



JASCULCA TERMAN
STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

Memorandum/January 7, 2025

To: Matt Walsh, Village Administrator
Jessica Spencer, Assistant Village Administrator

From: Rick Jasculca, James Chase & Nell DeCoursey Brennan
Jasculca Terman Strategic Communications

RE: **Neighborhood Dialogues/Key Findings**

Jasculca Terman Strategic Communications (JT) was retained by the Village of River Forest to facilitate seven neighborhood dialogues focused on future economic development and quality of life. Neighborhood dialogues are small, informal gatherings, mostly in homes or non-official community spaces, meant to encourage village residents to engage in a conversation that can lead to building consensus—at least on some issues.

Although we all understand that public meetings are required to give residents the opportunity to express their views about decisions being made by Village Trustees, testimony at these hearings can sometimes consist of speeches or talking points which don't foster an environment where conversations can happen, nor consensus built. Dialogues are not meant to be a replacement for public hearings, but rather can precede or complement hearings so interested residents are more directly and productively engaged.

There has been a lot of concern and frustration expressed by community members over the status and future of now vacant lots at Lake & Lathrop and Madison & Ashland. This has evolved into a grassroots campaign against zoning changes and eminent domain, as well as growing anxiety about public safety, traffic and parking issues.

The seven neighborhood dialogues—five on the south end of the village, one mid-village and one north end—were facilitated by either JT Senior Vice President James Chase, or Chairman Rick Jasculca, with Account Executive Nell Brennan taking notes. We loosely guided each dialogue with a set of four broad questions, which were intended to prompt organic discussion among residents and provide opportunities for the facilitator to pose follow-up questions when helpful. (The discussion questions are included at the end of this memo.) Either Village Administrator Matt Walsh, or Assistant Village Administrator Jessica Spencer, attended all seven dialogues. Dialogue notes will be shared with Village of River Forest officials and the public; however, attendees were assured at each dialogue that their comments would not be individually attributed so they could feel comfortable fully sharing their views.

As strategic communications professionals, we take what we have heard from village residents at all seven dialogues and try to identify patterns that can productively guide Village officials on the path forward.

We should add that we (JT) came to these dialogues with no preconceived notions or positions, even though Rick Jасulca has lived in the village for forty-nine years. Also, the JT dialogue team received no instructions/marching orders from either the Village Board or Administrators in advance of these conversations.

What follows are key findings from the seven dialogues:

Quality of Life

- Village residents overwhelmingly told us they decided to move or return to River Forest for quality-of-life reasons—a small, quiet, peaceful, charming community; within walking distance of shopping, restaurants and other bigger city amenities; high quality schools; proximity to transit; access to nature, parks, forest preserves.
- While some mentioned “high taxes,” few really complained about it. Taxes seem to be offset by positive quality of life in the village, and many residents expressed that a higher property tax levy is the trade-off for maintaining that quality of life.
 - Additionally, a number of residents explicitly said this trade-off is part of the reason they feel a strong investment in preserving what’s “special” about River Forest, and their desire to stay engaged and informed about development issues.
 - There were usually one or two residents per dialogue who spoke to the importance of expanding the tax base (and some specifically referenced the large share of River Forest properties that are tax-exempt), but this did not come across as a high-importance issue overall.

Future Development—Madison and Ashland

- Frankly, we were surprised. Very few residents who joined these conversations were anti-development. It really came down for most as: “Do they have a plan?” “Is this consistent with our quality of life?” Residents often asked for things like a “holistic view” and a “broader vision” from the Village I development, in addition to the public engagement processes that accompany individual development proposals.
 - Very few residents were aware of the Village’s Comprehensive Plan, and they asked numerous questions about it when the topic came up. Some residents suggested that a 2019 plan may no longer be well-suited for the post-pandemic world, and that perhaps the Village should produce an interim/supplemental plan—both for the Village government’s own use *and* for public consumption.
- Residents expressed both a desire to develop vacant lots as soon as practicable, but also for the village to “get it right” and not rush.
- Residents across the dialogues posed questions to the Village Administrator or Assistant Village Administrator about the Village’s role and powers in reviewing, approving and facilitating development. These questions came up especially when discussing retail development (“Does the Village have a say in what kind of business goes into a new building?”).

