

Thinking Through Northbrook Development

What Are We Trying to Build?



Start with the goal. Then work backward.

Thinking Through Northbrook Development

A planning framework for Meadow Plaza, commercial land, housing policy and local decision-making

Core premise

**Define the goal first.
Then work backward from the goal.**

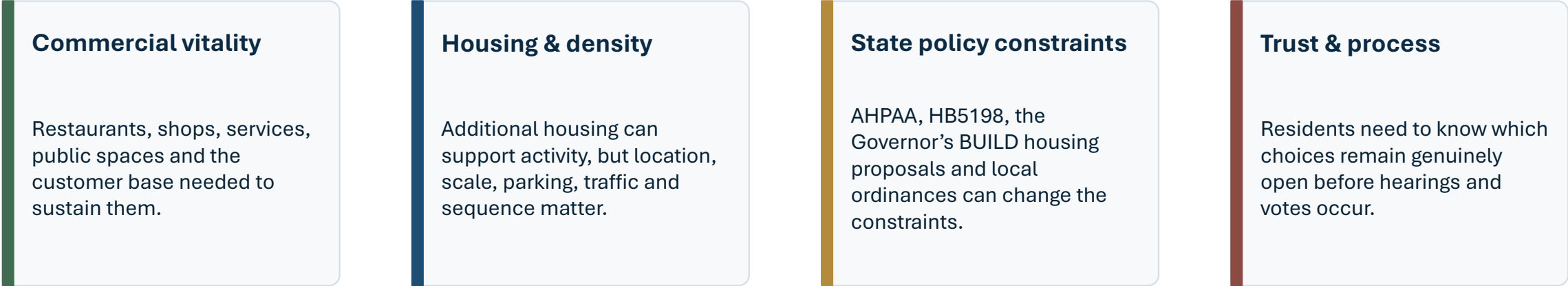
This discussion document is intended to frame the questions **before** permanent land-use decisions are made. It does not assume a final answer on any individual project.

Prepared by:

Daniel T. Behr, PhD
President, Behr & Associates, Inc.
Resident of Northbrook
dbehr@behrandassociates.com

The Core Planning Question

Before deciding what should be built, define what Northbrook is trying to create.



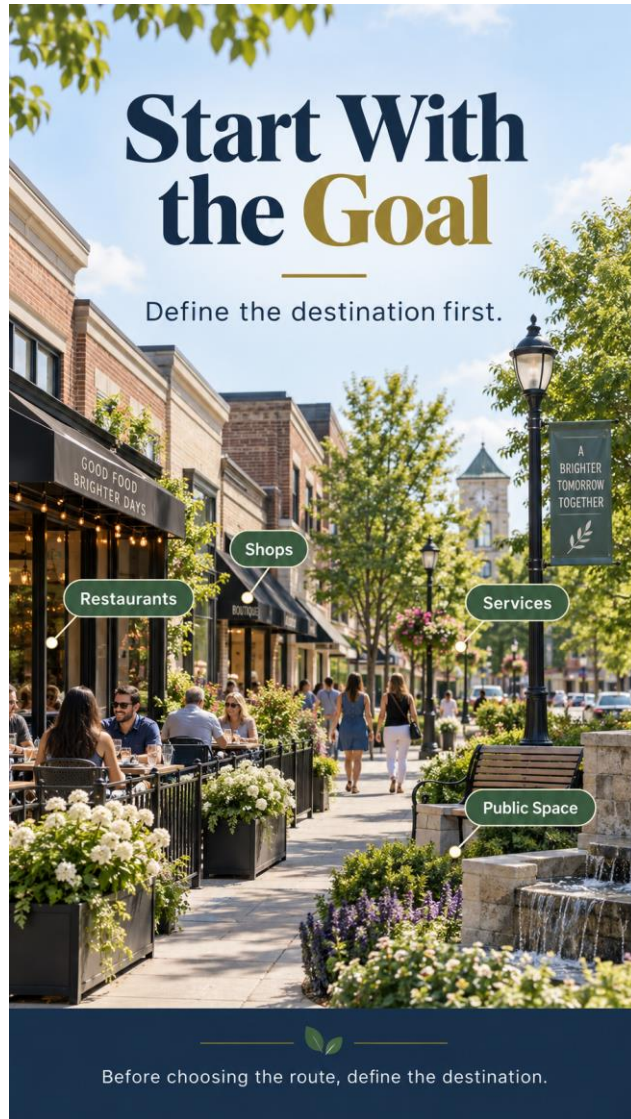
Suggested decision sequence



The issue is larger than one parcel: what development pattern makes Northbrook stronger over the next 10–20 years?

1. Start With the Goal

A vibrant destination must be defined before development choices are made.



