



City of Blue Island Comprehensive Plan

May 2012

Chapter 3

A Vision for Blue Island

Twenty years from today, Blue Island is an economically and culturally thriving community. A vibrant and pedestrian-friendly Uptown District is home to successful local, regional, and national retailers located along a two-way Western Avenue Complete Street. Historic facades have been restored, with additional streetscape in the form of lighting, signage, wayfinding, and decorative planters installed to create a sense of place. Vermont Street Metra station area contains a number of high-quality mixed-use developments with residential units occupied by residents looking for affordable housing options while maintaining a high quality of life such as that provided by the City of Blue Island.

The City has been successful in redeveloping its vacant residential parcels while maintaining the housing mix that endeared it to earlier residents and visitors. While the community is growing in population, the neighborhoods are distinctly pedestrian-scale and immensely pedestrian-friendly. The supply and location of parks in the City place a park less than a five-minute walk from nearly every resident.

The City's industrial sector has been transformed by a number of highly successful and sustainable businesses that are utilizing cutting-edge technology to produce green energy components such as wind mills and solar panels. Given the excellent freight infrastructure, Blue Island has become one of the nation's largest manufacturers and distributors of green technology, creating a number of green jobs not only for the City but also for the entire region.

The much anticipated Calumet-Sag Channel clean-up has been completed and the waterway has been opened for active recreational activities. The Calumet-Sag regional bike trail is bringing a number of visitors into the community on a daily basis to patronize local businesses and join in community activities.

The Blue Island community is continually growing more diverse. While a number of young professionals are attracted to the City, the pedestrian and transit friendly City is also the preferred location for retirees looking for transportation choices, housing options, and high quality services such as those provided by the MetroSouth Medical Center, Pronger Smith Medical Services, and City of Blue Island Senior Services.

Transportation and Circulation Goal

The City of Blue Island will provide each resident, business, and visitor with a viable option to choose among multiple modes of transportation that enable them to navigate the community, connect to their place of employment, and handle their business-related transportation needs.

To accomplish this, the City and its partners will:

- Pursue a high-quality multimodal transportation system throughout the community. Implement Complete Street Policy and non-motorized transportation plans that improve community health and provide sustainable alternatives to vehicular circulation.
- Convert Western Avenue and Gregory Street to two-way streets in order to improve local traffic circulation and create a safe pedestrian environment in the Uptown District.
- Repair pavement surfaces and sidewalks for improved circulation within residential neighborhoods as well as between major destinations, e.g., between the Vermont Street station and Uptown District.
- Support transit through continual coordination with Metra and Pace. Provide new bus shelters and rider amenities such as bike parking, route maps, and informational signage at Pace bus stops along Western Avenue, 127th Avenue, and Vermont Street.
- Provide a transportation system that supports freight traffic, as well as the industrial and logistics businesses that rely on goods movement.
- Promote regional bike trail connections such as the Calumet-Sag regional trail that connect Blue Island to neighboring communities, allow residents to access amenities outside its boundaries, and attract visitors from throughout the region.

