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**Milwaukee Avenue Alliance
2020 Annual Report**
by MAA board president Lynn Basa
December 31, 2020



About the Milwaukee Avenue Alliance

On Milwaukee Avenue between Diversey and Central Park, [we already have](#) what city leaders all over the country are trying to restore or recreate: An authentic vintage neighborhood main street close to transit, designed for walking, scaled for small businesses, and surrounded by a culturally diverse community. Further, the majority of our old buildings are still in the hands of individual families rather than real estate conglomerates. The Milwaukee Avenue Alliance is essentially a network of neighbors who appreciate and strive to be good stewards of this slice of real Chicago.

Mission, vision and values

The mission of the MAA is to build relationships between the people and places of Milwaukee Avenue between Kimball and Central Park in order to share information, resources, and opportunities; to support projects that unite us in restoring these four blocks to the thriving, walkable, small-business main street that it once was.

Our vision is that by understanding this neighborhood commercial corridor as an ecosystem connected by our physical surroundings and our layered history, we can continue its legacy of a culturally rich and diverse working-class main street.

street.

Board

The [inaugural board](#) consisted of 21 business and property owners, arts organization leaders, and elected officials. Their one-year terms began in May 2019 but extended to October 2020 because of meeting delays due to Covid. The board was intentionally composed to generate conversations between stakeholders whose paths didn't typically cross and who represent a range of perspectives, expertise and opinions related to our street. The purpose of the meetings was to identify shared issues and solutions we could work on as an organization for the common good.

Since it was the MAA's first board we developed the mission, approved by-laws and decided to become a 501c3. We also discussed practical questions such as the underlying causes of our many vacant storefronts and how our current businesses and arts organizations could thrive and benefit the community. But we also got into larger questions such as what we could do to recognize our role in and mitigate the effects of institutional bias that has kept people of color from building generational wealth in the form of property and business ownership.

In August, MAA vice president Christian Diaz, representing the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, resigned from the board citing "racial aggressions and unexamined white supremacy in the culture of MAA" without providing specific examples. While it has always been our mission to honor the multi layered history of this area and build a more inclusive future, this has prompted us to look more deeply at the unintended consequences of our main street revitalization efforts.

We identified these paths of action to implement in 2021:

- 1) Partner with small-business incubators focused on women- and minority entrepreneurs. (We currently have partnerships with Accion and The Bounce)*
- 2) Identify storefront owners who are willing to be flexible with leases for women- or minority-owned businesses; promote the availability of those spaces on MAA social media and website*
- 3) Recruit employees from outside of networks that typically go to Whites*
- 4) Form a work group of business owners to develop a strategy for thriving during the disruption of the upcoming Milwaukee Avenue street construction and on-going effects of the pandemic.*
- 5) Decide whether to create a new board that draws from the broader MAA network with an emphasis on neighbors who live on or near Milwaukee Avenue who reflect neighborhood demographics, or stay with the executive committee model with ad hoc work groups around specific projects/topics.*

Non-profit status

On March 24, 2020 the Milwaukee Avenue Alliance became a 501c3. This means that all donations are tax-deductible and we can apply for grants from government and private foundations. The timing of receiving our nonprofit status was fortunate because we were able to pivot immediately to emergency fundraising mode during the first Covid shutdown.

2021

- We will research and apply for grants to support these projects: Woodard Plaza, lights over Milwaukee, business promotion and recruitment, among others.*

Fundraising

Within days of the first pandemic shutdown the MAA launched an emergency fundraiser for restaurants workers at Crown Liquors, Dante's, El Ranchito, Friendship, Jimmy's Tamales, Moonlight Vulture, Tacos Tequilas, La Celia, Relys Cuban Cafe, Sipping Turtle. In 10 days we raised just over \$3000 in donations from 60 neighbors.

That was quickly followed by a [GoFundMe](#) for Jimmy's Tamales. Tomas Hernandez, the proprietor of the tamale cart, observed the shut-down mandate and was without his sole source of income for three months. Neighbors donated nearly \$1450 which went directly to Tomas and his wife.

Fundraising for commissioning artist David Orozco to paint the Blue Goose mural began in October 2019 and concluded in March 2020. \$6000 was raised from neighborhood businesses and residents, along with a \$1000

volunteers and mural subjects.

With these fundraisers we were able to identify how widespread the support is among the residents living in the apartments above the storefronts and homes within a few blocks of our stretch of Milwaukee Avenue. In 2021 we will engage more of these neighbors in our efforts to revitalize our commercial corridor.

