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Des Plaines Station Feasibility Study

Community Outreach
Overview

City of Des Plaines

June 3, 2019

Prepared for:

City of Des Plaines

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1. Introduction

The City of Des Plaines is conducting a comprehensive feasibility study for a new station on the Metra North Central Service Line (NCS). As a part of this study, The Lakota Group, along with AECOM and municipal partners conducted a thorough community outreach effort to understand how various stakeholders view the possibility of a new Metra station in the area. This engagement effort began with an awareness campaign to ensure all relevant community members knew that the project was underway and understood the associated goals and timeline. From there, several channels were utilized to gain input and understand the key issues and concerns of the community. The methods and findings of this outreach effort are summarized in this document.

The memorandum will cover the following topics:

- Project Branding and Collateral
- Social Media Campaign
- Stakeholder Feedback
- Online Survey and Website Responses
- Community Open House Input

2. Project Awareness

The baseline of any community engagement effort is awareness—ensuring the public knows that a process is under way and that project information is easily accessible and marketed to the community. Following the completion of the Station Spacing Memo and the selection of Oakton Street as the proposed station location, a community engagement plan was assembled and refined with input from City of Des Plaines staff and marketing team. The following key tactics were used as a part of that plan to achieve awareness of the Des Plaines Oakton Street Metra Station Feasibility Study.

2.1 Project Branding and Website

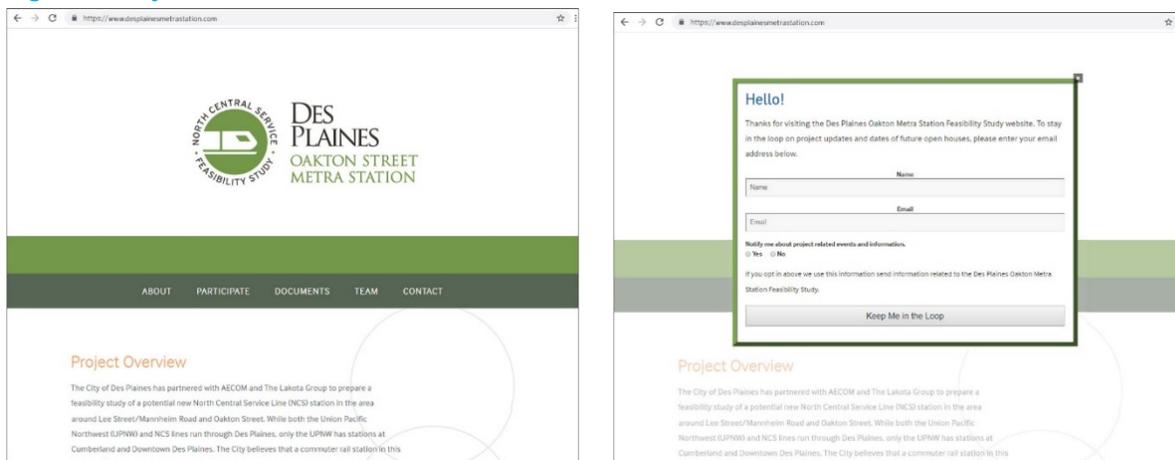
In order to provide information for area residents and stakeholders in a consistent and clear manner, a project brand was designed. This brand included colors and type treatments in keeping with the City of Des Plaines branding, which includes green and yellow graphics paired with a strong serif font. The blue from the Metra logo was also used throughout engagement graphics to draw a visual connection to Metra train service. Project materials use bold colors and duotone images to connect engagement materials to the proposed station location.

With the project brand as a starting point, a website was developed to house information and generate buzz around the project. A custom domain name was purchased to ensure the URL was easy to remember and easy to find—<http://desplainesoaktonmetrastation.com>. The project website was updated on a regular basis to include links to the online survey, information about the open house, and a catalog of documents and technical memos related to the project. The website included a pop-up that asked page visitors to enter their email to stay up to date with the project and featured a contact section where page visitors could ask questions or share their thoughts about the project. As of June 3, 2019, the project website had **1,046 page visits** and 86 email subscriptions. Project related information, such as invitations to upcoming open houses and available technical memos, was emailed to project subscribers throughout the project.

