



# 2019 Board Retreat Report

Downtown Oak Park

October 2, 2019

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## Present

Board: Mike Fox, Tammie Grossman, Robbin Harrow, Judith Lalor, Woody Linton, Jeff Long, John Lynch, Mary Ludgin, Naiyana McCaffrey, Cindy Summer, Eric Wagner  
 Staff: Anna Kosowski, Naomi Soto, Shanon Williams

## Overview

On October 2, 2019, the board of directors of the Downtown Oak Park organization gathered at a half-day retreat with the following goals:

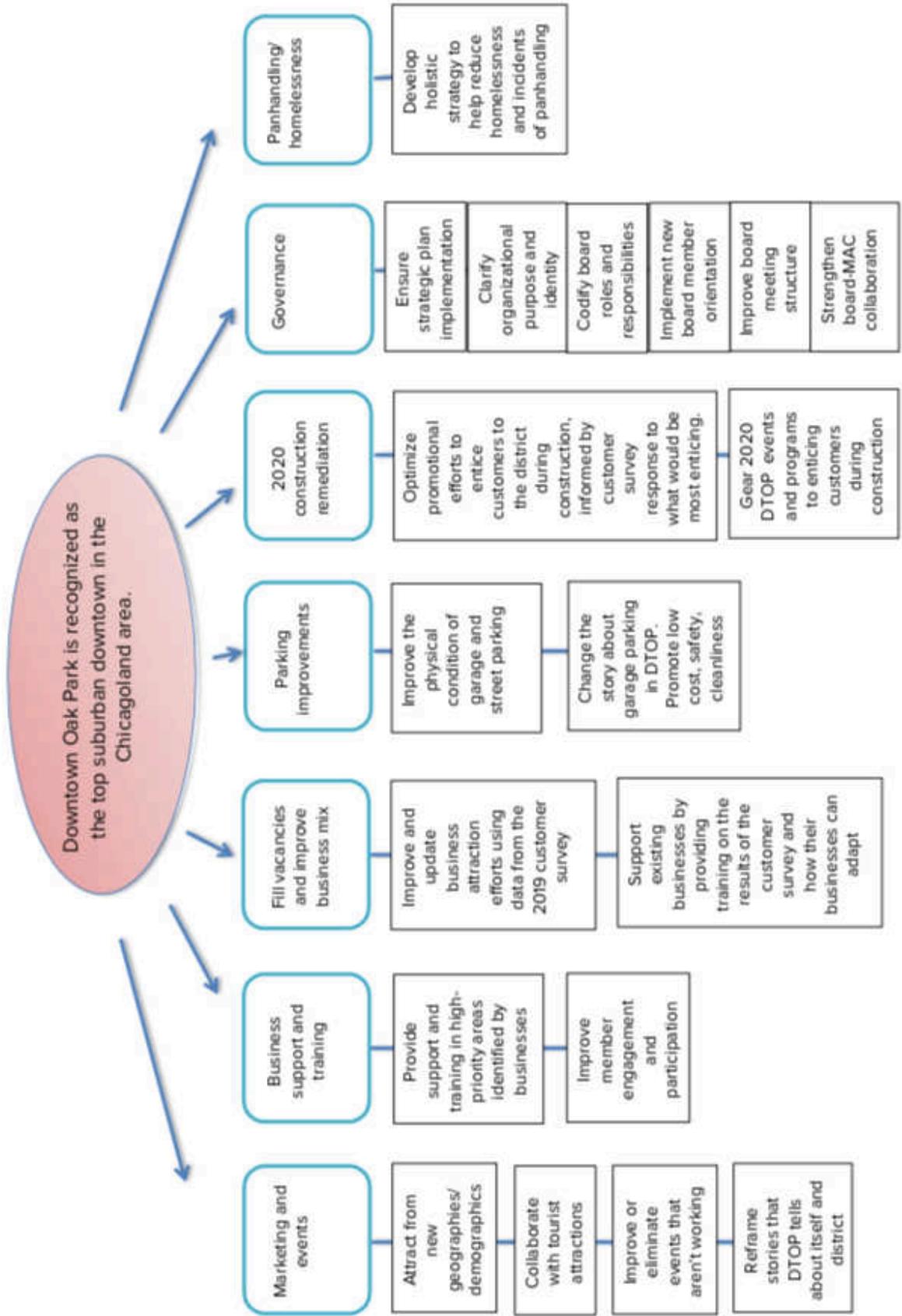
- Develop a compelling vision for the next three years of DTOP in order to provide focus to the board and staff and inspire involvement from DTOP businesses and customers.
- Identify Year One strategies and objectives, including specific pressing issues identified in the surveys.
- Strengthen board governance and clarify board roles in order to support the board in reaching its goals and allow the board to better communicate its purpose to potential new board members.

