

Impediments to Development: Despite Blue Island's assets for COD, any industrial project in Blue Island must overcome three serious obstacles:

- Brownfields conditions and the perception that brownfields may be more widespread and more expensive to improve than they are;
- Cook County tax rates that are higher than those of any other Illinois county;
- The perception that Cook County industrial property values will not appreciate.

Vacant Land: As a result of these impediments, approximately 223 acres of land in Blue Island are now vacant. Approximately 150 of these acres are in contiguous blocks. In some cases additional vacant acres are adjacent in neighboring towns.

Table 3: Blue Island Industrial Land Analysis

<i>Industrial Areas of Blue Island</i>	<i>Acres of Privately Held Vacant Land</i>	<i>Acres of Publicly Held Vacant Land</i>	<i>Total Acres of Vacant Land</i>
Northeast	6.8	89.1	95.9
West	17.2	17.8	35.0
South	79.9	12.1	92.0
Totals	103.9	119.0	222.9

COD Opportunity: In Blue Island the basic industrial development opportunity is to use the advantages of access to freight infrastructure, existing business clusters, and a ready industrial workforce (the elements of a COD), with a careful application of the incentives made available through public policy, to overcome impediments and restore more than 150 acres of vacant land to productive use. In capturing this COD opportunity the City of Blue Island would improve not only the regional economy but land use and transportation patterns that would avoid thousands of truck trips and tons of air pollution per year, making a lasting improvement to the regional environment.

III. COMMUNITY PLANNING INPUT

This plan is being created through a participatory community-based approach in which all Blue Island citizens are invited to participate. The planning process involves direction by a group of community leaders, a series of three to four large community meetings, and other channels including a website and survey forms available at City Hall and other public buildings. To date, two large and one smaller community meeting have been held in which more than 100 residents provided input for the draft plan proposals.

Working Group: The work of assessing information, formulating basic proposals, and revising drafts of this plan is being shared between the CNT-led professional team and a "Working Group" of Blue Island business and civic leaders. The Working Group has met regularly between September 2004 and June 2005. Among its other tasks the Working Group has helped to plan the large community meetings and assessed input from these sessions that have been held to date.

First Meeting: The first meeting was an informational and brainstorming session where participants learned about the planning process and the concepts of COD and TOD and provided input and community information through a series of activities. One of these exercises was a group discussion of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) facing Blue Island. Through the SWOT, residents identified strengths and opportunities in Blue Island's location, historical, physical and natural assets, and large prominent institutions but recognized weaknesses and threats in the city's aging infrastructure, increasing unemployment, and the lack of a vision or plan for a healthy and unified community. In visioning exercises that included an Image Preference Survey™, residents responded to photos as means of expressing their preferences for different types of building facades, building types, and streetscapes. In general, they desired more recreational and entertainment opportunities in town as well as additional local shopping. They also preferred images with an historic and traditional character to compliment the existing buildings, and liked the streets and buildings that accommodated pedestrians and bicyclists through attractive windows and facades, greenery along the street, sidewalks with street furniture, and dedicated paths for walking and biking.



Second Meeting: The second community meeting presented the results of the first meeting and used them as guidelines for an interactive charette process in which participants, at tables of 4-8 people, identified the areas they wanted to develop and how to develop them using maps, markers, tracing paper, and information from the surveys in the first meeting. Through the charette, participants identified several areas for redevelopment into mixed-use higher density housing as well as locations for more green space, bike and walking paths, other outdoor uses, and a bookstore, community theater, youth recreation center, and other commercial entities residents proposed in the first meeting. Participants also set guidelines for protecting residential neighborhoods from undesirable side effects of industrial redevelopment, proposing the use of dedicated truck routes to minimize truck movements through residential neighborhoods, planning new housing away from industrial areas, and proposing "green boundaries" between industrial and residential areas.



After the first two large community meetings, the professional staff and the Working Group were able to combine community input with other data to form a richer understanding of existing conditions and places where development is desired and possible within the TOD area. The specific area development proposals of this plan were formed with reference to this sharper picture of base line conditions and potential development areas, which is shown on the illustrations on the following two pages.

