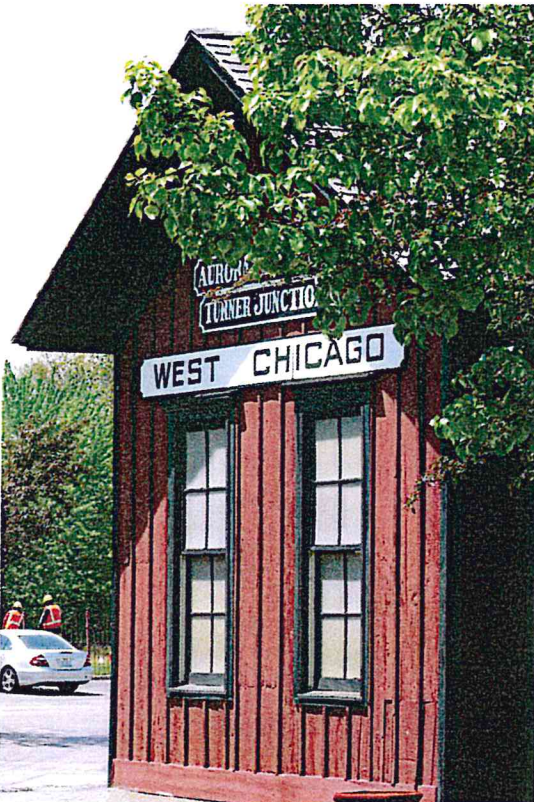


# West Chicago

*A Village on Track to a Vibrant Future*

By Lynn Petrak



**R**ailroads are at the heart of West Chicago, literally and figuratively. The downtown area, as with many central districts in the western suburbs, is built along the tracks of the Metra commuter rail line, running to and from Chicago.

The rails are the hub of the town's history, too. The city sprang up in the mid-1800s around the young state's first railroad junction, where the Galena and Chicago Union Railroad and the Aurora Branch Railroad met. Those historic tracks remain a part of the city's vibrant present. Every July, crowds from and beyond the town gather for Railroad Days, a four-day celebration with carnival rides, a parade, food and entertainment. The city's motto — Where History and Progress Meet — is a take on the significance of that first junction, and the official logo features a vintage-style locomotive.

The city's icons and its legacy as a junction are also fitting in other ways. Located on the far western edge of DuPage County, abutting Kane County, this community of more than 27,000 residents is demographically diverse. A population of multi-generation families with ties going back decades is mixed in with many newer Hispanic-American families.

## Family Roots vs. New Growth

Mayor Ruben Pineda, who has lived in town since he was a child, is West Chicago's first Hispanic mayor and is a leading proponent of new development. "I've been in West Chicago for 56 years and, while the population doubled in 2000 from the previous census, we still have that hometown look and feel," he says, adding that improvement plans in the works are designed to maintain that old town charm while bringing new benefits. "We want to be sure everyone is comfortable, from seniors to new residents."

As testament to ties that bind in West Chicago, Pineda is a childhood friend and teammate of David Sabathne, executive director of the Western DuPage Chamber of Commerce. "I grew up here and played pee wee football with the mayor," Sabathne says, adding that two other classmates from their year in school went on to be city aldermen, giving back to the suburb that gave them a happy childhood. Sabathne is the youngest of 10 children and lives in his childhood home with his own family. "My phone number is older than I am," he jokes.

Doug Domeracki, superintendent of Community High School



District 94, says that those who live in town tend to give back, whether it's in public service, community leadership and volunteering or through local business or other avenues. Domeracki cites parents who are active within the school district. Some grew up in town while others settled in West Chicago and are committed to making the town a good place to live and raise families. "We have faculty who are former students and we have longtime families in the community who have come together to support the schools. Mayor Pineda is an alumnus of West Chicago



Photo by Uwe Gadi



Community High School. "Everywhere you see the hometown environment," he says.

City leaders espouse the virtues and appeal of West Chicago that continue to draw people to the area, whether they're day visitors or looking to buy a home. "I think West Chicago is perfectly situated to take advantage of new growth opportunities," says Sabathne.

