



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

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We would also like to thank the Concerned South Asian Business Owners of Devon, the Indo-American Center and the West Ridge Chamber of Commerce for their valuable input as key organizations serving the Devon community.

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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.

PART I: Project Description

Context

Devon Avenue has acquired recognition over the course of the last two decades as an “international marketplace”, thanks to the diversity and bustling commerce of the retail establishments located between Ridge and McCormick avenues. Its predominantly South Asian demographic has also drawn comparisons to other similar South Asian concentrations in the United States, such as Artesia in California and Jackson Heights in New York. Many South Asians, whether they are international tourists or American residents, consider a visit to the Midwest incomplete unless it includes a visit to Devon Avenue with its glittering jewelry shops, fashionable boutiques, fresh produce markets, ethnic grocery and video stores, and famous restaurant cuisine.

But the neighborhood is also beset by challenges posed by its diversity and economic decline. Residents, merchants, shoppers and community organizations all hold diverse opinions on what is best for the Devon Avenue community. They are pulled in different directions and have not been able to unite and work towards a common goal. A slow economy, the World Trade bombings on September 11, 2001 and the rising growth of

There is no doubt that the city has been ignoring Devon but there may be a more fundamental economic problem with Devon.

-Devon businessman

ethnic stores in the suburbs are some factors that have hurt the local businesses in recent years, regardless of whether they sell high-

end jewelry or run a dollar store. Parking problems, run-down infrastructure and overcrowding have reduced the visual appeal of the neighborhood. Residents enjoy and value the easy access to the marketplace, cultural experience and major transportation lines. Some storeowners have invested in renovation, improving facades and interiors to provide a distinctive shopping experience, but still fear that their individual efforts may be undermined by the lack of a cohesive plan for economic development of the area.

The full economic and cultural potential of the Devon Avenue community remains unrealized, and its very survival may be threatened by the emergence of alternate shopping centers in satellite suburbs or the displacement of the current population as a result of gentrification. Those most affected by the slowing down of business, the ethnic businesses and small storeowners, have no strategic plan to counteract these trends. There is real danger that without a long range vision and concerted efforts to implement a well-thought out plan, Devon Avenue could suffer the fate of economic decline like other blighted neighborhoods in Chicago and Illinois. Not only could it lose its unique position of attracting shoppers from Wisconsin, Indiana, Minnesota and Michigan, it could also spell the disappearance of yet another ethnic Chicago neighborhood.

But there is still hope. Other Chicago ethnic neighborhoods, such as Argyle Street and Chinatown, have seen similar economic hardships, but have managed to revitalize themselves, thanks to vigorous efforts on the part of community and business members,

and generous support and commitment from the government. A study of those communities and in-depth interviews with leaders who spearheaded the turnaround reveal that the secret ingredient to their success was, in a word, organizing themselves for change. Indeed, most Chicago neighborhoods have survived and flourished by re-inventing themselves and seizing new opportunities for growth through the organized efforts of its citizens. Devon Avenue, too, is poised for such change. With the right blend of visionary leadership, and economic support from the city and state, the neighborhood can be turned around. It can not only retain its reputation as a premier shopping center for uniquely ethnic goods and services, it can also be a cultural attraction for tourists and an integral part of *Chicago's Neighborhood Tours* program. If residents stay and work to improve the neighborhood, Devon can continue to serve as the symbolic space that strengthens South Asian American identity and community.

All these factors described above provide a prime opportunity for the Devon community to consider “Smart Growth” options to redevelopment.

Project Description

The project was to conduct a needs assessment study for the economic development of Devon Avenue and formulate a “Smart Growth” strategy for its economic growth by holding a series of discussions with members of the community. Their input was sought in a variety of ways, including one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions. These conversations became the cornerstone of the plan to build consensus and commitment for a strategic economic plan.

In addition, a survey of all previous research on Devon Avenue was compiled. Outreach to other business communities was conducted to learn about their best practices and successful outcomes. This research also incorporates data on tax revenues generated by Devon Avenue businesses, and an assessment of public awareness of government programs such as TIF (Tax Increment Financing) and SSA (Special Service Area).

Community members are thus able to develop their ideas and plans, prioritize areas of change and growth, and build a strategy for the future.

Methodology

The main components of this study are:

- A comprehensive review of existing literature
- Economic data collected from state and city
- One-on-one interviews
- Focus group discussions

The last two provided the most critical input in the formulation of a “Smart Growth” plan.

The research and analysis process started with a comprehensive review of all previously published materials on Devon Avenue, including academic articles and newspaper feature stories. “As goes Devon, so goes the neighborhood” is the clear message.

Other efforts to provide context consisted of gathering information on the TIF plan (Tax Increment Financing) since Devon Avenue is part of the Devon/Western TIF district. In addition, state and city officials were contacted to learn more about tax revenues generated by the Devon Avenue business strip.

The substance of this report and the foundation upon which the strategic plan is based is a critical analysis of the results of one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions with community residents, leaders and business people. These interviews were conducted between September and December of 2007.

In January 2007, two focus groups were conducted to complement the findings from the interviews. One focus group consisted of business owners and the other consisted of residents and those who worked in the Devon Avenue community. Although the participants were not selected by any random sample meant to be statistically significant, they did represent the diversity of Devon in terms of age, gender, ethnicities, variety of occupations and interests.

An immediate outcome of the focus group discussions was the specially convened West Ridge Chamber of Commerce meeting on January 25, 2007, in which the focus group participants were invited to discuss their particular concerns and follow through on their ideas to solve the most pressing problems.

