



George Van Dusen
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Submitted via email to: letters@chicagotribune.com

To the Editor:

The *Chicago Tribune* recently editorialized against passage of a Business Development District designation for Westfield Old Orchard Shopping Center in Skokie which, per state law, would give the Village and the owners of the center the ability to create a fund to revitalize the infrastructure. This fund would derive from an added 1% sales tax and be the 208th Business District in Illinois.

The facts speak for themselves. Over the past five years, Old Orchard's sales plateaued and began declining. Yet, Old Orchard pays the highest property taxes of the 86 properties in Westfield's global portfolio. An astounding 38% of Westfield's revenue from Old Orchard goes to property taxes for Cook County, local school districts, the Village and other taxing bodies. Of importance is that the Village's share of property taxes has been frozen at \$15.4 million since 1990.

If these were normal times I'd agree with the sentiment expressed in the editorial. Old Orchard is at a crossroads - it can modernize and thrive or remain the same and slowly decline. In five or ten years, Skokie does not want to face significant costs for a modernized shopping/entertainment center like leaders in Niles face with Golf Mill Shopping Center, Northbrook leaders face with Northbrook Court - the list includes numerous other suburban centers. Anyone who thinks Old Orchard can't sink should remember the early 1990s, when it had major stores boarded up and it cost a combined \$165 million of private and public funds to modernize. COVID-19 struck, consumer habits changed, and Skokie once again needs to invest in this important community asset.

Old Orchard's importance to Skokie is immense as the largest tax generator for the schools, park district and library and as a local employment center offering 3,000 to 4,500 jobs annually. Without new investment, Old Orchard's property valuation will continue to decline, negatively impacting other businesses and residents that will shoulder the increased property tax burden.

The editorial barely even acknowledged there was a problem and offered no solutions. That's what Skokie is endeavoring to do - identify a problem, study various solutions, and then make the hard choices to solve the problem today before it becomes almost insurmountable tomorrow. All of the revenue will be accounted for and audited in accordance with legal requirements and best practice, and I invite the public, including the *Tribune*, to hold us accountable.

Sincerely,

George Van Dusen
Mayor