As West Chicago works on its plan for a new municipal hall and a revitalization of the downtown shopping and dining district, Pineda notes that the intrinsic attributes of the community bode well for its future. "Once we move the municipal campus to Washington Street, we'll get more foot traffic. When we do the redevelopment, we're looking to make it more of a sustainable community. We have the railroad and Metra, and we hope to attract more professionals to get on the train and go to work," he says. "On the

way, we want them to walk through downtown West Chicago to pick up a pizza or dry cleaning."

For now, there is plenty to do and see in West Chicago, with a range of attractions and events that will appeal to visitors across the western suburbs.

### Railroad Days

One of the highlights of the year is West Chicago's annual Railroad Days event. Slated for July 6 – 9 this year at Pioneer Park, the festivities are sponsored by the Western DuPage Chamber of



Commerce. Railroad Days includes a parade, a carnival and a 5K run/walk, as well as live music, a beer garden and food from local vendors.

"Railroad Days brings the community together," says Sabathne. "It's a great event, with the carnival and a chance for people to listen to some wonderful entertainment."

The community hosts a variety of other special events throughout the year. Blooming Days in late May draws garden vendors and experts, including those from Ball Horticultural Company, headquartered in West Chicago. The Tall Tales Tombstones Tell cemetery walk marks its 28th year this fall, while a Frosty Fest event and tree-lighting ceremony ring in the holiday season.

### The Shell and Reed-Kepler Park

As summer arrives, a new hotspot is set to launch in West Chicago. "The Shell," opening June 10 within the grounds of the popular Reed-Kepler Park, is an entertainment and cultural pavilion jointly created by the City of West Chicago and the West Chicago Park District. The idea for such a venue came years ago from late mayor Michael Kwasman and other community members, and the venue will be dedicated on opening day with a ribbon-cutting ceremony. Inaugural acts that day will include



performances by Girl and the Gang, Leman Mariachi Band and the big-band sounds of Wayne Messmer and the Chicago Skyliners.

"The Shell is the place to be for outdoor summer entertainment, offering free concerts, movie nights and other family entertainment," says Rosemary Mackey, spokesperson for the City of West Chicago.

Reed-Kepler Park, which surrounds The Shell, is a destination of its own. Run by the West Chicago Park District, the



park includes several athletic fields, a skate park, two dog parks and a playground. In summer, Turtle Splash Family Aquatic Center draws crowds who want to swim and cool off in the pool and on the slides. The indoor facility, the ARC (short for Athletics, Recreation and Community) Center, is a 70,000-sq-ft rec building with a three-court gym, fitness center, activity court, indoor track and indoor playground, among other features.

"The ARC Center has become the heart of the community," says Lily Medina, marketing and communications manager for the park district. "It offers a myriad of different programs and host lots of events for the schools and the village."

The 25-acre Dyer Nature Sanctuary is located within Reed-Keppler Park as well. And breaking ground this month will be the planned ZONE250 sports training facility, slated to open in March of 2018.

### Eat, Drink and Be Merry

According to Pineda, while village leaders hope to attract more eateries and

### Statistical Snapshot

#### Population

Census pop est: 27,447  
 → Increase from 2000: 17%  
 → Median age: 31.8  
 → 19 and under: 34%  
 → 20-24: 7%  
 → 25-34: 14%  
 → 35-44: 14%  
 → 45-54: 14%  
 → 55-64: 9%  
 → 65 and over: 8%  
 → Male: 51%  
 → Female: 49%  
 → White: 83%\*  
 → African-American: 3%  
 → Asian: 6%  
 → Hispanic: 51%

#### Education

→ High school degree or higher: 73%  
 → Bachelor's degree



Photo by Sharon Ann Davis

or higher: 24%  
 → Graduate or professional degree: 9%

#### Income

→ Median household income: \$70,719

#### Housing

→ Total households: 7,743  
 → Family households: 83%  
 → Avg household size: 3.6  
 → Mean price for detached houses: \$390,953  
 → Owner-occupied units: 5,180  
 → Renter-occupied units: 2,563  
 → Gross median rent: \$928

