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Niles 2040 Comprehensive Plan Advisory Committee

Wednesday, February 3, 2021

7:00 PM

FINAL Meeting Minutes

Attendance:

Project Steering Committee: Colin Baker, Michael DeSantiago, Tom Kanelos, Adam Konopka, Joe Maccione, Denise McCreery, Craig Niedermaier, Scott O'Brien, Mike Shields

Village Staff: Kate Lockerby, Staff Liaison/Recording Secretary, Charles Ostman, Nathan Bruemmer, Hadley Skeffington-Vos, Fred Braun, Tom Powers, Rich Wlodarski

Consultants: Scott Ruhland (The Lakota Group), Mike Kritzman (The Lakota Group), Abigail Rose (The Lakota Group), Linda Goodman (Goodman Williams Group), Sarah Wilson (Goodman Williams Group), Christen Hayes (Goodman Williams Group)

Other Attendees: N/A

Absent: Steering Committee Members: Janet Lee, Dennis McEnerney, John Murphy

Trustee McCreery called the meeting to order at 7:04 PM.

A roll call was taken.

Trustee McCreery asked for a motion to approve the October 20, 2020 meeting minutes. Mr. DeSantiago made a motion to approve the minutes. Mr. Maccione seconded. All were in favor. Mr. Kanelos abstained. The October 20, 2020 Minutes were approved.

Mr. Ruhland introduced the members of the consultant team that were in attendance. He explained that they were before the committee this evening to present the State of the Village report and seek feedback. He also briefly explained the participation at the December 3, 2020 public speak out.

Mr. Ruhland began a presentation (based on a presentation that is attached to these minutes). He reiterated the project timeline, explaining the different phases of the Comprehensive Plan process. Phase 1 is the “existing conditions” period of the project establishing a baseline, while phase 2 is the visioning phase that takes the information that we have and how to create the future for Niles (also includes additional community engagement). Phase 3 is the pulling all information from phase 1 and 2 together into a document.

Ms. Rose gave a presentation about the community engagement endeavors and the Niles2040.com website. She noted that, to date, the site has had 2,600 site visits and 286 total website submissions. Overall, especially with COVID-19, they are incredibly happy with the outreach. She explained that 75-80 people attended the December speak out event. She also noted that the survey results are not discussed in the State of the Village report as the Village wanted to keep the survey open longer to get more feedback during this pause. Feedback has been that the survey was too long, so Lakota and the Village decided to do a “Quick Poll” survey as well.

Mr. Ruhland went through the State of the Village review/sections within the report. He outlined the introduction, which talks about the project objectives and overview. He also discussed the community engagement documentation in the report as well as demographic highlights.

Ms. Wilson gave a presentation on the demographic highlights. A key highlight is that the population has been declining and aging. The aging population in Niles is not uncommon as this has been happening nationally due to the aging of the baby-boomer generation. Additionally, the Asian population in town is growing, accounting for 22% of the total population in 2020. She mentioned that:

- **Employment:** Jobs are at the highest they have been in 10 years, retail trade is the leading industry of employment, while health care and social assistance and manufacturing industries have seen the most growth.
- **Housing and Residential Assessment:** The housing stock is older and smaller, 80% was built prior to 1980. Newer residential development has been lacking in the last 20 years, which has contributed to the aging of the structures. Median sales prices are affordable, and homes are selling quickly. Through the stakeholder interviews, they were told that younger families and professionals are seeking Niles. There is opportunity to provide housing for seniors/empty-nesters that want to down-size.
- **Commercial and Retail Assessment:** Niles has a robust retail industry with over 5.2 million square feet of space and a relatively low vacancy rate of 8.8%. Although retail sales tax remains over \$15 million per year since 2015, it has stagnated. This is likely due to two major centers with a high vacancy rates (Golf Mill and Golf Glen). They are 2 properties that present opportunities. Also, this analysis is being done in the middle of pandemic so the after-effects of the pandemic are not really known, though it seems as though Niles businesses may be doing ok. A noticeable opportunity is to build up smaller businesses as well as home improvement stores and grocers, which are strong markets that have been successful through the pandemic.
- **Office Assessment:** Niles has just under 1 million square feet of office space, mostly class B, which are smaller spaces that need more renovation. The vacancy rate is very low 4.5%. There are no new demands for class A buildings. Coming out of the pandemic, there may be a way to capitalize