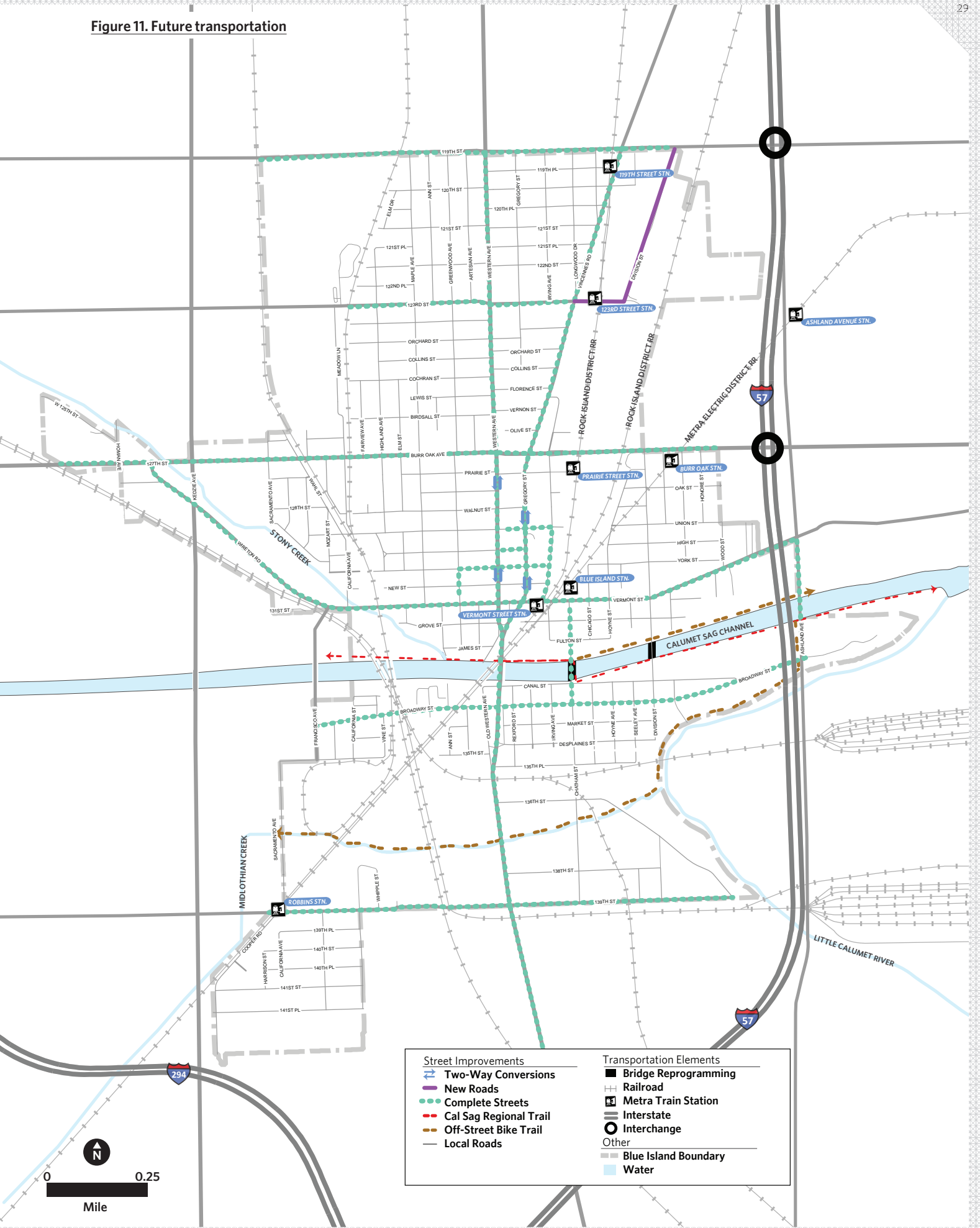
Existing bus shelter along Vermont Street



Vermont Metra station commuter parking



Figure 11. Future transportation



Chapter 4

Plan Recommendations & Implementation Strategies

The purpose of this chapter of the Blue Island Comprehensive Plan is to describe high-priority recommendations for action to achieve the vision, goals, and objectives laid out in the previous chapter. The recommendations are intended to allow elected and appointed officials prioritize action items and focus on achievable short-term strategies.

Prioritizing a limited number of strategies is also intended to communicate that some positive activities are going to be lower priority. The City has finite staff resources and funding, so some worthwhile activities that are not prioritized in the Plan may have to be deferred.

The first part of this chapter contains a list of the top 10 strategies that are recommended for immediate action. Each strategy contains a series of prioritized action items that will allow City officials to move forward with achieving the strategy's intended goals. The latter part contains a discussion of longer term initiatives that will be pursued by the City as resources become available, but unlike the top 10 strategies below, are not activities where the City is expected to take a leadership role.