PART II: The Plan

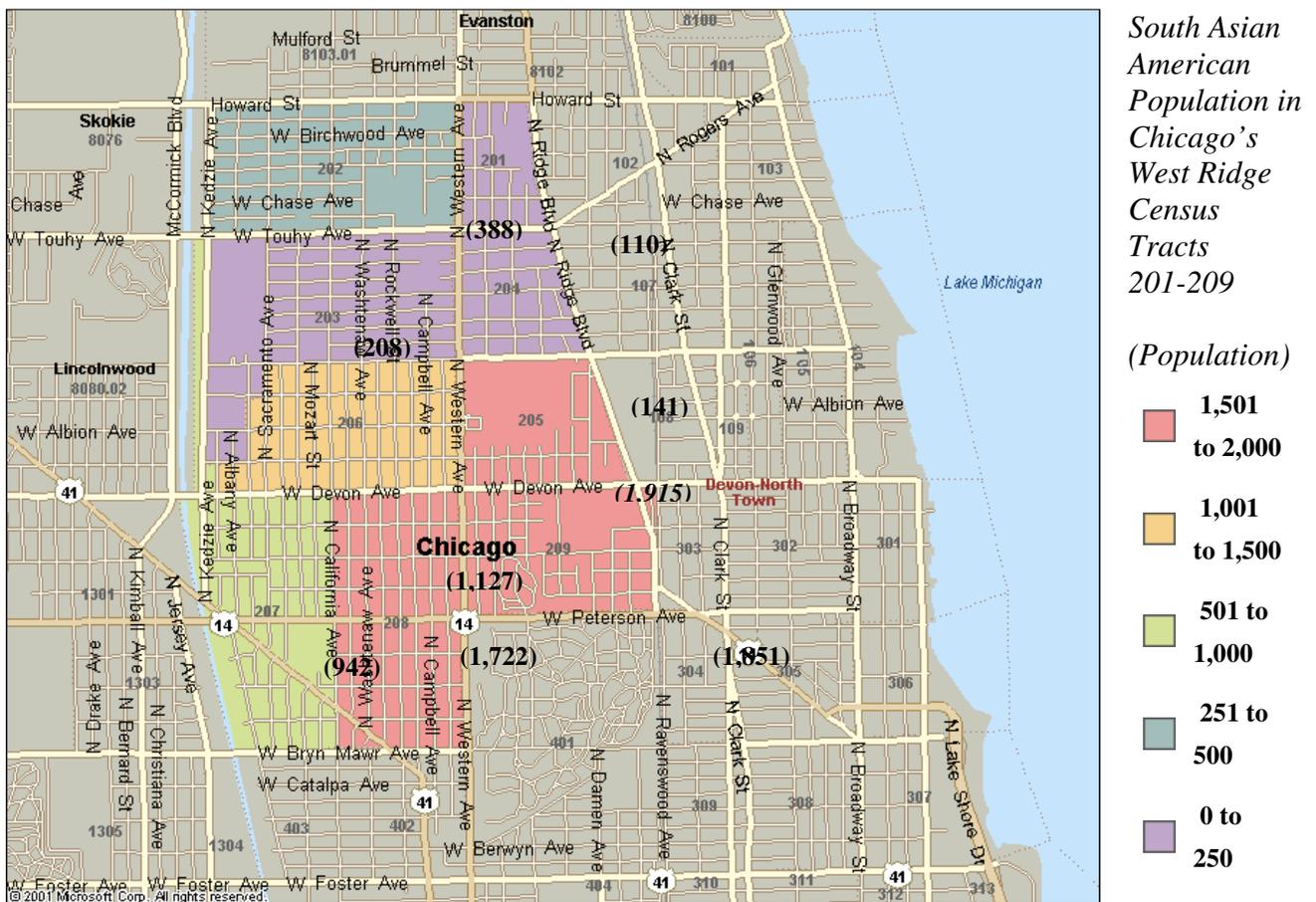
Evolution of a “Smart Growth” Plan

What does the Community Look Like?

A detailed study of the parameters of the West Ridge community including a profile of its population is available in the report titled *Making Data Count* published by SAAPRI in 2004. It shows the extent of ethnic diversity in the Devon Avenue area, and the socio-economic characteristics of the South Asian population in particular.

The Devon Avenue community, also known as “Indiatown” in Chicago, is bounded by census tracts 205 through 209. South Asians in Chicago recognize the approximate parameters of Ridge (to the east), Kedzie (west), Pratt (north) and Bryn Mawr (south) as containing the vast majority of South Asian shops and residences.

South Asian Americans in Chicago’s West Ridge Census Tracts 201-209, 2000



The population of Asians in these tracts grew from 8,744 in 1990 to 13,504 (a 54% increase) in 2000, and they represented more than a quarter (27%) of the total population.¹ While Indians are the dominant Asian group, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis

¹ It should be noted here that the Illinois South Asian population has grown significantly since the 2000 census. The 2005 American Community Survey puts the Asian Indian population in Illinois at 157,126, a

form a significant minority, particularly east of Western Avenue. Certain characteristics of the South Asian population in this community as seen in the 2000 census are worth noting., e.g. the ratio of male to female population (56% to 44%), the percentage of foreign born (84%), those who speak English less than “very well” (45%), those in low wage occupations (32% in production, transportation and machinery), and the low median per capita income (\$12,768, compared to the US national average of \$21,587)². Clearly, this population is more disadvantaged and faces more challenges than the average population in Illinois.

What resources exist for the community?

Given the concentration of high-end jewelry stores, boutiques selling bridal and designer ethnic wear, and the large number of restaurants catering to a wide range of culinary tastes on Devon, there is a persistent impression among the businessmen that they contribute substantially to the coffers of the city by way of sales tax revenue. Although the Devon Avenue commercial strip is among the city’s most vibrant, it was difficult to determine the exact amount of sales tax revenue generated by the stores on Devon, because of the way the tax revenues are calculated by the city and the state departments of revenue.

State of Illinois Sales Tax revenue

The Illinois Department of Revenue only calculates sales tax revenues by geographic areas in three ways: statewide, municipality and zip code. They cannot break out sales tax revenue by any smaller geographic area, though municipalities can break down their sales tax data how they see fit. Unfortunately the City of Chicago does not release sales tax revenue by any smaller geographic units than the state.

The State of Illinois collects sales tax on behalf of the State, Illinois counties, municipalities, and other government organizations to which the State returns the applicable sales tax after tax collection.

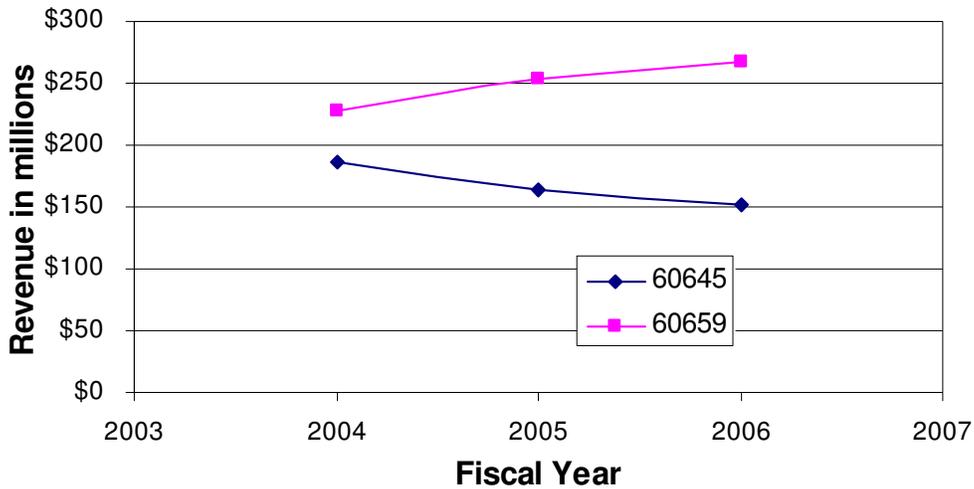
Sales tax information for the 60645 and 60659 zip codes are most relevant for this study. Most of the businesses on Devon Avenue are in the 60659 zip code and those on the south side of the street in the 60645 zip code. The following tables show data for 2004, 2005, and 2006 tax years, which occurred from July 1, 2003 – June 30, 2004, July 1, 2004 – June 30, 2005, and July 1, 2005 – June 1, 2006 respectively.

Although the state provided the full range of sales tax breakdowns, the most pertinent is the 1% base sales tax that applies to all products, including food, drugs and medical supplies. Using that tax figure, it is noteworthy that the 60645 zip code has lost revenue each year since at least 2004, while the 60659 zip code has been steadily gaining revenue each year.

26% increase from the Census 2000 figure of 124,723. Figures for other South Asian populations in Illinois are not available since the ACS 2005 does not show numbers for groups that fall below a population threshold of 65,000.

² Data source: Tables 21A through 21G, *Making Data Count*

Annual revenue by zipcode



During the 2003-2004 tax year, the State of Illinois collected \$1,864,568.07 from the 1% sales tax alone for the 60645 zip code. This means that the taxable revenue reported by businesses in 60645 for 2003-2004 was over \$186 million dollars. The reported taxable revenue for this zip code for 2004-2005 was \$163 million and for 2005-2006 was \$151 million—a steady decline.