#### Business/Employment

→ Residents employed: 96%  
 → Residents unemployed: 4%  
 → Avg. travel time to work: 23.8 min

\* Population percentages are based on self-reporting, where individuals may report more than one ethnicity. Sources: 2015 U.S. Census, City-Data.com and usa.com

stores, West Chicago as it is today includes an array of enticing restaurants, such as La Cochina de Maria, Pal Joey's, John and Tony's and Hawthorne's Backyard Bar & Grill, among others. The tapas-style Mexican eatery Al Chulo is always worth a visit. In the summertime, many places

offer outdoor dining and entertainment. The Taste Freez in downtown West Chicago is a popular spot for those who want a cool treat. Going there is a throwback experience of sorts, as people walk, ride their bikes and drive up for frozen dessert.

# Summer at The Shell

Celebrate music, drama, family and the arts!

Grand Opening - Saturday, June 10 at 1:00pm

### Outdoor Fitness

Yoga, Family Fitness  
Youth Fitness

### Concert Series

Rock, Country, Jazz,  
Classical & Latin

### Fun Fridays

Kids Entertainment  
Series

### Movie Night

Disney's Moana &  
Hawaiian Dancers



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## Gallery 200 and the City Museum

West Chicago's cultural offerings reflect the diversity of the city and showcase the talents of many residents and visitors. Gallery 200, for example, is an artist collective run by the nonprofit organization People Made Visible and is partially supported by the city.

The Gallery displays a variety of works in oil, watercolors, acrylic, wood, glass, clay and fiber, as well as photography and other media. Visitors can appreciate art and take some of it home, too, with pieces available for sale.

Those looking to make their own artworks can take classes that cover colored pencils, painting butterflies with acrylics, water-soluble oils and jewelry-making, among other subjects. Gallery 200 also offers special events through the year, such as a Family Art Night.

Culture is on display at the City Museum, too. The history and art center, located in a historic building that once served as the town hall, encompasses programs and research documenting the town's history. The Museum Center includes a circa-1893 railroad depot donated to the community by the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad. Visitors can tour the depot and checkout a model of a 19th century roundhouse from May through September as part of "Depot Days" at the museum.

Phalen, who is also director of the City Museum, suggests visitors use a free app from Tour Sphere ([westchicago/toursphere](http://westchicago/toursphere)) that provides a self-guided informational tour of the town. It's available at Gallery 200 and the nearby City Museum.

"We encourage people when they come here to really explore the downtown with the app as a way to continue their cultural education and appreciation," says Phalen. "We have so much local history here, with the railroad and the four historic depots that are still standing downtown."

## Forest Preserves and Trails

A vast amount of open land makes West Chicago unique among the western suburbs. "In terms of community-friendly lifestyles, we have many amenities around

**FUN FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY!**

**Pioneer Park RAILROAD DAYS**  
July 6-9, 2017  
West Chicago

**WESTERNDUPAGECHAMBER.COM**

**Explore Downtown**

**West Chicago**

- City Museum
- Gallery 200
- Banner Art
- History Walk
- 1860s Railroad Depot

[www.westchicago.org](http://www.westchicago.org)  
Image by Sarah Ann Bass



## Resources

### JUAN CHAWUK SUMMER 2016 VISITING ARTIST



#### West Chicago Public Library District

**Total Holdings:** 135,403  
**Items Checked Out per Year:** 230,420  
**Visitors per Year:** 116,441

#### Attractions

■ **Cascade Drive In:** 1100 North Ave., 630 231-3150. Single-screen drive-in theater showing double-feature films and offering in-car speakers, heated patios and lawn seating.

■ **Gallery 200:** 103 W Washington St., 630 293-9550. An artists' co-op featuring the work of local artists for sale at affordable prices as well as special events.

■ **Kline Creek Farm:** 1N600 County Farm Rd., 630 876-5900. Historically restored farmstead with children's activities and events.

■ **Sonny Acres Farm:** 29W310 North Ave., 630 231-3859. A 100-year-old farm offering a fall festival, a pumpkin farm and Christmas trees.

#### Museum

■ **West Chicago City Museum:** 132 Main St., 630 231-3376. Art and history center offering community research programs and exhibits.