The 10 strategies detailed in this chapter include:

- 1. Reconfigure Western Avenue and Gregory Street as two-way “Complete Streets.”**
- 2. Consolidate commercial uses along Western Avenue.**
- 3. Preserve the housing mix while rehabilitating residential buildings.**
- 4. Promote Cargo Oriented Development (COD).**
- 5. Repair or reprogram bridges to reconnect community.**
- 6. Clean up the Calumet-Sag Channel to accommodate active and passive recreation.**
- 7. Undertake small-scale and low-cost infrastructure improvements.**
- 8. Create workforce training opportunities.**
- 9. Improve historic preservation efforts.**
- 10. Improve organizational structure and implementation prioritization.**

In addition, other strategies described further as longer-term or ongoing initiatives include continued support for major transportation projects like the CREATE program and the I-294 / I-57 interchange improvements, coordinating investments with neighboring communities, supporting reforms to Cook County’s tax structure, improving transit service, and supporting environmental and health initiatives like local food production and access and the use of green infrastructure.

The following matrix is meant to demonstrate how the strategies contained in this chapter relate to the goals laid out in Chapter 3, which correspond to recommendation sections typically contained in comprehensive plans. As this shows, although the structure of the Blue Island Comprehensive Plan is unusual, it does address the topics that are traditionally found in comprehensive plans.

Blue Island strategies matrix

	LAND USE	ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT	HOUSING	TRANSPORTATION	NATURAL ENVIRONMENT	COMMUNITY FACILITIES	IMAGE AND IDENTITY
1. Reconfigure Western Avenue and Gregory Street as two-way “complete streets.”		X		X			X
2. Consolidate commercial uses along Western Avenue.	X	X	X				
3. Preserve the housing mix while rehabilitating residential buildings.	X		X				
4. Promote Cargo Oriented Development (COD).	X	X		X			
5. Repair or reprogram bridges to reconnect community.				X		X	
6. Clean up the Calumet-Sag Channel to accommodate active and passive recreation.	X				X	X	
7. Undertake small-scale and low-cost infrastructure improvements.				X	X	X	
8. Create workforce training opportunities.		X				X	
9. Improve historic preservation efforts.	X						X
10. Improve organizational structure and implementation prioritization.	Not a topic-specific strategy.						

Strategy #1

Reconfigure Western Avenue and Gregory Street as two-way Complete Streets

Western Avenue serves as the primary gateway into Blue Island's Uptown District, the City's cultural, architectural, and commercial center. The right-of-way running from 127th Street to James Street is also home to nearly 40 percent of retail businesses located in the City, making it a key commercial corridor.

Converted in the 1970s to a one-way couplet with the primary intent of accommodating additional traffic volumes, Western Avenue and Gregory Street to this day allow for unrestricted flow of vehicles through the City of Blue Island. While the conversion has created two to three lanes of travel along with on-street parking opportunities for patrons of Uptown businesses, it has also dealt a major socio-economic blow to the overall community and Uptown specifically. Higher vehicular speeds and restricted circulation have (or contribute to) a threefold negative impact:

- Unsafe and less desirable pedestrian environment
- Decreased business activity
- Prevention of the development of a sustainable and vibrant Uptown District

The reconfiguration of Western Avenue as a two-way street will have a significant impact on the City's Uptown district. This impact, as well as the City's ongoing efforts to address this issue, makes it imperative for the Plan to recommend this strategy as a priority action item.

Benefits

Land Use and Development Benefits

The combination of a pedestrian friendly environment and proximate train station act as perfect catalysts for higher density development. A two-way Western Avenue would contribute significantly to improving the quality of living and doing business along Western Avenue.

Economic Benefits

The combination of slower vehicular speeds and safer pedestrian environment will make the Western Avenue corridor conducive to retail activity. Slower traffic speeds will enable storefronts to receive greater visibility, allowing motorists to stop and patronize businesses. It will also allow pedestrians to cross the Western Avenue roadway in a safe manner and therefore make businesses on either side of the street more accessible. Over the long term, higher density mixed-use development at key nodes will also encourage a greater number of residents to walk to local shops along Western Avenue.