Define the destination first. (And is defining Northbrook as a destination even a goal?)

- If the goal is a vibrant downtown or commercial district, the required ingredients should be stated clearly: destination uses, public activity, commercial continuity and civic value.
- Those ingredients may include restaurants, shops, services, public space, walkability, visitors, employees, residents and attractions that are distinctive to Northbrook.
- A proposal should be evaluated against that end state, not merely against what a developer is prepared to build.
- If existing space is demolished, the plan should ask whether active tenants can be phased, relocated or carried into replacement commercial space. ***And not miles away, destroying the density downtown Northbrook needs.***
- What characteristics about this high-density and otherwise ordinary residential development are unique ***and achieve the goal*** of drawing in current residents and outside visitors by establishing downtown Northbrook as a ***separately distinctive destination?***
- Further, let's distill this down to a core question: ***Was creating a distinctive downtown destination actually the goal? If not, what is the goal?***

Before choosing the route, define the destination.

2. Who Supports a Vibrant Commercial District?

Demand comes from more than one source.



Commercial activity needs customers.

- Existing residents support everyday services and neighborhood retail.
- New residents can add nearby demand, but one residential project represents only a small fractional share of the customer base needed.
- Employees create daytime activity and support restaurants, cafés and services.
- Visitors from surrounding communities require destination dining, specialty retail, events or other uses that fill gaps in the local market.
- **What analysis** of local communities **identifies local and regional voids** in retail and commercial development as opportunities Northbrook can fill to help re-establish downtown, as a destination?

The question is not simply “how much housing?” It is “what combination creates enough demand, and what gives people a reason to come?”

3. Housing Is Part of the Equation

Housing can help support commerce, but it is not the whole objective.



Residential density is a means, not necessarily the end.

- Additional housing can place more customers near shops, restaurants and services, but nearby residential growth is still being absorbed. Adding yet more residential offsets retail options by absorbing the sites required for this.
- That does not automatically mean housing should dominate every redevelopment site or be included on every parcel, nor should it.
- When successive commercial or industrial parcels are converted to residential use, *the cumulative effect can reduce the diversity of land uses available to support employment, retail activity and future economic development.*
- The planning question is how much housing is needed, where it belongs and what commercial activity should accompany it.
- Balanced redevelopment asks how housing, commerce, employment, services and public space reinforce one another, without crowding out retail options.

Housing can support the goal. It should not replace the goal.

4. Alternative Housing Form: Residential Above Retail

Mixed-use housing above retail can address housing goals while reinforcing commercial activity.



Residential above retail can support downtown goals.

- Smaller units above ground-floor retail can add housing, without consuming an entire parcel that might otherwise support commercial uses.
- Walkability and transit access can let residents reach coffee shops, restaurants, retail, services, Metra and Pace with fewer car trips.
- Residents living directly above commercial space can create steady foot traffic and help sustain a livelier downtown “vibe.”
- This form can add density in a way that supports commerce, rather than replacing retail and commercial frontage.
- It can broaden housing options, without relying exclusively on large luxury condominiums.

If housing is part of the answer, the form of housing matters.

5. Sequence Matters

Residential first is not the same as coordinated mixed use.

Sequence Matters

PEOPLE. PLACES. STRONGER TOGETHER.



Timing can determine the outcome.

- If residential buildings are constructed first and commercial development is deferred, the commercial portion may remain uncertain, **especially if active businesses are displaced**.
- Market conditions, financing and ownership can change after the residential value has already been captured.
- If commercial activity is essential to the public vision, it should be built concurrently or tied to clear milestones.
- A project can be called “mixed use”, while still functioning primarily as residential, if the commercial element is delayed, too small or poorly located.
- The “River Walk”, as a public amenity, should be visible, accessible and connected to normal pedestrian circulation.

If commercial activity and public space are essential to the vision, timing and location matter.

6. Retail Has Changed

The issue is what successful retail becomes.



Changed does not mean disappeared.

- Online shopping permanently changed retail, especially commodity shopping and older mall formats, but physical retail still remains important, where it offers experience, convenience **and** feeds other retail by building traffic.
- Successful commercial centers increasingly emphasize dining, services, fitness, wellness, entertainment, medical uses, specialty retail and selective physical formats.
- The question is not whether the shopping center of twenty years ago returns.
- The better question is whether Northbrook can create a commercial model of the next twenty years, including uses people cannot easily replace online.

Retail adaptation is a planning opportunity, not just a reason to convert commercial land.

7. A Balanced Tax Base

Diversification matters for long-term fiscal resilience.



Land use is also an economic question.

