

MILWAUKEE AVENUE SPECIAL CHARACTER OVERLAY DISTRICT (SCOD) – DRAFT FINDINGS

Introduction

Pursuant to Section 17-13-0503 of the Chicago Zoning Ordinance, “before a public hearing is held by the City Council Committee on Zoning, Landmarks and Building Standards, as provided for in Section 17-13-0300, to consider recommending the designation of any area as a special character overlay district (“SCOD”), the Department of Planning and Development must hold at least one public meeting in the ward in which the proposed district is located for the purpose of explaining the proposal, soliciting comments on it, and making findings regarding the factors listed in Section 17-13-0505.” The applicable criteria and findings are provided as follows.

Eligibility for Designation

Criteria - Section 17-13-0505-A:

The property within the proposed special character overlay district meets the minimum requirements of Section 17-7-0602, Minimum Requirements: An area will be eligible for designation as a special character overlay district after a recommendation by the City Council Committee on Zoning, Landmarks and Building Standards if at the time of application it is located within any R, B, C, D or M district, and contains at least 4 contiguous acres of land area.

Findings:

The property within the proposed SCOD is located within R, B, and C districts and contains approximately 73 contiguous acres of land area.

Unique or Distinctive Physical Characteristics

Criteria - Section 17-13-0505-B:

The proposed overlay district is consistent with Section 17-7-0601, Purpose: The purpose of this section is to expressly authorize the establishment of special character overlay districts for neighborhoods that have unique or distinctive physical characteristics that are not generally present in other areas of the city, or to protect and guide development in areas that have distinctive neighborhood characteristics. Such unique or distinctive physical characteristics may come in the form of:

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1. Size, shape or lot configurations that deviate greatly from the platting pattern found in other parts of the city;
2. Building types or architectural styles that conflict with base district standards, yet make a positive contribution to the physical character or livability of an area;
3. Environmental or other physical features that would prevent reasonable development under applicable zoning standards;
4. Identifiable and cohesive neighborhood unit possessing similar development patterns and physical characteristics (for example, building features, site design, land use patterns, and natural or streetscape characteristics); or
5. May be located adjacent (that is, as a buffer area) to an existing Chicago Landmark District.

The special zoning regulations that apply within special character overlay districts are intended to reduce conflicts between new construction and existing development, encourage city beautification and conserve the character of the city's most unique neighborhoods. Special character districts are not intended to serve as neighborhood-specific zoning rules that modify zoning standards merely because of dissatisfaction with development that complies with otherwise applicable standards. Such situations should be addressed through consideration of amendments to base district zoning standards that would apply citywide.

Findings:

The proposed SCOD is consistent with Section 17-7-0601, Purpose. This area demonstrates the following unique and distinctive physical characteristics.

1. Milwaukee Avenue is a diagonal street which results in a unique platting pattern and lot size, shape and configurations that deviate greatly from the platting pattern found in other parts of the city.
2. Milwaukee Avenue has served as one of the city's core commercial centers for nearly 150 years and encompasses an identifiable and cohesive neighborhood unit possessing similar development patterns and physical characteristics. For example:
 - a. Milwaukee Avenue features a consistent streetwall characterized by mainly late-19th century/early 20th century, one- and two-story mixed-use buildings with commercial storefronts on the ground floor, punctuated by taller buildings at key intersections. Building footprints typically take up the entire lot and are built to the sidewalk.
 - b. Eleven architectural styles are represented in the corridor, with the most predominant architectural being "Commercial Vernacular."
 - c. 125 character buildings are identified within the SCOD, which date from the historic development (1870-1960) of the corridor and possess character-defining features including architectural style, building type, massing, scale,

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number of stories, building orientation, setting, materials, and architectural ornamentation at the primary facades.

3. The area is adjacent to two Chicago Landmark Districts: the Logan Square Boulevards District and the Milwaukee-Diversey-Kimball District.

The proposed SCOD design guidelines are intended to reduce conflicts between new construction and existing development, encourage city beautification and conserve the character of Milwaukee Avenue by providing illustrative guidance for rehabilitation, additions, alterations, and new construction. Driving the design guidelines are primary guiding principles developed based on the existing regulations, ordinances, and data collection, including fieldwork of existing conditions and community engagement. The guiding principles aim to enhance the historic and character-defining built environment of the district, encourage appropriate rehabilitation while supporting a maximization of height and density and compatible, but differentiated new construction through creative and contemporary designs that retains the pedestrian scale, building uses, and a strong sense of place.

Existing Zoning Compatibility

Criteria - Section 17-13-0505-C:

The existing zoning of the property would allow new development that is inconsistent with the unique characteristics within the proposed district.

Findings:

Milwaukee Avenue is widely known as the main commercial corridor for many Northwest Side neighborhoods, in part due to the prevalence of Business (B) and Commercial (C) zoning along the corridor. The predominant zoning types in the SCOD are as follows: B3: Community Shopping District, C1: Neighborhood Commercial District, B2: Neighborhood Mixed-Use District, and PD: Planned Development.

Since 2000, more than 1,000 new units have been delivered within the study area and since 2007 there have been 16 completed new construction projects within the study area. Most new developments have been approved through the Planned Development process. Section 17-8-0513 of the City of Chicago's Zoning Code requires planned development review and approval for any multi-unit residential development in a B/C-3 zoning district with 60 or more dwelling units.

Although there are citywide design guidelines such as The Neighborhood Design Guidelines which were adopted by Plan Commission in March 2022, there are no existing design guidelines which apply specifically to this area. The result has been several new developments that are perceived as inconsistent with the unique characteristics within the proposed district.