Transportation and Circulation Benefits

The conversion to two-way streets would improve traffic flow, improve safety, and support the use of alternative transportation modes. Blue Island's street-grid network would allow a much more effective circulation of traffic, eliminating the number of circuitous travel routes required to connect east-west neighborhoods. Given the high speed of traffic and wide right-of-way, there are many instances of vehicles either missing their turn or doing so last minute. This is a traffic hazard that could be easily avoided with the two-way conversion.

Decreased traffic speeds within the Uptown District would also contribute significantly to a safer and more pedestrian friendly environment. Alternate modes of transportation including bike lanes and buses could also be accommodated to make Western Avenue a Complete Street (as identified within the City's adopted 2011 Complete Streets Policy). Pace buses would also see an increase in ridership, making existing bus routes more efficient and financially feasible.

Community Health Benefits

Walkable environments have a direct and positive impact on physical health. Urban environments are defined as pedestrian and transit friendly areas that contain higher density mixed or multi use development. Creating a Complete Western Avenue right-of-way that accommodates sidewalks, safer crosswalks, bike lanes, and bus shelters would encourage greater physical activity among residents. It also would have direct transportation safety impacts, as described above.

Image and Identity Benefits

The Western Avenue corridor is home to a number of historic commercial buildings. A vibrant corridor would encourage and allow the business owners to maintain historic facades while also allowing the City to dedicate additional resources to ensure the same. The two-way Western Avenue corridor would provide several direct and indirect benefits to the Uptown District, the city's historic downtown. This would include a boost in commerce, cultural activities, and physical appearance.

Figure 13. Western Avenue 2-way conversion concept



Detailed Strategy

The conversion of Western Avenue and Gregory Street to two-way streets includes a number of changes. Below, these are broken into two types: transportation infrastructure improvements; as well as new policies and ordinances to be adopted by the City.

Transportation Infrastructure

The reconfiguration of Western and Gregory involves changes to these roadways themselves, redesign of intersections of other streets, and modifications to on-street parking. Overall, the roadways are recommended to be converted to two-way streets, with one travel lane in each direction, on-street parking on both sides of the street, and bike lanes on either side. It is also recommended that Gregory Street be realigned to intersect Western Avenue at a 90-degree angle opposite Grove Street to create a four-leg intersection in this location.

In addition, the intersections of Western Avenue with other streets are recommended to be redesigned. Recommended improvements include the following:

- Install curb extensions as per 2010 Traffic Study recommendations
- Re-stripe crosswalks on Western Avenue and each east-west street
- Retain and repair, as needed, brick-paver crosswalks at all existing locations.
- Add brick paver crosswalks at the intersection of Grove Street.
- Modernize signal equipment at York Street and at Vermont Street.
- Install new traffic signal at the intersection of realigned Western Avenue and Grove Street.
- Retain stop sign control at all existing intersections and modify to accommodate two-way traffic.
- Install gateway signage at existing triangular space between Western Avenue and the north-bound free flow lane of Gregory Street.
- Accommodate bus stops and bus shelters at appropriate locations as determined by Pace. Refer to Pace's Posted Stops Program to determine criteria for consolidation and relocation of existing stops.

On-street parking requirements are recommended to be modified as well. Parking lanes should remain on both sides of Western, except for removal in the following locations:

- East side of Western Avenue between Vermont Street and Grove Street/Gregory Street
- East side of Western Avenue for the southern half block between New Street and Vermont Street and on the northern half block between York Street and New Street.