The retreat was part of a larger strategic visioning and governance process designed to:

- Reenergize board, staff, and membership around a compelling vision for Downtown Oak Park’s work, which will provide the strategic direction for the next 3-5 years.
- Gather data from key constituencies, including business owners and customers, to inform the strategic direction.
- Refine board governance policies, procedures, and commitments in order to support the board in meeting its goals and allow the board to better communicate its purpose to potential new board members and its constituents.

As part of the larger process, Community Allies conducted surveys of Downtown Oak Park customers and businesses, as well as the DTOP board of directors. Over 1000 respondents completed the customer survey, with 41 business owners taking the business survey and 7 board members completing their survey. Together, the three data sets provide the DTOP board with keys to a roadmap for strategy and prioritization.

**Downtown Oak Park Three-Year Strategic Map  
2020-2022**



Next step: determine Year One priorities

## Key results and recommendations

The customer and business surveys and the retreat discussion revealed these strategic priority areas for DTOP in the next three years:

1. Marketing and events
2. Business support & training
3. Business attraction/fill vacancies/business mix
4. Parking improvements
5. 2020 construction remediation
6. Governance: board and organizational purpose/structure
7. Panhandling/homelessness?

Below are details on each priority and goals, pulled from the retreat. Also included, where appropriate, is supporting information from the retreat discussion to guide the board in its implementation of the priorities and goals.

### MARKETING AND EVENTS

#### Goals

- ⇒ Attract from new geographies/demographics
- ⇒ Collaborate with tourist attractions
- ⇒ improve or eliminate events that aren't working
- ⇒ Reframe the stories that DTOP tells about itself and the district

#### Supporting info: DTOP stories

At the retreat, the board worked on developing new stories to tell about the DTOP organization, the Downtown Oak Park commercial district, and the work of the DTOP board. Below are the “headlines” for the stories that the board developed for these areas. They can also be further developed to provide the basis for DTOP’s vision for the next three years.

Downtown Oak Park commercial district: “Oak Park Recognized as Top Suburban Downtown in the Chicagoland Area”

*becomes DTOP’s three-year vision, the thing you are working towards:*

DTOP organization. “DTOP Brings Vibrancy to the Downtown Oak Park District.”  
*becomes part of DTOP’s “who are we?” statement added to the mission statement as it appears on the website, or used to revise that statement.*

DTOP board recruitment. “Join Our Board of Directors in Shaping the Future of Our District.”

*Becomes the heading of the explanation of what the board does and how, along with the “who are we?” statement, the three-year vision, and the six priorities for the next three years.*

Other key points about how DTOP can improve how it talks about its work and the district included how to fight the negativity around the density in Oak Park:

- Reframe the issue and talk about solutions

- Find the kernel of truth in the negative reviews and focus on addressing that piece
- Be able to talk about density's role in sustainability and carbon reduction

See further nuance about DTOP's stories in the Detailed Retreat Notes.