The reported taxable income for the 60659 zip code for 2003-2004 was \$228 million, for 2004-2005 it was \$253 million, and for 2005-2006 it was \$267 million—a steady increase.

State of Illinois Taxable Revenue for 60645 and 60659 zip codes for 2003-2006

<i>Zip code</i>	<i>2003-2004</i>	<i>2004-2005</i>	<i>% change</i>	<i>2005-2006</i>	<i>% change</i>	<i>Total for all 3 years</i>
60645	\$186 M	\$163 M	-7%	\$151 M	-7%	\$500 M
60659	\$228 M	\$253 M	+11%	\$267 M	+6%	\$748 M
Total	\$414 M	\$416 M	+ 0.5%	\$418 M	+0.5%	\$1,228 M

For the three tax years from 2003 to 2006, the 2 zip codes with a concentration of South Asian businesses brought in over 1,228 million dollars in taxable revenue for the state. At the rate of 1% tax, the state has been beneficiary to the tune of over 12 million dollars.

Businesses in these zip codes may well ask how best they can leverage this information to help them stay profitable in the future.

City of Chicago Business Tax Revenue

The City of Chicago Department of Revenue is able to provide city business tax revenue data for a specified geographic range. In order to focus as narrowly as possible on South Asian-owned businesses, we asked for data for the businesses with addresses ranging from 2000-3000 W. Devon Avenue. The data provided in this section includes revenue collected by the city from small businesses, which is the focus of this project, as well as the estimated revenue that larger stores (with multiple locations throughout the city) earned from their Devon Avenue locations specifically.

City of Chicago Business Taxes 2004 – 2006

(For businesses with addresses ranging from 2000-3000 W. Devon Avenue)

Tax Year	2004	2005	2006	Total
<i>7525 (small)</i>		\$7,312	\$23,099	\$30,411
<i>7540 (big)</i>	\$ 3,853	\$3,975	\$4,160	\$ 11,988
<i>7550 (big)</i>	\$ 1,654	\$2,150	\$1,960	\$ 5,764
<i>7550 (small)</i>	\$16,633	\$13,673	\$9,176	\$ 39,482
<i>7578(big)</i>	\$ 2,000	\$2,000	\$1,620	\$ 5,620
<i>7580 (small)</i>	\$ 481			\$ 481
<i>7595 (small)</i>	\$12,729	\$9,366	\$14,088	\$ 36,183
<i>8402 (big)</i>	\$ 2,343	\$625	\$700	\$ 3,668
<i>8402 (small)</i>	\$ 671	\$1,132	\$190	\$ 1,993
<i>2222 (small)</i>	\$ 300	\$450	\$450	\$ 1,200
<i>Total (big)</i>	\$ 9,850	\$8,750	\$8,440	\$ 27,040
<i>Total (small)</i>	\$30,814	\$31,933	\$47,003	\$109,750
Total	\$40,664	\$40,683	\$55,443	\$136,790

Explanation of Tax Categories and Implications

7525 = Restaurant and Other Places for Eating Tax (0.25% of receipts for restaurants).

The most applicable city business tax revenue information seems to be the City of Chicago Restaurant Tax, which taxes 0.25% of the retail price of food sales only. Extrapolating from that percentage tax, for 2004, the Devon Avenue restaurants sold \$2,924,800 in food sales alone, and in 2005, \$9,239,600. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact reason for the dramatic increase in tax revenue receipts between 2004 and 2005. Without further investigation, it could be assumed that this would be due to some combination of the Restaurant Tax being collected for only a partial year in 2004 (it became effective 4/1/2004), new restaurants opened between the tax years, increased sales, less usage of the Restaurant Tax exemption, and perhaps increased enforcement of tax collections. The Restaurant Tax exception as described by the Chicago Department of Revenue is: “A place for eating with a Restaurant Tax liability of \$200 (equal to \$80,000 in taxable sales) in an annual tax year is not taxable if the tax was not passed on

to its customers. Due to the shortened tax year, the threshold for the 4/1/04-6/30/04 tax year is \$50 (equal to \$20,000 in taxable sales).”

7540 = Employer's Expense Tax (\$4.00 / month per employee working in Chicago - only paid by businesses w/ 50 or more Chicago employees).

The small increase in this tax revenue between 2003 and 2005 indicates a marginal increase in the number of people employed by the big businesses on Devon Avenue

7550 = Personal Property Lease Transaction Tax (6% on property leased in Chicago)

The drop in this tax revenue between 2004 and 2005 for 20 big businesses, and the more dramatic drop for each year for small businesses indicates a fall off in rentals on Devon Avenue, a situation reported by the business owners in their interviews and focus group sessions as well.

7578 = Electricity Use Tax (based on usage - paid by ComEd and some operators of larger buildings).

7580 = Anti-Litter Tax (this was a forerunner of the Restaurant Tax. This tax ended July 2002; and Restaurant Tax came into effect 4/1/04)

7595 = Ground Transportation Tax (paid by taxicab; limousine companies)

The sharp drop in tax revenues paid by cab and limousine operators between 2003 and 2004 is followed by a steep rise in 2005 to above 2003 levels. If this rise is due to an increase in the number of cab operators (rather than to improved business for the same number of cab operators), it does not necessarily mean better economic conditions. Further investigation would be required to examine the cause of this rise.

8402 = Non-titled Use Tax for Personal Property (1% of purchase price of items purchased outside Chicago to be used in Chicago, where a municipal tax was not charged by the vendor).

2222 = Automatic Amusement Device Tax (\$150 per year for each amusement machine being operated in the City)

Devon/Western Tax Increment Financing (TIF)

Because of the critical role of government in supporting and facilitating the economic growth of a neighborhood, it was important to look closely at TIF, a program designed by the city for the district’s economic benefit. The Chicago City Council created the Devon/Western TIF fund in 1999, and it is scheduled to expire in 2022. TIF funds are garnered by the incremental increase in property taxes in the area, the increase occurring as an area’s economy improves, and those revenues are funneled back into the community for further business investment. In the beginning of 2007, Chicago had 147 TIF districts, with a 23-year life span and in 2005 alone, these districts together garnered \$329.5 million in TIF funds.

How are TIF funds allocated?

The Department of Planning and Development (DPD), which administers the TIF program, can disperse TIF funds to current or prospective area business owners for a variety of project types including:

- Land acquisition, clearance and site preparation;
- Certain environmental remediation measures;
- Building rehabilitation and repair, (e.g. roof and facade improvements, HVAC and other mechanical system upgrades, building upgrades needed for ADA compliance and other substantial renovation);
- Signs or awnings which are permanently affixed to the building;
- Rehabilitation or remodeling of existing tenant improvements;
- Streets, streetscaping and other public infrastructure improvements;
- Professional fees related to the redevelopment project, including architect/engineering fees, developer fees and marketing/leasing commissions;
- Up to 30% of the applicant’s construction period interest costs; and
- Job training and Welfare to Work programs.