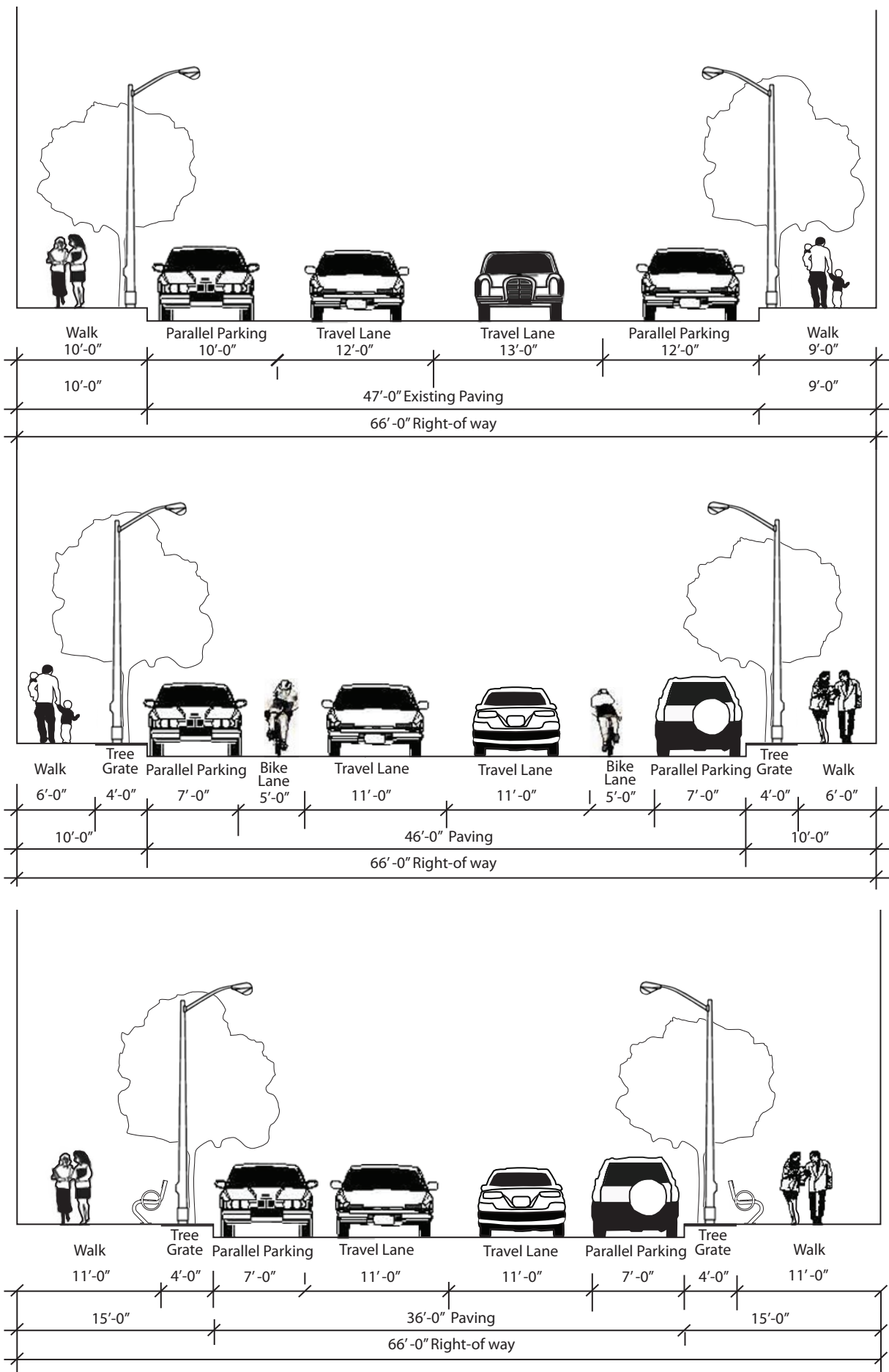
Policy and Programming Actions

In addition to identifying infrastructure improvements, the City should create and/or support the creation of the following policies and programs that would move the recommendation forward.

One important action is the creation of an advocacy group consisting of business owners along Western Avenue. This group would be beneficial in two ways. First, it would help raise awareness and gain support from Blue Island residents for the two-way reconfiguration by highlighting the benefits for the entire community as opposed to businesses along the corridor. Second, it would enable business owners to assist the City in reaching out to external organizations such as the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) and play an active role in implementation.

The City should also implement policies and regulations that would help improve the aesthetics and function of the corridor, both before and after the reconfiguration. A signage & wayfinding ordinance and landscape ordinance will assist the City enhance its visual character, and implementing the Complete Streets Policy ordinance will improve traffic circulation while improving community health.

