

The Village of Northfield

HAPP ROAD IMPROVEMENT COMMITTEE
RECOMMENDATIONS TO VILLAGE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

REIMAGINING HAPP ROAD – ITS NEXT 100 YEARS

MARCH 19, 2026



INTRODUCTION

On the cusp of its second century, Happ Road stands poised for a comprehensive reimagining that will reinforce its role within Northfield and the broader North Shore.

Happ Road is to Northfield what Michigan Avenue is to Chicago. It unites Northfield's downtown business district and establishes Northfield as a destination where people can experience the heart of our quaint, growing community – with its unique shops, award-winning restaurants, family-oriented neighborhoods, and miles of walking paths.

Special as it is, we have an opportunity to improve several aspects of Happ Road to strengthen its desirability as a destination – to support our residential base, inspire visitors and attract new business investments. Moving quickly to adopt these changes will have the further benefit to “reintroduce” our Village to the North Shore during our upcoming Centennial celebrations. This could be a pivotal moment for Northfield as we set our stage for the Village's next 100 years.

COMMITTEE

Northfield's Village President and Board of Trustees formed the Happ Road Improvement Committee (HRIC) in the fall of 2025 soon after discussions with Cook County ended regarding the prior Happ Road proposal. The HRIC was charged with “thinking big”: to create a visionary concept for Happ Road between Willow Road and Winnetka Road and to offer recommendations to the Village to revitalize this key stretch of road through our downtown area.

The committee aligned around the following objective:

Committee Objective: *Create a plan to establish Happ Road as a welcoming, accessible, and energetic community hub reflecting Northfield's uniqueness, while making Northfield a destination, supporting local businesses and attracting new ones.*

The HRIC includes 13 village residents from a wide variety of backgrounds, experiences, and professional skills. Seven committee meetings were held at Village Hall in partnership with the Village Manager. All meetings were announced in advance and attended by the public. The committee created two surveys, a residential survey that 893 residents completed (32% of the village contact list) and a business survey completed by 48 of the 202 known businesses in the village (24%).

The in-depth surveys enjoyed the greatest participation of any Northfield survey to date, and those results help inform this report.

Along with its public meetings and community survey, the HRIC considered the more than 1,200 pages from the previous Happ Road group, the Walkability Assessment (2006), the Northfield Village Center Design Study (2008), the Stormwater Management Plan (2009), the Branding Study (2015), the Northfield Road Corridor Plan (2016), the Village Plan 2040 (2020) and the Sidewalk Improvement Plan (2024). In addition, an in-person meeting with stakeholders representing Northfield's schools, parks and library was held.

