

Area Plan Summary

Railroad Island Plan

Addendum to The Comprehensive Plan for Saint Paul

Original Plan adopted by the City Council – November 16, 1994

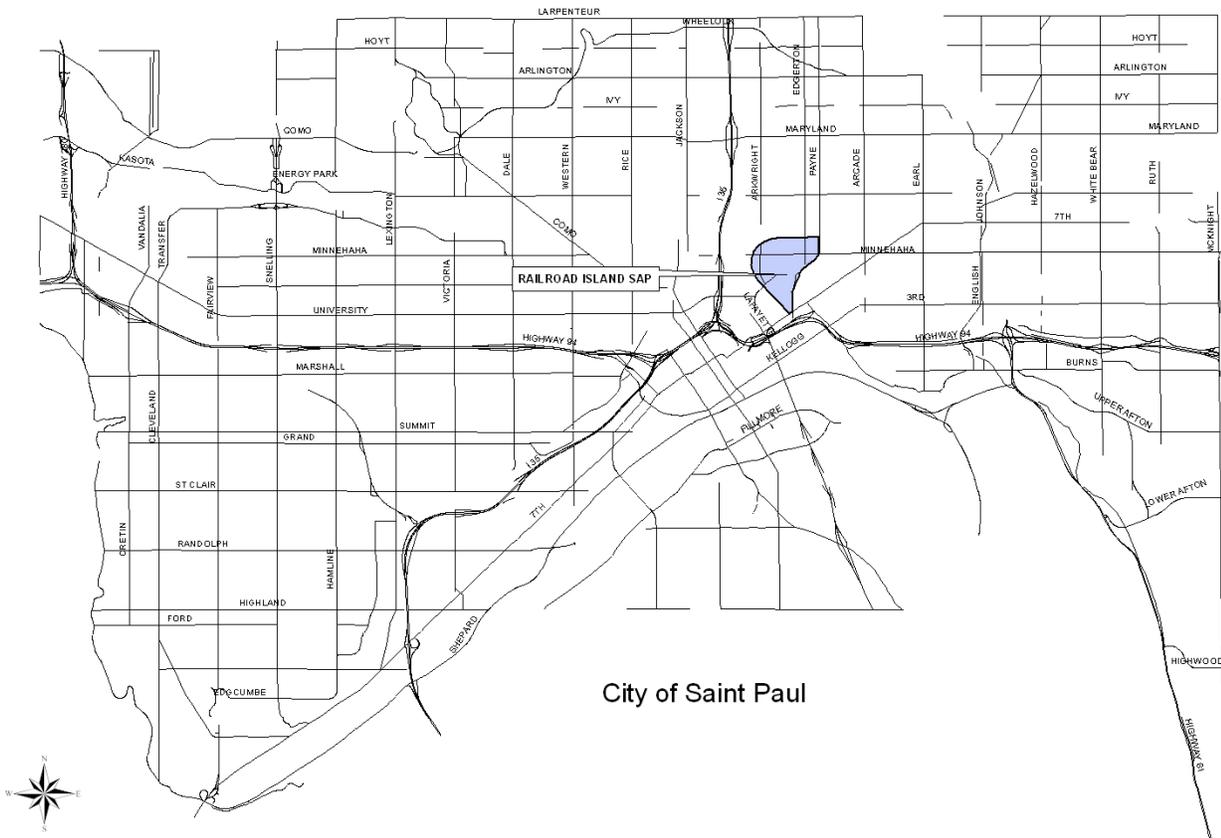
Updated Summary Recommended by the Planning Commission – June 15, 2007

Adopted by the City Council – July 18, 2007

This summary appends to the Comprehensive Plan, the visions and strategies of the Railroad Island Plan, and provides an updated review of the changes in the community over the past decade. The plan addresses five major areas, including housing, community and economic development, infrastructure, environment, and safety and social issues.

Copies of the full-length plan are available for review at the Saint Paul Department of Planning and Economic Development and the office of the District 5 Community Council.

Location and Current Land Uses



Railroad Island Plan Area

The Railroad Island Neighborhood is located at the southwest tip of the District 5, Payne Phalen area of Saint Paul. Railroad Island is approximately 180 acres, bounded by railroad tracks to the north and west, Swede Hollow to the east and East 7th Street on the South. The central and northwesterly portion of the neighborhood is residential. The primary retail area is located on Payne Avenue and industrial uses are concentrated along Bush Street on the north end and between Hopkins Street and East 7th Street on the south end. There is substantial open space including Swede Hollow Park, Eileen Weida Playground, the bluff and slope areas south and west of Rivoli Street and in other scattered areas throughout the neighborhood.