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Based on input received from community meeting participants and survey participants, many recent developments were rated low for successfully fitting the building character and identify of Milwaukee Avenue. Specific concerns were raised regarding building materials, overbearing height and scale, no relation to the neighborhood and not matching community character.

Heritage, Planning and Investment

Criteria - Section 17-13-0505-D:

The area's importance to the city's heritage or identity, whether comprehensive plans exist for the area and the nature of recent and planned public and private investment within the area.

Findings:

The area's importance to the city's heritage or identity is exhibited by the following:

1. Milwaukee Avenue has served as one of the city's core commercial centers for nearly 150 years and its origins date to several hundred years earlier when it was established as a Native American trail. The Northwestern Plank Road opened in 1849 and approximately followed the path of present-day Milwaukee Avenue.
2. In 1869, construction began on the Chicago Boulevard System, a ring of parks and wide, planted-median boulevards. In the study area, a visual point of the boulevard system is Logan Square itself, located where Logan and Kedzie Boulevards and Milwaukee Avenue meet. The Logan Square Boulevards District was designated a Chicago Landmark in 2005.
3. Beginning in the early 20th century with the advent of the automobile and continuing into the mid-20th century, repair shops, showrooms, and garages were constructed on Milwaukee Avenue, creating the third-largest concentration of automobile-oriented businesses in the city, along with South Michigan Avenue and Edgewater Motor Rows.
4. Post-World War immigration waves, particularly from Poland and Russia, alongside a housing construction boom, significantly increased the area's population and cultural diversity. In 2022, Milwaukee Avenue was designated by the State of Illinois as a Polish Heritage Corridor, recognizing the rich cultural heritage of Polish Americans in the area.
5. Beginning in the 1960s, the community's demographics began to shift following an influx of Hispanic immigrants from Puerto Rico, Cuba, South and Central America, and Mexico, helping to stabilize the area's population and contributing to its vibrancy and ethnic and economic diversity that continues to define the corridor's sense of place and character today.

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The following comprehensive plans exist for the area:

1. The North Milwaukee Avenue Corridor Plan was adopted by the Chicago Plan Commission on Dec. 11, 2008, and covers approximately 0.75 miles of Milwaukee between Western and California avenues. The plan was drafted in response to increases in development pressure and identifies means to strengthen and enhance the corridor through preservation, renovation, and/or redevelopment and establishes the framework for private development projects as well as a basis for public improvement along the corridor.
2. The Logan Square Open Space Plan was adopted by the Chicago Plan commission in July 2004, and represents a collaborative effort to address the critical need for more and better-quality open spaces in Logan Square.

The following are examples of recent and planned public and private investment:

1. Since 2000, more than 1,000 new units have been delivered within the study area and since 2007 there have been 16 completed new construction projects within the study area. Milwaukee Avenue in Logan Square and Avondale will continue to experience development pressure for denser rental multifamily residential developments.
2. The Milwaukee Avenue reconstruction project, stretching from Logan Boulevard to Belmont Avenue and budgeted at \$27.4 million, is slated to commence in Spring 2024. This initiative includes pedestrian and cyclist improvements, bus stops, and upgrades to traffic signals, landscaping, and lighting. Milwaukee Avenue will be rerouted around Logan Square and the roads surrounding the square will be converted to two-way traffic and equipped with separated bike lanes. Kedzie Avenue north of Milwaukee will be rerouted to create a new public plaza adjacent to the Logan Square Blue Line station.
3. The vacant property at 2550 N. Milwaukee Avenue and 3127 W. Logan Boulevard has been rezoned for public open space and has secured funding in the amount of \$6 million for the creation of a new public plaza and open space. Construction is planned to start in the second quarter of 2025 and be completed in the second quarter of 2026.

Criteria - Section 17-13-0505-E:

Supplemental special character overlay district regulations are needed to maintain the stability and unique character of the area or to promote development that is consistent with any adopted comprehensive plans or design guidelines for the area.

Findings:

The proposed design guidelines are needed to maintain the stability and unique character of the area and to promote development that is consistent adopted comprehensive plans or design guidelines for the area.

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Since 2000, more than 1,000 new units have been delivered within the study area and since 2007 there have been 16 completed new construction projects within the study area. The growth of residential density along Milwaukee Avenue in Logan Square and Avondale can be attributed to a combination of factors, including proximity to the Central Business District, access to public transit, and access to lifestyle and recreational amenities.

Milwaukee Avenue in Logan Square and Avondale will continue to experience development pressure for denser rental multifamily residential developments. Developers are likely to seek large available sites that are close to transit and are able to accommodate height and density that allows projects to be financially feasible.

The proposed SCOD design guidelines are needed to promote development that is consistent adopted comprehensive plans or design guidelines for the area. The North Milwaukee Avenue Corridor Plan was adopted by the Chicago Plan Commission on Dec. 11, 2008, and covers approximately 0.75 miles of Milwaukee Avenue between Western and California avenues. The plan was drafted in response to increases in development pressure and identifies means to strengthen and enhance the corridor through preservation, renovation, and/or redevelopment and establishes the framework for private development projects as well as a basis for public improvement along the corridor.

Potential Nonconformity

Criteria - Section 17-13-0505-F:

The proportion of land within the district that would become nonconforming if the special character overlay district Amendment were approved.

Findings:

The proposed design guidelines are applicable solely in cases of exterior modifications that necessitate a building permit, new construction or external alterations tied to Zoning Map Amendment or Planned Development applications. As these guidelines do not extend to pre-existing buildings and properties outside these conditions, they will not result in nonconformities. Furthermore, the Zoning Administrator has the authority to approve administrative adjustments to waive or alter any design guideline, provided that the proposed modification aligns with the criteria outlined in the ordinance.