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ALERT

TOP STORY

## Urban planner Jeff Speck returns to survey downtown Hammond, advise on next projects

Joseph S. Pete

Jan 18, 2025

**T**he renowned urban planner Jeff Speck returned to downtown Hammond recently to see some of his plans come to fruition and start to plan for the next phase of downtown redevelopment.

Hammond brought Speck in to design its downtown master plan that hopes to bring vitality back to downtown, which was long ago a major shopping hub filled with department stores and movie palaces. Hammond Executive Director of Planning and Development Anne Taylor said

Speck has been retained as a consultant on two upcoming projects, including the design of the downtown Hammond train station on the West Lake Corridor line and the design of the Station Square redevelopment on the west side of the station.

Hammond followed Speck's advice to make downtown Hammond more pedestrian-friendly by revamping Hohman Avenue to narrow it to two lanes, expand the sidewalks and put parking in a median in the middle of the street. The goal is to invite more foot traffic and encourage drivers to slow down so they're not simply speeding through.

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"I had actually not been back in Hammond since before [the] Hohman Avenue reconstruction was complete," he said. "It is always important to see how your projects look in the flesh after they are built, and I wanted to drive and walk the avenue to see if the outcome matched our expectations."

Speck believes downtown now has better bones to support new investment and economic development.

"It was great to see Hohman in use, people parked in its center and the now gently moving traffic along the street," he said. "In terms of feelings of safety, it is a complete transformation from what was there before. Unlike the prior high-speed layout, it now feels capable of sustaining economic activity."

Hammond is paying for the \$10 million downtown train station itself and not starting until after the West Lake expansion, to be known as the Monon Corridor, goes online, Mayor Thomas McDermott Jr. said.

Speck said design work is well underway.

"We are in the middle of designing the train station. My last visit was before we had landed on a scheme and before the viaduct was built past the station," Speck said. "Now that we are moving forward with a specific proposal, I wanted to site-check that design against the facts on the

ground. I also wanted to ride the South Shore Line again to get a better understanding of the platform architecture, which is also part of the project.”

He’s working with American Structurepoint, which won the job to design Station Square at the western face of the station. He wanted to walk the area again to get a feel for it.

“While I am mostly an urban planner, my training is in architecture and I occasionally get to design civic buildings in the plans we do. Here in Hammond, I’ve teamed up with my old friend Alex Gorlin, a truly accomplished architect, to design the train station,” he said. “It is small, but it is intended to be a little monument in the downtown, a place that celebrates Hammond’s past and future. I’m excited to show it to you.”

A South Shore Line station can help draw more residents downtown, which will create the density to support more local businesses.

“Not many people know that one of the key accomplishments of the downtown plan, after quite a struggle, was to move the train station significantly north so that it would be an easy walk from the heart of downtown,” he said. “It is located directly on the axis with Russell Street, where it anchors views from the east and west, announcing its role in connecting residents to the Chicago Loop.”

Downtown Hammond could become a desirable spot to live, especially for younger commuters looking to commute into the city.

“One-seat 40-minute train service to a huge jobs hub will make Hammond a much more attractive housing market for Chicago,” he said. “More residents downtown will eventually create the critical mass that can bring back some of the amenity retail that has been lost there. We really do see it as a new lease on life for downtown Hammond.”

Hammond will soon start work on the train station projects. It reached an agreement with the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District to wait until the South Shore Line’s West Lake Corridor expansion was complete so as not to interfere with the federal funding.

Hammond agreed to pay for the project itself if the downtown station was added later in the planning process so it would not interfere with the main rail project being on time and budget.

The new station will be two stories, like the East Chicago station, where people walk in and buy tickets from kiosks and then walk up to a raised platform.

“It’s a sleek urban look,” Speck said. “You’ll like it. It’s cool-looking.”

Hammond hopes to bring in more housing immediately around the train station, ideally a mixed-use building with apartments and first-floor retail that could include a coffee shop or restaurant with grab-and-go fare.

“We want housing. We want market rate apartments and townhomes,” McDermott said. “It should be a draw for people who want to experience Chicago but don’t necessarily want to live there. Hammond is a great alternative for that.”

Hammond hopes to break ground on the projects sometime this year.

“We are happy and positive about downtown,” McDermott said. “We’ve implemented Jeff Speck’s plan and are optimistic it will result in redevelopment.”

