

# Developing Devon: Crating a Strategic Plan for Economic Growth through Community Consensus

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **Background**

Since the 1980s, the growth of a diverse population and bustling retail establishments on Devon Avenue on Chicago's north side has created a reputation for the neighborhood as an "international marketplace." Though the merchants and residents are of predominantly South Asian origin, there is an interesting and complex mix of other ethnicities that gives the neighborhood its distinctive flavor. Yet its very diversity has posed one of the greatest challenges in bringing the community together to chart a clear and unified path to greater economic progress. Local businesses have suffered a decline in the wake of a slowing economy after 9/11 and the proliferation of South Asian stores in the suburbs of Chicago has provided stiff competition. Residents and merchants, new immigrants and long-established members of the Devon Avenue community have been unable to develop a common vision to resolve serious issues such as traffic congestion, crumbling infrastructure, dearth of parking, and simple cleanliness on the streets. A once-vibrant neighborhood is in danger of sliding into disrepair, and of driving away the very shoppers and businesses and residents who sustain it. Recognizing the gravity of the situation, SAAPRI undertook a project to bring the community together to create a strategic long-term plan for the economic development of the neighborhood.

### **Goals**

The overall goal of the project was to create a strategic community development plan for a community where people can enjoy the diversity of their neighborhood and live with comfort and security. The implementation of the strategic plan would facilitate economic growth of the area, revitalize it, foster its full ethnic and cultural potential, and thereby improve livability. Its purpose was to help preserve, expand and revitalize the various aspects of community life, such as housing, and educational, cultural, spiritual and social institutions and businesses.

The project undertook to conduct a series of conversations and focus groups with key stakeholders in the community to understand the needs, prioritize areas of change and growth, and develop a "Smart Growth" plan based on community consensus.

The plan would also be disseminated to the Devon community residents, businesses and local community organizations for their input and advocacy. A community lead agency would be identified to spearhead the redevelopment based on the plan.

### **Critical Issues**

There were a number of critical issues identified by the business owners, community leaders, heads of organizations, residents and workers who participated in this study. In an effort to determine which issues were most important and merited their immediate

attention, participants were asked to prioritize the issues using the multi-voting process. The frequency with which issues were identified in the interviews and the number of votes cast for a particular issue in the focus group discussions were used to calculate percentages that most accurately reflect participants' concerns.

| Critical issues on Devon |   |     |
|--------------------------|---|-----|
| 1.                       | Lack of unity and leadership  | 48% |
| 2.                       | Lack of adequate parking and traffic congestion                     | 41% |
| 3.                       | High rents and property taxes/lack of affordable housing            | 41% |
| 4.                       | Inadequate security/high crime-- Drugs, gang activity, prostitution | 39% |
| 5.                       | Poor cleanliness and sanitation                                     | 25% |
| 6.                       | Lack of affordable health care                                      | 17% |
| 7.                       | Unemployment/underemployment/low wages                              | 13% |
| 8.                       | Lack of awareness of government programs                            | 11% |
| 9.                       | Lack of participation in existing Chamber of Commerce               | 11% |

Besides these, community members also identified other issues:

1. *Declining business and growing vacancies*
2. *Lack of cooperation from the city*
3. *Frequent shutting down of restaurants*
4. *Lack of aesthetic appeal and signage*
5. *Dearth of new attractions*
6. *Begging, panhandling*

*One day a customer said, they don't come to Devon anymore for groceries because they can go in the suburbs and spend less on gas. But for jewelry, saris, and appliances, people still come to Devon.*  
*-Devon Businessman*

When asked how they would address these issues, community members had a number of recommendations. Below is a comprehensive list of the recommendations, culled from all the interviews, focus group discussions and meetings that were held as part of this project in the six-month period from September 2006 to February 2007. Subsequent input from the community through individual interviews and updates continued until the end of 2007.

Even as discussions were ongoing for this study, there were important developments that heralded a cautious optimism. City programs that provide significant funding for beautification projects were approved, and community members were hopeful that this would lead to visible improvements for the neighborhood.

