

Public Private Partnerships

Harrison Crist | 5.10.25

Suburban Placemaking

It is my privilege to present the newly elected Lake County Board with a compelling community development framework. Utilizing the principles and strategies set forth in this framework will allow the Lake County Board to achieve multiple goals. First, it will create the conditions for inclusive economic growth. Second, it will strengthen cooperation among Lake County municipalities, allowing the region to begin to overcome deeply ingrained patterns of isolation and inequality. And third, it will position Lake County as an attractive, vibrant collection of places that is supportive of existing residents and attractive for newcomers. Importantly, this community development framework will pursue these goals in a way that reduces reliance on corporatist economic development strategies that create costly zero-sum-games and races to the bottom among competing municipalities. Lastly, it should be noted that this type of placemaking and revitalization work does not often take place within a suburban context. Therefore, it is also my goal to make the case that this is a worthwhile endeavor, and that new thinking about placemaking, public space, and governance is needed in a place like Lake County.

Several challenges motivate crafting a new community development framework firmly situated in Lake County's suburban context. They can be summarized under the headlines of isolation, inequality, and apathy. All the while, these challenges exist within a contemporary urban political economy that presents an opportunity for a revitalization, or original vitalization, of the suburbs. We will explore these challenges and opportunities further before diving into the principles and strategies of the framework.

Challenge 1: Isolation

Lake County is a suburban region that sits within the Chicago metropolitan area. It is made up of 19 districts that contain at least 50 distinct towns, villages, and small cities. The largest municipality in Lake County is Waukegan, with a population of about 88,000 people.¹ By contrast, Lincolnshire, also within Lake County, has a population of 10,000.² While some municipalities within Lake County have meaningful nodes of connection – the suburbs of Deerfield and Highland Park share a public high school district - there is a lack of coordination among Lake County municipalities with regards to economic and community development. Largely reflecting the historical development of the suburbs as isolated, insulated communities, places like Deerfield, Highland Park, and Waukegan operate independently of one another. There are few examples of businesses that have an inter-suburban footprint; access to public services like libraries and pools are geographically limited; and any type of economic planning that might knit together the region are lacking.

Challenge 2: Inequality

A second challenge that Lake County faces with regards to placemaking and community development is inequality. Despite it being the second wealthiest county in the state, its municipalities have seen varying rates of growth and development. cursory demographic data show how Deerfield and Waukegan sit at two ends of this spectrum. Waukegan, the county seat, has a relatively mixed racial composition, with its population being 33% White, 16% Black, 6% Asian, and 57% Hispanic. On the other hand, Deerfield shows striking racial homogeneity with a

¹ United States Census Bureau. QuickFacts Waukegan city, Illinois 2023.
<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/waukegancityillinois/PST045224>

² United States Census Bureau. QuickFacts Lincolnshire village, Illinois 2023.
<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/lincolnshirevillageillinois/PST045223>

90% White population. The median household income in Waukegan is \$71,000 compared to Deerfield's \$190,000. The wealth gap that this represents is both created by and leads to dramatic differences in other community development indicators, like housing and education. These racially coded disparities reflect historical patterns of development similar to those that created sharp divides between urban and suburban places. It also seems that they will persist as long as the county lacks a united, cohesive community development framework.

Challenge 3: Apathy

Inequality is tightly connected to the third challenge of apathy. In most parts, Lake County is a very nice place to live. While its towns and villages might lack character, cultural identity, and economic dynamism, it is possible that residents are largely content with enjoying the structural advantages of a suburban lifestyle and accepting its downsides. This might be especially true in well-resourced municipalities that have not faced waves of disinvestments that might otherwise prompt the need for creative placemaking. To many places, concerted community development just might not be worth the effort.

The Opportunity

These challenges exist in parallel to a rapidly changing urban political economy that has the potential to open new opportunities for suburban vitalization. Cities today face multiple overlapping crises. Housing prices and rent continue to grow. As total costs of living rise, fewer and fewer working class households are able to afford living in the neighborhoods they helped grow. Displacement and gentrification not only deepen inequality, but also deprive cities of their cultural vitality. All the while, discourse on public safety and quality of life issues create a sense of insecurity among urban residents. Altogether, these challenges might generate a budding interest among residents and businesses in relocating to more suburban settings. Places like Lake County

should be ready to receive these newcomers by presenting them with a well-articulated value proposition that highlights the region's assets. Under these assumptions, Lake County should adhere to the following principles to achieve equitable, sustainable, and generative community development: 1) find power in numbers, 2) collapse space but do not replace, and 3) exercise culture as a muscle. In the following sections, we will justify each of these principles and describe how they can be put into action.