## BUSINESS SUPPORT AND TRAINING

### Goals

- ⇒ Provide support/training in these high priority areas identified by the business survey:
  - Increasing costs: occupancy and non-occupancy
  - Internet competition
  - Business to business partnerships
  - Inability to find/keep good staff
  - Decreasing sales
- ⇒ Improve DTOP's engagement with its members

### Supporting info: DTOP engagement

The board discussed how to more effectively engage members and potential/existing board members in the work of DTOP. They recognized these challenges to engagement:

- Business owners are working more than they have before. They are tired and overworked and don't want to do more related to their businesses.
- They need to see the value of the organization and we need to do things that are relevant to them. For example, are we offering a value for a business to read an email or go to a workshop?
- A lot of employees of the businesses don't know who/what DTOP is.

They identified these elements that should guide DTOP efforts to increase engagement in DTOP membership and board service:

- Provide defined tasks
  - People rally around specific things
  - People need to know exactly what is expected of them in board service and member engagement
- Inspiration
  - Inspiring, focused leadership from both board and E.D.
  - Causes that are relevant
  - Demonstrate that engagement can lead to making a real difference, a real impact
  - Fun!
- Ask people what they want/need to engage
- Competence/trust. Promote that DTOP can get done what it sets out to do.
- Make engagement easy and a good use of people's time.
- Offer value for a business to read an email or go to a workshop

Another key element that came out of the engagement discussion was ***the need for board members to take the lead in engaging with their peers***. The board recognized that business owners are more likely to be compelled into engagement by other business owners than they are by staff.

## **FILL VACANCIES AND IMPROVE BUSINESS MIX**

### Goals

- ⇒ Improve and update business attraction efforts. Collaborating with OPEDC, using the results of the consumer survey to provide targets.
- ⇒ Support existing businesses by provide training on the results of the consumer survey and how they can use the data to adapt their business models and practices.

## **PARKING IMPROVEMENTS**

### Goals

- ⇒ Work with VOP to improve the physical conditions of garage and street parking, with a focus on the elements most strongly identified in the consumer survey as needing improvement:
  - Garages: safety (lighting, security), cleanliness, expense.
  - Street parking: traffic congestion.
- ⇒ Change the story about garage parking in Oak Park by promoting its low cost, free initial parking, safety, convenience, and cleanliness

## **2020 CONSTRUCTION REMEDIATION**

### Goals:

- ⇒ Optimize promotional efforts to entice customers to the district during construction. Ensure that the VOP's plans to attract customers are informed by what survey respondents said would be most enticing to them:
  - Free parking
  - Deep discounts/freebies
  - Exciting special events
  - Knowing that I'm helping local businesses
- ⇒ Gear 2020 DTOP events and promotions towards the above priorities to get customers downtown during construction.

## **GOVERNANCE**

### Goals

- ⇒ Oversee the board's implementation of this strategic plan
- ⇒ Finalize three-year vision
- ⇒ Clarify organizational purpose and identity
- ⇒ Codify board roles and responsibilities
- ⇒ Implement new board member orientation policy and practice
- ⇒ Improve board meetings for greater productivity
- ⇒ Strengthen board collaboration with the MAC (align meeting times, monthly reports, etc.)

### Supporting info: DTOP identity

At the retreat, the board identified these primary identities for DTOP:

1. DTOP is a body that oversees Special Service Area #1, ensuring that public dollars are spent appropriately and effectively.
2. DTOP is an association of business and property owners helping to shape the healthy future of the Downtown Oak Park commercial district.
3. DTOP supports businesses within its service area, helping them to compete.

The board needs further clarity on its policy regarding second floor businesses. It may want to revisit its practices in this area and then ask the governance task force to propose a draft statement that articulates the board's policy and submit it for board revision and approval. The policy is needed in order to guide the board in its long-term planning, guide the staff in day to day operations, and ensure clarity to the public. In wrestling with this topic, the board and task force should consider the following questions that arose at the retreat:

- As a membership organization, should DTOP continue to provide direct service only to ground floor businesses? Why? Is there a benefit to be considered in welcoming second floor businesses into DTOP membership?
- If second floor businesses continue to be excluded from membership, how can DTOP's benefit to those businesses be better articulated?