Figure 1: Project Branding



Figure 2: Project Website



2.2 Social Media

In addition to the project website, a project [Facebook page](#) was developed. This Facebook page was co-hosted and moderated by The Lakota Group, in collaboration with the City of Des Plaines Communications Coordinator. The page was promoted to Facebook users who live within 5 miles of the proposed station (1349 E Oakton Street) and was shared with local business owners and the Des Plaines Chamber of Commerce. As of June 3, 2019, the Des Plaines Oakton Street Metra Station Feasibility Study Facebook page had 53 likes, 114 page views and had reached 1,147 Facebook users.

Figure 3: Project Facebook Page



Links to the project website and project Facebook page were also shared on the Village’s website and e-newsletter.

2.3 Awareness within the City and Local Businesses

The city formally announced the project at city council meetings on January 7th and 21st, 2019. The announcements included information about the Des Plaines Oakton Street Metra Station project in the form of a project info packet. The packet outlined the goals of the project, ways to stay involved through the project website and social media, and the project schedule. This info packet was posted to the project website and distributed to local stakeholders. An announcement about the project was made on the City’s cable channel, which provides 24/7 programming to the community and live web streaming of City Council meetings.

Project flyers marketing the community open house and the community ridership survey were distributed to Oakton Street business owners, the Des Plaines Chamber of Commerce, and available at City Hall. These flyers were also posted in the warming shelters at the City’s existing Metra stations in Downtown Des Plaines and at Cumberland.

Figure 4: Project Info Packet and Flyer



3. Community Input

Through the duration of the project, various channels were used to solicit input from area residents and local business owners and employees. The following sections give a summary of the input received throughout the process.

3.1 Open House

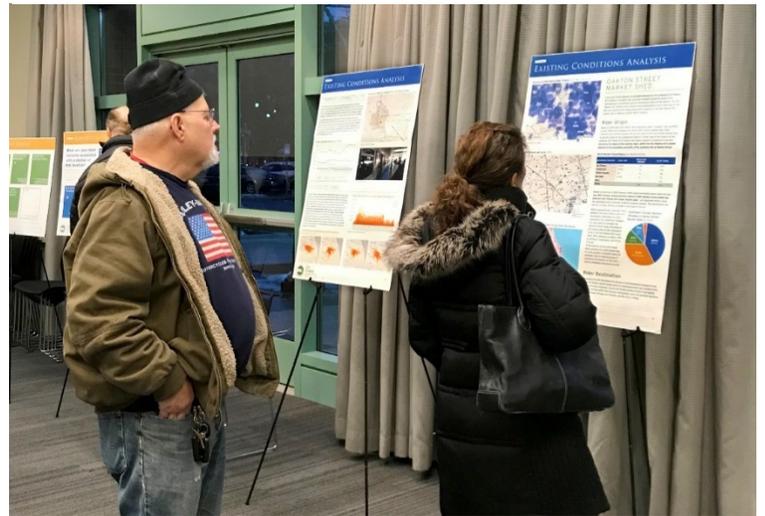
A Community Open House was held on Wednesday, February 6 from 5-7pm at the Des Plaines Public Library. The open house was designed to present the station spacing and existing conditions findings, and to address many of the concerns heard throughout the outreach process. A Facebook event was created for the open house, which was shared through the project Facebook page, the project website, and the City of Des Plaines website and calendar. Branded email announcements were sent out to 86 people who submitted their email addresses through the project website, and flyers were hung in City of Des Plaines buildings and Oakton Street businesses.

Thirty-three people signed in at the Community Open House, though closer to 45-50 people were thought to have attended throughout the evening. Staff members from The Lakota Group, AECOM, and the City of Des Plaines walked attendees through the various stations and answered questions as they came up. Many area residents were concerned about how the station would impact traffic on Oakton Street, and where parking for the station would be located. Gate downtimes impacting Oakton Street were discussed, as well as what impact these gate downtimes would have on the nearby fire station.

