identify focus areas for further densification with clusters of opportunity sites (like underutilized parking lots/garages and low-rise structures) that can be redeveloped.
 - Create a future redevelopment vision for these focus areas to guide and encourage private development.

Land Use Strategy #2: *Facilitate redevelopment of opportunity sites and underutilized properties*



- **Create an interconnected network of open spaces, trails and active transportation routes to and from the lake to the west and north-south along the river**
 - Expand the riverwalk along the South Branch of the Chicago River from Lake Street to Ping Tom Memorial Park (approximately 2 miles).
 - Expand the North Branch River Trail to connect the Central Area to the 606 Trail consistent with the North Branch Framework Plan.

Land Use Strategy #3: Create an interconnected network of open spaces, trails and active transportation routes...



- **Economic Development**

- **Attract new businesses and retain large downtown employers**
 - Support World Business Chicago efforts to encourage headquarters relocations.
 - Fund a program to enable low-rent or rent-free spaces for startups, nonprofits and M/WBE businesses.

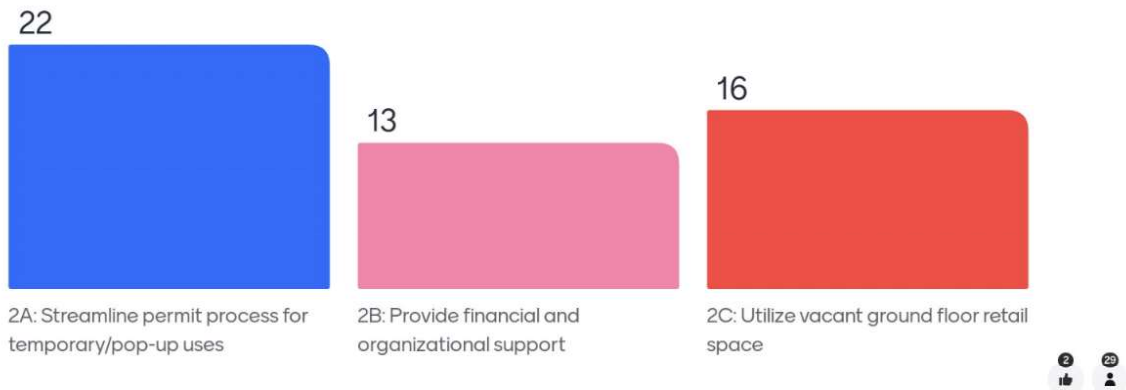
Economic Development Strategy #1: Attract new businesses and retain large downtown employers



- **Make it easier to locate pop-up uses in vacant storefronts**
 - Streamline permit process for temporary/pop-up uses.
 - Utilize vacant ground floor retail space as part of public realm enhancement and place activation strategy, such as providing temporary performance spaces and art displays.

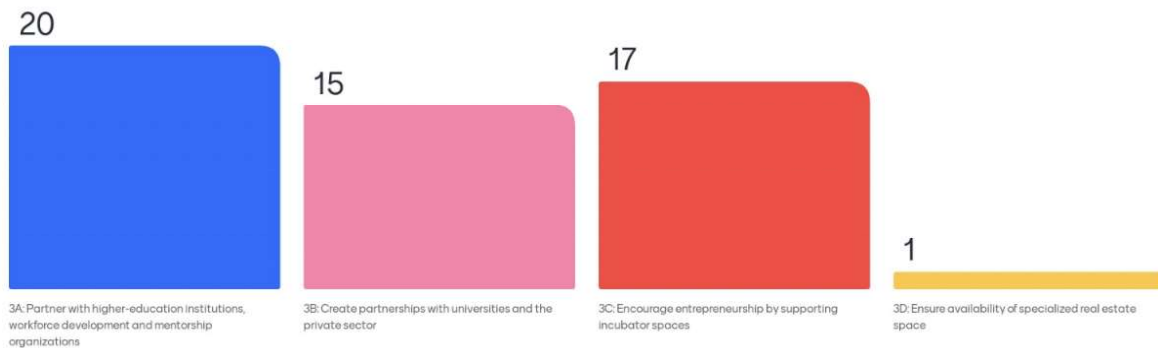
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Economic Development Strategy #2: *Make it easier to locate pop-up uses in vacant storefronts*



- **Enhance Chicago's economic diversity and vitality**
 - Partner with higher-education institutions, workforce development and mentorship organizations to create a pipeline of talent for businesses in high-growth sectors such as quantum technologies, life sciences, clean energy, information technology, and advanced manufacturing.
 - Encourage entrepreneurship by supporting incubator spaces for growing industries (like 1871, The Hatchery and mHUB).

