Project Introduction and Process

Introduction

Chicago’s Wicker Park and Bucktown neighborhoods (WPB) are known nationally for their ‘cutting edge’ retailers, restaurants, nightlife, and urban ambiance. The unique businesses in both neighborhoods draw visitors from throughout metropolitan Chicago and beyond. For Wicker Park and Bucktown, maintaining the unique character of both neighborhoods while fostering overall business growth will be key to sustaining the success of the WPB’s key commercial corridors.

Wicker Park and Bucktown’s commercial histories remain intertwined. Wicker Park became a wealthy German and Scandinavian enclave after the 1871 Chicago Fire with local ethnic businesses serving those residents. Both neighborhoods were home to large Polish communities by the early twentieth century. The neighborhoods’ Hispanic population growth began in the 1950s. WPB’s commercial corridors served the needs of these changing residential populations, and many of these local ethnic businesses remain in operation today. Both neighborhoods have experienced significant gentrification since the early 1980s. The revitalization of the area’s commercial corridors began in the 1990s.

Prior to the start of the recent economic downturn in 2007, new in-fill development and the opening of format retailers on high traffic corridors prompted both concern and celebration by local stakeholders. Many of these concerns persist in the current economy, given the tighter lending standards requiring national, or credit tenants, for redevelopment or refinance proposals. Also, in 2007, the WPBCC and the Special Service Area #33 Commission (WPB SSA #33) commissioned a Master Plan for the neighborhoods. This Master Plan was adopted in early 2009. Master Plan recommendations have been and continue to be implemented by both entities. The strategies and action plans included with this report supplement those ongoing efforts.
Study Area

The study area for this assessment encompasses the traditional Wicker Park and Bucktown neighborhoods. The boundaries are Fullerton Avenue on the north, Division Street on the south, the Chicago River to the east, and Western Avenue to the west. (Wicker Park and Bucktown are officially part of the City of Chicago’s Logan Square and West Town community areas.) This study area has eight (8) distinct commercial corridors described below.

- Armitage Avenue: From Ashland Avenue to Western Avenue.
- Ashland Avenue: From Division Street to Armitage Avenue.
- Damen Avenue: From North Avenue to Fullerton Avenue.
- Division Street: From Ashland Avenue to Western Avenue.
- Milwaukee Avenue/Ashland Avenue/Division Street intersection (described locally as the Polish, or Polonia, Triangle).
- Milwaukee Avenue/Damen Avenue/North Avenue intersection.
- Western Avenue: From Division Street to Fullerton Avenue.
- Fullerton Avenue: East of the Kennedy Expressway to Ashland Avenue.

While these study results are applicable to all eight (8) area, this study focuses on WPB’s three most notable corridors with the greatest concentrations of ground floor businesses---Damen Avenue, Division Street, and Milwaukee Avenue, including the two major intersections along Milwaukee Avenue—at Division Street and Ashland Avenue and at Damen Avenue and North Avenue.

Project Purpose and Approach

This market assessment examines Wicker Park Bucktown’s unique market opportunities for future business growth. This assessment considers current conditions in the retail and restaurant, residential, and office sectors within the study area. It then incorporates primary research from WPB’s customers and business owners. This primary research, combined with demographics and market share analyses, provides comprehensive data for the WPBCC to share with its membership, property owners, business owners, residents, and potential investors in both communities. It also describes the kinds of uses, potential tenants, and business categories presenting real opportunities for Wicker Park and Bucktown to sustain local character and build upon WPB’s strong existing image. Most important for implementation, strategies and action steps are suggested for tenant recruitment and business support.
In examining WPB’s markets, the emphasis has been on what is working, what will succeed in WPB’s commercial locales, and how WPBCC and WPB SSA #33 can shape the neighborhoods’ commercial future. The resulting opportunities are also considered within the context of current trends, particularly in the retail and restaurant sectors, and broader development themes, such as authenticity and diversity, that reflect WPB’s values. Each opportunity can be strategically and incrementally addressed to improve WPB’s overall economy. This implementation process also recognizes that the WPBCC and WPB SSA #33 will need to apply local resources to address business growth over time, in addition to continuing implementation of the 2007 Master Plan.