

INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT OVERVIEW



INTRODUCTION

This is the first complete update to Niles' Comprehensive Plan in ten years and comes at a time when the community, the state, and the country are slowly recovering from economic difficulties brought on by a world-wide pandemic. However, despite the pandemic and its impacts, Niles' citizens and stakeholders continue to plan for the future — one with a high quality of life, sustainable economic development, efficient and cost-effective public services, and ongoing opportunities for community participation and involvement in local decision-making. As with previous planning efforts, and despite the limitations of a global pandemic, an energetic community engagement process asked key questions and helped determine what Niles' residents, business owners, and other stakeholders desire for the future. What makes Niles a compelling place to live and do business? What aspects of Niles should the community keep, change, or enhance? How does the community best position itself to capitalize on constant economic shifts and transformations, even in the pandemic's aftermath?

Niles continues to evolve as one of Chicago's most diverse and stable inner-ring suburbs. Developed mainly after the Second World War, Niles features classic Mid-Century residential neighborhoods, high-quality parks and municipal services, thriving employment centers, and numerous shopping and commercial districts. Niles is also known for its schools, community festivals and special events, and its religious institutions that form a strong social network for existing residents and newcomers alike. However, Niles recognizes it must meet the emerging 21st century challenges: How will Niles remain a competitive place to live and work? How will it respond to the constant flux in the commercial sector as retailers, companies, and employers re-evaluate their operations post-pandemic and in light of growing internet-based sales? How does it maintain the quality and authenticity of neighborhoods while accommodating housing rehabilitation and new housing products that meet emerging housing needs? How does Niles continue its efforts in becoming a more walkable, visually appealing destination?

Today, Niles is a mature suburban community; tomorrow it can become an even more compelling place to live, work, and play that appeals to all people. This 2040 Comprehensive Plan is an expression of the community's vision for the future, providing a foundation for community action regarding land use, transportation, housing and neighborhoods, parks, economic development, arts and culture, and community design. It is the result of community discussion and collaboration. Its planning goals and strategies meet the challenges for the 21st century with new and complex solutions.



Leaning Tower in the Village of Niles, Illinois

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Village of Niles has begun the process to update its 2030 Comprehensive Plan. It is commonplace for municipalities to update their plans prior to the set vision date because of changing priorities and dynamics. Two main reasons why the Village started the planning process include: 1) significant portions of the current plan have been implemented and 2) the Niles business environment is rapidly changing setting forth new challenges. The purpose of the 2040 Comprehensive Plan is to provide a long-range policy framework to guide the Village's land use and development decisions over the next twenty years. The updated Plan will focus on a range of community issues related to land use and neighborhoods, transportation improvements and connectivity, commercial corridors and districts, housing, parks, trails and open space, community character, and sustainability.

The primary objectives of the project are:

Reinvestment and redevelopment of under-utilized and obsolete commercial and industrial properties to ensure economic competitiveness.

Infrastructure improvements and strategic transportation planning that balances land use and community growth.

Leveraging emerging technologies, advances in technology and planning techniques related to sustainability and smart growth to better serve the Village.

Address an aging and diverse population with actions regarding future housing needs and neighborhood reinvestment.

THE PLANNING PROCESS

The process to create the 2040 Comprehensive Plan started in the summer of 2020. The process will be completed over three planning phases:

- **Phase 1 - State of the Village**
- **Phase 2 - Community Visioning**
- **Phase 3 - Final Plan and Implementation Strategy**

Phase 1 State of the Village

The goal of the first phase is to better understand the existing conditions in Niles and to engage with the community. Analysis on a variety of topics such as land use and zoning, parks and open space, physical conditions and design elements, transportation conditions, demographic and economic market conditions, infrastructure, and utilities was conducted during the first phase. This phase results in the State of the Village report.

Phase 2 Community Visioning

The Community Visioning phase will explore and test a range of ideas, strategies, and policies for future physical improvements to key target opportunity areas of the Village. It will include a community workshop and other engagement opportunities. The team will also start drafting the updated comprehensive plan during this phase.

Phase 3 Final Plan and Implementation Strategy

The Final Plan and Implementation Strategy will include the combined effort of all the community engagement, existing conditions analysis, and opportunity area plans cultivated into a final Comprehensive Plan and Implementation strategy document to be reviewed by the community, Village Staff, and elected and appointed officials.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

PHASE ONE FEEDBACK

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020, an online and virtual format was utilized for the public engagement and interaction activities. The process was tailored to encourage participation through several online tools, meetings, and surveys, including a project website, community feedback survey, and other social media and online activities.