Through exercises designed to gain community input, community members described the main benefits of a potential Metra station at Oakton Street as improved transit options for nearby residents, and an alternative to UP-NW service (access to Union Station instead of Ogilvie). The main concerns noted about a station at this location were the potential for increased congestion on Oakton due to increased gate downtimes, and potential neighborhood impacts, such as noise pollution and Metra riders parking on residential streets. Ideas to address noise pollution to adjacent neighborhoods were discussed, including building a potential sound barrier.

While some were concerned about the impact that a train station and new development would have on their community, others were thrilled and described the potential station as a bold idea that would bring needed energy and attention to the Oakton Street area.

Figure 5: Photos from Community Open House



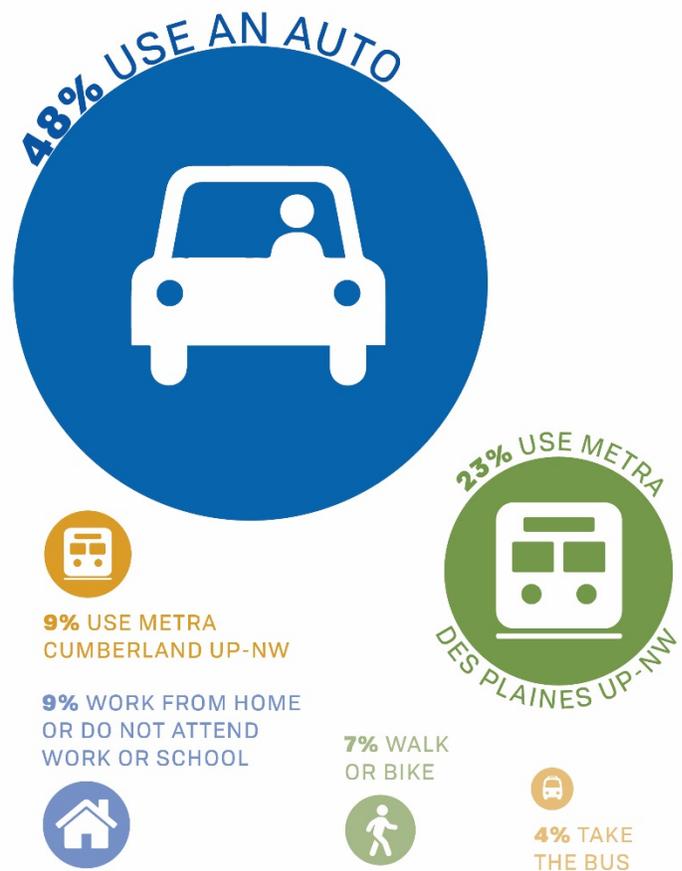
3.2 Community Ridership Survey

An community ridership survey was designed to gather input from potential users of the proposed Oakton Street Metra station. Questions for the survey were strategically written by The Lakota Group and AECOM to provide insight into the transportation choices made by potential station riders. The survey was distributed at the Community Open House on February 6th, and available online through Survey Monkey, an online survey resource.

The survey was shared via the project website, project Facebook page, through the City’s website and newsletters, and marketed to existing Metra riders through flyers in the station area. The survey was opened to the public in January 2019 and closed in March 2019. In that time, a total of **56 responses** were collected including 19 from the Community Open House. Key findings from the survey are outlined below.