on entrepreneurs and small businesses that are currently operating out of their homes that want to move into a storefront but they do not want to spend a lot of money. Rental rates are lower in our market versus the O'Hare market, so that may be a demographic on which the Village could capitalize.

- **Industrial Market:** Currently there is more than 8.8 million square feet of industrial space in Niles with an exceptionally low vacancy rate of 1.7%. Due to the lack of the available industrial space and lack of inventory, they do not foresee any expansion in the future. It will likely come in the form of renovating existing buildings.

Mr. DeSantiago said manufacturing being on the up, and young families moving in is a positive. Regarding the manufacturing, are we following a national trend and how are we attracting families? Ms. Wilson stated that she could not speak about the national trend for manufacturing in general, but transportation, distribution and logistics is the national trend. FedEx was discussed and the Village's great access to highways. Ms. Goodman clarified that the discussion was about industrial in general, not just manufacturing. Regarding attracting younger families, Mr. DeSantiago thought it was a bit counterintuitive. Ms. Wilson stated it was likely just the market, but the "Grow Your Home" program is a great way to attract younger families. Mr. Santiago asked if the pandemic is moving people out of Chicago. Ms. Wilson said trends are showing that suburbs are doing extremely well in sales, but it is hard to say if they are coming out of the City.

Mr. Kanelos stated that it is confusing because the report shows younger demographics as declining versus what the realtor shared. Ms. Wilson stated that the data was as of a date certain. The data should be tracked to see if there are any changes over the next few years. Mr. Kritzman stated that a lot of the information was based on the last census and community survey data. Ms. McCreery reiterated that the report was just the facts. She thinks it is important to refer to challenges and preface them in a way that there is a trend happening, even though the data may reflect differently. She also asked what benefits a transportation company would give to a community. Ms. Wilson stated that it brings jobs and Ms. Goodman underscored what Ms. Wilson stated, that it also brings tax revenue. Mr. Kritzman stated that this would tie into the visioning (second phase) of the plan.

Mr. Ruhland talked about bringing young families in and he stated it is the quality of life, schools, parks, etc. It is important to note that in this process, we take the facts and data and see how they translate into future policies.

Mr. Ruhland talked about the shopping centers and big box retail. Mr. DeSantiago asked about the residential sales; it would be interesting to see where the new buyers are coming from. Mr. Ruhland stated that they should be able to get that information. Mr. Konopka asked about the "Grow Your Home" program and who is taking advantage of the program (age demographic). Ms. Wilson stated she would explore that with the Village.

Mr. Ruhland continued to discuss the Land Use and Development section:

- **Existing Plan Review.** He went over some of the existing plans. He noted the differences between the Strategic Plan and the Comprehensive Plan. The Strategic Plan is integral from an administrative standpoint to achieve certain goals and objectives while the Comprehensive Plan is the external document, relying on external forces to implement.

- **Existing Land Use.** Niles is primarily residential and parks and open space is the second largest in land area. Also, he noted that there are two nodes for retail trade: Golf Mill area and the Touhy Triangle area. He also noted that the C-5 District already being within the Zoning Ordinance, but not currently used, will be an asset through this comprehensive planning process.
- **Opportunity Zones.** Mr. Kritzman clarified that this is the part of the document that starts to pivot to the second phase. It was an attempt to begin to set up some questions as we get into phase 2, identifying larger points that raise broader questions. They found that there are three/four main categories: 1) a desire for a downtown. It is important to note that there are two strong trade areas in the Village, and working with that reality may be worth exploring. 2) Niles' planned service by the Pace Pulse line. The Dempster line, which will connect downtown Evanston to O'Hare, will intersect the Milwaukee line. This presents a unique opportunity at the connection locations. 3) Shopping Centers. They are an opportunity, which may allow for growth because there is a lot of surplus land. The 8.8% commercial vacancy equals 10.5 acres of floor area that is vacant and, when you look at what that translates into the grander scheme for Niles, there are very interesting opportunities.

