

## i. Introduction

The Comprehensive Plan is the Village of La Grange's official *policy guide* to future land use, development and conservation within the community over the next twenty years. The Plan addresses community needs and opportunities from a Village-wide perspective, while placing an emphasis on the physical development and community services and facilities aspects of the Village. It is geographically comprehensive in coverage, in that it applies to both incorporated areas and selected unincorporated areas within one and one-half miles of the Village limits.

Unlike many other Village codes and ordinances which are adopted as enforceable law, a Comprehensive Plan is an advisory tool to be consulted and considered by the Plan Commission, Village Board, and other officials and staff when land use changes and capital facilities are proposed. It is long-range in orientation and intended to express general community goals and aspirations. Yet, it is specific enough to guide the day-to-day land use and development activities.

The Village's previous Comprehensive Plan was adopted in 1970. A more detailed plan that addressed the Downtown and surrounding areas, *A Plan for Northeast La Grange*, was adopted in 1986 and served, in part, as the basis for a very successful tax increment finance (TIF) project enacted in the same year. As useful as they once were, the passage of time has rendered these documents largely obsolete. However, many of the major recommendations contained within these existing plans have been implemented and they no longer provide effective development policy guidance.

Reinvestment and redevelopment within the Downtown over the last decade has raised redevelopment pressures on both commercial and residential properties. Significant single family residential redevelopment is also impacting several residential areas of the Village. For all of these reasons, the Village has undertaken the development of this update to the Comprehensive Plan that takes into account the changed conditions in and around the Village and will provide effective policy guidance into the future.



## A. HISTORY AND PLANNING CONTEXT<sup>1</sup>

In 1837, Robert Leitch purchased 440 acres of land from the U.S. government in what is now La Grange. Railroad service began in 1864, and by 1869 commuter rail service connected the La Grange area to Chicago. Franklin D. Cossitt purchased 600 acres adjacent to the railroad in 1870, including part of Leitch's property, roughly encompassing the area now bounded by Ogden Avenue, 47<sup>th</sup> Street, Bluff Avenue and Waiola Avenue. The Village of La Grange was incorporated in 1879, and was named for Cossitt's hometown in Tennessee. Many of the earliest residents of the Village relocated from Chicago after the fire of 1871. Commercial businesses clustered around the railroad depot at Fifth Avenue (now La Grange Road) as well as the Stone Avenue Station. By 1890, the La Grange business district consisted of 28 stores. The community's location within the greater Chicago area, and the opening of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad (now the Burlington Northern Santa Fe) in 1864 would continue to provide La Grange with opportunity for prosperity.

By the turn of the century the Village's population quadrupled from 1,000 to 4,000. The automobile was common by 1910, and its introduction continued to enhance access to the Village and its Downtown. Through the late 1920s the Village had expanded east of La Grange Road to East Avenue, and south of 47<sup>th</sup> Street to 51<sup>st</sup> Street. By 1930, the Village of La Grange grew from 6,525 to 10,103 residents, an increase of approximately 55%. From this period through the 1950's, La Grange had successfully positioned its Downtown as a regional shopping center, anchored with stores such as JC Penneys, Sears and Montgomery Ward.

Beginning in the late 1950's through the early 1970's the Village would face financial challenges. By this time, La Grange was fully developed. The introduction of the shopping mall would introduce a business prototype in nearby competitive locations, which significantly impacted the strength of La Grange as a retailing center. In the face of this challenge, La Grange did not completely succumb to the inclusion of large-scale shopping centers in the Downtown, as many other communities did. The introduction of the Calendar Court shopping street attempted to bring new identity and energy to the Downtown. The approach was only marginally helpful during this transitional period.

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<sup>1</sup> Historical information was taken primarily from the publication *La Grange Centennial History*, edited by William J. Cromie, published by the La Grange Historical Society in 1979 and "Downtown La Grange a Reflection of Past Success," by Jennifer Thomas, *The Doings Newspapers*, June 10, 2004.

In 1970 the Village took action to again redefine and shape its role as both a strong and desirable residential and business community. It engaged in its first community - wide comprehensive plan to focus community ideas and resources on reversing and stabilizing local business and retailing. The strategy supported the notion the Village maintain the basic orientation of the Downtown as a pedestrian environment, and work with businesses on property and marketing improvements. A flurry of rehabilitation that began in the late 1980s, and continues today, has resulted in major reinvestment in the Downtown.

With foresight of the need to continue reinvestment in the Downtown and sustain a unique role in the market place, in 1986 the Village adopted a Tax Increment Finance (TIF) District in the Downtown. The finance tool made possible many changes including street repairs, business incentives and façade renovation loans for refurbishing storefronts. One of the most visible and successful projects induced by TIF financing is the Triangle Redevelopment Project at La Grange Road and Ogden Avenue.

Today, the community has again called upon itself to evaluate the state of the Downtown, West End Business District, and the community as a whole, and to refine its course for the future. The last decade has brought prosperity to the Village. The Downtown has become a well known regional entertainment location. Major reinvestment has occurred in the Village's housing stock community-wide, and its Downtown remains strong.