2021

• *Fundraisers will be held as needed for specific projects: Woodard Plaza kiosk map and directory, Woodard Wonderland, performances and art installations.*



Blue Goose mural

Our most high-profile accomplishment this year was the Blue Goose mural by Belmont Cragin artist David Orozco at 2901 N Milwaukee. The central image was painted from a photo donated by the family of Stanley Zielinski, the man holding the eggplant. The photo was taken in the exact same corner 100 years ago where the mural is now. Alongside are workers from our street today and in memory of some who are no longer with us. You can learn more about the many stories of our street represented in the mural by going to the [Blue Goose mural in the Projects section](#) of the MAA website.

2021

• *Once construction starts on 2901 N Milwaukee, the mural panels will be distributed to their respective donors.*



Work Group

The Work Group was one of the most productive projects of the MAA before Covid brought it to a halt. Comprised of a diverse group of 30 drawn from the broader MAA network, including representatives from private foundations, social service providers and City departments, we completed four of six monthly meetings when the pandemic hit. Fortunately, we were able to identify practical responses to this question: Why did the pedestrian cross Diversey?

This simple question took us on a path that touched on almost every issue facing neighborhood commercial corridors in many parts of Chicago. Our vacant or blocked-up storefronts, 40 of 91 at last count, create long stretches of dead zones between businesses. Deteriorating facades littered with garbage further exacerbate the sense of unwelcome. The streetlights on one side of the street were out for most of the year. It's a self-reinforcing cycle. Potential businesses don't want to lease spaces because there isn't enough foot traffic, and there's not enough foot traffic because there are so many vacancies.

We narrowed down our many ideas to these projects as being the most achievable given our limited capacity:

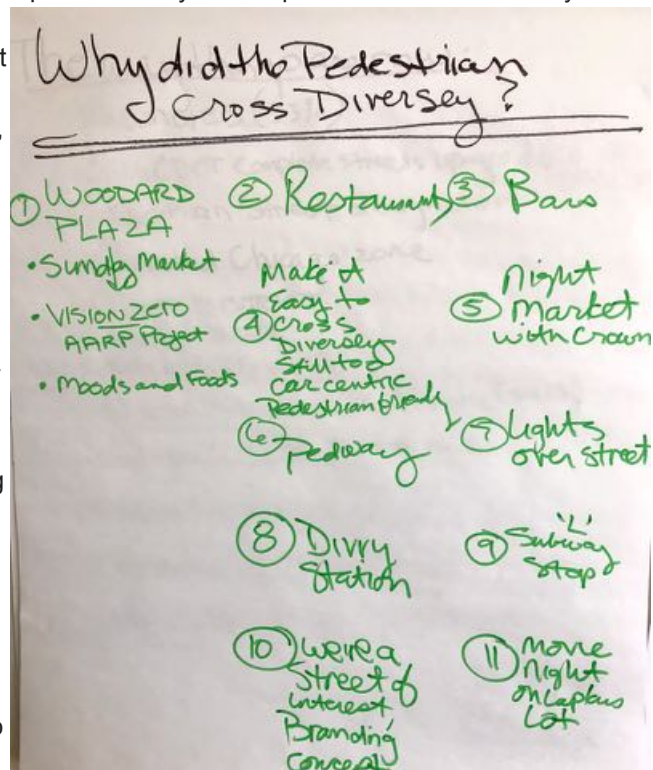
1) Lights over Milwaukee
2021

• CDOT will include outlets in the new light poles so we can install permanent festival lights over Milwaukee.

2) Wake Up Milwaukee Avenue: Select property owners who are willing to work with women- and minority-owned businesses on shorter leasers, build-outs, and mentoring.
2021

• Several owners of available storefronts have opted in. We will regroup in 2021 to spread the word to prospective businesses.

3) Activate Woodard Plaza: The group recognized Woodard Plaza as the "gateway to Avondale" and suggested



Ward aldermanic menu money purchased a kiosk for the plaza.

2021

- *Publish calendar on the [Woodard Cultural Alliance](#) website and posted in kiosk so people know when and how to schedule events in the plaza*
- *"Woodard Wonderland" winter holiday lights*
- *Post a map in the kiosk of businesses and arts orgs on our street*

4) Workers co-op: The idea that had the most enthusiasm was to buy or lease a building on the street and start a workers co-op.

