


To: Cara Pavlicek, Village Manager, Village of Oak Park

From: John Lynch, Executive Director, OPEDC 

Subject: Recommended Amendments to Zoning Ordinance Section 8-3(A)
("Use Restrictions – DT Districts")

Date: August 26, 2020

Downtown Oak Park has experienced a dramatic evolution over the past five-plus years. The addition of over 1,200 residential units has changed the greater downtown from a retail and service destination to an urban neighborhood. And while downtown's new residents are drawn to the walkable convenience of retail and dining options, a number of stakeholders have expressed concern to us about rising vacancies downtown. Members of the OPEDC Board of Directors, as well as others outside that Board, have suggested that certain downtown zoning restrictions may not be reflective of changes to the market for retail real estate, and may therefore present obstacles to maintaining traditional occupancy levels on our commercial streets.

In the greater downtown area - defined as Downtown Oak Park (DT-1), Hemingway District (DT-2), and Pleasant District (DT-3) - there is approximately 650,000 square feet (sf) of ground-level space, of which 14% is currently vacant. This is up from 3.5% in 2018. Some of this vacancy is the result of newly delivered space that has yet to be absorbed; between 2018 and 2020, 75,000 sf of new commercial space was delivered, and 17,000 sf (23%) remains unoccupied. Yet some is also likely reflective of a shift in retail toward e-commerce, and the restriction of many fitness and medical uses that have seen increased their space needs in recent years (notwithstanding recent COVID-related slowdowns).

Oak Park's current zoning code requires the front 50' of ground-level space to be maintained for retail use in the DT-1 and DT-2 districts, and the code clearly outlines what constitutes allowable retail use in those areas. In comparison with a handful of comparable municipalities (Elmhurst, La Grange, Naperville, Evanston, and Forest Park), we found that Oak Park is among the more restrictive in terms of permitted ground-floor uses in the core downtown area. Elmhurst and Forest Park are the most open to non-retail uses and allow office, medical, and business/financial services on the first floor. LaGrange, Naperville, and Evanston are slightly more restrictive than Elmhurst and Forest Park, but allow for more flexibility than Oak Park does for some non-retail uses.

On August 18, the Board of Directors of OPEDC voted to recommend to the Village Board of Trustees that additional "service-retail" uses be permitted in the Downtown (DT) zoning districts. We believe that these uses align with the intent of the downtown zoning district by

promoting vibrancy and pedestrian-friendliness that is appropriate for a vibrant mixed-use commercial district.

OPEDC's Board specifically recommends maintaining the 50' retail-only restriction as it exists, but including the following uses as exceptions and permitted uses in the DT districts:

- Art and Fitness Studio
- Health Club
- Recreation, Indoor
- Business Service Center

OPEDC staff recognizes that some of these uses may present unique parking requirements, and we defer to Village staff on how to best assure that parking requirements can be met for any newly permitted uses.

If you have any questions regarding these recommendations, please do not hesitate to contact me.