#### Recreation

■ **ARC Center:** 201 W National St., 630 231-9474. Fitness center featuring locker rooms, three-court gymnasium,

treehouse play area and a walking/running track.

■ **Coyote Crossing Mini Golf:** 27W650 North Ave., 630 293-8374. Professionally designed miniature golf course with picnic pavilion and snack stand.

■ **Pioneer Park:** 479 Forest Ave., 630 231-9474. Community park featuring a pond, two pavilions, a playground, soccer field and five baseball/softball fields.

■ **Prairie Landing Golf Club:** 2325 Longest Dr., 630 208-7600. An 18-hole, links-style golf course with mounds, bunkers and wetlands, designed by Robert Trent Jones, Jr.

■ **Reed-Keppler Park:** 129 W National St., 630 231-9474. 89-acre sports and recreation complex featuring the ARC center, two playgrounds and a basketball court.

■ **St. Andrews Golf & Country Club:** 2241 Route 59, 630 231-3100. Two world-class championship 18-hole courses, plus award-winning banquet and clubhouse services.

■ **The Shell:** 2241 Route 59, 630 231-9474. Newly opened entertainment and cultural center, with free concerts, movie nights and family entertainment.

■ **Turtle Splash Water Park:** 129 W National St., 630 293-6320. Water facility featuring a 12-ft waterfall, zero-depth entry,

a bucket drop, playground, sandbox and more.

■ **Wiggly Field and Southpaw Dog Parks:** 201 W National St., 630 231-9474. Fenced-in canine parks open seven days a week. Wiggly Field for larger dogs and Southpaw for smaller dogs.

#### Events

■ **Blooming Fest:** Downtown West Chicago, www.westchicago.org. Early summer garden celebration and plant sale with entertainment, food and activities.

■ **Frosty Fest:** Downtown West Chicago, 630 293-2200. Old-fashioned winter vignette with tree lighting, horse-drawn sleighs and live reindeer.

■ **Mexican Independence Day Festival:** Downtown West Chicago, 630 293-2200. Annual festival in September with mariachi, a 3 v. 3 street soccer tournament and a parade.

■ **National Night Out:** Reed-Keppler Park, 129 W National St., 630 293-2200. Annual summer event celebrating the success of communities' crime, drug and violence prevention programs.

■ **West Chicago Railroad Days:** Pioneer Park, 479 W Forest Ave., www.westchicago.org. Four days of entertainment, live music, a 5K walk/run, a carnival and more.

us, but we also have a tremendous amount of open space," says Sabathne.

Part of that green space is available for development and can attract businesses, but much of it is devoted to outdoor recreation. The West Chicago Park District runs several parks, including the Reed-Keppler Park and Pioneer Park, which has a newer splash pad.

The West Chicago Forest Preserve, run by the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County, spans more than 300 acres near the Illinois Prairie Path, making it accessible for bikers. The Great Western Trail also cuts through town.

Pineda says the interlinked paths make it a popular site, especially during the warmer months. "You can get on a bike and ride literally for hundreds of miles," he says of the path and trail system snaking to and through the community.

#### Other Highlights

- West Chicago is home to pristine golf courses, including the 18-hole Prairie Landing and the 36-hole St. Andrews Golf and Country Club, both public courses.
- Kline Creek Farm evokes the early days of the area. The farm, which mimics life in the late 1800s, offers tours and activities for all ages, such as old-time methods of planting, harvesting, cooking and canning. It's a popular destination for field trips and offers its own programs, including a "Farmhands" day camp for kids ages 7 through 12.
- One of the last (and largest) drive-in theaters in the state is located in West Chicago. Pull up in your car and enjoy new movies in retro style at the Cascade Drive In, which first opened in 1961. There should be a spot, since the parking lot has space for 1,200 vehicles.
- The DuPage Airport offers flights for cargo, business and recreation. Nearby, the DuPage Business Park encompasses 500 acres of space for manufacturers and organizations.
- The West Chicago Public Library is expansive, with more than 27,000 square feet of space. The library offers a range of programs for all ages, including children's activities in the summer. ■