Principle #1: Find Power in Numbers

Principle #1 should be considered the foundational principle in suburban placemaking. As described above, the Lake County suburbs, seen in a negative light, struggle to overcome the stereotypes that define suburban communities across the country. They can be seen as stale, cookie-cutter places whose identities have not moved beyond the idealist vision of the exclusionary, racist era in American history that propelled their rise. It can be said that they are more hospitable to the safety and predictability of corporate chain stores than any potential vibrancy offered by a thriving local businesses scene, and that they lack any real avenues for authentic cultural production. According to their critics, the suburbs are just dull. For the purposes of this project, this characterization is fair to the extent that it allows us to identify the specific features that the Lake County suburbs lack, and that, if present, would allow them to become vibrant, attractive places for existing residents and newcomers alike.

One of these features is certainly economic diversity. Places that allow for varying production and consumption patterns are generally more interesting. The presence of many different types of businesses means that people have more employment options, which can help reduce out-migration and induce stronger social ties to a place. It means that people can satisfy their consumer demands for both necessary and leisure goods. It also means that there are more

opportunities to generate new economic activity, in the style of Jane Jacob's theory that new work emerges from existing work to create new divisions of labor.³

This idea of concentrated economic diversity is actually what makes cities what they are, so it seems foolish to suggest that a suburban town should just become as economically diverse as a city. I agree that it would be nearly impossible for one suburban town to take on this task. After all, the intention of this community development framework is not to turn villages into towns and towns into cities, but rather to present new routes for vitalization that work within the existing urban/suburban fabric. So while Deerfield may not have enough assets to attract new and diverse businesses when acting alone⁴, it may be more successful when working in tight coordination with its neighbors, like Highland Park, Lincolnshire, and Northbrook. This is the heart of Finding Power in Numbers: turning a geographically related group of towns and villages into a cohesive network through which assets can be pooled, shared, and leveraged for collective benefit. The aim of this principle is to build mass – to collect enough people, businesses, and economic activity under one single economic orbit to produce the same self-generating agglomeration effects that we see in concentrated urban neighborhoods.

The challenge of creating this singular orbit brings us to our first strategy, which is to establish an empowered Community Development Committee (CDC) within the Lake County Board. The CDC would be charged with developing and implementing strategies that seek to strengthen and leverage the regional assets of Lake County. The CDC would function as a BID-like entity whose activities support the downtowns of each Lake County municipality. The CDC would

³ Jacobs, Jane. (1969). *The Economy of Cities*. New York: Vintage Books.

⁴ It may not just be unproductive but harmful as they depend on giveaways and privatization.

provide general maintenance and upkeep, beautification, and programming, in addition to the initiative described below. Financing of the CDC is discussed on page 7.

As a modest first initiative, the CDC could create a Lake County-wide business marketing campaign to position the Lake County suburbs as a coordinated regional entity. Such a campaign would be directed at businesses and residents who might be interested in locating to one of the Lake County suburbs. It would shift the narrative for these potential newcomers by demonstrating that in moving to a place like Deerfield, you are not only locating in a great village, but you are also gaining access to the workforce, entrepreneurship, real estate, and natural landscape assets of a tightly interwoven regional network.

A second initiative within the CDC could be the Business Support Branch (BSB). The BSB would provide material resources for entrepreneurs, small businesses, and new businesses across Lake County. The BSB would play an integral role in facilitating asset sharing, especially in the context of new business location decisions. Under current arrangements in which Lake County suburbs largely act in isolation of one another, there is high potential for economic mismatch. One town might have the local entrepreneur with new great business idea, but the other town, only 15 minutes away, has a real estate vacancy within their price range. Presently, few entities would be able to create that match. With oversight of the entire Lake County, the BSB could play an integral role in adding to the stock and types of businesses that are able to locate in the region.