A project steering committee was formed which included two online, interactive meetings to garner feedback and direction. Numerous stakeholder group interviews were also conducted with a wide variety of residents, business and property owners, school and other public administrators, transportation agency representatives, and community groups. A community online webinar was held in early December 2020 to engage the community with existing conditions data and confirm preliminary direction for Niles moving forward.



Niles 2040 Project Website Homepage and Interactive Mapping Tool

Niles 2040 Project Website

The Comprehensive Plan Update process includes a dedicated project website created and designed in collaboration with Bang the Table, specifically to engage the community for feedback about the Village and to provide updates on the process. Comprehensive engagement activities have included questions, polls, plans, online surveys, graphics, draft reports, mapping activities, and outreach for workshops. The *Bang the Table* site also allows for opportunities for continuous and real time comments, questions, and feedback. Since September 2020, over 2,700 people have been informed about the planning process from the project website and 200 plus people have engaged with the various feedback opportunities listed above.

Primary themes as a result of input through the project website included the following:

- Pedestrian and bicycle improvements and focus.
- Milwaukee Avenue Streetscape and Business Activation, particularly the southern portion Oakton Street to Touhy Avenue.
- Continue to nurture and promote the family-friendly environment, schools, parks and being a perfect place to raise a family.
- Destination creation at Golf Mill and the Touhy Triangle areas.
- A dog park and continued enhancement of its great parks and forest preserve resources.
- Become America's best example of a "15-minute City", a place where all daily activities and necessities are accessible within 15 minutes.
- Continue focus and investment in stormwater management.
- Help create more niche and specialty businesses focusing on Niles' diversity.

Steering Committee

A project steering committee was formed to help guide the planning process and provide direction to the planning team during the process. The committee consists of twelve community members including two Village Trustee representatives. The committee has given direction to the planning team and has been updated with two community meetings during the process. The meetings were in July and October 2020 to first introduce the project and then to update the committee with the team's initial findings, answer questions and seek direction. The committee will continue to guide the process moving forward through the visioning and plan development phases.

Stakeholder Interviews

In October 2020 the planning team held a series of stakeholder interviews with a wide variety of community participants. The interviews occurred over the course of two days, each with variety of community, business and public officials. The interviewees included school district superintendents, representatives from other local educational and religious institutions, park district staff, other Village staff, community residents and transportation officials. Through these meetings several planning themes emerged, as well as consensus on areas for improvement in the Village. These themes are summarized further in the Summary and Conclusions section. The following is a summary of the input gathered through these meetings:

Parks, Schools and Community Resources - Stakeholders generally agreed the Niles schools and community facilities are assets to the community and well-regarded by local residents. Communication and partnerships between schools and Village representatives appears strong and should continue to be a primary focus to achieve the interests of the community. Parks in Niles are also regarded as important assets; however, it is acknowledged that there is not much opportunity to significantly add new parkland. It will be important to explore other recreation options in the future. Other community resources such as the Niles-Maine District Library, the Niles Teen Center, and local religious institutions and civic groups are also well regarded and play important roles in Niles' social, cultural, and civic life.

Diversity and Inclusion - Niles' existing and expanding ethnically and racially diverse population is viewed as a strength by residents. Promoting and celebrating the community's diverse populations is seen as an opportunity for the Village to promote inclusiveness, economic development, cultural expression, and local identity. Cultural events and other programs, as well as continued partnerships through the local religious community and cultural groups, can help advance these aims.

Life-Cycle Housing - It was recognized that more housing options are needed in the Village. The Village primarily consists of single-family homes and there are limited options for other housing types. More multi-family style units, rowhomes, and condominiums would help diversify the housing stock and attract a variety of buyers while allowing existing residents to remain in the Village as they age and their housing needs change. The Village also has a significant supply of senior housing and it is expected that demand could grow even more in the future due to changes in the population.

Empty Nesters and Families - It was also acknowledged that the population of Niles is getting older and one- and two-person households are becoming more common. The population of Niles does include a large segment of empty nesters who have perhaps stayed in their single-family home for many years. As mentioned above, increased housing options will allow empty nesters to stay in the community while opening larger single-family homes for younger families. Increased quality of life amenities in the Village were also mentioned as an attraction to increase families.

Arts, Culture and Entertainment - The lack of a downtown business district or central gathering place in Niles is a constraint to fostering arts and culture activities in the Village. Given the difficulty of creating a downtown when one does not exist, the focus in Niles will continue to be towards creating vibrant entertainment, shopping, and restaurant destinations. The need for entertainment and destination type uses were discussed. New large-scale community events, such as a "Taste of Niles," which also helps promote diversity, were also mentioned as strategies to help create identity and recognize Niles as an entertainment and event destination.