Figure 14. Western Avenue reconfiguration concepts



Previous Plans and Studies that Inform Strategy Recommendations

- **Blue Island Reaches Next Crossroads:** contains policy recommendations to support revitalization of the Uptown District
- **Western Avenue- Gregory Street Traffic Study:** analyzes the feasibility and provides recommendations for two-way conversion of Western Avenue and Gregory Street.
- **Economic Assessment of Western Avenue Two-Way Conversion:** demonstrates the positive economic impact of conversion of Western Avenue on local businesses.
- **City of Blue Island Complete Streets Policy:** identifies rights-of-way that should accommodate non-motorized transportation and transit as well as supporting improvements.
- **Uptown TOD Zoning Ordinance:** outlines standards that would allow creation of a pedestrian-friendly and vibrant mixed-use Uptown District and TOD area around the Vermont Street Metra station.

Implementation

The conversion of Western Avenue and Gregory Street will not be a simple task, as demonstrated by the lack of progress that has been made to accomplish this strategy, even though it has been recommended for years. Because Western Avenue is under the jurisdiction of IDOT, this project must be made a priority of IDOT before it will move forward.

The implementation actions below should take place over the next two years. At the end of this period, the goal is to have IDOT consider this project to be a positive improvement, and to have IDOT program this project within its statewide transportation improvement program. Realistically, any physical improvements will be longer-term; the short-term goal is receiving institutional support. A three-part implementation strategy should be pursued over the next two years to advance this recommendation. The three elements of the strategy include:

- Build and demonstrate local support for the two-way conversion.
- Bring the project to IDOT’s attention and determine whether further work is needed to demonstrate its positive impact.
- Make this project a priority for legislative officials who represent Blue Island at the state and federal level.

Strategy #1 Implementation matrix

ACTION AND TIMELINE	LEAD IMPLEMENTERS	DETAILS
Develop brief summary of project details to discuss with IDOT Timeline: <i>within 6 months</i>	Engineering Department (Consultant)	Prepare a short description of the proposed improvements that focuses on its impact on traffic flow and safety. The KLOA report will be a good source for this information.
Create educational materials for local businesses and residents Timeline: <i>6-12 months</i>	Community Development Department	Prepare an educational fact sheet that describes the proposed changes and illustrates the potential future alignment. This should focus broadly on project benefits and be meant to build support locally.
Form local business advocacy group Timeline: <i>6-12 months and beyond</i>	Community Development Department	Identify a number of local businesses that support the project and are willing to participate in an informal advocacy group of local businesses to assist City staff and elected officials in advancing the project. Hold periodic meetings to discuss progress of discussions with IDOT and legislators.
Meet with IDOT to discuss need for project and identify further studies needed Timeline: <i>6-12 months</i>	Elected officials, Engineering Department, Community Development Department	Request meeting with IDOT leadership. At the meeting, present the case for the project, including its economic benefits and positive impacts on traffic flow and safety. Request that IDOT identify any further studies that would need to be completed to justify the change.
Conduct follow-up studies as needed Timeline: <i>12-18 months</i>	Engineering Department, Community Development Department	Based on the above meeting, conduct any further studies as requested by IDOT to help justify the project, or participate in these studies if they are done by another group.
Meet with legislators at the state and federal level Timeline: <i>12-18 months</i>	Elected officials, local business representatives	City elected officials and representatives from the local business advocacy group should meet with state and federal legislators. The purpose of the meeting is to demonstrate clear community and local business support for the project, request support for the project from the legislators, and ask for assistance in making the project an IDOT priority.
Meet with legislators and IDOT Timeline: <i>18-24 months</i>	Elected officials, local business representatives	A follow-up meeting should be held with City elected officials, local business leaders, supportive legislators, and high-level IDOT representatives. The purpose of this meeting will be to communicate the broad support for the project and to request that IDOT take steps to advance it, including a commitment from IDOT to program the project or to seek external funds to allow its implementation.

Figure 15. Western Avenue at Grove Street: before and after

