

CENTRAL AREA PLAN PHASE 2 | FOCUS GROUP MEETING SUMMARIES

Round 2

December 2024

Overview

In December 2024, the Central Area Plan team hosted the second round of focus groups for Phase 2 of the Central Area Plan Update, with a total of 90 participants joining three 90-minute virtual sessions via Zoom. The first two focus groups included a diverse range of stakeholders representing the various pillars covered by the Plan, many of whom had participated in previous rounds of focus group discussions. The final focus group included the Chicago Central Area Committee and Lambda Alpha International - Chicago Region Chapter members.

The focus groups began with an overview of the work completed during Phase 2 and an explanation of growth projections for the Central Area over the next 20 years. The team presented broad visualizations of where this growth will likely occur. Participants then broke into small groups for a guided discussion, providing valuable insights into the projected growth scenarios.

After breakouts, the team presented potential catalytic projects that could help bring the Central Area vision to life. This was followed by a large-group discussion, where participants discussed reactions to the list, suggested additional catalytic projects that could significantly impact the future of the Central Area, and identified inspiration from other cities.

The key themes that emerged from each focus group are summarized in the following sections:

Focus Group #1

12.09.2024 (12:00-1:30PM)

Important Meeting Link

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

List of Participants:

Alaa Mukahhal, TYLin
Bonita Sanchez-Carlson, Near South Planning Board
Brian Blankstein
Clem Taylor, Chicago Park District
David Baker, DePaul University
David Kostelansky, Lake Shore Park Council
David Kralik, Metra
Debbie Liu, Metropolitan Planning Council
Eileen LaCario, Broadway in Chicago
Elizabeth Ginsberg, CMAP
Farzin Parang, BOMA
Gail Spreen, Streeterville Properties
Ian Spula, Chicago Architecture Center
James Turner, CIBC
Joan Pomaranc, AIA Chicago
Joe Schwieterman, DePaul University
Jonathan Snyder, North Branch Works
Julie Obrochta, Chicago Public Library
Kumar Kintala, University of Illinois-Chicago
Leslie Recht, Grant Park Advisory Council
Lindsey Frey, CDOT
Maggie Clemons, Chicago Public Library
Marissa Jones, League of Chicago Theatres
Mark Kelly
Michael Lange, Chicago Park District
Michael Wood, Chicago Architecture Center
Mimi Cowan, Field Museum
Quinn Kasal, CTA
Ruben Franco, Alderman Sigcho-Lopez staff
Ryan McCray, Sierra Club
Ryan Moore, The Prime Group Inc.
Sarah Zimmerman, Chicago Public Library
Shenita Mack, Chicago Public Library
Suzanne Mosher, Amtrak
Vickie Lakes-Battle, IFF

Breakouts: Key Takeaways + Themes

This section summarizes the themes that emerged from the breakout discussions, where participants responded to the following questions: 1. Directionally, do you have any insights, thoughts or questions on the forecasts?; and 2. Are we missing any growth areas?

- **Growth Projections and Uncertainty**
 - Some participants expressed skepticism around overly optimistic growth forecasts, particularly for areas like State Street and college districts, due to high retail vacancies and the challenges of converting office spaces. The uncertainty of long-term development, given economic factors and shifting markets, was a major point of discussion.
- **Balancing Growth with Quality of Life**
 - There was an emphasis on balancing development with quality of life through investments in parks, amenities (schools, childcare, grocery stores), and public spaces. While some participants expressed a desire for Grant Park to be more activated, others expressed concerns about the impact of special events in the park which disrupt daily use.
- **Transportation and Accessibility**
 - Participants emphasized the need for better public transit, more pedestrian-friendly streets, and increased bike access to support future growth, particularly in the South Loop and the Roosevelt CTA station. Reducing car dependence and integrating transportation options into development plans were seen as crucial for sustainable growth.
- **Affordable Housing and Mixed-Use Neighborhoods**
 - There was a strong call for affordable housing solutions and the creation of mixed-use communities to create vibrant, inclusive neighborhoods. Support for small businesses, retail, and services to complement residential growth and attract families was also emphasized.
- **Prioritizing Key Projects for Impact**
 - Suggestions were made to identify and prioritize high-impact projects, such as Grant Park improvements, light rail development, and the Carroll Avenue transitway, to drive meaningful change. A clear framework for project prioritization and public engagement was viewed as essential for long-term success.

Additional Projects

Following the presentation on potential catalytic projects, participants were asked to consider the following: Are there any additional projects that could be catalytic for the Central Area? Any projects in other cities that we can learn from?

The themes below summarize the valuable insights provided.