Third and Fourth Meetings: The third meeting will present the draft plan to the community for their feedback and possible revision. The meeting is scheduled for July 2005. Before and after the meeting, the plan and drawings will be available for review on the website and in City Hall and the library. CNT, Farr Associates, and the Working Group will use the input to revise the plan. If revisions to the plan are extensive, a fourth large community meeting will be held for a last broad community review. If the requested adjustments are minor, they will be reviewed and approved by the Working Group. Following community acceptance, the plan will be adopted by the City Council as the City's primary redevelopment policy. It will then direct the City's work to realize the projects described on the following pages.



1 Western Avenue: Blue Island’s Main Street
Western Avenue in Blue Island’s downtown is an intact and successful Main Street. The assortment of businesses includes a nice mix of restaurants, bakeries and antique stores. Additionally, the historic quality of many of the buildings along the Main Street creates an atmosphere that ties nicely to the antique shopping. Main Street extends intact from High Street to just south of Grove Street, approximately 4 1/2 blocks of shops on both sides of the street. Typically, two to four blocks is the recommended distance a pedestrian will shop in a small downtown. Also, analysis indicates that four fully developed blocks is the approximate amount of convenience retail and service square footage that can be supported by the Blue Island market, a market that will grow with the addition of households and jobs.

Access to the downtown from the train stations is an issue for the city. The downtown is up a hill from the stations, and barriers such as the track intersection and the overpass discussed above discourage pedestrian traffic from the stations.

2 St. Francis Hospital
St. Francis Hospital provides an anchor bringing people to downtown Blue Island, exposing them to the City’s charm and perhaps bringing them back for recreation and shopping. The hospital campus, on Gregory, just one block east of Main Street and just northwest of the train stations could not be better situated. The entrance and front of the hospital should be announced from Western Avenue and a strong connection created to draw visitors between the two assets. The space between the rear of the hospital and the train tracks provides the perfect location for expanded parking, especially for employees of the hospital.

Hospital and affiliated services compatible with Main Street, such as outpatient treatment facilities requiring regular visits and administration/accounting offices, should be located along the connection between Main Street and the Hospital. Some of these services could be appropriate along Western Avenue, so long as the Main Street building form is maintained and appropriate for the use.

3 Hospital Parking Lots
The hospital utilizes several parking lots in the vicinity of the hospital for patient and employee parking. The large parking lot on Western between Union and High Streets is partially owned by the City and mainly serves as employee parking for the hospital. The lots on the interior and on Gregory within this block belong to the Pronger-Smith Heart Care Center, located on the southeast corner of the block, and are used by heart patients visiting the Center. The parking lot and parks in the block just south are also owned by the hospital. The parks are widely used by hospital employees and City residents for lunch and spring and summer events.

The lots located south of the hospital and east of Gregory Avenue along Irving are owned by the hospital and used mainly for employee parking. The treatment of these parking lots -- including chain link fencing, walks that are simply extensions of the asphalt paving and no landscaping -- is consistent with their location away from any main thoroughfare. The hospital parking garage located at the entrance to the hospital is the main parking facility for hospital visitors. The lot across Union serves as overflow parking for the garage.

4 City Hall
Blue Island’s City Hall is located adjacent to Main Street on Vermont but accessed through Greenwood. The historic post office is also an asset across the street from the City Hall. It is important to maintain this civic presence in the downtown and to celebrate the public aspect of these buildings. Currently, the historic building is flanked by the police station and the fire station. An annex building provides a large public meeting hall, and the value of this asset could be enhanced by an interior connection between City Hall and the annex. Some short-term, on-street parking is provided in front of the City Hall, with extensive parking in a public lot across Vermont Street. The utility of this lot and its Connection to City Hall would be enhanced by a crosswalk that would stop the busy Vermont Street traffic for pedestrians.

5 Old Western Avenue
Historically, the bridge across the canal was located on Western Avenue, connecting what is now called “Old Western” with the current main street. Rail bridges now cut diagonally across the canal at this location and the new vehicular and pedestrian bridge is located between Western and Gregory. “Old Western” should be reconnected to the other side of the canal, at least with a pedestrian/bicycle bridge that could possibly be hung below one of the existing rail bridges.

6 Open Space/Water Reclamation Aeration/Treatment Facility
The sculptural qualities of the Water Reclamation District’s aeration facility located at the canal near the Western/Gregory bridge are considered an asset by city residents and visitors. Although it is difficult to view this facility from the bridge while in a car, pedestrians crossing the bridge and visitors to the park may appreciate it. This facility and the park surrounding it could become a destination point within the community with trails connecting it to surrounding areas and community events held in the open space.