Examples of costs that are not eligible include new private building construction (except for low-income housing), initial tenant build-out, minor repairs or improvements (such as painting), the purchase of equipment and minor site improvements (such as planters and perimeter security fencing).³

Devon/Western TIF Facts 2006⁴

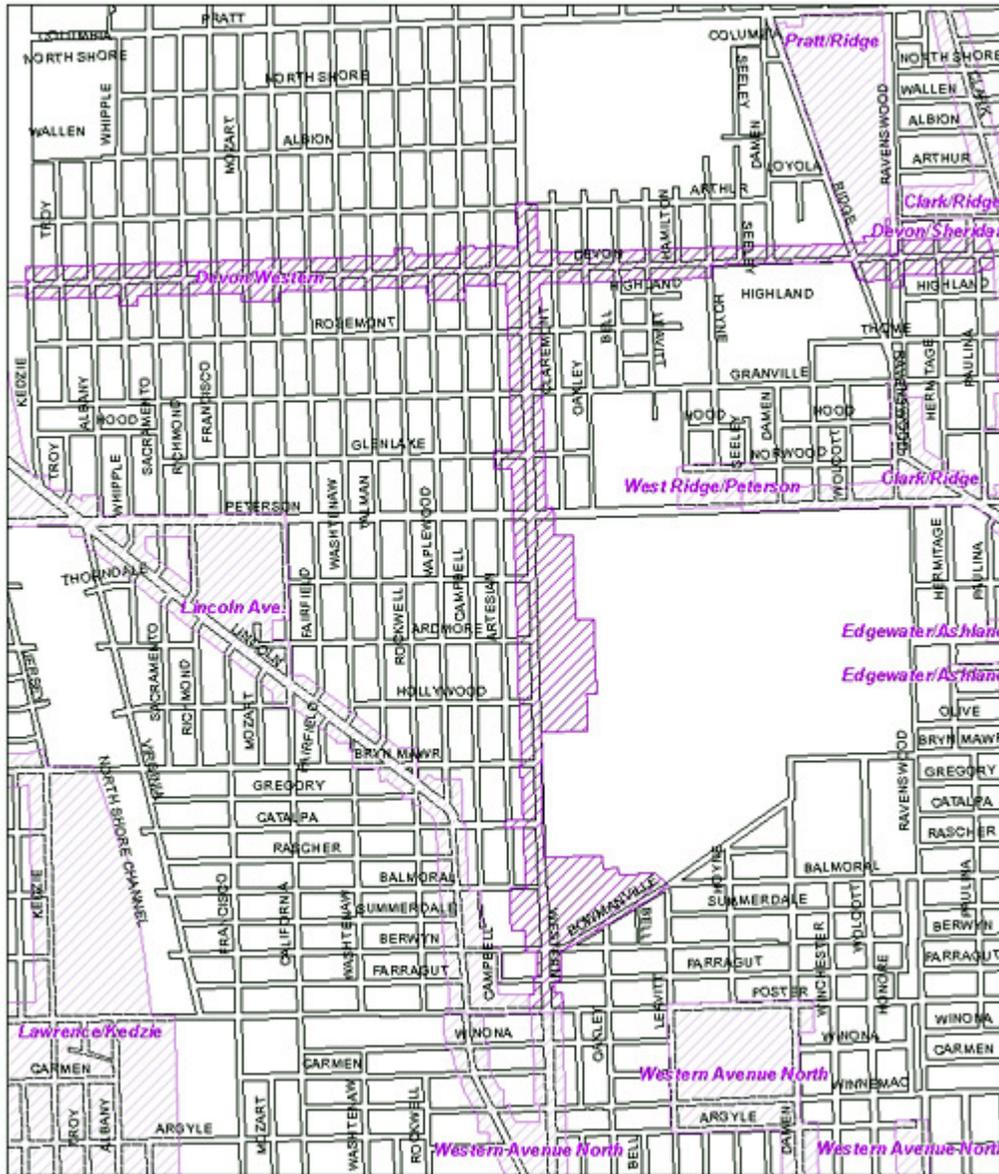
Total Net Balance	\$9,376,040
Revenue Collected	\$2,548,712
Total Expenditures	\$ 87,073

A map of the TIF district boundaries is shown on the next page.

³ Source: Chicago Department of Planning

⁴ Source: City of Chicago, Department of Planning and Development Annual Report, 2006.

DEVON/WESTERN TIF MAP



Only two projects in the Devon/Western TIF district have received TIF funds, to date. In 2001, the City Council authorized \$800,000 for the First Mutual Bank of Illinois to open a branch on Western Avenue. First Mutual Bank expended over \$3.5 million in private funds for the project. In March 2006, the City Council authorized \$1.187 million in TIF monies for the Devon/Rockwell redevelopment project, with the potential for upwards of \$3.455 million total in TIF funds being used for the project (contingent on the amount of additional private funds used and available TIF funds).

What are future plans for TIF on Devon?

In general, the local alderman and developers play an instrumental role in how TIF funds are allocated. In some TIF districts, the aldermen have created informal TIF boards comprised of community members who advise on how TIF monies should be spent. In other communities, local organizations have created oversight panels to lobby the alderman and Chicago's Department of Planning and Development on TIF spending. These boards and panels do not have formal input but can have oversight into the TIF process.

In the case of Devon Avenue, it became clear in the interview process that Devon Avenue business owners and residents had little or no idea about TIF. Some did not even know that they were part of a designated TIF district. Others felt that TIF information was being withheld deliberately by interested parties, and there was no transparency.

Basically there is the unity stuff, but then there were problems with the city. First, the city was involved, then they changed policy so they weren't in parking business, so then private companies made bids to do it. The TIF was floated to fund it, but TIF is a political issue so no one knows anything about it.

-Focus Group I Participant

Given this woeful lack of information on TIF, the focus group sessions conducted as part of this study were used to educate interested participants. Participants resolved to learn more about this issue from neighborhood groups, their elected politicians, and seek greater transparency so as to be able to better formulate plans on how to use their TIF funds. There is tremendous scope for proper utilization of TIF funds for genuine economic development of the community. This has remained unrealized due to the lack of awareness about the TIF, lack of cooperation from the alderman and developers, and a general failure to pursue the matter aggressively and access existing resources. A well-organized plan to tap into all available resources will no doubt result in better utilization of TIF funds in the district.

Small Business Improvement Fund (SBIF)

In the preliminary stages of this study, it appeared that the Devon/Western TIF District did not have an SBIF, but since then, an SBIF has been approved for the area and a kick-off event was held on March 21, 2007 by the West Ridge Chamber of Commerce to announce the program to the commercial property owners and businesses located in the TIF area. SBIF money is part of the TIF funds but are placed in a separate account to be managed for specific purposes. Approximately two dozen other TIF districts also have SBIFs, which provide grants to commercial property owners and small businesses to use a maximum of \$50,000 (up to 75% of their cost) in SBIF funds for such remodeling projects as: new heating, air conditioning, roof or floor repair, façade improvements, signage, awnings, and window replacement. The kick-off event was well attended by South Asians and over 50 applications were distributed to small business or property owners in the area. It is important for the South Asian community to ensure that they

fully familiarize themselves with the process so they can benefit from this program, and that they develop a relationship with the Alderman, who must finally approve their proposals.

Special Service Area

Special Service Areas (SSA) has been designed by the City of Chicago to provide neighborhoods with increased services beyond what is normally provided. Funds are collected through Cook County property tax bills. These monies fund additional community projects such as hiring additional neighborhood cleaning crews, planting trees and other sidewalk amenities, parking, security, snow removal, holiday decorations, community events and power-washing of streets. Under the West Ridge Chamber of Commerce's leadership, the process to establish Devon Avenue as a Special Service Area began in June 2006 and became a reality in one year. Devon Avenue became a Special Service Area #43 managed by WRCC and funds became available in November of 2007. For the average property owner, the annual tax increase may be only \$100 while larger property owners could pay upwards of \$1,400 based on property value. For the first year of the program, there was a fund of \$112,000 available for spending, but this amount could go up in subsequent years depending on the service need.

