
High-speed high-rises stagger Streeterville

By Kathy Bergen and John Handley
Tribune staff reporters

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Streeterville residents are not a naive bunch.

They moved into their condos and apartments knowing they would share their turf with hordes of tourists bound for Michigan Avenue or Navy Pier or Millennium Park. And they knew that the patchwork of surface parking lots dotting the landscape would eventually give way to more high-rises, and that those new skyscrapers, ranging from 26 to 65 stories, would block some spectacular views.

Still, many are reeling at the sheer volume of high-rise residential development storming their way at the southern end of the neighborhood. Within the next five years, another 13 high-rises will go up in the area wedged between Michigan Avenue and the lake, and Chicago Avenue and the river. That will boost the supply of apartments and condominiums by more than a third, to 12,523 units.

The building boom could bring another 5,250 residents to a neighborhood already housing 13,535, according to some estimates.

"Streeterville had been a totally overlooked sub-market, but now it's hot," said Gail Lissner, vice president of Appraisal Research Counselors.

"The new wave of Streeterville development has started," said Daniel McLean, president of MCL Cos., which already has built three residential high-rises and plans two more. "We're halfway."

The speed of change is making some residents sweat.

"It seems kind of overwhelming," said Deborah Mitchell, a marketing consultant who owns a one-bedroom condo on East Ohio. "The numbers I've heard seem staggering."

The concerns weighing on the neighborhood are many. What will happen to already-congested traffic, to panoramic views, to property values? What will happen to the character of the neighborhood, to the way it feels to walk down the street?

"Most people who live in the area find this a good place to live," said James Houston, president of the Streeterville Organization for Active Residents (SOAR). "Our concern is that if we get excessive density and begin to approach the feel of Midtown Manhattan, we may begin to see a decline in interest in living in this area. I don't think we're there yet, but we need to consider this as development proceeds in the future."

Not everyone wary

"Parking lots are not the best use of space," said Connie Buscemi, a spokeswoman for the city's Department of Planning and Development. "This is a high-density corridor, and people want to live there because there is so much to do."

An increase in residents should spell big business for the stores on North Michigan Avenue. Streeterville residents "shop locally, and that's part of the reason North Michigan Avenue has been a phenomenal success," said John Maxson,

president and chief executive of the Greater North Michigan Avenue Association.

The area was zoned for high-rise development 20 years ago, noted Ald. Burton Natarus (42nd).

"We've been struggling to negotiate with developers, on a volunteer basis, to reduce the size and alter the projects," Natarus said. "Also, we've been working with SOAR on their neighborhood plan, which does not have the effect of law but gives ideas on how to change."

The plan urges developers to preserve historic elements, maximize street-level natural light, use architectural screening on above-ground parking, and include landscaped areas in new developments, among other things.

Still, random chats with neighborhood residents indicate many harbor concerns, the biggest ones centering on traffic.

On summer evenings, traffic can gel into gridlock, especially when there are special events in the area, said Stephen Daniels, a legal researcher who owns a condo on East Ohio as a second family home.

On such nights, "traffic-wise, it's almost unbearable," he said. "And with what's on the books, it will only increase."

The city is trying to be proactive on the issue, said Brian Steele, a spokesman for the Department of Transportation.

For instance, the city is considering a \$4 million program to coordinate the timing of all traffic signals in Streeterville so they will work in sequences tailored to meet the traffic flow needs at peak times. The program is expected to go into effect next year.

Within Streeterville, there is no room to build new roads or expand existing ones, "so our goal is to manage the capacity we have," Steele said.

The city also works with developers to come up with ways to prevent traffic problems, he said.

Views indefinite

Then there's the issue of views.

Many residents understand that the views they've enjoyed will not last forever.

"If I really wanted a view of the lake, I would have paid for a place with a lake view," Daniels said. "I can't complain because I'm not paying a premium for a view."

Others are less sanguine.

Law student Shaun Raad and his girlfriend, attorney Amanda Feltman, would consider moving from their 35th-floor one-bedroom apartment on East Ohio if a planned development to the east should block their view of Navy Pier, Raad said.

The couple also has grown attached to a small, temporary park about a block from their home, where they take their 10-week-old golden retriever, Wrigley.

"It's beautiful and we've met tons of people here," Raad said as he walked Wrigley through the landscaped patch between Illinois Street and Grand Avenue, near Peshtigo Court.

"We've been told they are going to put up condos here," he said.

In fact, it's something of a neighborhood joke, he said.