- **Improve Transportation and Connectivity**
 - Enhance public transit links between key areas (e.g., between Union and Ogilvie stations and the Museum Campus).
 - Expand pedestrian and bike pathways to improve access to parks and the lakefront.
 - Construct a highway cap over the Kennedy Expressway and prioritize non-motorized transportation corridors.
 - **Expand Pedestrian Spaces and Public Areas**
 - Pedestrianize streets like Columbus Drive in Grant Park.
 - Create shared streets or festival streets, similar to examples from cities like Montreal and Amsterdam, which emphasize walking and community spaces over car traffic.
 - Upgrade existing parks, such as Grant Park and Union Park, and create more neighborhood parks, especially in Fulton Market.
 - Modernize the Pedway and upgrade the Harold Washington Library using inspiration from the Calgary Central Library
 - Renew and upgrade key urban spaces like Union Station and Grant Park to be more accessible and pedestrian-friendly.
 - Transform underutilized areas, such as the Kennedy Expressway, into vibrant multi-use spaces with a focus on modern urban design.
 - **Promote Inclusivity and Accessibility**
 - Ensure spaces are welcome for all residents, focusing on equitable access to parks, transit, and neighborhoods.
 - Create spaces like the Maxwell Street Market that encourage inclusivity and economic opportunity.
 - **Integrate Art and Culture in Public Spaces**
 - Introduce art installations and cultural displays in public areas, such as tunnel lighting or interactive street art.
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Focus Group #2

12.12.2024 (9:00-10:30AM)

Important Meeting Link

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

List of Participants:

Adam Flickinger, Friends of the Chicago River
Ahlam Khouri, CHA
Amanda Carlson, DCASE
Barbara Carpenter, Amtrak
Bradley Roback, DPD
Brian Hopkins, Alderman 2nd Ward
Brian Pelrine, Alderman Hopkins staff
Carla Agostinelli, World Business Chicago
Carrie Smaroff
Hugo Coronado, Metropolitan Planning Council
Jason Wald, CTA
Jeffrey Sriver, CDOT
Jennifer Kunde, Northwestern University
Julie Burros, CMAP
Julie Darling
Kate Thomas, Chicago Park District
Kyle Sussman
Kendra Parzen, Landmarks Illinois
Lamont Robinson, Alderman 4th Ward
Lisa Thomas
Marcy Huttas, Old Town Merchants & Residents Association
Mary Nicol, CDOT
Michael Edwards, Chicago Loop Alliance
Neil Stempel, The Prime Group Inc.
Rick Harnish, High Speed Rail Alliance
Rishab Mehan, CHA
Sarah Sheehan, University of Chicago
Sheila Rogers
Zoe Chan, Alderwoman Lee staff

Breakouts: Key Takeaways + Themes

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- **Uncertainty and Variability in Growth Projections**
 - Some participants expressed uncertainty around growth projections, especially regarding office space. Variability between low and high projections complicates the planning of related infrastructure needs (e.g., transportation and public services). This unpredictability makes it difficult to forecast how other aspects of the Central Area’s development will evolve.
- **Balancing Development with Essential Amenities**
 - With anticipated residential growth, there were concerns about balancing it with critical amenities like parks, schools, and public services. Many discussed the need for new park spaces and recreation facilities but highlighted the challenges of land acquisition, funding, and programming existing parks. There was also interest in expanding public transit access to these spaces.
- **Adaptive Reuse and Existing Buildings**
 - There was a strong focus on adaptive reuse to meet growing demand. Many felt that converting vacant office spaces and repurposing obsolete buildings could help address the need for more residential and cultural spaces. However, the scale and practicality of this approach are still unclear.
- **Public/Private Collaboration for Sustainable Growth**
 - The need for public and private sector collaboration to ensure sustainable, balanced growth was emphasized. Proactive investments in schools, green spaces, and transportation infrastructure were called for to support a high quality of life. Concerns were also raised about relying too heavily on special service areas (SSAs) to cover costs that should be shared citywide.
- **Linking Growth Areas to the Broader City**
 - Discussions also revolved around how growth in areas just outside the central Loop—like Bronzeville, Lincoln Yards, and the United Center—ties into broader planning. These developments were perceived as key to facilitating a more integrated city. However, they also piqued questions

about redistributing resources and whether they contribute to new growth or just shift existing populations and services within the city.

Additional Projects

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The themes below summarize the valuable insights provided.