Achieving balanced and fair financing of the CDC would be a key to its success. Sufficient staffing and grant funding to take on BID-like activities, marketing campaigns, and business services would require a fair amount of resources. Theoretically, these initiatives would serve all municipalities across Lake County, but it is unavoidable that others might benefit more. For example, in the case of business placement services, Deerfield gaining a new business would

mean that neighboring Highland Park would receive relatively lower returns on its contribution to the CDC. As referred to earlier, apathy might become a real problem here. Without a compelling value proposition, well-resourced municipalities might not be inclined to participate in the network, thus undermining the effectiveness of the CDC as a whole.

To address this, the CDC should adopt a novel financing model that can be referred to as Revenue Increment Financing (RIF). RIF is based on the Tax Increment Financing, which is a value capture mechanism through which increases in real estate tax revenue are limited for use in the areas that produce those higher tax revenues. The CDC's RIF model can be broken down into two main components. The first is that all property owners within each municipality's downtown core will pay a baseline assessment to receive the basic services of the CDC. The second component is that once the CDC is in operation, businesses within those downtown cores that see stable revenue increases over a sufficient amount of time, potentially 12 months, pay a portion of those revenue increases to the general CDC fund. This arrangement would achieve multiple equity aims and head off several challenges to full participation in the CDC. In blending property assessments and business revenue, the RIF would encourage retail tenant stability by offering a counterpressure to property owners' sole focus on extracting value through rent increases. This logic depends on property owners perceiving that a dollar to the CDC 'goes farther' in increasing their property value than a dollar that they would receive in higher rent. This might indeed stand up to scrutiny as long as CDC programs are effective, and would encourage property owners to help keep successful tenants operating and growing. Additionally, in being incremental, a RIF would allow the CDC to collect a greater proportion of funds only from municipalities that are doing well. Poorer performing communities will pay relatively less than their higher performing peers, even though they may receive more services and programming through the CDC as its overall funding grows.

What would Principle #1 look like in real life? We can look at this from the perspective of a fictional entrepreneur who currently runs a food innovations company in Chicago and is looking to expand their operation. With rising rents and zoning restrictions, it is hard for this entrepreneur to find the right space in the city for their new light manufacturing hub. Usually, relocating to a place like Waukegan or Deerfield would be a non-starter, but with a greater ability to leverage the assets that exist across Lake County, a suburban relocation might not be a bad idea. In fact, thanks to the CDC, the entrepreneur was able to find expanded office space in Deerfield, warehousing in Waukegan, and a light manufacturing facility in Highland Park, which is a 10-minute walk from the Chicago Botanic Gardens, which houses a world class plant research facility that would greatly help with product research. Previously, it would have been a major challenge to locate and assemble these various assets for productive use. But under a united community development framework, entrepreneurs can find better matches across Lake County.

Principle #2: Collapse Space But Do Not Replace

If Lake County is to successfully function as a more unified economic region, there must be greater connectivity among its municipalities. Cities create dynamism and interest through the concentration of different people and businesses. These create powerful forces of economic and cultural development, but structurally, such agglomeration effects are not readily generated by the suburbs, lending to the isolation, inequality, and apathy described in this brief's introduction. The key question is how can Lake County enhance proximity among its municipalities while preserving the assets and amenities that people find valuable, like open space, parking, and discernible differences in land use.

An important consideration for this question is transportation. Suburban development of the 1960s and 70s was enabled by widespread use of the automobile. Today, suburban residents

remain largely dependent on driving. A subset of Lake County communities is served well by the Metra commuter train routes that connect them with Chicago, but there are very few transit options that allow for travel from suburb to suburb within Lake County, which contributes to residents' and businesses' experiences of Lake County as an uncoordinated collection of individual places. The goal here should not be creating complete public transit coverage, but rather facilitating access across key nodes whose connections have the potential to produce agglomeration effects.