2021

- *There are no definite plans as of yet, but if anyone reading this wants to take this on, [e-mail me!](#) (Personally, I'd like to see a co-op bakery with a shared kitchen and cafe for all of the home bakers who popped up during Covid.)*

Support services

Over the summer there was a noticeable increase in the number of men who were spending the day drinking on the sidewalk near La Carniceria, on Woodard Plaza, and sleeping in the alleys. While no one wished them ill-will, it became an issue when some of them were found passed out in doorways, the sidewalk, and sometimes the street. One of the men died on the sidewalk near Gresham and Milwaukee. Littering, defecating and vomiting on or next to private property were frequent occurrences. One of the men threw a bottle at a property owner when asked to move across the street. Some property owners were becoming aggressive toward the men. The police were called often.

Housing insecurity and chronic substance abuse are intractable issues and beyond the capacity of the MAA to solve. At the same time we couldn't ignore something that was a factor of daily life. Instead we went back to one of the basic principles that the organization was founded on, what we can do with the resources we have.

I organized a meeting with Alderman Rosa and some of the property owners who were complaining the loudest. While those particular people chose not to attend any of the meetings, those of us who did ended up having a series of meetings and discovered that our stretch of Milwaukee is in a kind of void that is not on the radar of social services and mutual aid organizations. By talking to some of the men I learned that all of the good shelters were full and they needed IDs. The shelters also required them to be sober and they weren't allowed to drink while there. Since restaurants and coffee shops were no longer open to the public, there was no place for them to go to the bathroom.

Neighborhood resident, Caroline Eichler, volunteered to find out what she could about social services and free meals available within a quarter of a mile of Woodard Plaza. In addition, Alderman Rosa alerted the Chicago Department of Family & Support services to start paying attention to our area. He also spoke to the owner of La Carniceria about not selling single beers.

The result of these efforts is that we are now on the route of several social service and mutual aid organizations, and a concise handout that provides clear details of where people can go to get help.

It's difficult to say why, but even before it got cold, the situation got much better. The people who took aggressive action against the men will probably say that's the reason, while I'd like to think it was the increase in support services. It's hard to know. Two days ago I ran into one of the men I've had the most conversations with, Paul. He looked so well that I barely recognized him. He said he had stopped drinking. He was still wearing the sturdy work shoes that Monyca Price Flack from Kay Shoes had given to him in the summer to replace the ones that had gotten stolen so that he could get day labor work.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday
NIGHT MINISTRY HEALTH OUTREACH BUS Food, healthcare, essential items 6:30p - 8:30p W Division & N California (773) 256-7549	FREE BOX LUNCHES FOR SENIORS (AGE 60+) 10:00a - 1:00p Copernicus Senior Center, 3160 N Milwaukee **ID Required**	DROP-IN HOURS: Meals to go, toiletries, clothing 10:00a - 12:00p New Community Covenant Church basement 2649 N Francisco info@openarmsministry.org	DROP-IN HOURS: Meals to go, toiletries, clothing 10:00a - 12:00p New Community Covenant Church basement 2649 N Francisco info@openarmsministry.org
Thursday	Friday	FREE BOX LUNCHES (AGE 60+) 10:00a - 1:00p Copernicus Senior Center 3160 N Milwaukee **ID Required**	FREE BOX LUNCHES (AGE 60+) 10:00a - 1:00p Copernicus Senior Center 3160 N Milwaukee **ID Required**
HOPE FOOD PANTRY 10:00a - 12:00p Armitage Baptist Church 2505 N Kedzie	HOPE FOOD PANTRY 4:00p - 6:00p Armitage Baptist Church 2505 N Kedzie	NIGHT MINISTRY HEALTH OUTREACH BUS Food, healthcare, essential items 6:00p - 10:00p W Division & N California (773) 256-7549	FREE GROCERIES 1:30p - 3:30p St. Nicolai Church of Christ 3000 N Kedzie mutualaidavondale@gmail.com **Every other Wednesday: Sept. 16 & 30, Oct. 14 & 28**
FREE BOX LUNCHES (AGE 60+) 10:00a - 1:00p Copernicus Senior Center 3160 N Milwaukee **ID Required**	EVERYDAY LOVE FRIDGE (Free food) 2915 N Milwaukee Ave logansquaremutualaid.org smutualaid@gmail.com AVONDALE MUTUAL AID (Food, medicine) (708) 620-7941 avondalemutualaidsociety.org mutualaidavondale@gmail.com POLISH AMERICAN ASSOCIATION (immigration, housing, mens' day shelter, and more) (773) 427-6319 or (773) 282-8206 polish.org	COMMUNITY DINNER 4:00p - 6:00p St. Nicolai Church of Christ 3000 N Kedzie	FREE GROCERIES 4:00p - 6:00p New Community Covenant Church basement 2649 N Francisco
COMMUNITY LUNCH 1:00p COMMUNITY DINNER 4:00p - 6:00p St. Nicolai Church of Christ 3000 N Kedzie communitydinners@gmail.com			

Zoning

Zoning is a contentious and unavoidable issue for every urban neighborhood. In 2017, when the precursor of the MAA was informally organized as the Milwaukee Avenue Stakeholders Alliance, a few property owners under my leadership allied with Logan Square Preservation, Logan Square Neighborhood Association and 35th Ward Alderman Carlos Rosa to support the downzoning of Milwaukee Avenue between Kimball and Central Park.