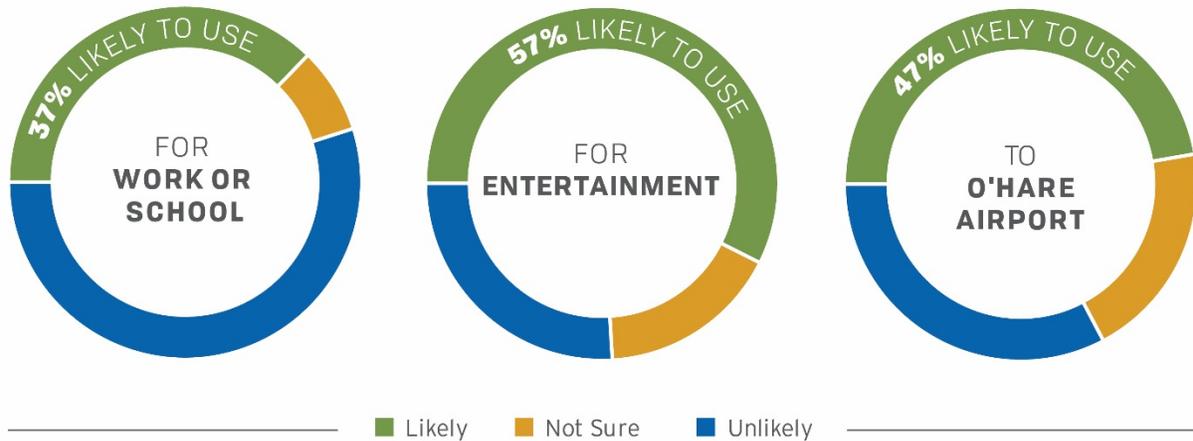
When asked how respondents typically travel from their home to work or school, 48% reported using a car, and 31% use either the Des Plaines or Cumberland UP-NW Metra Stations, with the majority of Metra riders using the Des Plaines UP-NW station. These results are likely impacted by the fact that the survey was advertised at Metra stations. An additional 9% of survey respondents either work from home or do not attend work or school, 7% walk or bike to work or school, and 4% take the bus.

Figure 6: Survey Q1-How do you typically travel from your home to work or school?



Next, survey respondents were asked how they would likely use an Oakton Street Metra Station on the North Central Service (NCS) line for different purposes. The most likely use indicated by survey responses is for entertainment purposes—57% of respondents reported being likely to use a station at this location for that purpose, with 17% not sure and 26% unlikely. Using the station to access O’Hare Airport is the next most likely use, with 47% likely to use the station for that purpose. Just 37% of survey respondents indicated they are likely to use the station to access work or school.

Figure 7: Survey Q2- If a new North Central Service Line (NCS) Metra train station were added on Oakton Street near Lee Street/Mannheim Road, how likely would you be to use this station?



When asked how respondents would reach the station if they were to use a train station at this location, 43% reported that they would walk to the station—indicating that many survey respondents live within a short distance of the proposed station location. Accessing the station via car was the next most common response, with 18% indicating they would drive and park, 16% indicating they would be dropped off, and 4% indicating they would carpool or use rideshare services such as Uber or Lyft. 12% of responses would bike to the station, and 7% would use Pace bus.

Figure 8: Survey Q3 - If you were to use a train station at this location, how would you reach the station?



Figure 9: Survey Q4 - In what zip code do you reside?

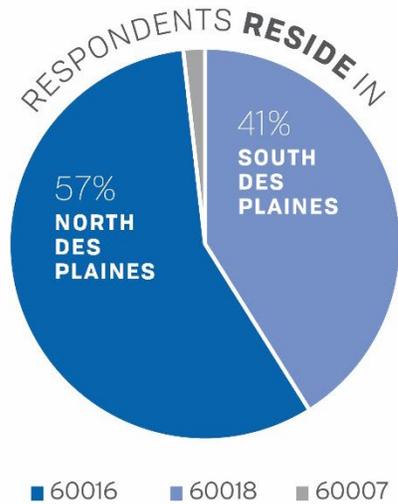
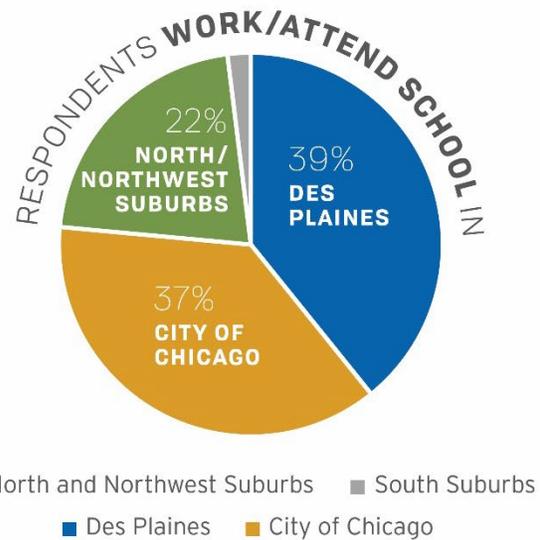


Figure 10: Survey Q5 - In what zip code do you work or attend school?



