

ENGLEWOOD, CHATHAM, AUBURN GRESHAM

In Auburn Gresham, A Community Debates What Should Come First: Affordable Housing Or Grocery Store?

"It's not so straightforward that if you bring more residents, amenities will follow," a University of Illinois Chicago professor says.

Atavia Reed 8:44 AM CDT on Aug 19, 2021



Credit: City of Chicago

Auburn Gardens, a \$20 million retail and residential development planned for city-owned vacant land at 838-58 W. 79th St.

Credibility: Original Reporting On the Ground Sources Cited

AUBURN GRESHAM — Amid the push and pull for affordable housing in the heart of Auburn Gresham, residents and local officials have hit a stalemate over what is best for the neighborhood's short-term future.

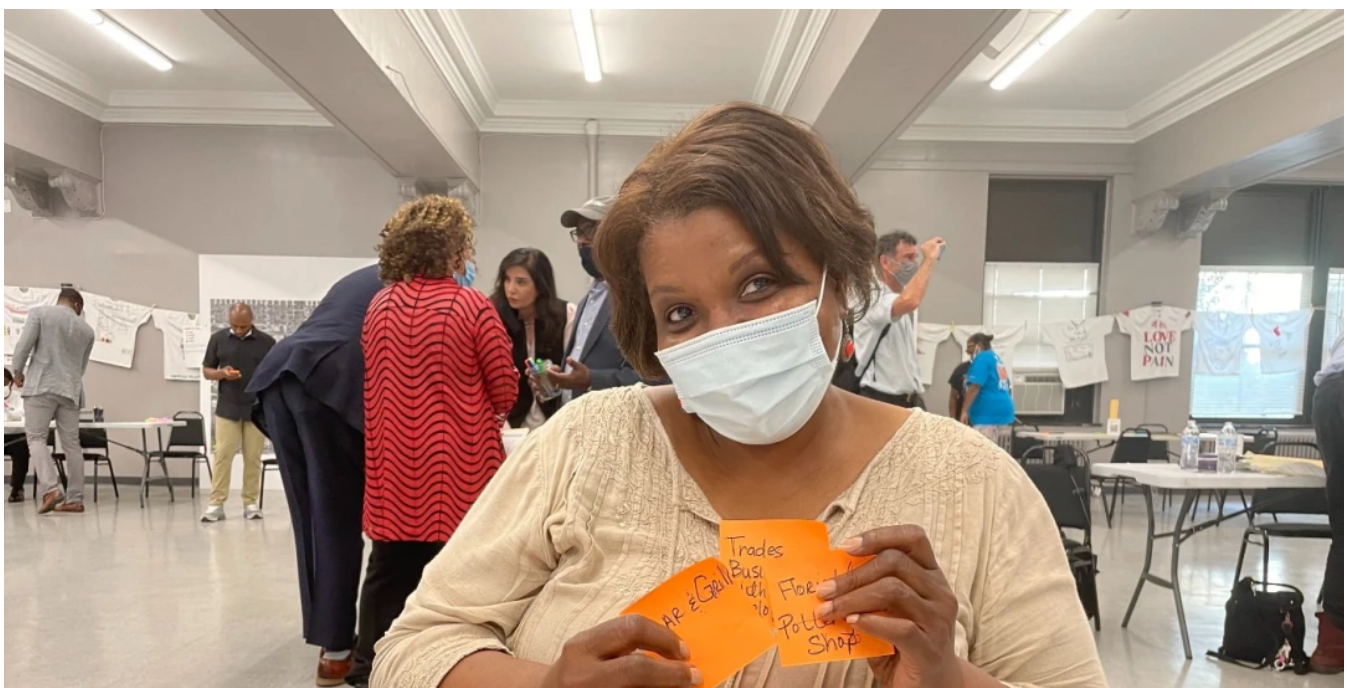
Auburn Gardens, a \$20 million housing and retail project envisioned for city-owned vacant land at 838-58 W. 79th St., has rankled some neighbors who long have demanded a grocery store, bank or pharmacy.