"People say, 'That's what we need around here. More condos,'" he said. "You can't look around without seeing more condo ads."

Two residential high-rises are planned for the site, but a permanent park will be built between the new buildings, the city said.

The volume of units coming on the market has other residents concerned.

"Basic economics tell you if there is oversupply, it will depress prices," said Mitchell, the marketing consultant who lives on East Ohio. She also is an adjunct marketing professor at the University of Chicago.

Others say there will be sufficient demand since the build-up will be gradual.

"I do not see a glut with new buildings half-empty," said Gail Spreen, who is vice president of the Streeterville residents organization and who sells and rents residential properties in the area.

Boomers drive boom

Real estate analyst Steven Friedman, president of S.B. Friedman Co., said he does not expect prices to drop as a result of the building boom.

"Strong Baby Boomer demographics are underlying the strength of the downtown housing market," he said.

"Boomers are emptying out of the suburbs and moving downtown. They especially want larger and higher-quality units," Friedman said.

The Streeterville organization does have some concerns about aesthetics.

The group is encouraging developers "to create a contiguous feel, from one building to the next and from one block to the next, and to create as much green space as possible," said Spreen, who is chairman of the group's Neighbors Action Task Force, which works with developers.

The group also is advocating for loading docks with adequate space, underground parking, and street-level facades with windows, and in some cases, retail.

"We really don't want this to be like a concrete jungle," said Spreen.

So far, the group has found developers responsive, she said.

"I feel very optimistic," she said. "I think the developers appreciate what a great location this is, and that the projects will be there for the long-term."

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Slices of Streeterville history

In 1834, what is now St. Clair Street was the shore of Lake Michigan and aptly named Sand Street.

In 1886, "Capt." George Wellington Streeter ran his steamboat, Reutan, aground on a sandbar between what is now Superior Street and Chicago Avenue. "Cap" Streeter filled in the area between the shore and his vessel with Chicago Fire debris, calling his settlement the "District of Lake Michigan."

By 1889, Streeter and his common-law wife, Maria, were evicted from the land only to return. By the following year, combat opened between police and residents of the District, which had become home to prostitutes, gamblers, drunks and assorted other undesirables.

The early 1900s saw an influx of factories and warehouses into the south end of the area. The North Pier Terminal stands as a reminder of the neighborhood's past.

The 1920 opening of the Michigan Avenue Bridge over the Chicago River created the prime real estate now known as Streeterville.

Though Streeter died in 1921, his nieces and nephews continued to lay claim to the land until a court ruling awarded the area to Chicago Title and Trust.

Streeter's home, by the way, was on the site now occupied by the John Hancock Center. Sources: Chicago Public Library, Chicago Tribune, Encyclopedia of Chicago, RedEye, Streeterville Organization of Active Residents, Wikipedia

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No small, no slow plans

Real estate developers have big plans to transform Chicago's Streeterville neighborhood into a high-rise haven by erecting numerous condos that will alter the city skyline and increase the population density in the area.

| NAME | DEVELOPER | STORIES | UNITS | PRICE PER CONDO | UNIT |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------|-------|--|------|
| 150 E. Ontario | Monaco Development | 51 | 160 | N/A | |
| 345 E. Ohio | Golub & Co. | 49, 51 | 901 | N/A | |
| 550 N. St. Clair | Sutherland Pearsall Development | 26 | 112 | From high \$200,000s to nearly \$2 million | |
| Avenue East Residential Homes | | 27 | 133 | From mid-\$200,000s to of America \$1 million plus | |
| CityFront Plaza | Centrum Properties | 40, 65, 31 | 281* | From mid-\$300,000s* | |
| 600 N. Fairbanks | Urban R2 Development | 41 | 224 | From \$310,000; penthouses, \$1.6 million to \$1.9 million | |
| 600 N. Lake Shore | Belgravia Group and Sandz Development | 40, 46 | 400 | From high \$300,000s to \$1.7 million | |
| Park View | MCL | 47 | 270 | From \$425,900 | |
| Name unknown | MCL | 25 | 210 | N/A | |
| Name unknown | LR Development | N/A | N/A | N/A | |

*Units and prices for 31-story building only

EXISTING LANDMARKS (stories)

John Hancock Center (100)

Water Tower Place (74)

Tribune Tower (34)

NBC Tower (37)

Lake Point Tower (70)

Sources: The developers
Chicago Tribune/Van Tsui and Keith Claxton

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