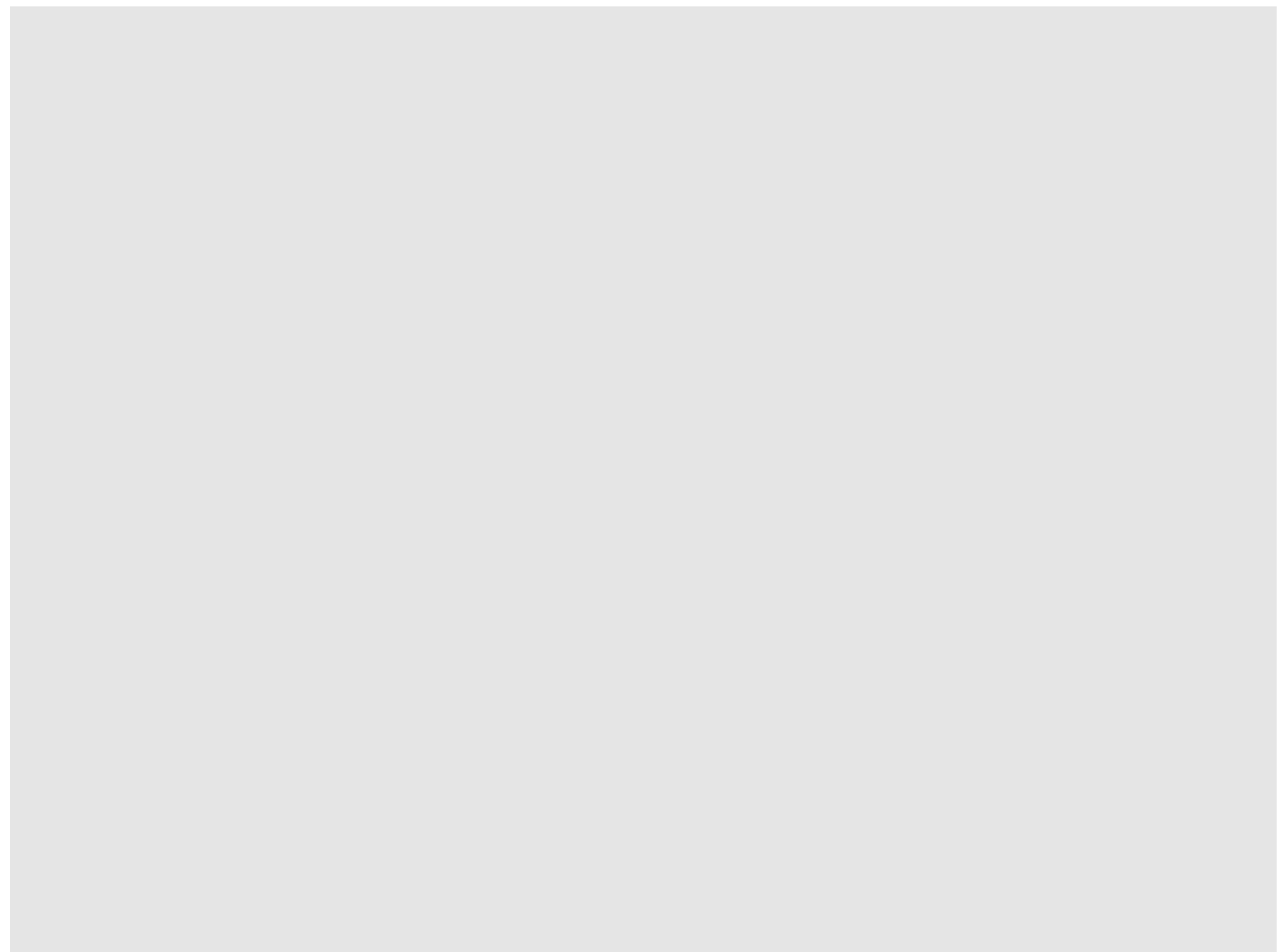
Downtown Hammond is prime for it, Speck said.

“Downtown revitalization everywhere was slowed due to COVID and higher interest rates, but the fundamentals remain as they were when we did the plan: people need housing, and a traffic-calmed downtown Hammond is a good destination for apartments, like in the Bank Calumet building under renovation, especially once the train station opens,” he said.

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**NWI Business Ins and Outs: Buona Beef, Great Harvest Bread Co., gluten-free bakery opening; bowling alley closed**

## **Coming soon**



Buona Beef, which bills itself as "Chicago's Original Italian Beef," is opening a second location in the Region.