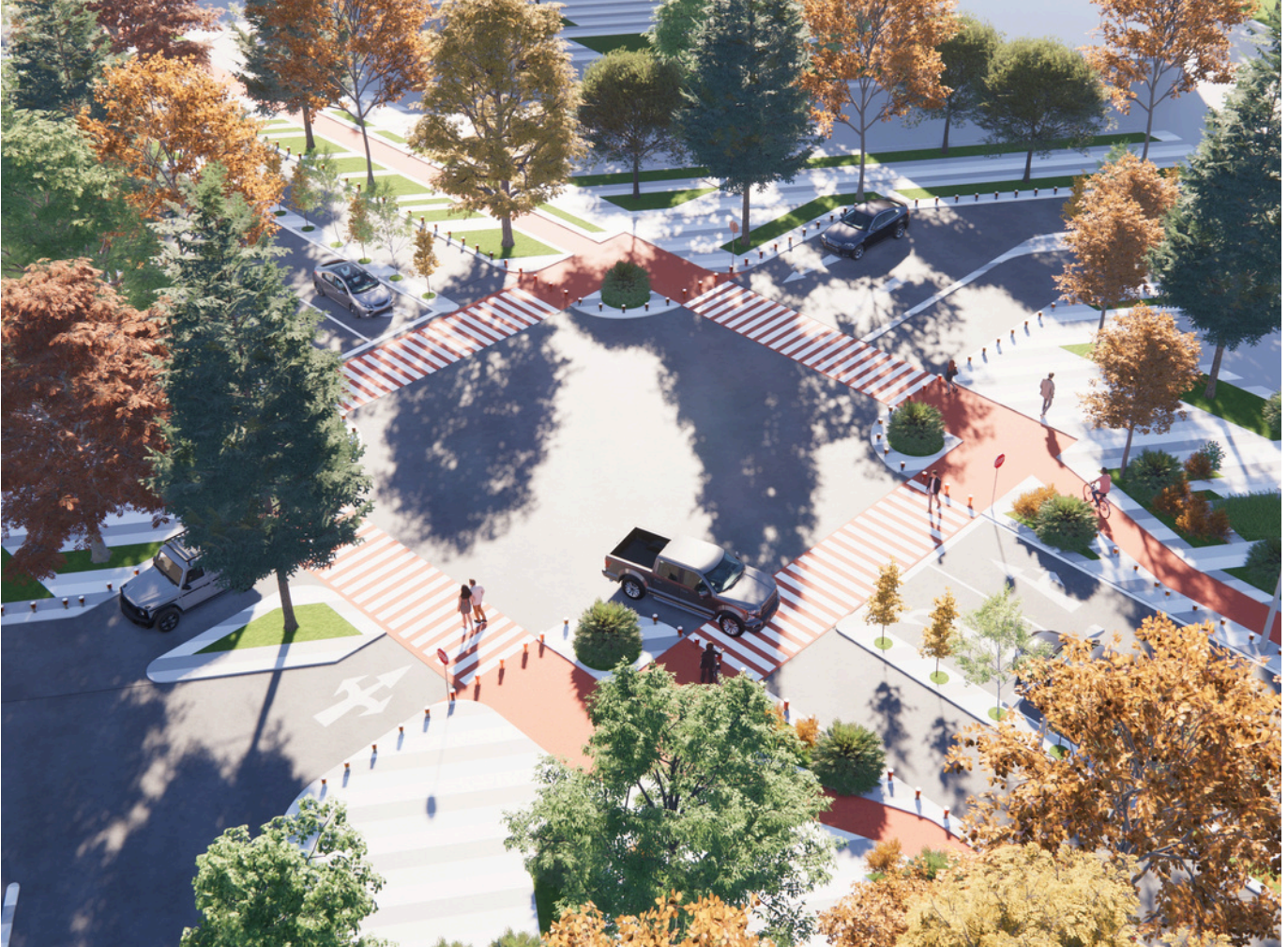
SURVEY

The headline from the surveys is that our residents want an energized downtown area where people and families can gather and move about easily and safely, one that is aesthetically pleasing with trees, landscaping and benches. They want a safe, walkable downtown, a comfortable place to eat, shop, gather and linger. And they want to bike there too.

Key findings from the surveys indicate:

- 75% want the downtown area cleaned up and beautified with more landscaping
- 75% support closing off downtown roads for occasional street festivals
- 64% want to see building exteriors improved
- 58% support the Village gaining greater control of Happ Road in the downtown area from Cook County (20% want more information on this topic)
- 50% want more public gathering places
- 45% support the addition of a weight limit for trucks on Happ Road
- 39% support the creation of a public art program

The survey results demonstrate broad and measurable support for a more walkable, beautified and energized downtown corridor.



COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations represent our collective thoughts for the Village's consideration. Moving forward, the HRIC recommends this report be shared with the relevant Village commissions (Planning & Zoning, Architecture) and that it is considered and integrated into future Happ Road-adjacent planning.

The HRIC recommends that the Village initiate these near-term actions ("Phase I") within the next 12-24 months. These actions are practical, achievable and reflect the Village's increasing momentum.

PHASE I (12-24 MONTHS)

- Develop a plan with Public Works to *clear weeds and litter* daily from the downtown area, and to enhance landscaping efforts in the central business corridor.
- *Lower the speed limit* of Happ Road to 25mph. Install appropriate signage, especially on the west side near the library.
- *Create safer, ADA-compliant pedestrian crossings* at Orchard Lane, Mount Pleasant Street and Happ Road Park (south of Holder Lane).
- *Plan and unveil streetscape upgrades* as part of the centennial celebration, including enhancing Inspiration Park, (the triangle park south of Village Hall) and sprucing up the northeast corner of Orchard Lane and Happ Road (trim back overgrown trees and bushes, upgrade landscaping).
- *Pursue conversations with Cook County leaders* on ways the Village can exercise more control of Happ Road through its downtown business sector (Willow Road south to Mount Pleasant Street).
- *Enlist an urban/suburban planning economic development consultant/staff* to provide a coordinated vision for recommended Happ Road improvements, as well as the Mariano's/Town Center and Central Street corridor development opportunities.
- Close off Happ Road (from Willow Road to Mount Pleasant Street) to vehicle traffic and *host village celebrations* featuring our businesses, restaurants and community engagement activities.



QUOTES FROM SURVEY RESPONSES:

"It's really a mess that's long overdue to fix, we need to reduce speed and use speed slowing hardscape like pavers: using Happ as a cut through for those exiting the expressway needs to be discouraged in every way. Also we should work on a plan to gather control from the county."

"As a family that has someone who uses a wheelchair, it is very important for us that my son can travel through Northfield safely on sidewalks. We often go to Stormy's or to the restaurants in the commercial area. There are limited sidewalks, and he often has to use his wheelchair in the street. This is not safe."

