

Share the wealth: Group says booming downtown can help the neighborhoods

The Chicago Central Area Committee hopes to focus discussions on ideas it believes will radiate downtown's dynamism into underserved areas.

By [David Roeder](#) on May 19, 2019 11:04 am



The Chicago Central Area Committee is calling for broad investments in public transit, workforce training, affordable housing and other efforts to spread the benefits of the city's growth. | Sun-Times file photo

Declaring that Chicago's competitive standing depends on bridging the gaps between its thriving core and its struggling neighborhoods, a downtown civic group is calling for broad investments in public transit, workforce training, affordable housing and other efforts to spread the benefits of the city's growth.

“A new physical and economic development strategy offers the opportunity to position Chicago as a leader in growth, quality of place and equity,” said a report of the Chicago Central Area Committee, drafted with input from more than 60 business and civic leaders.

With a new mayor taking office Monday, the group hopes to focus discussions on ideas it believes will radiate downtown’s dynamism into underserved areas. These include incentives for hiring people from poor communities, bus rapid transit service on key routes such as Lake Shore Drive and Clybourn Avenue, a fast rail link from downtown to O’Hare Airport using existing rights of way, and expansion of broadband internet service.

The report doesn’t get into cost estimates, but it accepts the notion that economic activity downtown can be used to subsidize neighborhood projects. “If there’s going to be money taken from the downtown area, let’s make sure it’s used in the best way possible,” said Kelly O’Brien, the group’s executive director.



Kelly O'Brien, executive director of the Chicago Central Area Committee | Provided photo

“As a downtown area organization, we want to be part of making positive change for all neighborhoods.”

Gregory Hummel, chairman of the group and partner at the law firm Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner, said the city must continue exploring creative financing for community improvement. Examples under Mayor Rahm Emanuel included tax increment financing for transit work and tapping revenue from downtown projects to help businesses on the West, South and Southwest sides.

“Public-private partnerships will be key, and they will drive capital spending,” Hummel said.

Another idea is to pair housing needs with a public use, such as Emanuel’s use of libraries built in combination with Chicago Housing Authority units.

Paul O’Connor, senior urban strategist at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and another contributor to the report, said the group hopes to discuss its ideas soon with Mayor-elect Lori Lightfoot and to talk about how neighborhood assets, such as the Illinois Medical District or the universities, can be used to promote growth.



Hummel said many Chicago neighborhoods “don’t have the connective tissue” with downtown, so the report, “A Central City Strategy for all Chicago,” emphasizes transit as a tool for growth.

It recommends significant attention to the Metra Electric service from downtown to the Kensington-115th Street station, almost making it equivalent to CTA rapid transit. It also calls for new CTA stations along

Subscribe for unlimited access.

[Learn More](#)Already a subscriber? [Sign in here.](#)

ground to smaller metro regions that have walkable and bikeable business centers, the report said.

The group suggested that expanding businesses should get incentives, such as expedited permits, if they meet targets for subcontracting to minority- and women-owned firms. It also calls for creation of an online message board to promote downtown job openings to neighborhood residents.

An overriding theme is that the old idea of transit and roads serving a dense, Loop-centered core is outmoded. It speaks of a broader “central city” with a mix of uses that can be thought of as running from Armitage Avenue to 31st Street and west to Western Avenue.



Some of its ideas will be controversial or far too expensive to contemplate. Its section on bus rapid transit revives memories of a city plan for dedicated bus lanes on Ashland Avenue that died because of local opposition.

The report also plugs a downtown “connector” transit service connecting Navy Pier to the commuter train stations, the museums and McCormick Place. It’s an enlarged version of the old downtown light-rail circulator that died for lack of funding.

Hummel said the report shouldn’t be viewed as an end product but “as an open-source document and part of a dynamic conversation we hope offers ideas and directions that will be helpful to others.”