While some continue to resist the idea of housing, city officials and developers say the high-density housing will be a boon for the community, ushering in the businesses neighbors so badly want.

But as each side argues their cases, the question remains of which should come first: housing or neighborhood essentials?

Housing and urban planning experts said there's not a clear-cut answer.

"I think you're going to need to do both," said Geoff Smith, executive director of the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University. "It's going to have to happen in tandem with each other over time. I think the key is to look at the neighborhood and try to create a plan that is in line with what the community wants but also have a plan for a long-term vision."





Credit: Atavia Reed/Block Club Chicago

Cynthia Love, an Auburn Gresham resident for 35 years, shares what she would like to see in the community.

‘It Definitely Is That Chicken–Or–The–Egg–Type Situation’

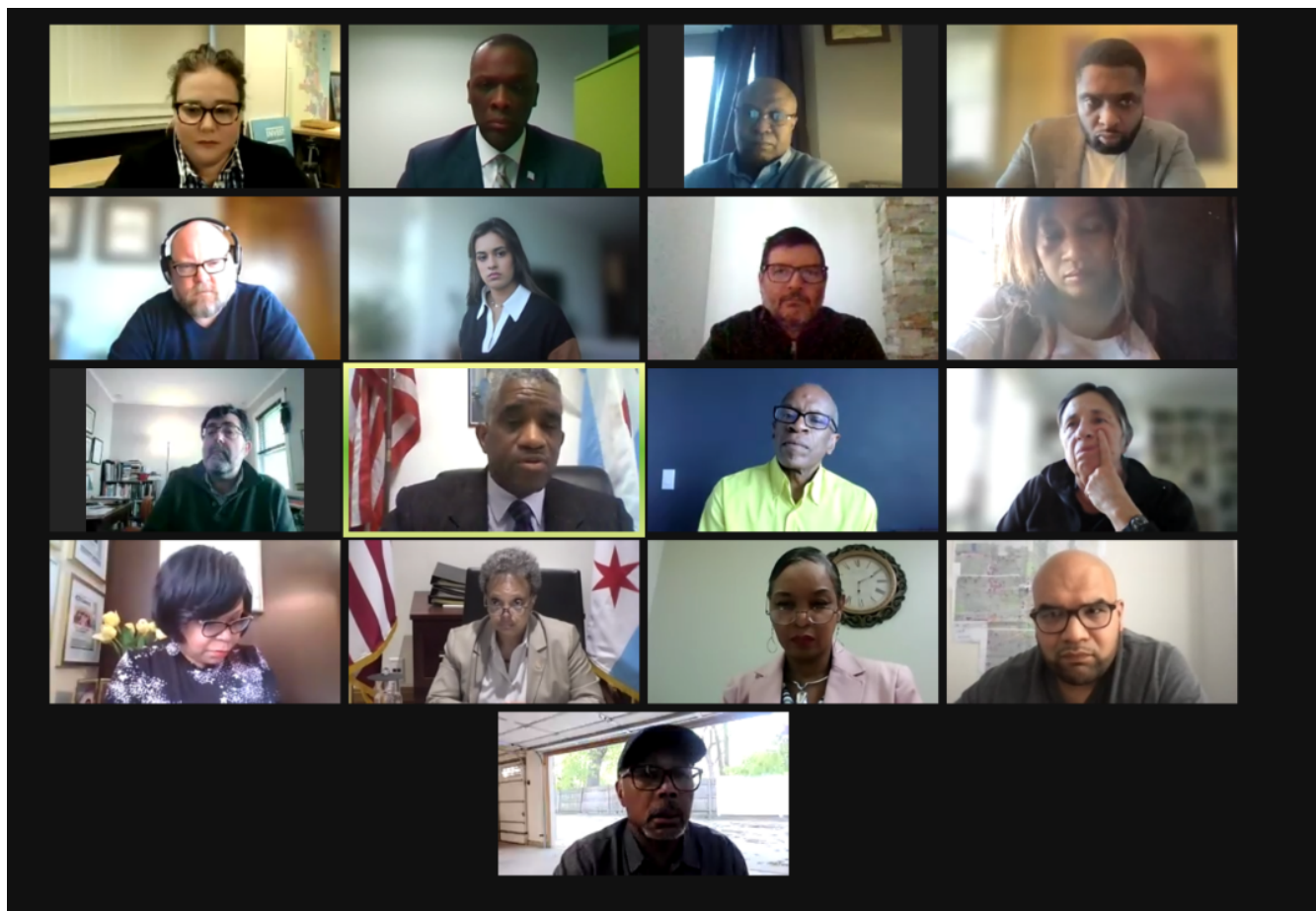
Auburn Gardens was selected as part of the INVEST South/West plan, an initiative to bring development to West and South side communities.