Golf Mill and Touhy Triangle - Locations in Niles that received the most commentary for redevelopment and improvement were the Golf Mill shopping center and the area generally regarded as the Touhy Triangle. Both areas were discussed as potential for redevelopment or introduction of new uses. The Touhy Triangle is already zoned as a multi-use entertainment district and a plan is in place for the transformation of this area. The Golf Mill shopping area provides an opportunity resulting from a change in shopping patterns, the retail environment, and economy in general. Given the vacancies and land availability, redevelopment of portions of the area into new and different uses appear to be supported.

Milwaukee Avenue Corridor - The community also identified the Milwaukee Avenue corridor as a primary location for improvement in the Village. The corridor is highly visible and serves as the Village’s “Main Street” in a certain manner. Interview participants discussed building improvements, streetscape repairs, and parking access as primary concerns. The opportunity for the Village to strengthen its identity through this corridor was discussed. The Village’s Design District along the southern third of the corridor also presents another opportunity to strengthen the identity of the Village and promote an important niche retail destination.

Community Webinar

Over 80 participants joined the first community webinar held on Thursday, December 3, 2020. The planned in-person community workshop format had to be modified to an online webinar format due to the pandemic and public health guidelines. The webinar included a presentation and discussion of various issues, question and answers, and poll questions and results.

Specifically, the project team first provided an overview of the project objectives and planning goals. They summarized past planning efforts including the 2030 Comprehensive Plan as well as reviewed the project schedule and key milestones. The primary activity of the webinar included a review of several key topic areas and general polling questions related to those topics. The questions were exploratory and not intended as an exhaustive review of the topic. They merely helped generate discussion to the larger topics in general. The topics and summary of each is provided to the right.

Topic 1 Land Use and Neighborhoods

Almost 2/3, or 63 of the respondents do identify with a neighborhood in Niles. The Village has created and maintains a list and boundaries of the residential neighborhoods throughout the Village. The strengthening and maintenance of walkable, residential neighborhoods close to parks and schools is a core principle of common city planning and should be a focus of the 2040 Plan.

Regarding land use and development, the planning team asked about geographic locations in Niles that are need in of improvement, redevelopment or change. The results indicate a clear preference for change in the Golf Mill, Milwaukee/Golf intersection, and northern Milwaukee Avenue area as the priority areas. These are followed by the southern portions of Milwaukee Avenue and the Touhy Triangle.



Topic 2 Mobility, Connectivity and Corridors

The responses regarding use of public transportation indicated only 25 percent of participants were regular users. However, this contrasts with the relatively overall high rate of use of the PACE system in general throughout Niles.

It was almost an equal amount of people (57/43 percent) who thought it was easy to get around Niles on foot and bicycle indicating improvements still need to be made.

Topic 3 Demographics and Housing

Participant responses regarding home ownership and tenure indicated a high number of long-time homeowners. Ninety-two percent were homeowners, and 88 percent lived in Village for 10 or more years.

Topic 4 Economic Development

Regarding shopping preferences, most people do their shopping in Niles although their favorite restaurant is not in Niles. This is not surprising given the large range and amount of shopping opportunities in Niles as well as the range and diversity of great restaurants in the Chicagoland area.

Topic 5 Parks, Trails and Open Space

The responses indicate a high use of the North Branch recreational trail and general satisfaction with park and open space resources in the Village. The park facilities received praise for quality and condition, but some responses indicated a need for a dog park, more passive areas, as well as playground and active park space. Niles' landlocked position and lack of land for park opportunities complicates the progress and necessitates alternative thinking about park and recreation facilities.

Topic 6 Utilities and Stormwater, Environmental Conditions and Community Facilities

Most participants feel they are adequately served by Village infrastructure with more than three-quarters (77 percent) indicating so. As far as future concern and attention, streets/roads received 56 percent of responses followed by stormwater management at 50 percent. Drinking water and wastewater only received two percent each indicating a satisfaction with those services. The Village understands the need for safe roads but is constrained by the fact that most of the arterials and major roadways are controlled by IDOT and Cook County. The Village largely only maintains its local streets. The Village is also aware of flooding and stormwater issues and has directed considerable resources to these problems in recent years.

Topic 7 Sustainability and Community Health

The responses were overwhelmingly positive regarding the inclusion of sustainability and community health as primary themes in the comprehensive plan. Ninety-four percent of responses indicated that these two topics should be brought forward and a large focus of the plan.

Topic 8 Urban Design and the Arts

Most participants indicated that arts and culture is important to them, 82 percent, while only 33 percent feel that Niles has a unique identity. Niles has completed its Arts and Culture Master Plan that directs implementation of arts and culture initiatives which will remain a priority moving forward. Design improvement and enhancements can also help further shape and strengthen an identity for Niles.