A nine member commission chosen by Alderman Stone has oversight on the SSA and meets regularly to determine spending priorities. With the active participation of the South Asian Devon Avenue business community in this program, funds have been used to hire a crew to clean Devon Avenue six days a week, twenty existing cement flower planters have been cleaned and painted, sidewalk power washing, and installation of solar trash compactors. Parking arrangements with nearby institutions have been made for patrons visiting Devon. Other plans include buying holiday decorations, snow plowing in the winter and generally sprucing up and beautifying the neighborhood. This would begin to address many of the major concerns on sanitation and aesthetics expressed by study participants.

What can Devon Avenue learn from others?

A series of interviews was conducted with heads of community organizations outside the Devon Avenue neighborhood and with representatives of city departments in order to understand other successful models for community development and help create an asset map for the Devon community. These interviews yielded the following list of opportunities for Devon businesses to explore further:

There are some business leaders who probably want to get involved – but no one has made a concerted effort to bring them together. ...Also, they may not be aware of how to get things done.

-Business development leader

- *Department of Consumer Services* can assist new businesses prior to opening with determining compliance with city rules.

- *Neighborhood Capital Budget Group* can help business owners and community organizations build a strong plan to effectively use TIF monies for development.
- *Department of Business and Licensing* can help new business applicants navigate the licensing process.
- *Department of Planning and Development* staff can meet with prospective TIF applicants to go through applicant process. They could also hold meetings with the greater Devon business community about TIF opportunities.
- *Department of Streets and Sanitation Health Division* has held sanitation seminars in Chinatown for local businesses and could be approached to do the same for Devon Avenue.
- *Chinatown Chamber of Commerce* indicated a willingness to share with the Devon community their successes and failures with addressing community issues and promoting local businesses.
- *The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign* has a student group that created a plan for the beautification of Devon Avenue. It is inviting residents and business owners to visit its website www.westridgeneighborhood.blogspot.com.

PART III: Voices of the People

Even as the interviews were being conducted, it became apparent that business owners and community leaders were used to talking about the problems on Devon but many had lost faith that the problems would ever be resolved. They felt that no meaningful action was being taken by

No point in doing another project, they have already tried to address problems. All the problems on Devon have already been discussed and printed. Now, everyone is sick of talking about problems and media won't care.

people in the neighborhood and by elected officials. They also felt that the business associations had not done their part in helping resolve critical issues.

But others were optimistic, and were looking forward to improvement. It seemed important to seize the moment and build on hopes to revitalize the Devon Avenue community.

This is right time to do this project. I don't look to past failures, but am focused on the future.

What follows is a detailed analysis of each important issue identified by community members and their suggestions for tackling them.

Developing Unity/Leadership

Devon is diverse. Devon is divided. How can a neighborhood be so diverse and still be united? Entire countries with multiple ethnicities have struggled with this issue, and Devon Avenue represents a microcosm of a larger, heterogeneous universe. The very freedom that community members enjoy to express their own particular interests pulls them in different directions making this a neighborhood of minorities and pluralities without a clear majority to lead the way.

None of the store owners work together, they need to work together. They could do something like a two-minute joint commercial about Devon, but only 2 stores will chip in, and the other 6 will complain that there is not enough focus on them.

The confusion and stalemate caused by the lack of unity and leadership in the community was voiced by many frustrated interviewees.

While cultural differences and personal egos may play their part in preventing the community from working towards a common goal, other factors were also identified as contributing to the problem. The lack of direction is worse confounded by the lack of a general sense of accountability. Whose fault is it that there is no unity? What role does politics play in dividing the people?

Some community members not only identified the problems, they sought to understand the root causes and offered solutions, citing the interdependence of various sections of the population, and ways to bring them together.

The focus group participants, too, saw the diversity of Devon as strength, not a weakness, characterizing the neighborhood as a mini-United Nations. They felt encouraged that the boom in the information technology sector would bring more South Asians into the neighborhood for shopping, help the neighborhood develop its own identity as “India town” and rejuvenate Devon as a strong regional commercial center.

A group should urge the business owners to form one business association. Everyone says they want an association, but no one has actually taken steps to create one. For example, when approaching the district police chief, they, the Pakistani business owners, who are mostly east of Devon, had their own talk, and the Indian business owners also went in separately. If they went together, they would have better sway.

The most important problem facing South Asian business on Devon Avenue, from my perspective, is lack of coordination among themselves as a business group in getting things done. They had a lot of safety/police related issues. But often, they do not report the matter on time, never participate in the prosecution of bad guys, and always complain about lack of service.

Countering the threat from the suburbs

A serious threat to Devon was seen as coming from the competition in the suburbs.

Not only are the suburban businesses being developed, but also people [South Asians] who live on Devon are moving to the suburbs. So, generally, Devon’s relevance is decreasing.

Developing a solution to a prime problem: Parking

The thorniest, most intractable issue for the Devon Avenue community has, without doubt, been the parking problem. Businesses and residents alike have been paying the price of progress for many years. The more popular Devon Avenue became as a destination for shoppers, the greater was the traffic congestion. Shoppers came not only from the Chicago area but from all over the Midwest, parked on the side streets, and created a shortage of parking space for the residents in the neighborhood. Linked to the parking problem was the problem of crowds and litter, and in an attempt to control both parking and cleanliness issues, restrictions were imposed on parking, much to the ire of businessmen who said it was deterring shoppers. The parking problem ball was tossed between city and private developers, and every significant attempt to resolve it met with the displeasure of one or other section of the diverse population. The current hot button topic is the construction of the Devon and Rockwell multiuse facility, touted by some as the answer to Devon’s parking problems and denounced by others as an architectural “monstrosity.” Running through all the comments was the sense that the citizenry were not taken into confidence about the project, and decisions were made over and above their objections.

Major problem is the shortage of parking spaces, people circle for hours and hours and yet they can't find parking. We have talked to the alderman and city about it but nothing is being done.

The major issues on Devon are cleaning and parking, especially because of the zoned side streets. People from the Midwest will still come, Devon is still a destination for them. But people from suburbs aren't coming because of parking.

Parking is the biggest issue. People may not know about the regulations, so then they park illegally, then get tickets, and finally they don't want to come back to Devon because of that experience.

City says that Devon parking meters pay a lot of revenue to the city. They want to increase police patrolling of Devon.

The Devon/Rockwell structure is one proposal but neighborhood is up in arms.

First and foremost issue is the traffic flow and parking because the congestion has a huge impact on doing business. This solution would have to come from the city.

From the shoppers' point of view, the shortage of parking led to yet another problem—handing out of parking tickets by the police, sometimes unfairly, and harassing them without justification.

It was not until the focus groups got down to discussing solutions to the parking problem that there were constructive suggestions forthcoming. One approach was to go in strength to meet the Alderman, and involve the Chamber of Commerce in the effort. Discussing the parking issue publicly and hosting a debate between candidates standing for public office was deemed yet another way to explore all options. Other specific steps suggested were: remove permit parking one block north and south of Devon Avenue, change zoning to enable one building behind stores to be converted into parking (TIF-subsidized), consider remote parking with valet service, investigate the real benefits of the Devon and Rockwell structure (Will this result in more or less parking?), remove parking meters and place pay boxes, commission a research study to determine how much parking is

needed for next 5 years, and encourage private sector investment (with subsidies) in a parking structure.