7 Western and Gregory Options
Community residents have discussed the need for Western Avenue to revert back to its original two-way status. If this were to occur, Gregory Avenue should also become two-way, as the two streets currently serve as a couplet. While little revision would be needed for Western Avenue and Gregory Avenue other than re-striping, this traffic reconfiguration would affect the intersection at Western and Gregory just north of the bridge crossing the canal. The necessary restructuring of this intersection would offer opportunities to expand redevelopment options on the land between Gregory and the tracks, south of Vermont, to create a more prominent gateway to the area, and also to direct northbound people to Western Avenue and downtown businesses.

8 Gregory Avenue Overpass at Vermont Street
In the 1960’s, Gregory Avenue was widened and an overpass was constructed over Vermont to bypass downtown and speed traffic to the north from the bridge. Over the years, this reconfiguration has resulted in several negative impacts on downtown Blue Island. First, the traffic counts along Gregory Avenue do not warrant the wide expanse of pavement. The barren quality of this pavement on a raised

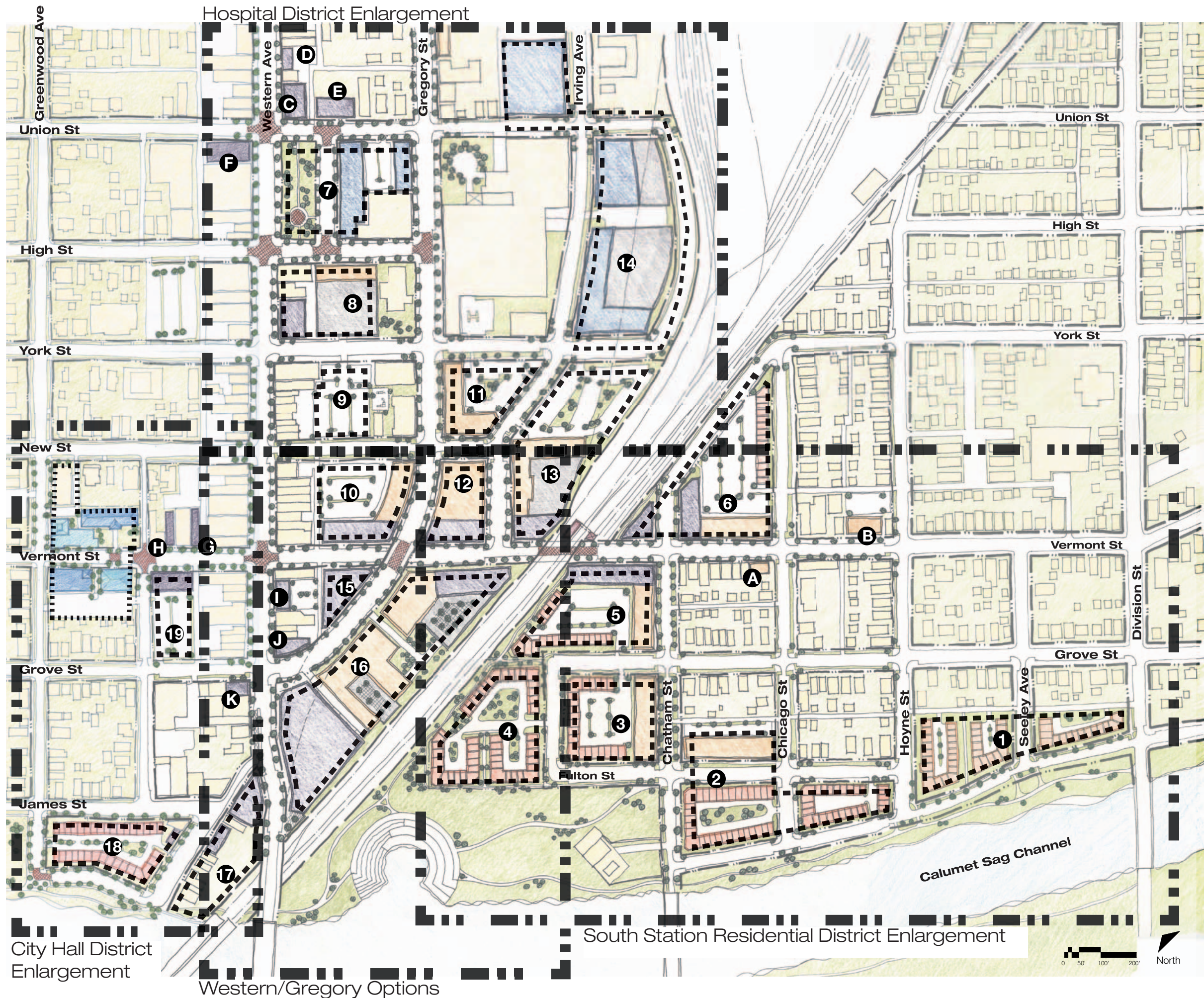
overpass has produced a lackluster entrance to the downtown and the hospital from the south. Additionally, pedestrian access to the bridge and canal has suffered because of the uninviting quality of this segment of the corridor. Second, the overpass at Vermont Street has severely affected both vehicular and pedestrian continuity. Car traffic heading north off of Vermont is forced to turn at the unimproved intersection at Irving Avenue to the east to reconnect further north at Gregory. This intersection is already dangerous due to the proximity to the train tracks and the traffic on Vermont at peak hours. Pedestrians from Vermont attempting to access the hospital or businesses north on Gregory must either use Irving Avenue where no sidewalks exist or climb a dirt path on the embankment of the overpass.