### **PANHANDLING/HOMELESSNESS**

The consumer and business surveys did not include a question about addressing panhandling and homelessness in the Downtown Oak Park district. However, a significant number of consumers wrote it in as a concern about the district, and board members seemed to agree that it needed to be addressed. Should the board determine that this is a priority for the next three years, it will need to set goals to do so. Suggested means of addressing this issue include:

- Partner with the city and local non-profits on a holistic effort to reduce homelessness and poverty in Oak Park.
- Partner with local food pantries and soup kitchens to provide informational cards that customers can hand out instead of cash, directing panhandlers to the nearest location to find a free meal.

### **Next Steps**

1. Board governance training. The board will identify a future board meeting to host a training on best practices for association governance, clarify the role of the board, and begin to develop and codify its governance policy. The governance task force should oversee this work.
2. Finalize the Year One plan.
  - a. The board should use its next meeting to:
    - i. Review the retreat results and affirm its commitment to the seven priority areas as the focus for the next 2-3 years.
    - ii. Assign a board lead and small task force (2-4 people, plus relevant staff) to each of the seven topics. The task forces will develop priorities and work plans to accomplish them. There are suggested instructions and worksheets provided at the end of this report.
    - iii. The board may opt to use this meeting to break into task force groups and begin work plan development.
    - iv. The task forces should provide their work plans to the Governance task force prior to the following board meeting.



## Detailed retreat notes

### **Introductions.** “My dearest hope for Downtown Oak Park is...”

- Mary Ludgin (Property owner – 9 years on board). My dearest hope for DTOP is to continue our growth as a place to live, work and experience.
- Mike Fox (property owner – 23-24 years on board). My dearest hope for DTOP is to define our target market(s) to see if it is still the same. Times have changed and want to make sure we are doing the right things as an organization.
- John Lynch (OPDC). My dearest hope for DTOP is for Oak Park to become a regional draw for entertainment. We need to evaluate our programs and the promotion of those programs, to make them compelling for a regional audience.
- Tammie Grossman (Village of OP. 2 years on board). My dearest hope for DTOP is to create a vibrant exciting community that attracts visitors. They should have a good time, tell their friends, and spend more money!
- Judith Lalor (Business owner. 2 years on board). My dearest hope for DTOP is to create a cohesive marketing plan for businesses to attract more customers, and for empty storefronts to be filled.
- Robbin Harrow (Business owner. 1 month on board). My dearest hope for DTOP is for everything to settle down a little bit so that things can start to happen (she was referring to all of the traffic and construction).
- Naiyana McCaffrey (Business owner. 6 months on board) My dearest hope for DTOP is to bring a larger variety of businesses that compliment the existing businesses and make it an area for one-stop shopping. She also wants to make it easier for people to come to the district.
- Cindy Summers (Business owner. 3-4 years on board). My dearest hope for DTOP is to have a thriving mix of individually owned businesses along with regional and national companies to make Oak Park a draw.
- Shannon Williams (Executive Director. 13 years with DTOP). My dearest hope for DTOP is to see the district blossom to what it can be. Maybe what we are doing is dated and we aren't doing everything we can. Want to integrate sustainability into what we do, but wants to make sure businesses want to do that as well. Even if it is just at a consolidated waste management. We have always been a leader and we can lead in this area. She needs help.
- Woody Linton. My dearest hope for DTOP is to do more with the new residents that are recently in the neighborhood, which includes researching their demographics.
- Eric Wagner (Visit Oak Park. 1 year on board). My dearest hope for DTOP is to create an organization that supports local businesses that help support a thriving downtown community.
- Jeff Long (Business owner). My dearest hope for DTOP is to figure out how to bring in more non-residents to downtown area and fill in empty storefronts.
- Anna Kosowski (staff). My dearest hope for DTOP is to create a bustling business district and a place where people want to be.
- Naomi Soto (staff). My dearest hope for DTOP is to tackle the mid-20s young professionals demographic who are now moving into the area.