Community Poll Questions

A detailed summary of the poll questions and answers from the webinar follow next:

Do you identify with a neighborhood?

Yes | 63%
No | 37%

Poll #1

Do you use public transportation in Niles?

Yes | 63%
No | 37%

Poll #3

Is it easy to get around on foot or bicycle?

Yes | 57%
No | 43%

Poll #4

Which areas of Niles need improvement or change?

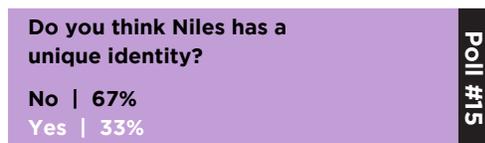
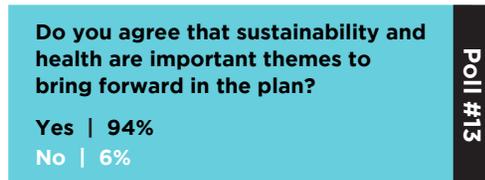
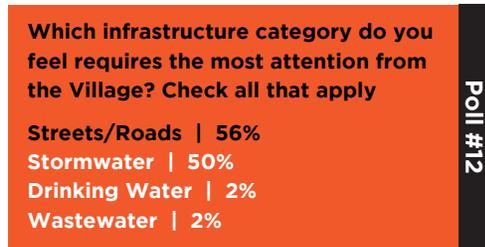
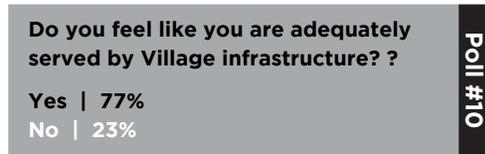
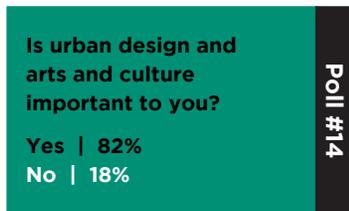
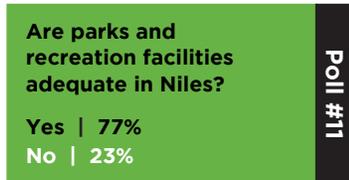
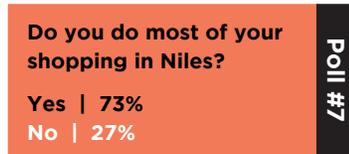
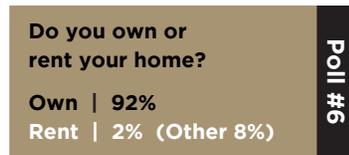
Golf Mill and Golf/Milwaukee | 89%
Milwaukee Avenue North | 47%
Milwaukee Avenue South | 45%
Touhy Triangle | 37%
Other Areas | 9%

Poll #2

How long have you lived in Niles?

20+ years | 69%
10 - 20 years | 19%
5 - 10 years | 6%
0 - 5 years | 6%
Less than 1 year | 2%

Poll #5



Staff Technical Meetings

A series of staff technical meetings with a wide variety of Village staff were also held during the first phase of the process. These meetings included staff from various Village departments including Public Works, Fire Department, Community Development, and Economic Development. These meetings gave the planning team an opportunity to hear different perspectives related to future planning and infrastructure programming in the Village.

Other Social Media and Online Engagement

In September 2020, the Village shared the news of the Niles 2040 project website launch by including a flyer in all water bills sent out community-wide throughout three-month intervals. During the following weeks, the Village spread the word about the project website through social media platforms, printed materials and the creation of lawn signs, which were placed in key locations. The virtual webinar event was advertised using the Village's social media platforms and printed materials, as well as the Niles 2040 Steering Committee members encouraging their own networks to attend. The project team sent out numerous project update blasts to the 600 and growing Niles email contacts. These project update blasts have informed many of the creation of the project sheet, community virtual webinar and survey, and the Q&A Questions and Summary Sheet. The Q&A Summary Sheet is an important document that includes responses from Village staff regarding all questions posed during the virtual webinar event. In late January, a series of Community Quick Polls were made available to the public for a fast, fun way to share feedback.

Community Survey

The first community survey was made available the week following the virtual workshop. The main goal of the survey is to gather insightful feedback regarding the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges of the Village of Niles. Since December 2020, 112 participants have shared their thoughts regarding the following key topics:

- 2030 Comprehensive Plan
- SWOT Analysis
- Land Use and Neighborhoods
- Mobility, Connectivity and Corridors
- Housing in the Village
- Economic Development
- Parks, Trails and Open Space
- Utilities and Stormwater
- Sustainability and Community Health
- Urban Design and Arts and Culture