Evergreen Imagine JV, a joint venture between the Imagine Group and Evergreen Redevelopment, was the only bidder for the project. It proposed building affordable housing and got the green light to move forward in March.

Immediately after its announcement, neighbors demanded city officials reconsider the proposal. Longtime residents said they needed more basic services and amenities — one person called the area the “doughnut hole” of the city — and not affordable housing or promises of more neighbors.

“We have enough people; we just don’t have a place to take them. We don’t have stores, so the money is going outside of the neighborhood,” resident Philip King said at a meeting in April. “Nothing is a bad idea, but the focus should be on how we keep people in the community.”

In May, Lightfoot joined a community meeting to plead the city’s case, repeating the city’s contention the housing would revitalize the neighborhood and attract businesses.



Credit: Atavia Reed/Block Club Chicago

City officials take part in a community meeting to discuss a new affordable housing complex in Auburn Gresham.

Developers agreed in July to split the controversial building into one 26-unit structure on 79th and Green, with another 24 units on 79th and Halsted.

Peter Strazzabosco, deputy commissioner of the Department of Planning and Development, said the two buildings will “support the market” for businesses neighbors want.

“INVEST South/West is a commercial corridor revitalization strategy that’s partly premised on the proven concept that density, pedestrian activity, retail and housing options, and tactical urbanism can enhance public safety and community cohesion,” Strazzabosco said.

“By replacing two vacant blocks in the heart of Auburn Gresham with these types of improvements, the 79th and Halsted proposal can help address residents’ safety

concerns while also supporting the market for other neighborhood needs, like a grocery store, pharmacy, bank and other amenities that all Chicagoans expect and deserve.”

David Block, director of development at Evergreen Real Estate Group, said a big development might spur other developers to invest in the community, which has seen a “dramatic pattern of disinvestment” accelerated by the pandemic.

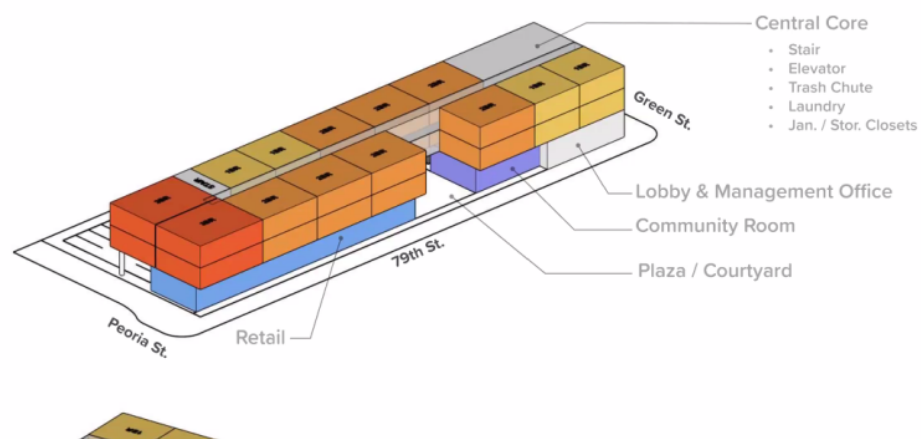
“The CVS, Bank of America and Save A Lot closed, and there are quite a few vacant storefronts down 79th Street,” Block said. “We’re hoping that a big development like this is a signal that provides some confidence to invest in the community.