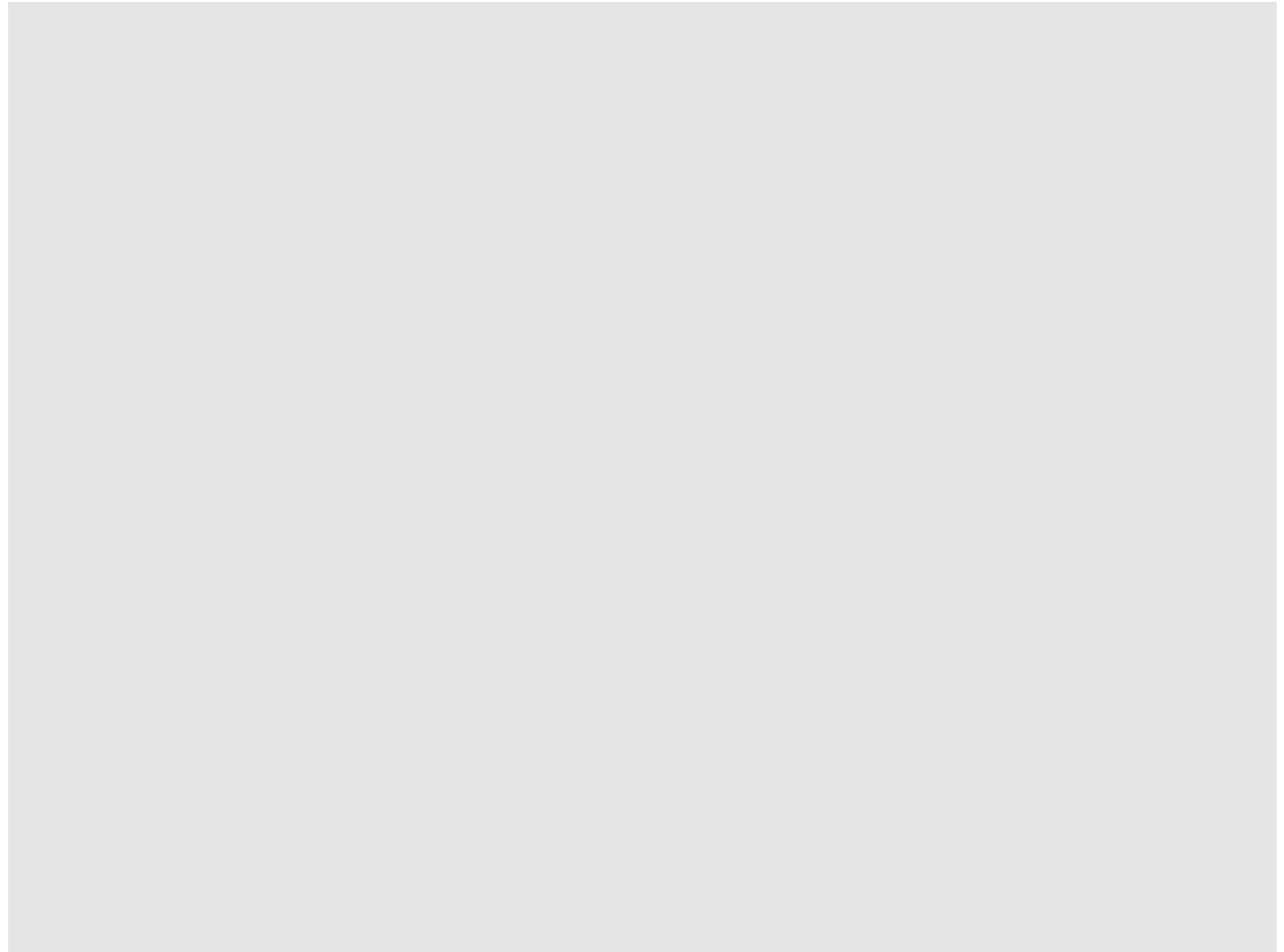
The Berwyn-based chain is building a new restaurant next to Family Express on Silhavey Road in Valparaiso, said David Lasser, the principal at Merrillville-based Commercial In-Sites.

Buona Beef was recently named one of Chicagoland's favorite Italian Beef places along with Al's, Johnnie's, Pop's and Satchell's Beef and Pizza, according to a WGN survey.

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## Coming soon



Buona Beef has been around for more than four decades, but has expanded more aggressively in recent years, opening locations across Chicagoland and franchising to owner-operators. It's had high-profile sponsorships of the Cubs and White Sox, including the Buona Beef races pitting the fleet-footed and not-at-all-plodding Cheesy Beef, Juicy Beef and Hot & Sweet Beef in an all-out mad dash to the finish line on the exploding scoreboard at Guaranteed Rate Field.

It took over the former Krispy Kreme location on Indianapolis Boulevard in Schererville in 2017, drawing long lines in its dual drive-thru. Buona also eyed a Crown Point location in Beacon Hill that has not come to fruition.

Long run by the Buonavolanto family, it's grown to more than 25 locations, including in Flossmoor and Beverly. It's the second largest Italian Beef chain in Chicagoland after only Portillo's.

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