Mr. DeSantiago discussed what the extension of the Blue Line did to the neighborhoods in Chicago. He thought marketing the Pulse Line connectivity to O'Hare would be a great thing to market. Mr. Ruhland noted that Niles has some of the highest Pace ridership in the region.

Mr. Ruhland continued with the presentation, explaining some of the information presented regarding mobility and connectivity. Mr. Kritzman stated that 80% of Niles residents still ride, alone, to work and it is not yet known what impacts the Pulse lines will have on that number. He also noted that there are financial implications on several the recommendations regarding mobility and connectivity, but there is a great foundation to work from in Niles. Mr. Ruhland noted that changes to Golf Road regarding the Pulse lines (dedicated lanes) would be interesting. Mr. Kritzman noted that the SRA plans (IDOT) may be inconsistent with Niles' objectives, so it is important for Niles to know what they want in the area as the regional plans move forward.

Mr. Ruhland discussed the Village's infrastructure systems and park, recreation, and open spaces. Generally, the acreage is low, but they are well situated in relation to residential properties. If the population begins to increase, it will be important to think about park and recreation spaces that relate to the needs of the community. Mr. Kritzman mentioned that the funding shortfalls do need to be discussed as well but changing site efficiencies may help. Mr. DeSantiago noted that, when the Forest Preserves in the area are included, the acreage per population is much higher.

Mr. Ruhland continued discussing the Character, Design, and the Arts. He noted that improving identity is certainly an objective – "how do you know you are in Niles?". The diversity of Niles is important as well. Mr. DeSantiago stated that he liked the bike bridge over Touhy in Lincolnwood, with the Village of Lincolnwood sign. Could that be done here? Ms. Lockerby stated that it was a new bridge. Ms. Rose stated the identity question was going to be built off in the second phase of the project.

Mr. Ruhland explained the community facilities and services section which all add to the vitality of the community.

In conclusion, Mr. Ruhland talked about the key takeaways from the report in 6 subject areas:

- Neighborhoods, Districts/Centers, Corridors
- Mobility Alternatives and Safety
- Fiscal Resiliency
- Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities
- Diversity, Inclusion, Culture, and the Arts
- Identity, Design, and Character.

Trustee McCreery stated that the people on the Committee have so much talent and so much to give so she is excited for the visioning in next phase. She encouraged the committee members to focus on the presentation and begin to envision what the next steps are – what is our vision, what is our identity? We can think about threats, but we need to really think about the opportunities. She stated that she wants decisive paths to move forward.

Mr. Konopka stated that there is a lot to work with in Niles. He noted that he is a bit concerned about the housing situation in town (regarding the aging housing stock and expense for remodeling). Trustee McCreery agreed. She noted that there is legislation proposed that prevents inspectors going into a home unless in conjunction with a 911 call and what that may mean. She also noted what Mr. Bruemmer has started putting together a document tracking the houses additions in the Village. She mentioned the document could perhaps be shared once done. Mr. DeSantiago talked about Chicago's program regarding the 606 to pay for renovations in the area.