Economic Development Strategy #3: *Enhance Chicago's economic diversity and vitality*



Breakouts: Key Takeaways + Themes

Housing + Neighborhoods

- **Building a Community in the Loop**
 - Create a sense of belonging and inclusivity for all residents. Advocate for policies that protect the rights of youth, people of color, and vulnerable communities from discrimination.
 - Provide resources for daily needs, such as affordable grocery stores and recreational facilities. Explore the bodega or small-format grocery store model.
 - Ensure families with children can access schools, childcare, and retailers.
- **Expanding Housing Affordability and Development**
 - Prioritize developers who offer housing options that align with the needs and preferences of residents.
 - Leverage public-private partnerships and philanthropic support to fund and develop affordable housing.
 - Simplify zoning and regulatory processes to facilitate housing development.
- **Supporting Local Businesses and Entrepreneurship**
 - Utilize vacant spaces for pop-up shops, farmers markets, and community events.
 - Encourage the growth of small businesses, particularly bodegas and local retailers.
 - Pilot Cut the Tape strategies on two major corridors and build City support to scale into other parts of the Central Area.
 - Facilitate connections between large institutions and businesses with the community, involving City and aldermen offices, SSAs, and business districts as intermediaries.
- **Public Spaces and Amenities**
 - Add more walkable, safe public spaces, such as pocket parks and plazas, to enhance the quality of life in the Central Loop.
 - Improve connectivity between different parts of the Central Area and surrounding neighborhoods.

Land Use

- **Rezoning and Redevelopment**
 - Identify opportunity sites for alternative uses, such as underutilized parking lots, garages, and low-rise structures. Reframe eliminating surface parking to repurposing surface parking.

- Implement local policies and incentives to encourage the conversion of obsolete buildings into residential or mixed-use spaces. Recognize that some obsolete buildings should be demolished.
- Balance development and community needs by considering the impact of land use changes on factors like public schools, open space, and park maintenance.
- Consider the balance between residents' and tourists' interests to ensure the Central Area remains a vibrant destination.
- **Public Spaces and Amenities**
 - Increase green space, including trees, planters, and parks, to enhance the quality of life and curb appeal.
 - Repurpose existing buildings into recreational facilities in addition to expanding outdoor green space.
 - Explore how transit stations and infrastructure can transform into great public spaces.
- **Neighborhoods and Community**
 - Engage families and residents in the land use planning process to develop neighborhoods that meet their specific needs and preferences.
 - Retain and enhance the unique character of different neighborhoods.
- **Sustainability and Environmental Impact**
 - Prioritize building reuse over demolition to reduce waste and promote sustainability.
 - Integrate green infrastructure elements into development projects.

Economic Development

- **Attracting Businesses**
 - Support efforts to bring in businesses of all sizes and encourage smaller, local businesses to locate downtown.
 - Offer economic incentives to property owners and businesses to encourage investment and growth.
 - Improve leasing practices to fill vacant spaces and create a more attractive environment for tenants.
 - Invest in infrastructure to make downtown more attractive to businesses and residents. Avoid pitting downtown with other Chicago neighborhoods.
- **Addressing Property Taxes**
 - Commercial property taxes are a significant barrier to attracting businesses and increasing rents.

- Mitigate the impact of high property taxes through incentives or public funding.
- **Vacancy**
 - Explore strategies for incrementally filling large spaces with a mix of smaller businesses. Develop a system to facilitate the sharing of office spaces and match smaller businesses with suitable spaces owned by property owners.
 - Address the mismatch between available spaces and the needs of potential tenants by encouraging property owners to repurpose vacant spaces to meet their needs. Expand access to capital funds to renovate, subdivide, or make improvements for long-term tenants.
- **Small Business Support**
 - Provide resources and support to help small businesses and minority-owned businesses thrive in the Central Area, while minimizing regulatory barriers. Consider partnering with universities, incubators, and business development organizations.
 - Discourage the use of pop-ups as an economic development strategy in the Central Area due to their cost and complexity.