



# VILLAGE OF WILMETTE

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**Date:** August 2, 2007

**To:** Christopher Canning, President  
And the Wilmette Village Board of Trustees

**From:** Vincent W. McBrien, Chairman  
And the Plan Commission

**Subject:** West Village Center Recommendations

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## Background

The Village Board asked that the Plan Commission review the various planning studies conducted of the West Village Center and recommend general planning guidelines for the block (“Concept Plan”). The following memo serves as the Plan Commission’s written response to the attached memo, dated August 18, 2006.

The West Village Center consists of the area west of Green Bay Road, bounded by Central Avenue on the north, Park Avenue on the west, and Wilmette Avenue on the south. The west half of the block is occupied by the Library and US Post Office, while the east side of the block is occupied with small retail/commercial uses and a small number of residential apartments and offices. In roughly the middle of the east side of the block, the Village Board has approved a five-story mixed use development on the former Ford dealership site. Construction is expected to begin on this project later this summer.

The Plan Commission has discussed and synthesized the various reports and previous concept plans regarding potential redevelopment of the West Village Center block. The Plan Commission offers the following analysis of common elements discussed in previous planning studies, particularly the Valerie Kretchmer Study and the 2000 Plan Commission study, and is pleased to also present several recommendations.

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

### **Public Benefits**

Redevelopment and reinvestment in the West Village Center is not only important to bring business development to the Village Center and Green Bay Corridor, but can, if planned well, provide benefits for all of Wilmette. Increased residential units will add to the customer base in the Village Center and increase the number of people actively enjoying the attractions and amenities of the Village's downtown area. New retail space will provide an attractive location for new or expanding Wilmette businesses, as well as provide increased sales tax dollars to support vital Village services. Expanded parking opportunities will not only help the library and US Post Office, but will allow people to park once and do multiple errands and services, thus reducing traffic congestion along Green Bay Road near downtown. Finally, a well designed West Village Center can add to the character of the community and offer a destination for all Wilmette residents to enjoy.

### **Concept Plan for West Village Center Redevelopment**

Numerous versions of concept plans have been prepared over the last seven years that address many of the recommendations described later in this memo. Attached are copies of: (1) the 2000 hand-drawn renderings by former Plan Commission Chairman Reinhard Schneider; (2) three scenarios provided in the Green Bay Road Corridor Study by Valerie S. Kretchmer Associates, Inc.; (3) a hand-drawn rendering by former Plan Commissioner Bob Surman; (4) a scenario prepared by OKW Architects.

The common elements in these concept plans are that they: (1) incorporate mixed-use, multi-story buildings that will bring modern space for new retail, restaurant and entertainment amenities as well as residential uses; (2) reflect thoughtful detailing consistent and compatible with the existing character of the Village Center; (3) provide for extensive landscaping and open space; (4) recommend a parking structure be built between the Library and the US Post Office; (5) work to attract pedestrian traffic linked to other parts of the Village Center area; (6) upgrade the alley to provide primary access to the properties developed on the Green Bay side of the West Village Center block, minimizing the need for additional curb cuts on Green Bay Road and present improved site lines in the area.

**Recommendation:** Develop a Concept Plan incorporating these elements with the open space/courtyard/park to be located either on the northeast corner of the block (Green Bay Road and Central Avenue) or in the center of the block on the north side (Central Avenue) immediately to the west of any new buildings constructed on the Green Bay Road/Central Avenue corner. Rather than encouraging a new open space design in the middle of the block (as has been done with the approved Ford site plan), the Plan Commission recommends that new open space be positioned to maximize its use by Wilmette residents so that it will serve as a connector across Green Bay Road to the rest of the Village Center or at least be more accessible to pedestrians from Central Avenue.

**Recommendation:** It is vitally important to the success of any redevelopment effort involving the West Village Center, that an overall Concept Plan be approved by the Village Board to provide a clear statement of the overall shared vision for this block. With this approved Concept Plan in hand it will be possible for the Village staff, Plan Commission and the Village Board to more fairly evaluate new development proposals and to avoid the appearance of arbitrary decision making in the future. The current situation that uses the unapproved but widely quoted Valerie Kretchmer's Green Bay Road study to justify any and all new development proposals should be clarified by the Village Board by approving a Concept Plan for the West Village block.

**Recommendation:** Once this Concept Plan is in place for the West Village Center block, it should be used as a starting point for an expanded and more comprehensive West Village Center/Green Bay Road conceptual plan.

### **Zoning Districts**

There are three underlying zoning districts within the West Village Center block. Properties located between the alley and Park Avenue are currently zoned R2 (Townhouse Residence District), while properties fronting Green Bay Road are zoned VC (Village Center Business District), and the property at the center of the block, east of the main alley, on Central Avenue zoned GC-1 (General Commercial District). Previous studies of the block have suggested that the R2 district was intended to provide a buffer between the existing single family residential uses to the west and the commercial uses fronting Green Bay Road.