Residential Development

- There is, no surprise, widespread and consistent opposition to any sort of high-rise buildings, no matter the use—condos or rental. Virtually everyone wants height limitations.
 - Some residents take this position because of “look and feel,” which they relate back to their priority of maintaining River Forest’s unique character compared to some neighboring villages that have embraced more density, such as Oak Park and Forest Park.
 - A further subset of these residents clarified that height is just one element they consider among many when it comes to a building’s design/architecture, and whether it’s a good fit for River Forest. An overall appealing design may mitigate concerns about height to some extent, but height remains the most important design issue.
 - Some residents were hesitant to cite a specific building height or other design elements that would make a hypothetical development acceptable and in keeping with River Forest’s character. Because there are so many different things to consider when making this judgement, these residents suggested they would need to see a proposed design and react to it.
 - Other residents have more localized concerns, such as privacy (“I don’t want someone sitting on their balcony looking down into my backyard.”), as well as noise, traffic and parking, which are already consequential challenges for south end residents.
- There was a split between residents who want residential development to help “welcome the next generation of River Forest residents” and those who are skeptical of any residential development other than detached single-family homes.
 - The former group expressed concerns that young families face barriers moving to the village because homes don’t often go on the market and because housing costs are high in general. These residents support development that makes it easier for a young family or couple to buy a starter home in the village, establish themselves in the community, and potentially move to a larger home within the village as time goes on.
 - The latter group is very concerned about the impact of increased population on village infrastructure and local schools. One resident described River Forest as “a fragile ecosystem,” and cautioned village leaders to ensure that new residential development will be “sustainable.”
- Similarly, among residents who are open to denser residential development, there was a split between those who would prefer low-rise condos versus low-rise apartments. Some supported affordable rental units to attract younger families, in hopes that they will become future home buyers. Others were concerned that rental units would only attract temporary residents, and that condos would do a better job attracting people who want to build a long-term future for themselves and their families in the village.
 - A number of residents said they would prefer townhouses over either condos or rental apartments.

- If either low-rise condos or rental apartments are proposed, dialogue attendees pretty universally said there must be built-in parking.

Commercial Development

- An overwhelming takeaway is that residents want “something everyone can use.” A handful of residents spoke to the importance of expanding the commercial tax base, but most dialogue participants are thinking about the opportunity for new amenities.
 - Most residents were open to private or public development, as long as it provides a new amenity that is broadly appealing to the community. For example, residents suggested a gym, yoga studio, restaurant, café, or higher-end convenience store.
 - A smaller group of residents were more strongly in favor of public use for the Madison & Ashland lot. These residents typically had a specific community need in mind, which would likely only be addressed through development by the Village, Park District, or other local taxing body—such as a modern recreation center, indoor pool, or community garden.
- There was also a recognition of the challenges facing retail establishments these days; and so, concerns about turnover, which they have seen with restaurants and retail in neighboring Forest Park and in some parts of River Forest. Residents asked questions about what role the Village government can play in helping desirable retail businesses locate in and stay viable in River Forest.
- Across all the dialogues, residents noted that they often have to leave River Forest to go to restaurants and other retail businesses. They’d like more options within River Forest, both because of the greater ease of access and also a desire to spend their dollars locally.
- While most conversations about parking related to residential development, some residents also noted that a popular retail business would require sufficient parking for customers.
- There were also strong feelings that the Village “should not just leave a vacant lot until the right developer/development comes along.” Some suggested putting in a temporary dog park, community garden or art installation until the right kind of development comes along; although there was some recognition that those temporary amenities might prove to be so popular that it will be difficult to let them go, even when the “right development” is found.

Future Development--Lake and Lathrop

- Etched into the front of the National Archives Building in Washington are the words “The Past is Prologue.” Right or wrong, it is very clear that there is a trust issue many residents in the village have because of what has happened at Lake & Lathrop. That has unquestionably had an impact on the views many, if not most residents have formed about Lake and Lathrop.
- We heard very few people express displeasure about the development concept for Lake & Lathrop (although a huge number of folks mourned the loss of Annie’s). But pretty much everyone who weighed in on Lake & Lathrop pointed to what they believe was a flawed

process for selecting a developer. That may be hindsight, but it's a decidedly prevalent view.

- Residents conveyed that their misgivings about the Lake & Lathrop process have heightened their desire for increased Village communication and public engagement about any major development moving forward—beginning as early in the process as possible.