A major focus of the plan update is sustaining the economic success of the community while retaining its small town charm and character. For example, issues include: the growth of the Downtown and the need for investment in the West End Business District; allowing desirable residential replacement housing while ensuring a range of housing types for all citizens in the community; identifying ways to sustain and improve conditions within the Village's smaller commercial locations; and the need to continue to provide high quality community services and facilities. Many other needs have been identified in the planning process as well.

The Village is well positioned to again meet its challenges. It is well organized and in a strong financial position to manage and influence its future. The Comprehensive Plan and BNSF Corridor Subarea Plan lays groundwork to leverage the strengths and successes of the past to meet the needs of today. The Plan provides a framework for action, built upon citizen aspirations which are embodied in La Grange's Vision and the Goals and Objectives.



Again relying on its strong civic institutions, businesses, and citizen volunteerism, La Grange will continue its legacy as a strong, high quality, and full service community.

## **B. PURPOSE OF THE PLAN**

The Village of La Grange is at a critical point in its evolution as a community. It is a built-out, mature suburb with little available land for redevelopment, yet it is facing significant market pressure for new commercial and multi-family housing development. The West End Business District holds significant potential for change in the coming years; change the Village should proactively seek to direct for the benefit of the entire community. Residential redevelopment is beginning to alter the character of several residential neighborhoods. Key community facilities are facing the need to expand and/or upgrade. The long term potential for an additional transit station facility on the east side of the Village through Metra's proposed Inner Circumferential Service (ICS) on the Indiana Harbor Belt (IHB) Railroad also has far-reaching implications.

The Village has a demonstrated history of being proactive and sensitive to community planning issues, as evidenced by the successful implementation of the Downtown TIF District and the resulting resurgence of the Downtown. The existence of two Metra commuter stations and other available transportation modes are also highly desirable regional facilities. For these reasons, and many others, the Village will continue to attract investment and market opportunity. The Plan should provide guidance in the investment of both public and private resources.

The State of Illinois "Local Planning Technical Assistance Act" encourages local government comprehensive planning. It provides for incentives in two ways. First, technical assistance grants can be made available from the state to write or revise a local comprehensive plan. Second, compliance with the statute positions the Village to receive other state funding sources potentially affecting an array of municipal services and operations.

Plans must address each of the following elements: 1) Community Issues and Opportunities (Vision); 2) Land Use; 3) Transportation; 4) Community Facilities; 5) Telecommunications Infrastructure; 6) Housing; 7) Economic Development; 8) Natural Resources; and 9) Public Participation. Optional elements include natural hazards, agriculture and forest preservation, human services, community design, historic preservation and the adoption of sub area plans as needed.

While the state legislation identifies the purposes of each element, it also calls for the incorporation of performance measures in the Mobility Plan. To receive a technical assistance grant for five years after the effective date of the Plan, land development regulations, including amendments to the Village's zoning map and any land use actions should be consistent with the new or revised comprehensive plan.

Adoption of the La Grange Comprehensive Plan and BNSF Railroad Corridor Subarea Plan places the Village in compliance with the act, and enables the Village continued access to State of Illinois funding sources.

The Comprehensive Plan also provides guidance and direction for future land use and zoning patterns. As opportunities arise to guide and direct land use changes, the Plan will serve as a valuable resource to decision-makers. Reviewing the maps, goals, objectives and policies contained within the Plan will ensure that decisions regarding public and private investments are made with regard for the larger context that they will impact, and for the long-range "vision" that the Plan represents.

Without the benefit of a clear statement of community expectations and aspirations, there would be little consensus upon which to evaluate land use and development decisions. The Comprehensive Plan fulfills this purpose. It has been developed with substantial community input, and represents the conclusion of a two-year long planning process.

### **C. PLANNING PROCESS**

Preparation of the Comprehensive Plan has followed a rigorous public involvement process. It began with documentation of the existing conditions and identification of issues or problems facing the Village. Involvement techniques such as focus groups, interviews, the Village's web site, and community surveys were employed to reach a range of La Grange's citizenry. Preparation of alternative plans and policies allowed citizens to compare and contrast alternative approaches to realizing community aspirations.

Critical to the success of the project was the appointment of a Steering Committee composed of a range of citizen representation from the Village. The Steering Committee brought a balanced view of the community and served as a critical "sounding board" on preliminary plans and proposals. Ultimately, consensus on a



community vision, and a preferred comprehensive future plan was reached. Implementation strategies to support preferred community improvement and conservation ideas were then developed.