Developing a safe environment and deterring crime

Many participants had either first hand experience of crime or could cite instances of their friends and acquaintances being victims of crime in the neighborhood. The nature of the crimes ranged from vandalism to hate-talk (such as “Go back where you came from”), from break-ins to shootings.

Another threat for the community is an increase in crime, ranging from break-ins into parked cars and store windows, to purse snatching, soliciting by prostitutes and begging on the streets.

Also heard that on Devon, at Rockwell and Maplewood, there has been an increase of drug trafficking which makes the area unattractive and unsafe for shoppers at night.

There are frequent thefts on Devon, especially the breaking in of cars where people break window glasses and steal things from within car.

Focus group participants came up with some concrete suggestions for tackling this serious and growing problem.

- They resolved to ask the police department for regular patrolling by beat cops.
- Parking a dummy police car would deter would-be criminals.
- Greater efforts should be made enforce no-loitering signs and remove beggars from the streets.
- Installing of cameras at key intersections in Chicago had proved effective, so residents wanted the same in their neighborhood.
- Because the threat to high-end jewelry stores on Devon was so acute, they had hired private security guards, and it was suggested that such measures could be adopted on a larger scale by other merchants as well.

Developing a clean and sanitary environment

This is a particularly sensitive issue for South Asians who have to combat the ugly stereotype of the “dirty immigrant” in a neighborhood that is bustling with so much commerce that the residents feel that the problem of sanitation is spinning out of their immediate control.

Weekends bring a surge in traffic and shoppers, and consequently more litter. Businesses and residents feel that the city does not do its fair share to clean up an area that is generating so much extra revenue (the general perception among the Devon Avenue community, and indeed among

Problem is that on weekends, people pass out flyers and on Monday, the street is filled with trash.

Stores should be kept clean. It's very dirty on Devon, people don't care, and it doesn't look nice. People also put too much on the windows, everything looks too junked up.

Business owners also complain that city authorities don't pay enough attention to sanitation issues, including infrequent pick up of garbage.

The city collects enormous amount of revenue but streets and sanitation is neglected.

other Chicagoans as well, is that shops on Devon contribute substantially to the city's coffers.) How much of the responsibility to keep streets and back alleys clean devolves upon the businesses and residents themselves and how much on transient shoppers is the bone of contention.

How did community members themselves plan to solve this problem? Again, answers came from the brainstorming of the breakout sessions of the focus groups. A Special Service Area (SSA) designation would help in beautifying the neighborhood with planters and signage, and provisions could be made for sidewalk sweeping and power cleaning 4 or 5 times a week. However, vendors should also be encouraged to clean up and work with the Department of Streets and Sanitation to educate the public, enforce ticketing, and deploy sufficient number of inspectors to do spot checking and surprise inspections of restaurants and alleyways. Such pro-active measures would pre-empt the shutting down of restaurants and ensuing harassment of restaurant owners. A positive measure to encourage cleanliness was to hold contests and give prizes and recognition awards to the best kept stores in the neighborhood.

Developing an affordable housing market

The rising values of property on Devon were proving a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it meant that it was a desirable neighborhood; on the other hand, the concomitant rise in property taxes was driving up rents and putting it beyond the reach of businesses. This was resulting in store vacancies which could very well accelerate a decline a property values.

Focus group participants who were residents of Devon were apprehensive that with most of the buildings being converted into condos, not enough units are being set aside for renters, leading to a dangerous shrinkage in rental properties. They felt that at least 20% of such condo conversion should be set aside for rental purposes. They also complained that even when they paid the high rents, the apartments were not properly maintained by the landlords. Subsidized housing was one solution, and while some special units had been built for senior citizens, there should be more set aside for low income residents.

Devon already peaked in 1999-2000, and since then has been declining. Now, there are many vacant storefronts for example across from his store, the former tenant paid \$7,000 per month in rent, and now they are asking for \$5,000

Retail space on Devon for rental is now more per square foot than Michigan Avenue.

As far as property owners are concerned, real estate taxes are going higher and higher.

From the developers' and landlords' point of view, any quota set aside for low-income housing would devalue their investments. They were wary of using any government subsidies that might obligate them to provide a certain percentage of units for low-income tenants.

Developing an awareness of government programs

The issue of government assistance remained a cloudy one for businesses and residents alike. While many had heard that funds were available for things such as façade improvement, the general impression was that that the documentation required to qualify for this assistance was too burdensome and the returns too small to justify the effort. Few community members were aware of SBIF and SSA programs (though they could be

better informed soon, with both these schemes having been approved for implementation during the course of this research.) Many had heard of TIF but felt they were being kept in the dark about the true nature of the program. There was a persistent impression that backroom dealings between politicians and businessmen were being made while the welfare of the ordinary citizen was being sacrificed. Some people blamed the merchants' pre-occupation with their own affairs for their neglect of TIF and inability to understand it fully.

For some people who have attempted city assistance, they say that process is very difficult and it is hard to actually get money.

Developing a streetscape and pedestrian friendly experience

This is not seen as an isolated issue but one that will bring in new business, create an identity and put Devon Avenue on par with some other neighborhoods such as Chinatown, Andersonville, Evanston, and Lincoln Park, where the addition of greenery, attractive signage, and interesting sidewalks have drawn visitors and enhanced the livability of the area.

The problem is that street is “hodge-podge” of types of stores and signage. A certain amount of coordination would be helpful. In general, although Devon gets a lot of pedestrians, it is not really pedestrian friendly.

Considering that Devon is a destination, it does not have that feel. For example, compare it to Chinatown – Chinatown has a major gateway so that people know that they are in Chinatown. Devon should have something similar, though not as big.

Some open space, even just one lot, could also go a long way to improve the residential and business communities. For example, this space could be used for concerts and community gatherings that would also bring people closer to the restaurants, etc.

What a difference re-doing one block of Devon could do – there could be a 6-story building with parking and a theater – that alone would provide a solid anchor for neighborhood and go a long way to improving it.

It appears that some action is already being taken on this front by the West Ridge Chamber of Commerce. An SSA has been created and the neighborhood should get a boost in beautification as a result.

Developing an effective Chamber of Commerce

The West Ridge Chamber of Commerce spokesperson described the many ways in which the Chamber had reached out to the South Asian business owners, such as helping businesses with city programs and working on a web page, but focus group and interview participants clearly saw those efforts as inadequate.

While many community members were critical of the shortcomings of the existing Chamber of Commerce, some felt that they themselves could play a constructive role in enabling it to be more effective. Many were downright critical and disillusioned, raising the same old specter of lack of unity, while others sought solutions along more positive lines. Since many interviewees and focus group participants had been part of the Chamber of Commerce at one time or another, they were aware of its strengths and its potential reach, but they felt side-lined or ineffective in bringing about needed reform. The general consensus was that much more needed to be done for the South Asian concentrations on Devon Avenue since they formed a special interest group.

Community members articulated the challenges of getting all interested parties to be involved, but they also suggested concrete steps to overcome them. Assuming good intentions on the part of the Chamber of Commerce, they wanted to find solutions in a spirit of partnership and team effort. There were questions as to whether the Chamber of Commerce should take into account the interests of non-business owners, be a smaller body, or have a sub-committee focused exclusively on the needs of the South Asian businesses.

There should be Indo-Pak merchants group or a business group. There should be an outside President, though, so they are neutral and don't just put their interests before that of the community.

Have tried 2-3 times already to build a merchants association, it would never materialize...All new associations have problems, but once established, then everyone fights to chair it.

