

Community Input

During September and October of 2006, as part of the process of collecting input on the neighborhood, R.A. Smith & Associates conducted focus group sessions with business representatives and property owners from the 124th Street and Lisbon Road Neighborhood. During this same period, meetings were conducted with commercial real estate brokers to solicit input regarding conditions in the area, and with staff from both the Village of Butler and the City of Wauwatosa to determine their goals with adjacent properties. The comments from these groups and individuals were overwhelmingly consistent, diverging only on a few issues of importance.

Business Activity

Many of the comments related to existing and potential business uses within the neighborhood. This has traditionally been an area of light manufacturing businesses. Many of the businesses participating in the focus groups were started in the 1950's or 1960's, and are in their second or third generation of ownership. These are small businesses, often family owned or limited partnerships, although there are some businesses owned by larger corporations.

Several of the newer businesses in the area have relocated from Milwaukee or other nearby communities, or have often been started by employees of businesses in the area. There is a perception, though, that this is not a good place to start a new business and that many of the small businesses are closing. Several changes are occurring, not just in this neighborhood, but in the entire Milwaukee region. The manufacturing sector is declining in importance, and what remains is shifting to final assembly. Businesses with outdoor storage are finding it easier to relocate to outlying parts of the region.

There is a great deal of consensus that this has been an historically industrial neighborhood and should remain so. The majority of users will continue to be small businesses. Opinions were somewhat more mixed when it came to identifying future business opportunities. There is agreement that manufacturing should continue to be the primary focus. Most brokers and focus group participants tended to favor technology businesses. There were suggestions that these might be tied to the Milwaukee County Medical Center or to GE Medical. The recent addition of automotive-related businesses in the neighborhood has been viewed as a negative change by several focus group participants.

The businesses in the neighborhood appreciate the proximity of retail, services, and particularly restaurants. Several commented that the recent additions along 124th Street and Capitol Drive have been welcomed. While retail uses may be possible further north along 124th Street in the Village of Butler, this was not viewed as a desirable use for within the neighborhood. Most of the participants in the various sessions preferred that retail uses be kept south of Lisbon Road. Some expressed a concern that uses such as the gas station on 124th Street and Capitol Drive, which is used by many area employees, may be forced out.

Work Force

One of the greatest advantages of this neighborhood is its ability to draw a large skilled work force. Area employers draw workers from a wide area, extending to the south side of Milwaukee and out to Oconomowoc and Hartford. Regionally, there is a growing shortage of skilled workers. The planning area's central location and highway connections provides access to the largest possible pool of potential employees.

Transportation

The close proximity to Interstate 45 and the interchanges at Capitol Drive, Hampton Avenue, and Burleigh Road provide outstanding access to the neighborhood. This is a significant advantage as a business location. Still, there are several problems which need to be addressed.

At the edges of the neighborhood, traffic volume can present problems for access at certain peak times. The intersection of 124th Street and Capitol Drive was noted as the most significant bottleneck in the area, followed by the two-lane section of 124th Street from Lisbon Road north to the Village of Butler. There is widespread agreement among neighborhood stakeholders that this section of 124th Street needs to be widened to four lanes with turn lanes into the neighborhood. Additional improvements could be made to the intersections of 126th Street and 127th Street with Lisbon Road.



There is a transit stop located to the south of the neighborhood at 124th Street and Capitol Drive. While some businesses identified employees who used transit to commute to work, it does not appear to be a significant choice for employees. There are no sidewalks connecting the neighborhood to this bus stop or to the retail businesses and restaurants along Capitol Drive. There was general consensus that they would be desired.

Within the neighborhood itself, several problems were noted as being directly related to the substandard construction of streets and the layout of private buildings. Truck maneuvering may be difficult within the neighborhood, as streets are narrow. Trucks may also block the road when attempting to access loading areas directly from the street. There are many concerns related to cars racing on 126th Street in the evening hours, and truck trailers parked along the street.

Infrastructure

The infrastructure supporting this neighborhood is universally perceived as needing improvement. Following the condition of the streets, storm water management tops the list of concerns. There has been frequent flooding in the past. A new storm water detention basin and storm sewers in the northwest part of the neighborhood, and storm sewer improvements recently made in Brookfield and Wauwatosa may help to alleviate these problems. Still, there are concerns that the issues may not be entirely resolved. This is particularly true where parking lot grades or sunken loading docks do not permit storm water to drain. Some properties in the neighborhood are located below the flood elevation.

Several of the businesses and property owners complained of the difficulty in obtaining broadband service within the neighborhood. Neither AT&T nor Time Warner Cable is able to serve most of the area without significant costs, as the infrastructure is simply not in place. In the opinion of interviewees, internet access options need to be available to support existing businesses, and to bring new technology businesses to the area.

A small number of the business representatives complained of frequent power outages. Providing redundant power to the neighborhood may be an asset to help attract business investment.

There are perceptions that the neighborhood is becoming increasingly unsafe in the evening hours. There are few street lights now either in the neighborhood or on the roads bordering it. Improved street lighting would be considered an improvement.

There is a U.S. Post Office mail drop located on 126th Street just north of Lisbon Road. This is seen as a convenience for the neighborhood and should remain in any plan for redevelopment.