### PLANNING PROCESS

| Data Collection          | Issues and Opportunities                          | Vision                               | Professional Design Standards  | Alternative Plans  | Plan Formulating               | Implementation  |
|--------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|--|--|--------------------------------|---|
| *Field Research          | *Physical<br>*Social<br>*Environmental<br>*Fiscal | *Goals<br>*Objectives<br>*Strategies | *Land Use<br>*Transportation<br>*Community Facilities<br>*Economic Development | *Land Use<br>*Transportation<br>*Community Facilities<br>*Economic Development | * Locally Best Acceptable Plan | *Capital Improvements<br>*Land Development Code<br>*Finance |
| ----- <i>Time</i> -----> |   |                                      |  |  |                                |   |

As mentioned earlier, the Plan update was guided by a Steering Committee comprised of Village officials, citizens, staff, and representatives of the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA), Metra and Pace (refer to the Acknowledgements for a complete list of Steering Committee members). The development of the Plan was assisted by HNTB, a Chicago-based urban planning and design firm.

In addition to regular Steering Committee meetings, several community meetings were held during the planning process to solicit citizen and stakeholder input, and achieve consensus regarding the Plan, including the following:

- La Grange Business Association Workshop, September 11, 2003
- Community Workshop, October 7, 2003
- Community Workshop, October 20, 2003
- Key Person Interviews, November 3 and 4, 2003
- Focus Groups, November 5, 2003
- Community Forum, December 1, 2003
- Community Forum, March 2, 2004
- Community Forum, March 4, 2004
- Community Forum on the Draft Plan, August 18, 2004
- Plan Commission Open House, January 11, 2005
- Plan Commission Public Hearing, February 15, 2005 (continued to March 1, March 15 and March 29, 2005)

Comments received during meetings, interviews and focus groups held in the fall of 2003 are summarized in *Memorandum No. 1*. Comments received during later meetings served to provide guidance to the consulting team and Steering Committee as specific land use and transportation concepts and policies were developed.

The La Grange Village Board considered, discussed and ultimately adopted the *Comprehensive Plan and BNSF Railroad Corridor Subarea Plan* on May 9, 2005.

#### D. PLAN ORGANIZATION

The Comprehensive Plan is organized into seven elements or chapters as follows: 1) Vision, Goals and Objectives; 2) Land Use; 3) Mobility; 4) Community Facilities; 5) Economic Development; 6) BNSF Railroad Corridor Sub Area Plan; and 7) Implementation.

References are frequently made to the BNSF Railroad Corridor (the "Corridor"), as described in Figure 6 on page VI-13. This area of the Village was identified for careful examination in the planning process due to: its importance to the quality of life for all Village residents; the presence

of several key transportation modes within the area; and the likelihood of significant redevelopment pressure in the coming years. The Regional Transportation Authority (RTA), Metra and Pace engaged in discussions with the Steering Committee at appropriate points in the process with regard to the BNSF Railroad Corridor to ensure that physical planning recommendations and planning policies support transit operations, develop transit ridership, and result in transit supportive land use and development patterns.



*BNSF Railroad Corridor Subarea Boundary*

The contents of the Comprehensive Plan are supported by three work papers produced during the course of the planning process. These work papers, while important elements of documentation of the planning process, do not constitute the official adopted plan and policy. This Comprehensive Plan report does. Thus, where inconsistencies exist between the content of these previous

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documents and this Plan, the Plan itself shall be the guiding resource. Previous work papers prepared include:

- *Memorandum No. 1: Conditions Inventory, Public Input and Issues and Opportunities Summary* (HNTB Corporation, December 2003) contains detailed background information regarding physical conditions within the Village, previous planning policies, current initiatives, summaries of stakeholder and community input, and issues and opportunities.
- *Memorandum No. 2: Preliminary Community-Wide and BNSF Railroad Corridor Concept Plans* (HNTB Corporation, March 2004) contains goals and objectives, and preliminary alternative land use and BNSF Railroad Corridor planning concepts that were reviewed and evaluated by the Steering Committee and community in order to develop the refined policies and maps contained within this Plan.
- *Market Assessment: Village of La Grange* (Goodman Williams Group, March 2004) contains an analysis of general demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the Village. The market study also contains information on local and regional economic and real estate market trends, strategic advantages and opportunities for the Village with regard to development, and general strengths and weaknesses with regard to redevelopment opportunities. This market assessment was used primarily to ensure that future land use and development plans and policies reflect a realistic assessment of the likelihood of change within the Village over the time horizon of the Plan.

#### **E. USE OF THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN**

The Comprehensive Plan should be used by all Village departments, committees, agencies and other community organizations and private interests. The Plan is relevant to all citizens and property owners in La Grange. In particular, the Planning Commission, Village Board of Trustees and Village staff will have a special role in administering the Plan. Many of the Plan's recommendations are directed to both public and private actions and improvements. The interface between the majority of public and private interests are primarily managed by the Village of a Grange.

In general all policies and recommendations embodied in the plan "carry the same weight" without prejudice or preference. However, the community vision and goals and objectives form a fundamental

basis of the plan. When reviewing private or public plans and initiatives, a level of deference should be given to these elements as they most directly embody the values expressed by the community in the preparation of the plan.

Further, the review of development proposals should collectively consider all relevant elements of the plan including maps, text, policies, and recommendations. Given the complexity of community evolution and change, the “priority” or “emphasis” of any given aspect of the Plan will vary depending on the nature of the issue, request or improvement under consideration by the Village.