The ridership survey went on to ask what zip code respondents live in, and what zip code they work or attend school in. The vast majority (98%) of respondents live in Des Plaines. North Des Plaines (zip code 60016) is home for 57% of respondents, while 41% of respondents live in South Des Plaines, where the proposed station is located (zip code 60018).

Interestingly, 39% of respondents work or attend school in Des Plaines, and another 22% work in the North/Northwest Suburbs. These results may account the findings in survey question 3 (Figure 6)—if survey respondents work/attend school in Des Plaines or the surrounding suburbs, they are would be more likely to use the station for entertainment or to access O’Hare Airport, as opposed to using the station to access work/school.

The final survey question was an open ended response giving community members space to voice their general support, concerns and questions. The majority (54%) of these comments were positive, with 7% of the comments neutral and 39% of the comments negative. Positive comments focused on the benefits this station could make to the area as a whole as well as support for additional transit options for residents. The negative comments expressed concern about traffic impacts on Oakton, as well as concerns about the proximity to the fire station. The majority of the neutral

Figure 11: Survey Q5 - Do you have any general comments concerning a potential new Metra station in this location?

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

“Think big! Incorporate residences and retail into the plan, do not stop at just a platform and shelter. This is a wonderful opportunity to transform an entire neighborhood.”

“We have too many trains in Des Plaines. Adding another one will annoy everyone even more while commuting.”

“I think the station is a great idea. I’m sure there will be the usual “NIMBY” complaints and complaints from people who dont want anything to interfere with their drive. But we need more development that will get people out of their autos and relieve gridlock and help the environment. I think the station will help nearby property values and make the city a bit more walkable. I would hope that there be more focus on public-transit and walkable friendly development around the station.”

“How will you handle parking? How will you manage traffic? How will you keep cars out of neighborhoods?”

“Des Plaines needs this, please do this!”

comments were supportive only if adequate parking were available, and included comments about other improvements that should be made to the station area and to nearby Metra stations.

3.3 Website Response

The project website includes a contact section for page visitors to submit questions and concerns. Few responses were received from the website, which included notes from those in support of the station and those against the station. Below is a sampling of responses received:

“A nice idea. Drawback is Oakton traffic which is already horrendous especially at rush hour. Need to restore second traffic lane each direction from tracks to River Rd. Provide more off-street parking for those businesses benefitting with the existing single lane configuration.”

“I’m a neighbor and haven’t heard of this project until today from a friend. The last thing we need in Des Plaines is another delay to traffic on Oakton. The majority of residents don’t work in the City of Chicago and don’t require additional unnecessary transportation. The current Metra station on Miner street is ample to serve the community.”

“I am very happy to hear about potential new station.”

3.4 Stakeholder Interviews

The City of Des Plaines arranged meetings with a number of stakeholders with interests in the station area, including local businesses and organizations, area residents, and local developers. A series of meetings were conducted over four days. The following key themes emerged from these discussions.

3.4.1 Impact on Oakton Street District

Conversations with Oakton Street business owners revealed universal support for the station. Business owners see a train station at Oakton as a catalyst for economic development in the area that could serve as a gateway to the Oakton Street business district. While business owners and residents expressed disappointment with what some described as a ‘run-down’ look of the corridor, they also described a good energy and a bright future for the district. New businesses are opening on Oakton Street, and business owners were hopeful that the corridor would experience a renaissance and become a second downtown for the City. It was discussed that the City recently stepped up its efforts on Oakton Street, with improvements in street cleaning, lights and banners, as well as economic development grants for businesses on the corridor.

Traffic and safety on Oakton Street came up in many conversations. Some businesses see traffic as a benefit, as it forces drivers to slow down and see local businesses they might otherwise drive past. However, many business owners and residents described the back-up that occurs on Oakton when the gates are down at the rail crossing, particularly for freight trains. Traffic speeds on Oakton we’re characterized as an issue, particular in regard to street parking, which many described as feeling unsafe. For some Oakton Street business owners, street parking is the only parking available for their customers.