We supported it because downzoning has been used as strategy to discourage speculation and encourage the renovation of vintage buildings. When there is a public process attached to it, as there is in the 35th Ward, it is a way for the community to have a voice in what gets built, or torn down, in their neighborhood. However, many property owners object to downzoning on the grounds that it will devalue the worth of their buildings, discourage development by adding obstacles that use up more time and money, encourage tear-downs, and disincentivize new investment.

The 2017 initiative stalled in the City Council Zoning Committee but was revived by Alderman Rosa in the form of rezoning 14 properties in the same boundaries so that they would conform to how they are currently built.

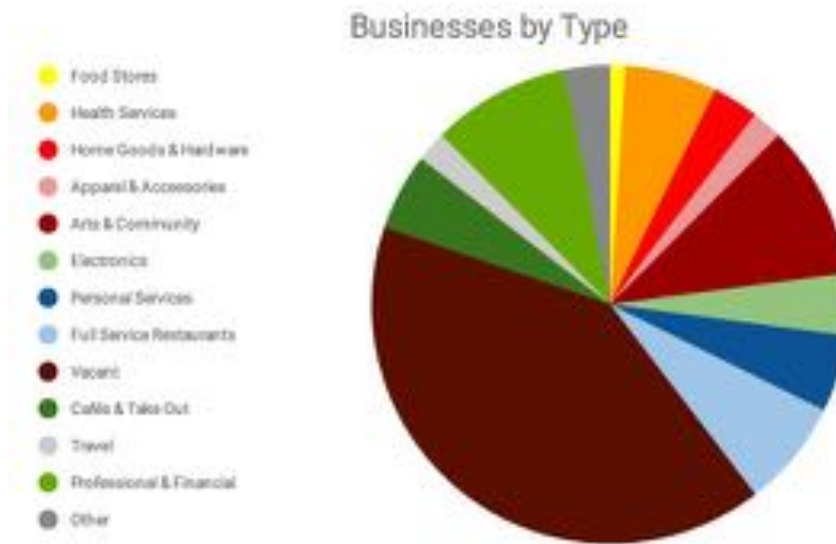
A poll of the board showed that while there was a range of strong opinions, there was no clear consensus to either support or oppose this move. One former board member, Nick Katsafados, organized opposition to the rezoning, and there was an anonymous smear campaign against Alderman Rosa. Not wanting this one issue to tear apart the organization when our strategy is to focus on initiatives that unite us, the executive committee submitted a letter to the City Council Zoning Committee stating the MAA was neutral on this issue now that it is recognized by the IRS as a nonprofit and has a board whose opinion is divided.

At the same time we want to support development that will contribute to our main street revitalization efforts. The board decided at our October 2020 meeting that we would write letters of support for individual zoning change requests based on these criteria:

- **Local ownership and community involvement**
- **Preserves the vintage character and scale of our buildings**
- **Supports women- and minority-owned independent businesses**

We subsequently wrote letters in support of zoning change requests for 2839 and 2901 N Milwaukee.

thesis. It's only as good as its updates, however. Thanks to neighborhood volunteer Michelle Bright for tending to it this year.



Milwaukee Avenue between Kimball and Central Park as of 11/1/20. Occupied but blocked-up storefronts are not called out.

Website and social media

The [MAA website](#) was launched in January to share stories, events, and opportunities on Milwaukee Avenue between Diversey and Central Park.

Our social media following currently:

[Instagram](#) = 620 followers

[Facebook](#) = 536 followers

Newsletter = 349 subscribers

2021

- We will use the website to promote the availability of our vacant storefronts to women- and minority-owned businesses, and continue to promote our small businesses.
- Volunteer writers will be sought to expand the Meet the Street blog with stories about our street.
- We will continue having an active social media presence that promotes businesses and arts organizations.

Volunteer

If you'd like to volunteer, please fill out this [survey](#) or [contact me](#) directly. We could use your help with:

- Writing stories for the blog
- Grant research and writing
- Property database updates
- Support services updates
- Graphic design
- Fundraising
- Event planning
- Small business promotion and recruitment
- Muscle

See you in 2021!