**Advice for new board members.** How can you best integrate into our operations and culture?

- Sit in on committee meetings (finance and MAC).
- Understand the budget and how it works.
- Listen to the merchants who are NOT on the board.
- Instead of just complaining about them, think of the Village as a partner, not the enemy.
- You will get more out of the experience if you attend the meetings and get involved. People who come to the meetings and see what we do get that we are trying to help everyone.
- There are people we are on this board with a lot of history. Get to know those people and other people in the neighborhood who have been historically engaged because they have a lot of knowledge.
- Be familiar with the history of and the rules of DTOP and understand what the organization is.

**DTOP priorities**

*(This is the full list of ideas, not prioritized)*

**Business support**

- Marketing
  - o Online magazine. Bi-monthly
  - o “Hidden Gems” spotlight in newsletter
  - o Highlight social media posts from satisfied customers
  - o DTOP add all businesses’ Facebook pages
  - o Increase earned media
  - o Create co-operative advertising opportunities
  - o Encourage marketing partnerships between medical/service/personal businesses and retail/restaurants
- Compete with online businesses
  - o DTOP food delivery service, with lower fee to businesses than GrubHub etc.
  - o Training in online sales, including determination of viability of online sales for indie businesses
  - o Social media presence. Training on how to be in constant conversation with customers.
  - o Ensure short term parking for quick pick-ups of online sales
  - o Training in creating engaging in-store experiences
  - o Training in managing customer review sites such as Yelp, Trip Advisor
- Draw customers from new geographies and demographics
  - o Target promotion and creation of activities and businesses to outside of OP
  - o Target promotion of DTOP activities and businesses to more diverse communities within DTOP
  - o Explore how to compete with Forest Park restaurant scene
  - o Explore how to appeal to more youth
  - o Outreach to the new high-rise buildings
  - o Further examine demographic mix
    - Utilize Shoppers’ Reward zip codes
- Labor
  - o Employment portal for DTOP businesses

- Costs
  - o Training on how to reduce labor costs
  - o Training on maximization of profit: best practices for inventory, lease negotiations
  - o Explore cooperative purchasing program for businesses to save costs
  - o Work with OPEDC to track rental rates
- Store hours
  - o Education on aligning store hours with hours customers most want to shop

#### Change our story

- Parking
  - o Address misconceptions about cost, inconvenience, safety
  - o Accentuate parking options
- Local First education
- The DTOP story
  - o Posters/art in vacant storefronts
  - o Third party endorsements

#### District & program improvements

- Parking
  - o Improve parking garages per feedback in consumer survey
  - o Parking program during upcoming construction
- Panhandling
  - o Determine what sorts of deterrents are legal
- Events
  - o Uncork Illinois
    - Explore and address reports of low sales
    - Add food tents
  - o Re-examine March \$5
  - o Open House OP
  - o Evaluate events
    - What is and isn't still working? Fix or eliminate what isn't.
    - Do our events attract the right demographic?
    - Utilize data on events.
- Business attraction & mix
  - o Use customer survey data and rental rate information to support OPEDC in business attraction
  - o Provide current and potential business owners with customer survey results

#### **DTOP engagement**

What compels us to engage in organizations?

- Content/learning
- Inspiration: inspiring leader and/or inspiring mission
- Leadership opportunity
- Ability to make a real change: seeing the cause and effect of engagement
- Personal growth

- Strong alignment with social values. Belief in the cause.
- Being able to give and receive support
- Personal experience with a cause
- Being asked/required to do it
- Being part of a team/relationships

What causes us to disengage in organizations?