- Residential, retail, office, and industrial/employment uses contribute differently to local revenues and public costs.
- Retail can support sales-tax revenue and local services; employment uses can add jobs and daytime demand.
- Residential development adds households and assessed value, but also generates service, infrastructure, traffic and school-district impacts.
- Before permanently converting commercial or employment land, the gains, losses and alternatives should be compared.

A strong community should avoid overdependence on one development category.

8. State Housing Policy

Housing goals, state policy, and local planning constraints.

State Housing Policy Another Constraint to Consider.

Local decisions don't happen in a vacuum. Community goals, affordable housing requirements, and state rules all interlock — and each shapes what is possible.



Good planning **reconciles objectives** instead of ignoring them.



Local decisions do not happen in a vacuum.

- Illinois housing policy is increasingly focused on housing supply and affordability, **which is partially a driver here.**
- State initiatives **can and do** affect local rules involving density, parking, lot size, allowable housing types and affordable-housing obligations.
- Mixed-use housing above retail, smaller units, walkability and transit access may address housing goals, while catalyzing downtown activity and limiting school, parking and traffic impacts.

Good planning must reconcile housing goals with local consequences and choose forms that strengthen the commercial district.

9. Resident Concerns

Credibility requires acknowledging the concerns residents are raising.



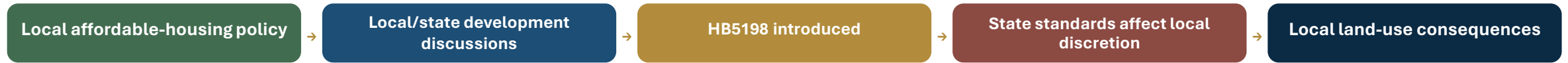
These concerns should be treated as planning inputs, not distractions.

A balanced discussion should recognize that residents may support good planning while questioning scale, sequence, and state preemption.

- Density can affect traffic, parking and the character of nearby residential streets.
- Parking pressure can weaken remaining commercial and retail uses, if customers and employees cannot conveniently access them.
- Property-value concerns should be identified as resident concerns, unless supported by project-specific analysis.
- Local-control concerns are especially important when state legislation changes the standards under which municipalities operate or when public amenities are relocated into low-use areas.

10. How Local and State Housing Policy Connect

Policy origin, interaction, and accountability.



Documented context

HB5198 was introduced by **Rep. Tracy Katz Muhl**, who represents Northbrook in the Illinois House. Because the bill would materially change the statutory framework governing municipal affordable-housing obligations and local discretion, **its sponsorship is directly relevant to this local discussion**

Important limitation

This does not, by itself, prove coordination on any specific bill or project. **It does, however, make transparency and accountability central to the local discussion. Readers may draw their own conclusions.**

Public questions

- What effect would HB5198 have on ***Northbrook's ability to make its own land-use decisions*** and ***did residents support that policy direction before it was advanced in Springfield?***
- What public input ***preceded the policy direction?***
- ***What zoning, overlay or policy changes*** created the current development envelope ***and what public process accompanied them?***
- How do state housing standards affect the ***Village's discretion over Meadow Plaza, Shermer and future redevelopment areas?***

11. Trust and Process

Public hearings must feel consequential, not merely procedural.

Official process narrative

Formal application → staff review → Plan Commission hearing
→ public input → eventual Board decision.

FOIA chronology

Pre-application communications document owner contacts, developer introductions, residential discussions and substantive redevelopment discussions, before the formal hearing stage.

Both narratives can be true at the same time.