**Recommendation:** Any subsequent development within the boundaries of the West Village Center block should be approved through the Planned Unit Development (PUD) process and in conjunction with this new Concept Plan for the block. This Plan would encourage higher density development on the east (Green Bay Road) side of the block, consistent with the existing VC zoning, and less intense development on the west (Park Avenue) side of the block consistent with the existing R2 zoning. The small parcel of property that has been zoned GC-1, to promote high-volume and high-commercial uses, would be absorbed into one of the less commercially intensive areas more compatible with the West Village Center. A unique overlay- zoning district should be developed for the West Village Center block to provide added flexibility in permitted uses for any smaller developments that would not use the PUD process. This new overlay zoning district could then be used as the template for future overlays in the expanding developments of the West Village Center.

### **Mixed Uses**

Previous studies, together with the recent Village Board approval of the PUD plan for the former Ford property, seek to foster the goal of achieving mixed use development within the West Village Center. It is expected that all street level uses will be commercial or retail in nature with any residential or office spaces to be located on the second floor or higher.

**Recommendation:** Continue to use the PUD process to promote mixed use developments that are compatible from a design and use standpoint, for the remaining undeveloped or under-developed properties on the block. The overlay concept would also be an appropriate tool to ensure that the types of uses, massing, height etc. of future projects meet the expectations of the Village.

### **Setbacks and Architectural Detail**

The 2000 Plan Commission study supports recent discussions by the Plan Commission concerning efforts to incorporate better quality architectural design including using setbacks in the design for new West Village Center buildings. By using ground level and upper floor building setbacks along with other design techniques, new West Village Center structures can be made much more appealing and interesting from a design standpoint and made to appear less massive to visitors arriving at the Village's "front door" near the Village Hall, METRA station and the rest of the downtown area.

The precedent has already been established with setbacks approved by the Village Board for a five (5) foot ground level setback on the east side at the approved Ford site development together with other upper floor setbacks that enhance the architectural design and appeal of this structure.

**Recommendation:** New structures being redeveloped along the east (Green Bay Road) side of the West Village Center block should have at least the same five (5) foot ground level setback so that all structures fronting on Green Bay Road would have the appearance to line up. This setback would create pedestrian friendly space in front of these properties.

**Recommendation:** In order to minimize the sense of bulk and to stimulate more attractive architectural design, the upper floors should be required to be setback at least 10 feet or more on the east (Green Bay Road) side of these properties and five (5) feet or more on the north and south (Central Avenue and Wilmette Avenue) sides of these buildings.

### **Height Limitations**

Height has been a sensitive issue regarding the potential redevelopment of the block. The former Ford property site has been approved at five floors (59 feet 10 inches) and will be the tallest structure within the West Village Center. The Plan Commission has discussed a height limit on all future West Village Center proposals of 50 feet regardless of the number of floors. One of the studies reflects a similar belief, with most structures expected to be no more than four floors or 50 feet in height.

**Recommendation:** The Plan Commission recommends that in order to maintain a sense of scale consistent with other structures in the downtown area that new structures fronting on Green Bay Road be limited to 4 floors above grade, but no more than 50 feet in height. Other structures within the block to the west would be scaled down from those along Green Bay Road.

## **Parking Demands**

The studies discuss the need for a parking structure to accommodate the parking needs of current and potential existing institutions (i.e. Library and US Post Office) and existing and new businesses located within the West Village Center. Across the country, study after study has shown that the availability of parking is often a key element in attracting and keeping viable new businesses and restaurants in suburban downtown areas. The Urban Land Institute, one of the preeminent national land-use advisory organizations composed of city officials, planners, developers, lenders and other stakeholders, promotes best practices to maximize efficient use of parking and addressing the needs of current uses as well as new development. For example, there are many developments around the country where public-private partnerships have been created to finance shared parking structures, or where developers have contributed to funds to support the construction and maintenance of parking structures. While the 2000 Plan Commission study emphasizes the need for additional parking within the West Village Center, it should not be to the detriment of design elements. The Kretchmer study suggests a reduced parking ratio when compared to the current code requirements. The Plan Commission has been very encouraged by the Village Board's decision to appoint an ad hoc West Village Center Parking study group working with an outside consultant to make recommendations with respect to a parking structure that would take into account the future parking needs of the entire West Village Center block.