- **Connectivity and Transit Improvements**
 - Strengthen transit connections, including improving bus connectivity in areas like Fulton Market, enhancing connections between key railway stations, and exploring water transit.
 - Expand pedestrian and cycling access, such as easy east-west cycling routes, improving bus routes, and expanding sidewalks.
- **Public Space, Green Infrastructure, and Riverfront Development**
 - Emphasize green spaces, such as micro forests, pocket parks, and integrate greenery in every development.
 - Transform the riverfront into a park corridor, with related parks and developments like the Riverwalk extension to catalyze new activity. The redevelopment of the Domino Sugar Refinery in New York City can serve as a model.
- **Economic Vitality and Urban Design**
 - Support Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) to enhance each of the four districts.
 - Build off existing assets by investing in pedestrianized areas, the pedway, and bus rapid transit.
 - Encourage the creation of small-format retail spaces and cultural/community centers to foster local entrepreneurship and enhance neighborhood vibrancy.
- **Accessibility, Inclusivity, and Affordability**
 - Ensure full ADA compliance and make the public realm and transit accessible for all, with a focus on affordability.
 - Keep the Central Area inclusive for people of all income levels through affordable housing and supporting workforce development.

- **Public Amenities and Quality of Life**
 - Add essential public amenities like restrooms, bike storage, luggage storage, and comfortable indoor spaces.
 - Enhance public safety and ensure a high-quality experience for residents and visitors in the Central Area.
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CCAC / Lambda Alpha Focus Group

12.12.2024 (12:00-1:30PM)

List of Participants:

Ally Justinak

Avram Lothan, LVD Architecture

Caitlin Ritter, Transwestern Real Estate

Christen Hayes, Goodman Williams Group

Dean Alonistiotis

Deborah Stone

Denarie Kane, Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission

Diane Gormely-Barnes, HNTB

Igor Studenkov

Jim Mark, Wight & Company

John Lyons

Kelly O'Brien, Invest Aurora

Lynette De Johnette, CHA

Linda Goodman, Goodman Williams Group

Malek Abdulsamad, Greenstone Partners

Mark Hopkins, CCAC

Nae Alter

Nurul Eusufzai, Chicago Sustainability Leaders Network

Phil Adams

Phil Enquist

Ralph Kinser, Johnson Research Group

Rana Lee, HOK

Sara Egan, Firefly Planning + Design

Scharnell Williams

Terri Haymaker, The Planera Group

Ty Warner, Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission

Breakouts: Key Takeaways + Themes

This section summarizes the themes that emerged from the breakout discussions, where participants responded to the following question: "Directionally, do you have any insights, thoughts or questions on the forecasts? Are we missing any growth areas?"

- **Enhancing Transportation and Infrastructure**
 - There was a strong emphasis on improving transportation options, including intercity bus terminals, rail lines, and new transit stations, to support growth. Key concerns included traffic flow, connectivity, and the need for better transportation support as residential and office demand increases. The variability of projections complicates the types of infrastructure and other support services needed.
- **Integrating Communities and Neighborhoods**
 - There was an ongoing dialogue about the potential to create synergies with neighborhoods and developments just outside the Central Area. Engaging with local businesses, residents, and community groups is crucial for accessible, inclusive growth.
- **Promote Greening and Environmental Sustainability**
 - Several participants emphasized green spaces, ecological preservation, and sustainable development. This included greening areas near train tracks, enhancing the Riverwalk, and balancing development with recreational and environmental needs.
- **Adapt Urban Density and Zoning**
 - Participants noted the need for flexibility in zoning to accommodate evolving growth patterns and different land uses (residential, commercial, cultural, etc.) while considering the economic implications of higher-density projects and how they intersect with transportation needs.
- **Create Cultural and Recreational Spaces**
 - There was a significant focus on integrating cultural, recreational, and educational spaces into development. As the residential population grows, well-maintained, programmable public spaces and services connected to transit, with a focus on family-friendly amenities, are needed. High retail and office vacancies present opportunities for businesses that have been

priced out and for cultural uses. Staffing, budget, and long-term maintenance of parks and programming are also key challenges.

Additional Projects

Following the presentation on potential catalytic projects, participants were asked to consider the following: "Are there any additional projects that could be catalytic for the Central Area? Any projects in other cities that we can learn from?" The themes below summarize the valuable insights they provided.

- **Improving Transit Infrastructure**
 - Focus on enhancing key transit facilities like intercity bus terminals and new transit stations (e.g., 16th & Division).
 - Highlight transit facilities as valuable assets rather than underappreciated components.
- **Economic Impact of Transit Projects**
 - Consider the economic potential of well-designed infrastructure, such as the "green bridge" in Midtown Atlanta and the Beltline.
 - Prioritize transit projects that can drive economic development and urban revitalization.
- **Connectivity and Integration**
 - Improve east-west and north-south connections within the transit network.
 - Continue ongoing efforts to develop a high-capacity transit network that serves the "outer ring" zones, especially underserved areas.
- **Addressing Gentrification and Community Impact**
 - Address concerns about the accelerated gentrification linked to projects like The 606.
 - Ensure development is balanced with the preservation of community needs and equity.