The Path Forward—Process, Communication and Engagement

- Right or wrong, true or not, one universal view consistently expressed at all of the dialogues is that the Village has a flawed process for selecting future development concepts and developers. And when we suggested at one dialogue that you “can’t completely democratize the selection of projects and developers” because of all the complex factors that determine viability, there was still an overwhelming sense that residents must be given a significantly greater opportunity to view concepts and developer proposals much earlier in advance of public hearings and Trustee voting.
- As described above, residents emphasized that they are not anti-development. They want to have an informed and productive role in partnership with Village leaders. They generally acknowledged that the Village is operating under constraints of market conditions and must respond to developers’ needs—*residents just want a better understanding of these issues*. Many residents asked, “What are you hearing from developers?” They want the Village government to help residents gain a better understanding in this area so that they, in turn, better understand where Village leaders are coming from when they make proposals intended to spur development.
- One memorable line, uttered numerous times at our final dialogue in this series, was “How about we start with, don’t tear it down without an approved and vetted plan firmly in place.” Everyone at that conversation nodded their heads in agreement.
- One thing we probed deeper on were comments suggesting that the Village needed to be better/do more communication. We pointed to the excellent and expansive weekly Village newsletter and Facebook page, as well as special newsletter blasts attendant to Village Board meetings and breaking developments affecting residents. That was acknowledged, but was viewed by nearly everyone as insufficient as related to proposed new development. Residents said they want earlier input, as well as the opportunity to directly ask questions of developers before selection is solidified.
 - Some specific suggestions included making development-related news/announcements/meeting notices more prominently displayed on the Village website, more prominently and repeatedly displayed in the newsletter, featured on the Village Facebook page, sent to residents via mailers (village-wide instead of just to nearby residents), announced at the top of board meetings, and placed in the Wednesday Journal through ads/articles/letters to the editor.
 - The JT team is well aware that the Village has already been using many of these communications practices in the past. The Village generally exceeds the communications practices of most municipalities and other taxing bodies with whom we’ve worked. However, residents’ comments make clear that the Village should err on the side of *overcommunicating* on development issues—including

giving more-than-ample notice, engaging in repetition, and providing development-related communications as standalone products when possible so they don't get lost among other information.

- While pretty much all dialogue attendees want to see these neighborhood dialogues continue on a regular basis, it is likely impractical to bring a developer, or several developers with proposals to a dozen dialogues. What might be possible is to have community ambassadors (those who have previously hosted neighborhood dialogues) collaborate to have two community engagement sessions on two different dates, maybe a week apart, and have developers make a presentation and answer questions at each. Developer concepts and credentials would be shared in advance with those who have RSVP'd to attend one of the two community engagement sessions. We would be happy to work with the Village and community ambassadors about how this can work.
- Like the above point, residents often asked about studies, market research, consultant reports, etc. that the Village has commissioned or may commission in the future. They'd like to hear from third-party experts so residents can become better informed about development issues.
- While most residents welcomed more creative steps from the Village for public engagement (such as these dialogues), they also emphasized that the legally required public meeting and comment process is still an essential way for residents to express their views.

Additional Thoughts

- Virtually everyone talked about public safety, and most of it was about traffic volume, speeding and parking. Although this seems to be an issue throughout the village, it is a profound issue for those living near Madison, Washington and Lake. Parents are worried about their kids and speeding vehicles; and homeowners are sick of visitors to Forest Park establishments parking in front of their houses. Some residents also discussed incidents of property crime and the importance of frequent public reporting from the Police Department.
- Many dialogue attendees complained about the inadequacy of the existing Community Center, including insufficient parking, and want to see modern recreational amenities, including an indoor swimming pool. Some suggested a revamped community center at its existing location, while others pushed for a new recreational center at Madison & Ashland, with indoor parking included as part of the center.
- And in these polarized times, it is wonderful to report that these neighborhood dialogues were completely devoid of political overtones. Attendees were engaged, friendly and respectful.

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Neighborhood Dialogue Discussion Questions:

1. How long have you lived in River Forest? Why did you decide to move to River Forest? What do you like most about living in River Forest? And what do you like the least?
2. Are you satisfied by the retail choices/amenities available in River Forest? Would you like to see additional options? What kind?
3. Understanding that most River Forest residents live in single family homes, but that a significant number may prefer condos or apartments depending on their situation and/or stage of life—what kind of condos and/or apartments might you find acceptable?
4. There has been a lot of conversation about what should be done with the vacant parcel on Madison & Ashland. Please share some ideas about what you would like to see there?

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