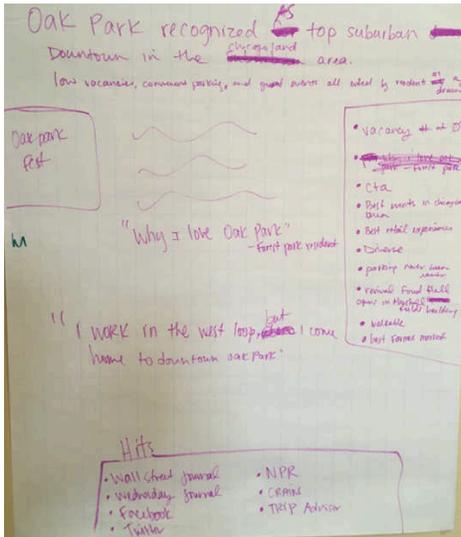
- Can't meet time commitment
- Change in the organization: no longer values aligned
- Personal change: no longer relevant
- Distrust in the organization's ability to have impact: frustration, chaos, lack of forward movement
- Lack of organizational direction
- Exclusivity: opinions not engaged or only a select few have real power
- Change in the world: cause no longer inspiring
- Bad leader
- Burn out

How to increase engagement in DTOP membership and board service

- Provide defined tasks.
  - People rally around specific things
  - People need to know exactly what is expected of them in board service and member engagement
- Inspiration
  - Inspiring, focused leadership from both board and E.D.
  - Causes that are relevant
  - Demonstrate that engagement can lead to making a real difference, a real impact
- Ask people what they want/need to engage
- Competence/trust. Promote that DTOP can get done what it sets out to do.
- Asks for board service and member engagement are strongest coming from other business owners and board members
- Make engagement easy.
- Make engagement a good use of people's time.
- Offer value for a business to read an email or go to a workshop

Conclusion: we need to reshape and put a new look on DTOP that presents a fresh image and spells out what we stand for. It needs to be compelling.

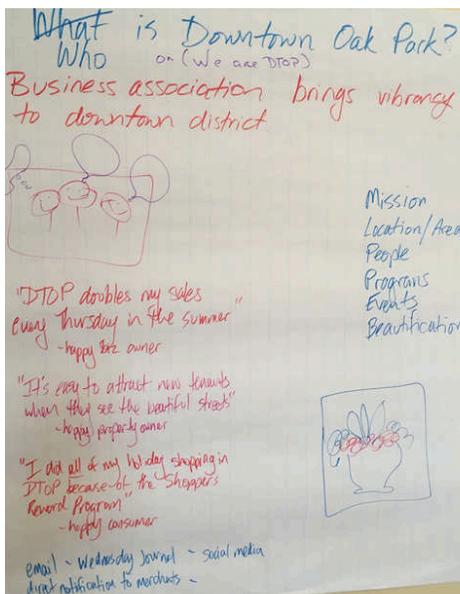
## “Headline” exercise



### “Oak Park Recognized as Top Suburban Downtown in the Chicagoland Area”

*Low vacancies, convenient parking, and great events all cited by residents as a draw!*

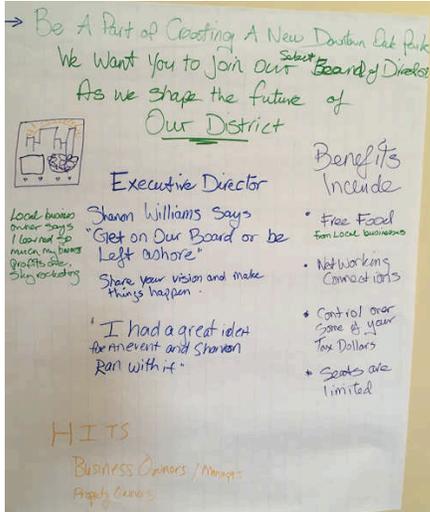
- We have a CTA stop, the best events and best retail events, a food hall, and the best farmers markets.
- We are walkable.
- “I work in west loop but I come home to downtown Oak Park.”
- Want to focus on social media and getting some national exposure.
- Want to focus on sustainability.
- A possible downtown OP festival?