**Recommendation:** Actively pursue the development of an attractively designed new parking structure to be located in the area between the Library and the US Post Office. The Village's commitment to help solve a potential parking issue for new businesses and restaurants in the West Village Center and throughout the Villages downtown area is sort of a "chicken and egg problem" (i.e. it will continue to be difficult to attract new businesses if parking is viewed, by these businesses, as a problem by these businesses). Further benefits of a new parking structure would be to improve the visual landscape of the West Village Center and the downtown area. By eliminating surface parking lots and by potentially relocating some or all of the US Post Office trucks from their current ground level parking spaces around the Post Office to a space inside a parking structure, the visual site lines of the entire West Village Center area will be improved.

**Recommendation:** Parking is one of the key elements in attracting new businesses and restaurants to virtually all redeveloping suburban downtown areas. Many communities have been able to persuade developers to contribute in a meaningful way to the costs of constructing new parking structures. This contribution has come most frequently from developers when they perceive that they are receiving something valuable such as increased height, increased density, a reduction in their on-site parking requirements, etc. However it is very important that for a Village considering this style of public-private partnership to construct a parking structure to be able to clearly identify real benefits from this arrangement. Communities have been able to insist on a higher standard of architectural design, better grade materials, more energy efficient building designs, provisions for affordable housing, etc. In addition, the current parking facilities in the Village Center should be marketed and enhanced through landscaping, markings and signage.

**Recommendation:** Off-street parking shall not be allowed between any new developments and the street fronts. Parking within this block shall be limited to below grade, within the structure, or behind the structure out of view from the street.

**Recommendation:** Residential parking shall be accommodated on-site. However, a reduced parking ratio for commercial space may be negotiated in exchange for a proportionate contribution to the Village parking deck and/or other substantial public benefits.

### **Unified Streetscape(s)**

Both the Kretchmer study and 2000 Plan Commission study reference an attractive, unified streetscape plan for the West Village Center.

**Recommendation:** With the approval of the Ford site redevelopment proposal, any future developments within the West Village Center should be compatible with this design. However, in order to tie the West Village Center and Village Center together and make it look like it is one Wilmette Village Center, the landscaping and streetscape materials should be consistent in both areas.

### **Architectural Design**

**Recommendation:** Thoughtful detailing consistent and compatible with the existing character of the Village Center and the new Ford site design should be encouraged. The design of these structures should create interest by varying the height and massing particularly in the upper floors. High quality materials and architectural finishes should be carefully detailed, well proportioned and appropriately scaled to create a contextual design that will encourage continuity (i.e. new will fit in with the old). All sides of the structures should maintain a similar design and quality, so that there are no perceived “back sides”.

### **Traffic Circulation and Alley Access**

As additional mixed use developments are added in the future on the West Village Center block, there is likely to be a significant increase in vehicular traffic on the streets in the immediate area (i.e. Central, Wilmette, Green Bay and Park) and the alley (i.e. north-south alley running between Wilmette and Central). Given the current level of traffic congestion at the intersection of Green Bay Road and Wilmette Avenue, particularly during the morning and evening rush hour and occasionally on weekends, planning for these additional traffic loads needs to be addressed immediately.

**Recommendation:** In order to help alleviate further congestion at the Wilmette Avenue/Green Bay Road intersection caused by more intense future development of the West Village Center block, vehicles serving this block should be directed to the alley and to Park Avenue for parking and deliveries. This will require that the existing north-south

alley be widened and resurfaced to provide access to the rear of structures along Green Bay Road, the new parking structure, and the Library and US Post Office.

**Recommendation:** No further curb cuts on Green Bay Road should be permitted for the following reasons: (1) given the three stacking areas that are existing and proposed (Central Avenue, Wilmette Avenue, and the Ford site redevelopment) in the center stacking lane, there is insufficient length within this block to accommodate any more curb cuts; (2) curb cuts take away from the architectural design integrity of projects fronting on Green Bay Road; (3) curb cuts interrupt the more unified streetscape; (4) vehicular traffic across the sidewalk will make these projects much less pedestrian friendly.

### **Buried Utilities**

Telephone, cable and electrical services are currently provided to several of the existing West Village Center businesses by overhead wires located on poles in the north-south alley and elsewhere on the block. While overhead electrical wiring was popular in the past, more recently developed areas have moved to burying these overhead lines. Visual site lines within the area would be greatly improved. In addition, reliability of these services is increased by reducing the likelihood of severe weather damage and damage due to vehicular traffic or tampering.

**Recommendation:** As the alley is redeveloped to accommodate parking and traffic needs, we strongly urge that the overhead lines in the alley be buried. Further we believe that the architectural appearance of new structures in the West Village Center block would also be enhanced by requiring that all overhead lines servicing these buildings, both on the public right of ways and on the private properties, be buried.

Thank you for providing us with the opportunity to review and make recommendations for the West Village Center. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our recommendations with the Village Board in the near future.

Respectfully submitted by,

Wilmette Plan Commission

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