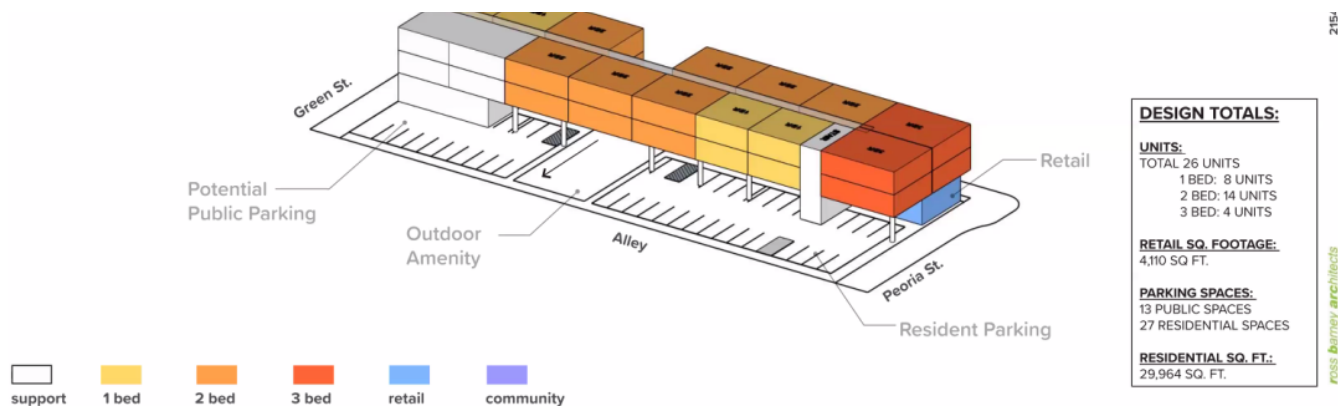
“Small business owners or developers who are looking to develop smaller projects can come in and say, ‘OK, this pattern of businesses closing has come to an end, and now it’s a good opportunity to reinvest in the community.’”

In terms of which comes first — more people to encourage businesses or businesses to draw more people — Block said it’s clear.

“We have pretty consistently said that it’s kind of a cliché in the world of development that retail follows rooftops,” Block said. “My view as a developer is that you’ve got to bring residents back to those communities in order to make them attractive places to do business for the grocers, for the pharmacies, for the restaurants. It is a chicken-and-egg question; but, in my view, the people come first, and the businesses follow the people.”

