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7215 Oak Avenue 📍 River Forest, Illinois 60305 ☎ 708/366-5200 Fax: 708/366-5280
Email: dl@planningcommunications.com URL: <http://planningcommunications.com>

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Testimony to the River Forest Plan Commission

Subject: River Forest Commercial Corridors Plan

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony on the proposed River Forest *Commercial Corridors Plan*.

The plan itself offers an ambitious and informative guide to revamping land uses along North Avenue, Madison, Lake, and Harlem. The document itself is a good looking tome chock full of information and very useful graphics that present a clear picture of current land uses and potential development. There is much to praise in it.

The plan, however, includes some seriously misguided assumptions, statements, and policies that warrant correction or revision to be worthy of the rest of the plan. The observations offered here are intended to help strengthen the proposed *Commercial Corridors Plan* and enhance its credibility.

The surveys. Two online surveys were conducted as part of the “community outreach” phase of this plan. The non-scientific manner in which they were conducted undermines the credibility of the *Commercial Corridors Plan*. Their results *cannot* fairly be considered representative of the River Forest community. The surveys’ extremely small sample sizes — 80 residents and 8 businesses — constitute a very minuscule and non-representative self-selected sample. The idea behind random sample surveying is to get beyond these self-selected samples so you obtain results that accurately represent the views of the entire community. A random sample survey should have been conducted using a sample size of at least 300 River Forest households. Conducted properly, such a survey can yield a response rate of 65 percent or higher, making it a very accurate representation of resident viewpoints.

At a minimum, the *Commercial Corridors Plan* should include a clear disclaimer that explains the two surveys were not scientific and their results should be taken with a grain of salt because they are not representative of the full River Forest community. Such a disclaimer would enhance the credibility of the *Commercial Corridors Plan*.

Harlem Avenue “Commercial” Corridor. The Plan Commission to remove the two “Land Use Conversion Opportunities” along Harlem Avenue from the *Commercial Corridors Plan* and instead note the diversity of land uses along Harlem Avenue and the desirability to maintain this mixture of land uses. Such restraint will only enhance the credibility of the *Commercial Corridors Plan* by keeping its focus on realistic development opportunities that do not diminish the quality of life for River Forest residents nor eliminate the homes in which they live.

Harlem simply is *not* a commercial corridor by any stretch of the imagination. Nonetheless, on page 77 the plan presents two “bold” concepts to “create new commercial districts through the realization of Land Conversion Opportunities” which would require “the large-scale redevelopment of multi-family residential properties into unified commercial/mixed-use development.”

As both as professional city planner and a 23-year resident of River Forest, I have no doubt that these proposals are well intentioned, but are also misguided and should be removed from the ***Commercial Corridors Plan***. It makes no sense to even suggest replacement of perfectly good less-expensive multi-family housing with even more intensive mixed uses along the largely residential Harlem Avenue.

First, as the plan appears to recognize, Harlem Avenue is *not* a commercial corridor in River Forest or adjacent Oak Park. Although there are some commercial, institutional, and open space land uses along Harlem Avenue, the street is largely residential — and there’s nothing wrong with that. Our communities would be incredibly dull places if there were only a single type of land use along our major streets.

I do not understand why the plan would even suggest redevelopment of the condominiums on Harlem north of our block between Oak and Chicago avenues. They constitute a very pleasant set of buildings with a very calming and enjoyable interior space from north to south. They offer ownership housing to households that cannot afford nor need single-family homes or the high-priced new townhouses and condominiums being built in River Forest. Over the years, the residents have invested millions of dollars in the upkeep of these buildings.

The plan expresses concern that the site does not provide enough off-street parking spaces to meet current River Forest standards. Yet residents have somehow managed to survive. Concern over off-street parking is not a compelling enough reason to suggest redevelopment of this site. In my 37 years as a professional planner, this is the first time I’ve seen this given as a reason for redevelopment. If the village is concerned about off-street parking, it should allow some overnight permit parking along Chicago Avenue for the residents of these condominiums.

The proposal on page 78 would greatly intensify the use of these 2.88 acres. In addition to providing 125 condominiums that will, no doubt, be more poorly constructed than those now there and inevitably higher priced, any developer would have to squeeze in commercial uses and more than double the number of parking spaces. This would require a much higher intensity of use — and greater density — than anywhere else in River Forest. While such density and intensity might be appropriate at the River Forest Town Centre, it certainly is not appropriate at this location. This “Land Use Conversion Opportunity” is simply not realistic if River Forest’s character is to be maintained.

Why even suggest replacing these rock solid buildings with a more intense use of the property that will only increase traffic congestion along Harlem Avenue and be incompatible with the adjacent single-family residences along Bonnie Brae? The unnecessary proposal contained on page 78 sends a very bad message to the residents of these condominiums, telling them that they aren’t wanted in River Forest. It sends a bad message to the residents of Bonnie Brae. This proposal would only reduce the quality of life and property values for those homes on Bonnie Brae and possibly on Oak Avenue between Harlem and Bonnie Brae.

Sound planning principles and respect for the residents of these condominiums and the residents on Bonnie Brae demand that this proposal be stricken from the Commercial Corridors Plan.

Similarly, there is no rational reason for the "Land Conversion Opportunity Site #2" south of North Avenue. The land to the west is single-family residential. The block to the south is residential. This unwarranted proposal would produce commercial development that is not needed at this location and that would change the character of the neighborhood. Again it targets the little bit of River Forest housing affordable to households that are not wealthy. It goes against every national, state, regional, and local principle of sound planning practice by eliminating affordable housing that the private sector provides at a profit — at a time when such housing is in seriously short supply.

Elsewhere the plan speaks of protecting existing single-family residential homes from the intensity of commercial use on North Avenue. Yet under this proposal an entire block of Bonnie Brae would be added to those that need protection. As a planner and from personal experience living next to commercial uses on Harlem, I must urge the Plan Commission to refrain from recommending more commercial uses on Harlem Avenue that would be adjacent to residential uses. They would only reduce the quality of life and property values for those homes on Bonnie Brae.

**Need to Update Photo of
McDonald's**

Page 69 features a photograph of the old McDonald's on Harlem that has been replaced by a new structure. You might want to replace this photo with one of the new building. I'd be happy to take a high resolution photograph and send it to the Commission's consultant.

The *Commercial Corridors Plan* is wise to focus on building up North Avenue. But it is imprudent to suggest elimination of well-built existing multi-family housing in favor of commercial uses.

The entire credibility of the Commercial Corridors Plan is lessened by inclusion of these two proposals for Harlem Avenue. They should be removed and the plan should simply state that the mixture of uses along Harlem offers a variety that should be preserved.

As a professional planner, I recognize the desire to plan and plan again. But sometimes you must exercise restraint and not "over plan."

I urge the Plan Commission to remove these two "Land Use Conversion Opportunities" from the *Commercial Corridors Plan* and instead simply note the variety of land uses along Harlem Avenue and the desirability to maintain this mixture of land uses. Such restraint will only enhance the credibility of the *Commercial Corridors Plan* by keeping its focus on realistic development opportunities that do not reduce the quality of life for River Forest residents nor eliminate the homes in which they live.

Thank you for this opportunity to present these concerns.



Daniel Lauber, AICP

Planning Consultant/Land-Use Attorney

President, American Planning Association, 1985–1986

President, American Institute of Certified Planners, 1992–1994, 2003–2005