Mr. Shields talked about the presentation information and wondered about the state of the social systems in the Village. He talked about his growing up in a small house with a lot of family support. He wonders if Niles has ever measured if the residents all share the same values, i.e. do they all support those in need? Do the kids of Niles reach their potential? He believes the State of the Village report was focused on the built structure not about the people. It would be nice if we could identify the "state of the people". Could we, anecdotally, could we come up with a questionnaire about values in town? Do they support the needy and do they feel their kids are reaching their potential? He understands this may be intangible, but he thinks it's important. Mr. Ruhland stated some of that information is gathered through engagement, but Lakota could make specific questions (work with the Village). Mr. Ruhland stated it is "social planning" which is part of city planning. Mr. Shields believes it may have been a missed opportunity and he doesn't want that to happen again. Ms. Rose stated they did something similar to that at the beginning of the visioning phase in a town in Minnesota. She stated that it helped people to think about their connections, and how that translates to the future. As it was the kickoff of the visioning phase and made people more comfortable going to subsequent events. It helped to lead that community to the visioning, etc.

Mr. Ruhland stated he did sense some frustration with the document, and the most fun part of the process is the visioning phase of the project. However, we cannot get there without going through the perfunctory phase 1. They will be able to make sure the social environment is explored through phase 2.

Mr. Kanelos stated that he was confused with the concept that is being discussed. He sees the document as something that is a way to direct the things that we can and should be (as government) to create an environment where there is growth, people want to be here (quality shopping, programs, etc.). He questioned who gets to decide what the values are? He'd like to focus on the tangibles. He doesn't see it as a social

engineering document. Mr. Ruhland agreed and heard what Mr. Kanelos was stating. At the end of the day, it is a policy document and these discussions help inform the policy.

Mr. Kritzman stated that it is always difficult to engage everyone through comprehensive planning projects, especially during COVID-19. Typically, they would go to senior centers, churches, community centers, schools, etc. He stated that evaluating all channels of outreach should be explored, understanding that engagement is going to be more challenging as we get into the visioning process. He further stated that the items that Mr. Shields asked about do tie into social services, etc. in town and are important to know.

Trustee Niedermaier stated that he doesn't like the discussion about the "potential" of Niles. He believes Niles could be so much better than it is now. He believes that Niles is failing to look at the competitors in the general area, so Niles needs to figure out who it is and who it wants to be, but most importantly, we need to make that decision. Niles is very functional, right now, but he stated that he wants Niles to be more emotional. Everyone's first opinion on Niles is first by driving through it. He would like to start hearing recommendations and actionable items. He would like to figure out "who" is Niles before figuring out "what we want to do/be". He believes he has heard truly little that is new, and we need to be very cognizant of the wants and needs of the residents in 2040. He would like bigger, bolder ideas and for Niles to start leading.

Mr. Kanelos stated that he agreed with Trustee Niedermaier that we need to decide who we want to be. Why do people move to the suburbs from the city? Let's try to be that, rather than recreating the city in the suburbs. He expressed the same frustration as Trustee Niedermaier.

Mr. Kritzman thanked Trustee Niedermaier for the comments. He believes it will be a good challenge and wants to push people to think boldly, as there are really big questions that need to be tackled. Trustee McCreery talked about all of the surveys that have been completed, and much of the resulting information provide little divergence from one survey to the next. She would like to make sure we are meeting the demands of the plans, especially because development is happening. She noted that sometimes there is pain in making difficult decisions on land development.

Mr. Ruhland thanked everyone for the input at the meeting. He indicated that the pause will be in effect until the spring when we may be able to do outside events in person. Ms. Lockerby stated the more immediate issue at hand is the finalization of the State of the Village report. If anyone on the committee has any additional comments that should be communicated to the Lakota Group. Trustee McCreery asked that seen trends verses data be presented in the report. Mr. Ruhland stated that that will be added to the report, and it also explains why community input is so important.

Ms. Lockerby noted that no public comments were received during the course of the meeting. Trustee McCreery made a public comment asking that if anyone on the Comprehensive Plan Advisory Committee is interested in serving on the Building and Zoning Committee, please contact Chuck Ostman at (847) 588-8041.

Trustee McCreery asked for a motion to adjourn. Mr. Kanelos made a motion and Mr. Maccione seconded. All were in favor. The meeting adjourned at 8:47 pm.