Why this matters

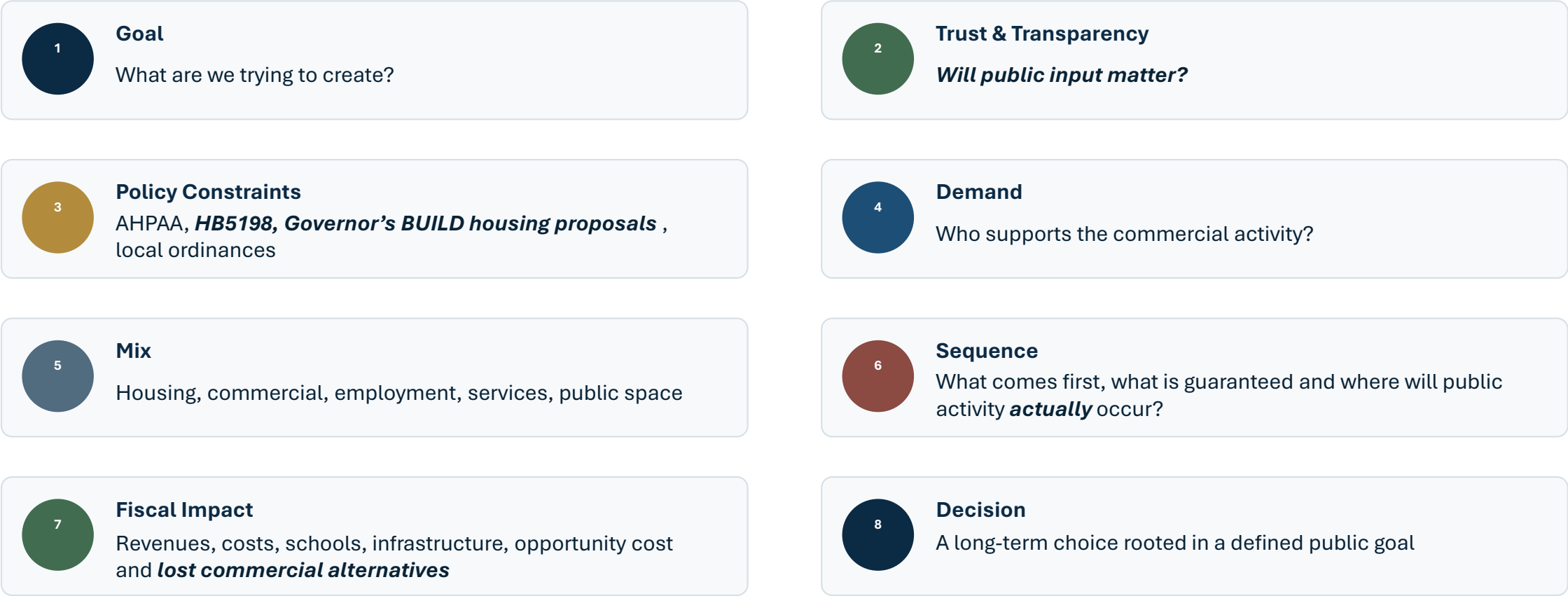
- A legally sufficient process may still lose public confidence, if residents believe the fundamental direction was already substantially settled.
- The appropriate response is not to assume motive; it is to put the complete record on the table.
- Residents should be able to compare public statements, the pre-application chronology and the decisions that followed.

Core question: which decisions remain genuinely open to change?

See Selected Sources, slide 16.

12. Updated Decision Framework

Goal → Trust → Constraints → Demand → Mix → Sequence → Fiscal Impact → Decision



A defensible decision should move through the framework, rather than beginning with a preferred building form.

Questions for Further Local Review

A concise checklist for evaluating Meadow Plaza and related redevelopment decisions.

Goal

What ***specific public goal*** is the project supposed to achieve?

Commercial commitment

What commercial development is required, when must it be built and can active tenants be phased or relocated into replacement space?

Resident impacts

How will density, traffic, parking, character, public-space location, school impacts and ***property-value concerns be evaluated?***

State policy

How do AHPAA, ***HB5198, the Governor's BUILD housing proposals*** and local inclusionary rules affect the ***Village's discretion and development form?***

Trust

Which parts of the decision remain genuinely open and which policy directions were established earlier?

Fiscal balance

What is the net fiscal and economic effect, compared with other plausible land-use options, ***including a stronger destination-retail model?***

Define the goal first. Then work backward from the goal.

Selected Sources & Public Records

References supporting the factual background in this discussion framework.

- 1

[Village of Northbrook — Meadow Plaza / PCD-26-05](#)
Official development-review materials and public-hearing notice for 1901–1975 Cherry Lane & 1807 Shermer Road.
- 2

[Village of Northbrook — Public participation notice](#)
Village notice describing the Meadow Plaza review process and opportunities for resident participation, Sept. 23–24, 2026.
- 3

[Village of Northbrook — Inclusionary Housing Ordinance](#)
Summary of the Village’s inclusionary-housing requirements, including the 15% standard for governed developments.
- 4

[Illinois General Assembly — HB5198](#)
Official bill status and legislative history. Last action: re-referred to Senate Assignments on June 1, 2026.
- 5

[Illinois Compiled Statutes — AHPAA, 310 ILCS 67](#)
Affordable Housing Planning and Appeal Act.
- 6

[Governor’s BUILD housing proposals](#)
Building Up Illinois Developments proposal addressing housing supply, permitting, zoning and related development rules.
- 7

[Village FOIA production — Meadow Plaza communications](#)
Pre-application correspondence and meeting records concerning Meadow Plaza redevelopment, reviewed for the chronology summarized here.
- 8

[Retail-market context](#)
Kate King, Wall Street Journal, Apr. 5, 2022 and Sept. 14, 2026, on U.S. mall retrenchment and subsequent recovery.

Source note: Public records support factual background. Analytical conclusions are presented as planning judgments or questions; retail-gap and fiscal-impact issues require further local study.