### “Who Is Downtown Oak Park?”

*Business association brings vibrancy to downtown district*

- Programs, beautification, pictures of staff and planters.
- Quotes are from happy business owners, happy property owners, and happy consumers.
- “It is easy to attract new businesses”
- “I did all of my holiday shopping in downtown OP”.
- There is a lot of social media and tools for businesses to use.



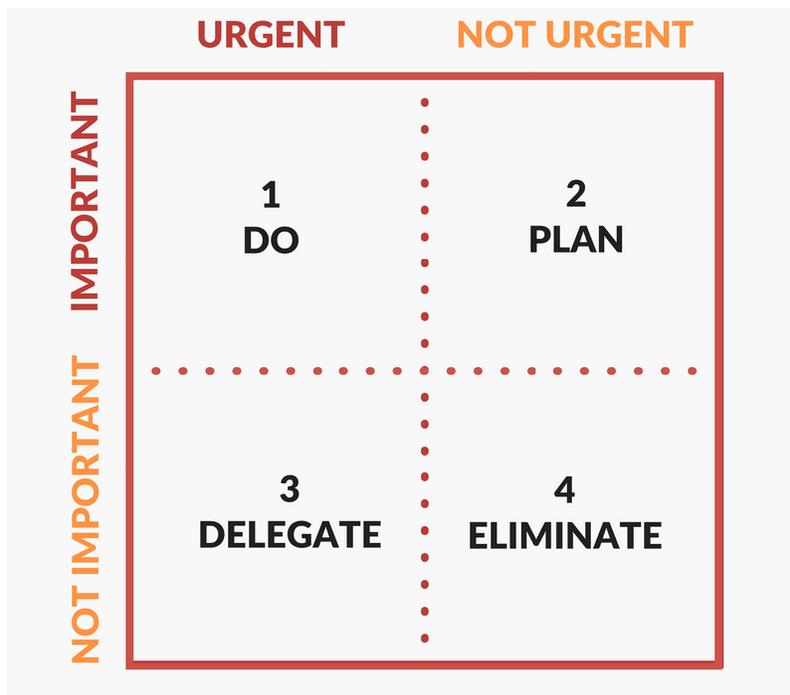
**“Be a Part of Creating a New Downtown Oak Park”**  
 Join our select board of directors as we shape the future of our district.

- “Share your vision and makes things happen.”
- “Get on board.”
- “Apply to be on our board as we support your local business in downtown Oak Park.”
- Sharon and staff are doing a lot for downtown Oak Park.

## Task Force Process

The following is a suggested process by which the task forces can finalize the goals and create the Year One work plans for each strategic priority area.

- I. Before your task force meeting, review the sections of this report and the consumer and business surveys that pertain to the priority area you are working on. Be sure to use the data collected in the consumer and business surveys to support your decisions about what to prioritize.
- II. At the first task force meeting, use the prioritization filter below to help determine whether or not each goal should be addressed in Year One.



- III. For each goal that is both important and urgent, use a separate Strategic Priority Area worksheet to build out the Year One work plan to reach that goal. See the blank and example worksheets provided at the end of this report.
- IV. You may have goals that you don't rank as important or urgent but you believe should be accomplished in Year One. Perhaps they require very little time and resources and so should just get done, or perhaps there is a political or other reason for tackling them. That's ok; just be clear on why you are recommending them as a Year One priority.
- V. The task forces should submit their worksheets for Year one to the board governance committee with sufficient time for that committee to aggregate the Year One plan. At its next meeting, the board will review the aggregate plan and make final determinations of priorities for 2020.