Connecting Metra train stations using existing assets like the Pace bus system can be a starting point for this work. Pace, which bills itself as the transit backbone of Chicago's suburbs, serves tens of thousands of daily riders and covers more than 35,000 square miles of routes. However, it does not seem to provide the connectivity that would be needed if the region is to draw in and support new and diverse economic actors. To take the example from Principle #1, the new food innovations company that decided to locate its corporate office in Deerfield might have administrate business to take care of in the county seat of Waukegan, a 25-minute drive away. The employee charged with this task, working for a company that thought it would be feasible to ask its Chicago-based workforce to reverse commute out to the suburbs, likely arrived at the office via Metra on a direct 35-minute route. However, now in Deerfield without a car, that employee, according to Pace's trip planner, would have to embark on an hour-and-a-half long trip with multiple transfers, modes, and walks to public transit pick up points to attend to their business in Waukegan. After just one instance of this scenario, leadership at our food tech company may begin to regret their company's relocation to the suburbs. However, by creating new bus routes that serve regional nodes like Metra stations, Lake County can better connect its geographically disparate assets.

As with other public transportation networks, any blanket suggestion to expand its footprint will fall flat without means to collect new revenue streams. Here is where private sponsorship

opportunities might be potentially valuable. In a similar context, Los Angeles has utilized public private partnerships to an effective degree by allow companies to advertise at bus stops in exchange for their funding of bus stop modernizations. A similar tactic could be adopted across Lake County, possibly with entire bus lines being sponsored by private entities.

Principle #3: Exercise Culture as a Muscle

While Principle #1 alluded to the importance of cultural identity in the context of a regional marketing plan, the community development framework outlined thus far has been mostly oriented towards leveraging and building economic assets. In contrast, Principle #3 focuses on creating conditions in which local cultural assets can be developed and sustained. While new businesses and diverse economic forms can create interest and lend character to a place, authentic vibrancy comes from the experience of a place's cultural footprint. The perceived lack of an authentic, original culture within a suburban environment is often seen as the fault of the people who live there – that the residents themselves lack creativity and a desire to make their places special. I think this is wrong. All people have the capacity to develop their own cultural forms and artifacts. Certain social historical developments have created both more and less creative communities, but all communities have the potential to engage with art and placemaking. What is needed in the suburbs, then, is not new types of people, but new outlets, opportunities, and structures that can help people express their and their community's history and future in unexpected and interesting ways. This is the heart of Principle #3 – recognizing that suburban settings can become more vibrant by the effort of the people who live and work there, as long as there is a concerted effort to support communal exercise of those culture-making muscles.

A starting strategy that can enact this principle is the creation of an Arts and Culture Committee (ACC) within the Lake County Board. As with the CDC, the ACC would serve as a

directive body that would create county-wide arts programming. However, as opposed to the CDC, the ACC would focus more on seed and sparks, or initiatives that functions as catalysts or background support for more localized cultural development efforts. The reason behind this is that moreso that economic development planning, cultural production derives its value from local expression. Cultural cohesion among Lake County municipalities would not mean that they all adhere to the same beautification standards or building façade designs. Rather, it would mean that each town and village is empowered to the same extent to develop and strengthen their own individual cultural assets.

With this guiding philosophy, the ACC can adopt several initiatives to guide cultural development throughout Lake County. First, they can appoint Local Arts and Culture Boards made up of diverse creatives and curators that can set programming within their own communities. Local Boards' members would come from all different backgrounds, including older artists, teachers, and young kids. Each Local Board would be given a yearly budget, possibly with funds from the CDC, and the ACC would facilitate communication among them, allowing for crossover events like Lincolnshire Theatre Troupe performances at the Deerfield Farmer's Market or Resident Artist roles. Strategies like these can go far in igniting a shared cultural identity that can be self-generating – when people see their fellow community members engaged in placemaking, it builds their own confidence to imagine new creative outlets as long as there is a structure or organization to support those tendencies.

Close

By adapting placemaking principles and strategies that have been honed in more urban environments, suburban communities can articulate their own visions of community development that spur vitalization and vibrancy. As suggested in this brief, this work relies on creating greater

cohesion among neighboring suburbs under the direction of a singular governing entity. In the case of Lake County, the Lake County Board provides a ready-made platform to coordinate placemaking and implement a community development framework. By following the three principles outlined – Find Power in Numbers, Collapse Space But Do Not Replace, and Exercise Culture as a Muscle – Lake County can pursue strategies that turn the region from a loosely connected group of isolated suburbs into a regional network with interesting, dynamic economic and cultural assets.