"As we develop the area let's keep the appearance similar to our existing small- town look. No big chains. No tall buildings. Maximize green space. Dining options. And please let's get a grocery store back where Mariano's was. We need one!!!"

The following recommendations are identified as "Phase II" actions and are expected to be achievable within the next 24-48 months.

PHASE II (24-48 MONTHS)

- *Create a dedicated sidewalk on Orchard Lane* that extends from the Bosworth bridge to the library.
- *Install colorful walkway indicators and signage* connecting all parks to the nearby business district.
- Partner with landlords to *create safe, aesthetically pleasing walkways* running east-west through the parking lots along Happ Road.
- Create a Village program to *add additional seating, landscaping and lighting* on both sides of Happ Road from Willow Road to the Happ Road Park.
- Activate the signage committee's recommendation to install *"Welcome to downtown Northfield"* signs (four locations: Willow Road – east and west sides, Central Street to the north, Happ Road to the south). Erect a gateway into downtown that establishes the business district as a destination.
- *Add a colored bike lane* on the west side of Happ Road running from Willow Road to Winnetka Road. Position it to easily connect to the Skokie Valley Trail at a later date. Install bike and scooter racks near the library.
- *Create a privately funded public art program* that will install eye-catching pieces along Happ Road.
- *Institute a recycling program* along Happ Road as part of a Village commitment to maintaining the beauty of a downtown Northfield experience.



QUOTES FROM SURVEY RESPONSES:

“Signage, street banners and pedestrian and bike friendly walks/paths would be a great start.”

“Safer travel on foot and bike & places to pause and rest (benches) would encourage less driving around town, which would decrease traffic and pollution.”

“A safer place to walk and bike. Encourages people to come to the village. Places to gather for dining throughout the day. Beautification would enhance the experience of outsiders visiting. Additional retail stores, restaurants and ice cream shops that will bring in kids and adults. A boulevard creates a homey but active feel with potential street parking. People want to go where other people go!”

HAPP ROAD SOUTH OF THE COMMERCIAL DISTRICT

Much focus has been given to the commercial segment of the Happ Road corridor. However, the corridor includes a significant residential segment. South of the commercial district to Winnetka Road, the corridor includes a park, condominium and townhome developments, and single-family homes. Anyone arriving to downtown Northfield from the south will pass through this residential stretch of road.

The HRIC makes the following recommendations for the residential portion of Happ Road. These recommendations are informed by survey responses and discussions with residents from south Happ Road:

- *Reduce the speed limit to 25mph* and use other traffic calming measures to discourage speeding.
- *Create a safe, ADA-compliant crossing at Holder Lane*, on the north end of Happ Road Park.
- *Improve aesthetics* by addressing unsightly utility boxes that dot the parkways.
- *Upgrade street lighting* throughout the full length of the road.
- Work with residents to upgrade *landscaping* through a cost matching program.
- *Install curbs* to improve drainage when the road is next resurfaced or rebuilt.
- Continue your work at the intersection of Winnetka Road and Happ Road: Temporary traffic signals have been in place for some time. The committee understands that plans are in place to install permanent traffic signals at this location. Additional study of the intersection is needed, particularly in light of the potential impacts from the planned renovation of the New Trier Athletic Field and the replacement of the Winnetka Road bridge that spans the Edens Expressway (Interstate 94).

QUOTES FROM SURVEY RESPONSES:

“Even though that area is not listed as part of the corridor, the “temporary” and poorly functional traffic signals at the Happ/Winnetka intersection need to finally be replaced by permanent structures. The committee and village board should press the Cook County Road Department to fix this long-standing problem.”

“At the very minimum the same lighting (light posts) that exist north of Willow on Happ should extend the length of the south side of Willow to the New Trier Campus. This is an easy fix/upgrade that would lighten up/dress up that stretch of Happ.”

“Lack of curb and gutter in the residential section makes pedestrian travel much less safe.”

Taken together, these recommended steps can transform Happ Road into the vibrant, visually appealing downtown our residents desire (as evidenced by our survey results and residents’ written suggestions).



FURTHER DISCUSSION

Supplementing the phased recommendations, the committee also offers the following suggestions. Some items may be a repetition of previous recommendations, but their importance warrants their inclusion in this section as well.

These recommendations are organized around two pillars:

Mobility (cars, pedestrians, bikes, etc.)

Aesthetics (look, feel, vibe)

MOBILITY ISSUES AND RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

1. Safer Road Crossings

The Committee believes slowing traffic and enhancing the visibility of key road crossings – for pedestrians, bike riders, and cars – will improve road safety and inspire residents and visitors to spend more time exploring the downtown. The main areas of concern are Orchard Lane, and the area near Happ Road Park (south of Holder Lane).