I was a member at one point of the Chamber of Commerce, but there are some people who have questionable background who are on the board of the organization. I do not want my organization to be associated with this.

Number one is that there have been different business associations, but many of the Indians have not participated...Number two is that there is West Ridge Chamber of Commerce ...Not too many people have joined that organization.

Trying to form a Devon Chamber of Commerce is overdue, but doubt whether it will really happen.

They (the Chamber of Commerce) do have a strong reach but participation is difficult.

There is a West Ridge Chamber of Commerce, but a lot of South Asians don't think that it's for them, and they would like an Indian Chamber of Commerce.

They (the Chamber of Commerce) have done some advertising over the years like taking out a couple of full page ads in the publications. They've tried a number of different programs, generally, some have worked a little bit and others haven't.

Developing a vibrant commercial presence/promoting business

This was one topic on which interviewees and focus group participants spoke animatedly. There were some observations about the need for in-depth studies on consumer purchasing habits, but in the group setting, community members needed little prompting to identify their strengths. Diversity was seen as a marketable commodity, something to showcase and highlight to the wider community. Devon businesses could capitalize on the trend toward “buying ethnic”. They could better advertise their price advantage. Many items, including groceries, electronic goods and goods, were available elsewhere but not at such competitive prices, so in addition to ethnic goods and service, they could cater to the larger population.

Noting that businesses on Devon had not introduced any new attractions, in quite a while, people came up with an abundance of ideas on how to make Devon more lively—hold cultural festivals, have sidewalk sales, start innovative businesses such as clubs for young professionals, bring in a big anchor store that could draw the crowds, create stronger links between businesses and residents, etc.

Among the more oft-raised suggestions were:

- create a distinctive structure to identify the neighborhood as Indian and Pakistani,
- publish a business directory,
- celebrate ethnic festivals with street presence,
- promote a center for the performing arts, and
- generally create a buzz on Devon.

Also used to have a “Taste of Devon” in the nearby parking lot, would be good to have on Devon again.

They should also allow street vendors on the street, because then you see more people on Devon. They should sell special kinds of items or during special times, maybe even a small juice bar. That might bring more people in – something new happening on Devon.

The new big restaurants should have music at night to attract more people. It would attract more people on weekends and nights because it would be more of outing.

An example is like Chinatown’s main arch – business leaders should lobby to have a big dome or door, something to represent India and Pakistan to promote Devon Avenue. The city should help. It could be placed at Devon/Rockwell or Western, as impressive as an altar.

Some sort of performance space (perhaps movie theatre or dance stage) on Devon could liven up the area in the evening. If you look at shopping centers, they used to close down at night, but now they have added movie theaters and restaurants so the evenings are much more vibrant there.

Ultimately, it was important to zero in on how Devon should market itself, and focus on those sectors of the market that could withstand the ups and downs of the economy.

It's my personal opinion that for an ethnic community to survive, they must demarcate their area as the ethnic group's and provide ethnic-specific entertainment.

We should be promoting Devon to conventioners, reaching out to Navy Pier, and McCormick Place. Devon should be destination for them, it would be profitable for Devon business owners.

For Chicago, ethnic restaurants are king because of the diversity here and because of the rich culinary backgrounds of the residents.

Prioritizing the issues

All three sets of participants, namely the interviewees and the two focus group participants, one consisting of business and property owners, and the other consisting of those who lived and/or worked in the community, identified similar issues affecting them, but each group prioritized them from their own perspective.

For business owners, community leaders and heads of organizations who participated in one-on-one interviews, the top five critical issues were:

1. *Lack of adequate parking and traffic congestion (18%)*
2. *Poor cleanliness and sanitation (14%)*
3. *Lack of unity and leadership (14%)*
4. *Lack of awareness of government programs (11%)*
5. *Lack of participation in existing Chamber of Commerce (11%)*

For the business owners who took part in Focus Group I, the top five critical issues were:

1. *Lack of adequate parking and traffic congestion (23%)*
2. *Inadequate security/high crime-- Drugs, gang activity, prostitution (21%)*
3. *Lack of unity and leadership (20%)*
4. *High rents and property taxes (13%)*
5. *Poor cleanliness and sanitation (11%)*

The residents and workers who took part in Focus Group II had a different set of priorities. For them, the top five critical issues were:

1. *High rents and property taxes/lack of affordable housing (28%)*
2. *Inadequate security/high crime (18%)*
3. *Lack of affordable health care (17%)*
4. *Lack of unity and leadership (14%)*
5. *Unemployment/underemployment/low wages (13%)*

Besides these, other issues identified by the community were:

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 theme that emerged consistently in all interviews and meetings was the lack of unity and leadership in the community. The most important recommendation to address this burning issue was for the community to get more involved with the local Chamber of Commerce, and consider the formation of a separate sub-committee for Devon businesses. Towards that end, a special meeting of the West Ridge Chamber of Commerce was convened to discuss the particular interests and concerns of the Devon Avenue community. Participants resolved to work more closely with existing resources and keep open channels of communication with local authorities. They came up with a series of recommendations for further action.

PART IV: Recommendations

The interviews and discussions yielded a rich dividend of ideas, through a spontaneous and dynamic process of interaction among community members. These ideas, when sorted through, fell into four different categories, with each category encompassing a certain set of issues raised by the participants. What follows is a comprehensive list of recommendations for a “Smart Growth” strategic plan for the economic development of the Devon Avenue community.

I. Build leadership and organizational strength

(Major issues addressed: Lack of unity and leadership, lack of awareness of government programs, lack of participation in existing Chamber of Commerce, Lack of cooperation from city)

1. *Create an organization of community members focused on development of Devon.* The first step towards fulfilling this recommendation was the convening of a meeting of the West Ridge Chamber of Commerce specially to address Devon issues. Leaders who are trusted by both businesses and residents of the community will be identified as members of the Devon development group and ideally a paid staff member should be hired to support their activities.
2. *Establish network of participants willing to address Devon Avenue issues.* In order to grow and sustain the core group of leaders and committed members who will help solve Devon’s problems, a broad-based network of participants willing to work on the issues must also be developed. Recruitment should be ongoing and sustained to ensure inclusiveness and inclusion of key stakeholders.
3. *Develop channels of communication that are inclusive and sustainable.* Effective strategies to ensure regular communication must be formulated, such as holding regular community meetings, disseminating a newsletter informing the community of current developments and opportunities in the neighborhood.
4. *Create community asset map that will help implement Devon Avenue initiatives.* A critical step towards planning for development is the identification of existing resources. This must be done in a framework that assesses the community’s current strengths and weaknesses, and enables targeting of new opportunities for growth.
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, Lack of participation in existing Chamber of Commerce)