Site 1

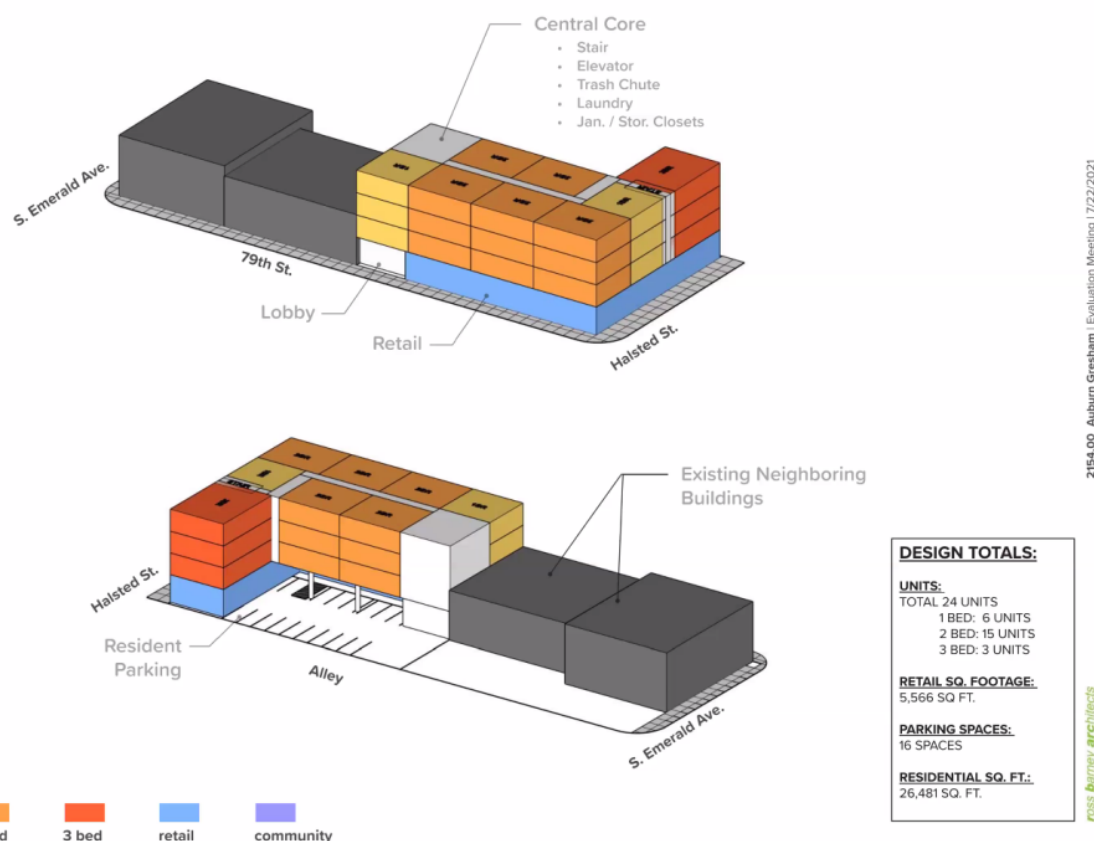




Credit: Ross Barney Architects

Plans for one of two affordable housing complexes slated for the Auburn Gresham neighborhood, this one at 79th and Green Street.

Site 2



Credit: Ross Barney Architects

Plans for one of two affordable housing complexes slated for the Auburn Gresham neighborhood, this one at 79th and Halsted Street.

Winifred Curran, a professor of geography and sustainable urban development at DePaul University, said it's not that simple.

"In terms of supply and demand, it should make sense that if you bring more

people to a neighborhood that the services for those people will necessarily follow,” Curran said. “But the history of urban development in Chicago and elsewhere in the United States is that that’s not necessarily true. Businesses tend to chase not just numbers of people but people with money and buying power.”

Historically, the buying power in communities of color is often underestimated, Cuuran said. Predominantly Black neighborhoods like Auburn Gresham have been “historically underserved” by the things that neighbors want now, like a supermarket, Curran said.

“So to just kind of assume that if you build affordable housing, businesses to serve those residents will necessarily come is an assumption that has not held up in the history of American cities,” Curran said.

Stacey Sutton, an associate professor at the University of Illinois Chicago, had a similar analysis.

“It definitely is that chicken-or-the-egg-type situation,” Sutton said. “It’s not so straightforward that if you bring more residents, amenities will follow. ... There are all sorts of discriminatory and racist practices that have led to supermarkets hollowing out of areas. It’s complicated.”

But population-dense areas might appeal to a new commercial enterprise, Sutton said.

Businesses “like dense neighborhoods for obvious reasons,” Sutton said. “It’s greater potential for consumption.”





Credit: Metra

A rendering of the proposed Auburn Park Metra station.

As community members and officials decide the future of Auburn Gardens, Curran said it's important to remember any one project done in isolation, such as a development or a new Metra station, is not enough to build a sustainable neighborhood.

"I think that the first lesson of urban planning should always be to listen to the people who are in the neighborhood because they're the ones who know what it's like to live there and know what they need," Curran said. "A neighborhood is all of these [resources] tied together. Just targeting one or two things is not enough."

[Subscribe to Block Club Chicago](#), an independent, 501(c)(3), journalist-run newsroom. Every dime we make funds reporting from Chicago's neighborhoods.

Already subscribe? Click [here](#) to support Block Club with a [tax-deductible donation](#).

Listen to "It's All Good: A Block Club Chicago Podcast" [here](#):