

New Sun

North Chicago receives \$1.1M to reopen King Drive at navy base Lakes

By Ralph Zahorik

<mailto:rzahorik@scn1.com?Subject=SuburbanChicagoNews.com.Story.Response>

STAFF WRITER

NORTH CHICAGO - A \$1.1 million federal check to help fund the reopening of King Drive to Great Lake Lakes Naval Training Station was presented Monday to Mayor Bette Thomas and other city officials.

The street, a main east-west city thoroughfare that once crossed the Metra tracks and ended at Great Lakes' Gate 4, was closed to the base in 1990 when the south end of the Amstutz Expressway was built.

The street was North Chicago's direct link to Great Lakes.

Until 1990, thousands of vehicles exiting Great Lakes daily used King Drive - called 22nd Street at the time - to cross the tracks to reach Sheridan Road in North Chicago. Sailor foot traffic from the base through the 22nd Street gate was restricted, too.

The once thriving Sheridan Road-King Drive "Strip" across the tracks from Great Lakes has been in decline ever since. The Strip was lined with bars, restaurants and stores catering to sailors. Today, some taverns and restaurants and a few shops are still there, but many storefronts are boarded up.

A commercial building at the corner of King Drive and Sheridan Road, long vacant and considered an eyesore, was torn down this week.

With King Drive reopened, "Retail businesses and restaurants will reopen" to serve the tens of thousands of sailors who train annually at Great Lakes, said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, speaking at a news conference outside Gate 4.

With Kirk was North Chicago Mayor Bette Thomas, most city aldermen, Rear Adm. Ann Rondeau, base commander, and a half-dozen other Navy officers.

The Navy is planning a major overhaul and beautification of the somewhat drab Gate 4 entrance to the base, Rondeau disclosed.

The closure of 22nd Street cost the city "numerous retail establishments" including its only drug store "and even its grocery store," Kirk said.

Kirk worked to get funding for the project. Two years ago, he brought in a Commerce Department official from Washington, Deputy Assistant Secretary David Bearden, to look at the King Drive-Sheridan Road intersection.

The \$1.1 million check was presented by C. Robert Sawyer, the Chicago-based administrator for the U.S. Commerce Department's Economic Development Administration Region V.

Grants are based "on economic distress and the quality of the investment," Sawyer said, noting North Chicago's low per capita income and relatively high unemployment rate.

"This is a key area because it will open up the base," he said. "The hope is that the 30,000 sailors will bring legitimate businesses here."

Kirk said the infrastructure investment would "reduce unemployment, raise property values and lay the groundwork for future investment in one of Illinois' lowest income communities."

With the federal government spending more than \$700 million in new construction at the base "the Navy can become an economic juggernaut for businesses in our community," Kirk said.

"I think it's great. They're beginning to do something," said Mary Katris, whose family has operated Jim's restaurant and tavern on King Drive for more than 50 years. "I'm glad they tore the corner building down, too. It was an eyesore."

"It's been long and hard, a lot of work and a lot of meetings," said Mayor Bette Thomas. "I'm so thankful and grateful we had someone to go to like Congressman Kirk."

It isn't known when the intersection work will begin, or what its total cost will be. "We have to go back to the drawing board," Thomas said.

A major reconstruction of the mile-long stretch of King Drive between Green Bay and Sheridan roads also is planned. That project has been estimated to cost more than \$6 million.

About 70 percent of the King Drive cost will be paid for by the federal government, according to Bruce Burris, the city's consulting engineer. The new King Drive will have 8-foot-wide sidewalks, trees and new ornamental lighting, said Burris, speaking at a City Council committee meeting in January.