9 Intersection at Vermont Street, Irving Avenue and the Railroad Tracks
Some community residents feel that this intersection is dangerous. For vehicles, the Irving-Vermont intersection is located too close to the tracks and is difficult to maneuver. For pedestrians, the distance across the tracks combined with the crossings at Irving creates a wide, uncomfortable stretch to navigate. The expanse of track area looks industrial and uninviting; yet this is the gateway to the City for visitors arriving by train.

10 Metra Train Stations
The Blue Island station on the Rock Island Line is an historic station located south of Vermont Street. It receives the majority of the train rider-ship and has two sets of north and southbound tracks. A third track also serves the freight traffic that passes this station directed to industrial business customers and the Burr Oak intermodal terminal to the north. These multiple sets of tracks crossing Vermont create the sense of unease experienced by many pedestrians when crossing this intersection, as discussed above. The Blue Island electric station is located on the north side of Vermont Street. This station is relatively new, specifically serves riders of the electric line and is the end of this line. Pedestrian access to both of these stations is provided by minimal sidewalks. A recently added crosswalk connects the two Metra stations. However, this crosswalk does little to mitigate the overall impression of expansive, busy track and roadways that can make this station area an unpleasant place for pedestrians.

11 Metra Parking Lots
Blue Island has six parking lots with capacity for 795 cars specifically designated for Metra riders. One parking lot is provided on the north side of Vermont Street immediately east of the Metra Electric station. Parking for the Blue Island’s Rock Island station is provided in five separate parking lots, most of which are distributed to the east of the tracks with no visual site lines to the station. The large lot located on the canal furthest from the station is often not fully occupied. If the parking spaces of this lot could be replaced at a convenient site, it could serve as a prime redevelopment parcel.

12 Existing Neighborhoods
The mostly single family homes to the east of the tracks and the west of main street create intact, pleasant residential neighborhoods. The community has identified these neighborhoods as an asset to the downtown, providing shoppers for the retail and restaurants. In several locations throughout the years, residences have been demolished to provide parking lots between the neighborhood and the commercial district. Any additional erosion of the residential neighborhoods should be avoided in the future; however, redevelopment of denser residential on these vacant or underdeveloped parcels would provide additional activity and shoppers for Blue Island’s Main Street.



Key

Potential redevelopment parcels are identified on the plan to the left. These parcels are separated and noted in the two following categories:

A

Infill Redevelopment Parcels

Smaller developments on existing parcels are noted with a white letter in a black circle. These parcels require little infrastructure change and can be redeveloped at any time during the process.

1

Large-scale Redevelopment Parcels

Larger scale redevelopment can occur on parcels noted with a white number in a black circle and a dashed black line outlining the potential site. These parcels will require City input and aid for redevelopment.

City Hall District

A smaller dash outlines potential redevelopment of the City Hall area.

Enlarged Plans

This outline marks the four enlarged plans outlined on the following pages.

Key Building Types:

- Existing Buildings
- Residential: Townhouse
- Residential: Multifamily
- Public
- Mixed-use
- Structured Parking

Redevelopment Parcels

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