## Recommendations

### I. Build leadership and organizational strength

(Major issues addressed: Lack of unity and leadership, lack of awareness of government programs, Lack of cooperation from city, disconnect between residents and businesses)

1. *Create an inclusive organization of community and business members focused on development of Devon Avenue community, which includes representatives from both businesses and residents.*

2. *Establish a broad-based network of participants* who are willing to address and resolve Devon Avenue issues.
3. *Develop effective channels of communication* that are inclusive and sustainable.
4. *Create community asset map* by identifying existing resources that will help implement Devon Avenue initiatives.
5. *Elected Officials at all levels need to take particular action in helping the Devon community retain its ethnic character and realize its full economic potential.* People come from all over the world to visit this transnational space and therefore it is important that elected officials proactively provide federal, state, county, and city programs that help this ethnic economy to remain viable.

## II. Improve Infrastructure

(Major issues addressed: Parking, Cleanliness/sanitation, Security/crime, Lack of awareness of government programs, Not much participation in existing Chamber of Commerce)

- 1) *Arrange meeting of Devon area businesses with Chicago's Department of Planning and Development (DPD) Commissioner and staff* to address local issues in the context of existing and proposed projects in the area.
- 2) *Coordinate effort to maximize benefits of Small Business Development Fund (SBIF)* which allows small businesses to use TIF funds for remodeling projects.
- 3) *Coordinate with the Chamber of Commerce* to meet with the Alderman to explicitly discuss the parking problem, use the TIF program, and modify zoning if need be to maximize parking space.
- 4) *Use the Special Service Area (SSA) program* which started in November, 2007, to help keep the area clean and attractive.
- 5) *Meet with the Neighborhood Capital Budget Group (NCBG)* to maximize the positive impact of TIF funds
- 6) *Work with the Chicago Department of Transportation (CDoT) and Chicago Transit Authority (CTA)* on ways to promote public transportation to Devon.
- 7) *Create an Adopt-A-Street Program on Devon*, enlisting the help of local private and public institutions to keep streets clean.

## III. Promote Business Development

(Major issues addressed: Cleanliness/sanitation, Frequent shutting down of restaurants, Declining business/growing vacancies, Lack of aesthetic appeal and signage, Dearth of new attractions, Lack of cooperation from city)

1. *Hold Meetings with Department of Streets and Sanitation Health Department* to update business owners on city regulations and procedures.

2. *Conduct “Mock” Inspections* to reduce the number of health citations and store closings for Devon-area grocers and restaurants.
3. *Create Resource Guide for New Businesses* to familiarize them with requirements and regulations for starting and running a new business.
4. *Introduce New Attractions* such as a Devon Avenue Festival with street vendors and performances, a neighborhood side-walk sale, or a “Taste of Devon” event.
5. *Celebrate Important Dates with Street Presence* including Asian American Heritage Month, Diwali, Eid, and Christmas.
6. *Increase Visibility of Devon businesses* by advertising in prominent, high-traffic city venues, such as O’Hare Airport and Michigan Avenue.
7. *Create Devon Avenue Business Directory and Coupon Book* to spread awareness city-wide and beyond of the variety of goods and services on Devon and provide incentives to shoppers.
8. *Award Recognition Prizes to Outstanding Merchants* to instill pride and encourage excellence.

#### IV. Create A Better Place to Live and Work

(Major issues addressed: High rents and property taxes/lack of affordable housing, Inadequate security/high crime. Lack of affordable healthcare, Lack of cooperation from government, Unemployment/ underemployment/ low wages)

1. *Meet regularly with the Police Department and Alderman* to voice concerns on crime and security issues, and ask for installation of better security measures on streets and in parking lots.
2. *Combat High Rents* by supporting subsidized housing and reservation of condos for rentals
3. *Institute Self-regulating Measures* to ensure that employers pay fair wages and refrain from exploiting workers
4. *Campaign for Affordable Healthcare for All* by voicing concerns at community meetings and meetings with Alderman.

The next step is for the Devon Avenue business owners and community leaders who participated in this project to ensure that they follow through on the actionable items that they themselves have drawn up in this strategic “Smart Growth” plan. SAAPRI will continue to act as catalyst and provide assistance in securing more resources for implementation of the plan.