Consider:

- *Installing ADA compliant crossing tools* to ensure accessibility for all.
- *Reducing the speed limit* of Happ Road to 25mph. Install appropriate signage.
- *Adding a bike lane on the west side of Happ Road.* Providing dedicated space for bicyclists will accommodate residents' current demands for safe passage as well as protect pedestrians and drivers. (Note: timing for the extension of the Skokie Valley Trail through our Village is uncertain.)
- *Implementing recommendations from the 2024 Sidewalk Committee* that connect various sections of the downtown district with public services (i.e., Library).
- *Adopting a system of red flags* placed in buckets that pedestrians use to alert drivers of their intention to cross (as used on Sheridan Road in Evanston).
- *Installing solar-powered flashing yellow "caution" lights* in high-pedestrian/traffic areas.

2. Parking Lots

The Committee believes improving the visibility of parking locations throughout the downtown business district will ease concerns of our business community about parking capacity.

Consider:

- *Install signage* to help drivers navigate the downtown area better. Many lot locations are not known by the public therefore go unused. Providing direction may also relieve vehicle congestion on Happ Road during certain time slots and improve pedestrian/bike safety.
 - Simple “P” signs
 - Maps showing the lots and their proximity to shops/restaurants
- *Add sidewalks (and landscaping) to connect parking lots* to shopping/dining locations. While many of our parking lots are privately owned, the Village and building owners have a common interest in making these parking lots aesthetically pleasing and safer for pedestrians. The Village should consider creating an incentive fund to encourage landowners to add pathways and landscaping to the parking lot areas.

3. Happ Road Ownership and Long-term/ongoing Care

To accomplish its goals for the Happ Road Corridor, the committee recommends that the Village Board work with Cook County to explore taking control of the road so that it can function the way the Village wants and the way that Northfield needs. Northfield wants to slow down traffic through this area and encourage people to stop and enjoy what is here.

AESTHETICS ISSUES AND RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

1. Village Identity

- *Add signage* similar to that at the intersection at Willow and Waukegan Roads, to welcome traffic entering our community from the east.
- *Re-establish the Board’s 2023 Wayfinding Committee* and consider implementing its recommendations which deliver identity, traffic management, and community engagement-building benefits.
- Proactively work to *unleash the potential beauty of our downtown*. Remove eyesores and hold building owners to certain standards (trash, empty flowerpots, vacant buildings with papered windows, weeds, etc.).

2. Village Destination

- *Launch a public art campaign* as called for in the 2040 Strategic Plan to attract visitors and inspire downtown patrons to gather and explore. Consider reviving the Village's Foundation to privately fund art installations. Unveil the first piece at an upcoming Centennial event.
- *Create more areas for residents to gather in our community.* Northfield's motto is "the comfortable corner of the North Shore" yet there are few places for people to sit in the downtown area. Expanding public seating could make the corridor more inviting for residents and visitors. There might even be an opportunity to link this effort to a public art campaign and broader community engagement. For example, benches could be sponsored and artistically painted by area schools and community groups, similar to the well-known "Cows on Michigan Avenue" public art display. A bench on every corner might be a formidable goal, and could become a visible and meaningful community project.
- Establish a community engagement effort whereby *residents can "adopt" corners* within the community and take responsibility in their design, improvement and upkeep.
- *Lean into our Village of Trees status* by raising the bar on tree placements along Happ Road.
- Partner with the Centennial Committee to *create and install historical markers* along the corridor that highlight Northfield's history.

CONCLUSION

Happ Road has served Northfield for nearly a century as a transportation corridor. The next hundred years call for something more. The HRIC believes that this is a rare and defining opportunity to transform Happ Road from a pass-through into *a place* – a safe, beautiful, economically vibrant and welcoming center of village life. With thoughtful leadership and steady commitment, Northfield can develop a downtown that reflects who we are today and who we aspire to be.

We consider our recommendations to be consistent with the Village's 2040 Plan, which was recently reaffirmed by the Northfield Board of Trustees, and have confidence that they are grounded in extensive community input. We remain committed to working with Village leaders, community groups, stakeholders and residents to support the Village's efforts to advance this vision and deliver the downtown our village hungers for and so richly deserves.

We respectfully urge the Village Board to act boldly and begin the work of reimagining Happ Road for the next generation.

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED BY THE HAPP ROAD IMPROVEMENT COMMITTEE,

Co-chairs: Barnaby Dinges, Debbie Papas

Members: Alicia Bellar, Kelly Cheng, Ed Elfmann, Francisco Gonzalez Pulido, Maureen Huhs, Andrew Juedes, Sarah Muñoz, Pamela Papadatos, Asheesh Seth, Jennifer Sucher, Samantha Tideman