1. *Meet with the Neighborhood Capital Budget Group (NCBG).* NCBG is one of the most prominent, if not the most prominent, organization that tracks and advocates on behalf of smart usage of TIF funds. Although highly critical of the program, NCBG has conducted unparalleled research of the data and effectiveness of TIF groups. NCBG has offered to help interested organizations create a TIF oversight panel and budget for maximizing benefits of TIF funds for the Devon community. It would be worthwhile for Devon Avenue businesses and residents to see how they could make the most of NCBG, especially given the history of lack of awareness and the perception that TIF funds are under-utilized in their district.
2. *Small Business Improvement Fund (SBIF).* This is already in effect and has opened up opportunities for small businesses to improve the visual appeal of their establishments. A significant amount of money (up to \$50,000) is available for property owners and small businesses to recover up to 75% of the cost of refurbishing their buildings. Through group efforts, the South Asian community should ensure that there are no barriers, such as language and cultural competency, that stand in the way of eligible applicants being able to fill out their applications. All applications require the approval of the Alderman, so it is imperative that good relationships are maintained as well.
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. Encourage public debate on the issue, especially among candidates standing for public office, and require them to state their positions. Commission a research study to determine how much parking will be needed for the next five years. Consider removing permit parking at least one block north and south of Devon, and study the feasibility of providing valet parking.
4. *Lobby for Devon Avenue Streetscape Project.* The Chicago Department of Transportation (CDoT) can work with the local alderman to create streetscape improvement projects, which can be funded by the CDoT. For example, Alderman Vi Daley helped enact a streetscape project for Lincoln Park to improve sidewalks, create better lighting, new garbage bins, and planting of more trees and flowers. Many other models exist and the best one can be chosen for Devon Avenue community members.
5. *Utilize Special Service Area.* Special Service Area (SSA) funding became available in November of 2007. This is an excellent opportunity for the Devon Avenue community to use their own taxes for the specific purposes of keeping streets clean and beautifying the neighborhood. However, active involvement in the administration of the program is the key to success. South Asians must ensure fair representation on the nine-member

Commission that is in charge of administering the funds and determining priorities.

6. *Create an Adopt-A-Street Program on Devon.* Local businesses, churches, or other non-profit organizations can partner with the city to “adopt” local streets which entails sweeping the adopted street twice a week. On Devon, the cleaning could occur prior to and after the weekend business rush. Sheli Lulkin of the Edgewater Chamber of Commerce highly recommended this no-cost approach to helping keep streets clean. It does not appear that there is current participation in this program on Devon Avenue.
7. *Invite DPD Commissioner to Address Development Issues in West Ridge Area.* The Chinatown Chamber of Commerce hosted the Commissioner of Chicago’s Department of Planning and Development (DPD) for its quarterly luncheon series to discuss South Loop development issues. Inviting the DPD Commissioner for such a discussion on Devon Avenue could help the business community address local issues in the context of existing and proposed projects in the greater West Ridge area.

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. *Arrange meeting with DPD staff and Devon-area business owners.* Before an applicant submits a TIF application, the DPD strongly recommends that applicants arrange a meeting with DPD staff to review the project and application. DPD staff would be open to meeting with interested individuals about the TIF process. A meeting between DPD staff and a coalition of South Asian business leaders to discuss the TIF process is highly recommended.
2. *Hold Sanitation Information Meeting.* The Chinatown Chamber of Commerce has held a community meeting with the Department of Streets and Sanitation Health Department to update business owners on city regulations and procedures. This is a pro-active approach to reducing the number of health citations and store closings for Devon-area grocers and restaurants.
3. *Create Resource Guide for New Businesses.* Individuals interested in opening new businesses have two city resources that are often under-utilized. First, individuals can meet with the Department of Business and Licensing to discuss what specific business permits are needed. Businesses may need multiple permits, but applicants often are unaware of requirements and thus get subsequently cited after the business opens. Second, prior to a business opening, store owners can request a Department of Consumer Services representative visit the store and assess whether the business is compliant with city regulations.

4. *Explore Devon Avenue Festival.* Chicago is well-known for its wide range of neighborhood summer festivals, which can introduce new groups of visitors to specific communities. Devon Avenue currently does not have such an event, though it is home to the India and Pakistan Independence parades which bring visitors to the neighborhood but not additional business to area stores and restaurants. An event geared towards increasing visibility of area businesses could take the form of a cultural festival with street vendors and performances, a neighborhood side-walk sale, or even a “Taste of Devon” event.
5. *Create Devon Avenue Coupon Book.* The West Ridge Chamber of Commerce coupon book has no coupons from South Asian-owned businesses. Distributing a coupon book is a promotion tool often used by individual businesses or business associations.
6. *Work with CTA on ways to promote public transportation to Devon.* Currently, train and bus services provide convenient links to the city, but those who are aware of Devon Avenue attractions, and Devon community members themselves might make full use of more frequent public transportation schedules. Working closely with CTA to gauge current usage, waiting times, and potential usage would help achieve desired results.
7. *Devon Neighborhood Guide.* A handy printed guide that lists the whole range of goods and services available on Devon would go a long way in promoting business. The guide could contain short, interesting descriptions of the culture and history of the unique products available on Devon, and serve as a vehicle for merchants to showcase and advertise their wares to the larger community.

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. Community members acknowledged that they would have to be present and vocal at venues such as CAPS meetings, and go as a group to the Alderman for their legitimate concerns to be addressed. They could also pursue other avenues (such as SBIF and SSA) for resources to improve streetscape, install improved lighting, cameras, etc.
2. *Combat High Rents* by supporting subsidized housing and reservation of condos for rentals. Gentrification poses a threat to many Chicago residents, and the Devon Avenue community is no exception. While a rise in property taxes indicates that a community is seen as a desirable place to live and work, it can take a toll on those who cannot afford the rise in property taxes. West Ridge has many seniors and low-income residents

who have benefited from subsidized housing, and more can be done to continue the trend. Only an active and involved citizenry can balance these interests the interests of landlord and tenant.

3. *Institute Self-regulating Measures* to ensure that employers pay fair wages and refrain from exploiting workers. There was general agreement that undocumented workers are part of the Devon area community, but the concern was that even legal residents were being exploited. Many covert practices were designed to circumvent laws on minimum wages and equal opportunity. Reporting such practices to authorities was not considered desirable as it would alienate many employers. Rather, community members wanted to set up an “ombudsman” system where the community would police itself. This would be in keeping with the culturally compatible practice of saving face and preserving the integrity and reputation of the community.
4. *Campaign for Affordable Healthcare for All* by voicing concerns at community meetings and meeting with Alderman. Community members thought that the Illinois Kidcare program could serve as a model for affordable healthcare for adults. Such measures can only result from continued citizen input, so community members resolved to keep it in the forefront of public meetings.

With the formulation of this comprehensive needs assessment study and the creation of a strategic “Smart Growth” plan, it now remains for the community to make continued and coordinated efforts towards its implementation.

Addendum: Recent Developments

In March 2008, the Concerned South Asian Businesses of Devon Avenue (CSABDA), was formed under the leadership of Susan Patel to represent businesses on Devon between the streets of California and Claremont. Police harassment of a client in full view of on lookers on Devon Avenue for apparently no valid reason galvanized many businesses to come together in protest. The West Ridge Chamber of Commerce (WRCC) and CSABDA organized a meeting with the police commander to address safety, crime and respect of customers on Devon Avenue. Both groups are taking the leadership in addressing many of the issues discussed in this report and to engage the storeowners in reforming Devon Avenue.

Similarly, the North Side Alliance held a neighborhood meeting in May 2008 with the Police Commander and officials from Streets and Sanitation and Buildings to discuss several issues. Several business owners of Devon Avenue were also present at this meeting. The West Rogers Park Community Organization's Community Planning Board is working on providing oversight towards any new development in the ward in a very proactive manner.

While all these efforts are geared towards improving the neighborhood, it is extremely important that there is coordination especially among the leadership of these various groups to ensure maximum effectiveness. It is also crucial to engage the residents in these efforts to help reduce the total disconnect between the residents and business owners.

“Devon Avenue is a source of pride for many of us who live in the neighborhood and want to preserve this ethnic enclave for future generations.”

– Resident near Devon Avenue