Though many businesses indicated that their clientele were local, stakeholders see very little foot traffic on Oakton, likely due to traffic speeds and uneven sidewalks, as well as businesses such as auto body shops that don’t draw pedestrian activity. The foot traffic that does occur on Oakton was characterized as mainly students who attend school nearby.

3.4.2 Development Potential

Local developers see potential for redevelopment in the area surrounding Oakton Street and Mannheim Road, though there are hesitations from current property owners. The strip mall adjacent to the proposed Metra station has substantial vacancies, including 10,000 square feet of contiguous vacant retail space. A new Metra station was seen as a potential benefit to filling vacant retail, though connectivity between retail establishments and the station was described as an issue. Infill development at this site could be an issue for the visibility of existing businesses, such as Butera Markets.

While infill may be a challenge, developers described the addition of an Oakton Street Metra Station as creating real potential for residential and mixed-use development within a transit oriented development (TOD) corridor. The plans for a Pace Pulse stop in the area was also noted as beneficial, though not as much of a driver of new development as a potential Metra station. The location of the area, close to O'Hare Airport as well as downtown Des Plaines and Oakton Street businesses, was seen as an asset for redevelopment. Developers outlined that any residential development would likely focus on one-bedroom to two-bedroom units, with a handful of studios and three-bedrooms. Potential new residential development in the area was characterized as likely to be at a lower price point in comparison to recent developments in Downtown Des Plaines, due to the character of the surrounding area.

Developers were clear that new residential and mixed-use development would likely depend on commitments from the City to improve appearance and walkability in the station area. Though the area has potential, TOD developments were described as most successful when located in areas that are enjoyable to walk around. Streetscape improvements to make Oakton Street and Mannheim Road more attractive and more pedestrian friendly would be needed for redevelopment around the station area to thrive.

3.4.3 Connectivity & Quality of Life

Many residents and business owners expressed concern about the number of accessible crossings over NCS tracks. Additional crossings at Forest Ave or E Lincoln Ave would better connect Metra riders to local businesses. These connections were also discussed with residents in relation to safe routes for cyclists to access the Des Plaines River Trail, as current crossings in the area exist only at Oakton Street and north on E Algonquin Road.

While some residents and business owners recognize that a new Metra station would increase property values in the surrounding area, others expressed concern that a Metra station could bring in crime from neighboring communities. The impacts on air quality were also discussed, with some residents concerned that a train stopped at the station would increase diesel emissions, and others excited by the improvements to air quality that could come from reducing the number of cars on the road. Many residents and business owners saw the potential for an Oakton Street Metra Station to improve the quality of life in the area by providing additional transportation options for area residents and employees.

4. Conclusion

The community outreach conducted as a part of the Des Plaines Oakton Metra Station Feasibility Study revealed several key findings:

- There is general support and excitement for improvements to the Oakton Street business district that a new Metra station may bring. This area has good bones but is seen as in need of investment—both private and public.
- For the proposed Oakton Street Metra Station area to be desirable for TOD, improved pedestrian and bike infrastructure as well as beautification efforts are needed.
- Survey results show general support for a proposed Des Plaines Oakton Street Metra Station. Though these results indicate higher demand for the train as an amenity to access entertainment, events and O'Hare airport, the survey counts are not high enough to determine if these preferences are truly representative.
- There are many misconceptions about potential impacts of a Metra Station on the adjacent neighborhood, including increased crime, lowered property values, and air quality conditions. While aspects of this feasibility study can address these at a high level, the City will need to continue its educational and engagement efforts to ensure that community dialogues are fact based and productive as plans move forward.
- The biggest concern among community members is the impact on traffic on Oakton Street. While this feasibility analysis looked at the impacts that a Metra station would have on traffic as well as changes in gate downtimes, it does not include a full analysis of how gate downtimes or potential new development would impact local traffic. Given that traffic on Oakton Street is already an issue, additional studies that look more in depth at how local traffic patterns can be improved would be beneficial and could ease community concerns. Local traffic and parking management efforts will also play an important role in mitigating issues.