Site Issues



The lots in this neighborhood were platted a half-century ago, when standards were considerably different than today. Many of the buildings are similarly constructed to standards which do not meet current expectations or the needs of many potential users. Participants in the focus groups and interviews were in general consensus that several of the neighborhood's buildings are functionally obsolete, being too small, constructed with low ceilings, or having poor circulation patterns and poorly-configured loading areas. Retrofitting these buildings is a costly proposition, if at all possible.

Expandability is an issue for many of the buildings. The small lot sizes and zoning requirements make it very difficult to add square footage to existing buildings. This can be limiting to businesses, and may prompt many of them to relocate from the neighborhood.

The appearance of properties in the neighborhood was brought up in every interview and focus group. Real estate professionals and businesses both see the poor aesthetic quality of the neighborhood as a detriment. Most brought up outdoor storage and poor screening, as well as inoperable vehicles parked along the road.

Security was raised as a concern in the business focus groups. There have been an increasing number of incidents in recent years. Some employees feel the area is unsafe at night. There is an impression that the car storage lot on 127th Street and Congress Street is a significant contributor to the problem, as it is perceived to attract people looking for an easy target. The lot is not lighted and is relatively secluded from view of the road.



Adequate parking is an issue for some businesses. Ironically, these seem to be the businesses located within the newer buildings on 124th Street, which have had to comply with current City of Brookfield parking requirements.

While nearly all of the participants in these meetings felt that some changes were necessary, there were several notes of caution. Firstly, there is a strong sense that if redevelopment is to occur, it should be driven by the private marketplace, and not forced by the City of Brookfield. Secondly, any designs must first be functional. Participants saw the potential that grandiose "planning concepts" could get in the way of what is functional and practical. They were concerned that "these should not get in the way of what works." Thirdly, while the area could benefit from improvements such as sidewalks, better landscaping, and improved buildings, it is never going to be Gateway West (a newer industrial development at Capitol Drive and Springdale Road). It should be recognized as an industrial neighborhood and be allowed to develop to a different set of standards.

City of Brookfield

Relationships between the City of Brookfield and both businesses and property owners in the neighborhood appear to be strained in several areas. In general, there is a hesitancy on the part of business and property owners to trust the City, and a feeling that the City has failed to live up to its promises in several areas. This is particularly true of the deferred repairs to neighborhood streets and the failure to widen 124th Street to four lanes.

Businesses in the neighborhood feel strangled with what they have described as Brookfield's all-or-nothing approach to improvements. Several businesses have wanted to construct additions or make improvements to their properties, but have been told that in order to do so, they would have to make other changes. These often prove unfeasible or too costly, providing a disincentive to make any improvement. Several of the property owners indicated a willingness to undertake improvements if the City was willing to view change as a long-term process, rather than demanding all at once.

With few exceptions, both the neighborhood and the real estate community viewed City of Brookfield standards as burdensome. The design standards for new development (or redevelopment) are perceived as too restrictive for this neighborhood, especially given the small lot sizes. Additionally, the City's requirement for sprinklers on any building over 6,000 square feet was seen as an unnecessary cost. There were suggestions that the requirements might be restructured to allow for greater flexibility, allowing a higher density or loosening setback requirements in exchange for higher quality in other areas.

Code enforcement brought up mixed reactions by participants in the meetings. Several of the businesses brought up past experiences where they believed the City's building inspectors were confrontational. A greater number, and the real estate professionals, believe that the City has been overly lax in enforcing its codes in this neighborhood. There were comments to the effect that the City has allowed violations to occur there which would never be tolerated in other parts of Brookfield. Screening and property maintenance were cited as examples.

On a positive note, there was universal agreement that police and fire services have been very good. This is true despite the perceived increase in crime. Police are very quick to respond.

There is a consensus that change within the neighborhood will need to be supported by the City of Brookfield. In addition to improved code enforcement and flexibility in development standards, financial incentives may also be required. This is especially true to make the economics of redevelopment work out. At a smaller scale, incentives could help to encourage improvements to the existing properties.

Uncertainty remains as perhaps the greatest impediment to change in the neighborhood. The business community is uncertain what the City's intentions are for them and the neighborhood. Property owners and businesses believe the City of Brookfield needs to make a clear statement of what it wants to see in this neighborhood, and follow through on its commitments to make improvements to the area's infrastructure. Once the City commits to a plan for this area, it needs to be consistent in pursuing that plan.

Neighboring Communities

Administrative and planning staff from both the Village of Butler and the City of Wauwatosa indicated that their communities view this area as an industrial neighborhood. Butler is currently in the process of re-zoning properties neighboring Brookfield from the current M-1 zone to its heavier M-3 district. There is a development proposal to construct a bio-fuel plant and convenience store on the property, accessed from Arden Place and 124th Street. Although Wauwatosa has courted retail development, including a new Home Depot on the east side of 124th Street at Lisbon Road, it has indicated that properties to the north of Home Depot will remain industrial.

The Village of Butler indicated an interest in providing a cross-connection from its water system to the City of Brookfield at the north end of the neighborhood. Both communities brought up the issue of past flooding, but thought the recently constructed improvements in Brookfield and Wauwatosa and the detention pond in Brookfield should alleviate the problem, at least in part. Butler expressed an interest in seeing 124th Street widened to four lanes. Neither community has immediate plans for any infrastructure improvements within the area.