

City, RNA look to make streetscape improvements

BY KENNETH L. R. PATCHEN
STAFF WRITER

The Ravinia Neighbors Association and city officials emphasized streetscape improvements during a meeting last week.

About 70 residents, business and property owners, chamber of commerce members, elected officials and city staff members gathered at a breakfast meeting at the Highland Park Country Club to discuss long-range improvement plans.

The Ravinia Neighbors Association and city hosted the meeting to bring together in one place people who can tie the business district together with a unified design of sidewalks, plantings and other street enhancements. They discussed city programs to pay for store improvements and the benefits of involvement with a strong Highland Park Chamber of Commerce.

Community Development Director Michael Blue spoke about streetscapes and signage and the existing plans done for the area.

"The word was streetscape, streetscape, streetscape." Association member Doug Purington said.

The genesis for this special session emerged from a meeting of Ravinia neighbors who wanted more organizations helping them improve the area, said Belsky. He suggested a forum at which many available resources could be described at once so everyone would know what now exists to help.

"It was really successful," said Mayor Michael D. Belsky. "It was more than I could have expected. My sense from that meeting was that (they have) a lot of energy. We had several speakers," Belsky said. "The idea was to take a comprehensive look at the business district."

Purington said about 80 planters will be used in the future to identify the limits of the business district. A local condominium developer will prepare a streetscape design plan for Ravinia that will extend the appearance of the area near the Walgreens on Roger Williams Avenue to the rest of the area. Such a plan will allow costs to be estimated and serves as a start for the improvement process.

"We want it to be a nice neighborhood (business district)," Purington said. "We've got to be proactive. We've got to do it now."

The Business and Economic Development Commission has a Business Attraction and Retention Program. Also, the small business improvement program offers up to \$10,000 to help businesses improve their facades. Kelly Fuoco, the business relations assistant in City Manager David M. Limardi's office said Highland Park can provide up to \$5,000 to a business, and another low interest loan, up to an equal amount, from a local bank. The city and bank amounts combined can be used to pay for improvements. The city has budgeted \$20,000 for its share of the program.

After the meeting, Belsky said a property owner was seen talking with a member of the Business and Economic Development Commission about property improvements. Fuoco said, since the meeting, another person has stopped by city hall to learn more.

Chamber Executive Director Pat

urged businesses to join the chamber to help make it a stronger organization. She said strong representation by Ravinia area business leaders would assure their involvement in decisions and promotional programs by the chamber.

State Sen. Susan Garrett, D-29th, of Lake Forest, and Karen S. May, D-58th, of Highland Park, were present as were 46 merchants, 12 property owners, 20 Ravinia area neighbors, and representatives of the city staff and commissions.

"It was a chance for people to express things, and the city listened," said Purington.