Vision

Railroad Island will continue to be a safe, attractive and vibrant community that retains its distinctive character, historic housing and abundant natural amenities. The area will be pedestrian-friendly with upgraded streetscapes. It will be a community for a lifetime, conducive to and embracing all age groups and cultures. Residents will have a diverse choice of housing options that are affordable to a range of income levels and family types. The commercial base will be enhanced through the positive changes taking place within Railroad Island and along the Phalen corridor. Residents in the community will have improved access to parks, schools and jobs that will help to strengthen and maintain this thriving community.

Specific Strategies and Actions Required

Since the original Small Area Plan for Railroad Island was approved in 1994, positive changes have occurred on Railroad Island: Hope Community Academy, a charter school, moved into the Hamm's Brewery administration building, and recently completed an expansion of their facility; the Brownstones of Swede Hollow were built and are now more than 50% occupied by residents who were attracted to this area from other parts of the Twin Cities; Yarusso's Italian Restaurant recently completed a renovation and expansion; a small business center was built at the intersection of Hopkins and Payne; a full-service grocery store, La Palma Supermercado, opened in the neighborhood in 2005; Phalen Boulevard was completed and pedestrian and bicycle trail connections improved, and the nearby Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary opened.

Railroad Island neighborhood is at a "tipping point": in other words, by taking action in several key areas, the neighborhood can become a more vibrant neighborhood that attracts new residents and encourages current residents take pride in the area and to improve their properties and become involved in the community. To move to this next level, strategies and goals have been identified in five areas: Housing, Economic and Community Development, Infrastructure, Environment, and Safety and Social Issues.

Housing

Over the last decade, the City has worked with Dayton's Bluff Neighborhood Housing Service (DBNHS) in developing and rehabilitating over 40 units of ownership housing. DBNHS continues to work on three other sites for possible future housing together with addressing the rehabilitation of existing owner-occupied units and working on vacant and foreclosed properties. The new homes are affordable to a range of income levels, and 51% of the homes are owned and occupied by people at or below 80% of the area's median income. The first phase of new housing at Beaumont/Bedford and Otsego sold out in 2005. The second phase of 24 townhomes was started in 2005 and completed in 2006 with over 50% of the units sold to date. Existing homes will also be improved through enforcement and incentives in the form of city grants and special financing.

In 2005, Dayton's Bluff Neighborhood Housing Services conducted a housing condition survey for Railroad Island. It showed that 63% of the neighborhood's housing units are rental, and 88% of its residential structures are in need of some type of repair (Attachment 2). This highlights the critical need for extensive housing rehabilitation for the area.

Railroad Island is the closest East Side neighborhood to downtown. The desire to live close to the downtown area has helped to spur redevelopment efforts in the Railroad Island neighborhood. The following strategies should be employed to build on the successes of the last ten years:

1. Encourage better maintenance of the existing housing stock through enforcement and incentive programs.
2. Address the issues of vacant housing and absentee landlords through laws and enforcement.
3. Encourage new housing in the community with city grants and revolving funds.
4. Preserve the affordability of housing in the area by creating new ownership opportunities for a range of income levels.
5. Encourage new single-family housing to be built on lots that are at least 40 feet in width and 5,000 square feet in lot area; discourage lot splits that create lots that do not meet the minimum standard for the zoning district.
6. Rivoli Bluff would benefit from an influx of new owner occupied housing. New development and rehabilitation should consider the design guidelines contained in the full *Railroad Island Plan* – Appendix G. Below the bluff, redevelopment of housing or other uses should occur as soil condition permits.
7. Provide financial assistance to residents to maintain and improve their homes (especially improvements in energy-efficiency) and to improve the aesthetics of the homes while maintaining their historic character.
8. Strengthen city code enforcement to discourage nuisance properties.
9. Explore the demolition and industrial redevelopment of housing located on Bush near Payne Ave.
10. Study the potential need to change the duplex zoning to single-family in order to deter the conversion of single-family houses to duplex and curb the increase in rental units.
11. Explore a program to move historic structures currently located on substandard lots (less than 40 feet wide or 5,000 square feet in area) to vacant buildable parcels in or near the neighborhood. Economic feasibility should be a part of the evaluation for suitable structures for relocation.

Economic and Community Development

Economic and community development should build on existing geographic, recreational and environmental strengths. Development that includes small- to medium-sized commercial uses along Payne should be encouraged.

12. Support the establishment of commercial uses that serve the neighborhood and/or would attract people to the neighborhood.

13. Work with the community to explore potential uses for the vacant properties on Payne Avenue from Kenny to East Seventh Street, including the possibility of purchasing State Supply to allow for creation of a more attractive gateway to the area.
14. Railroad Island community supports development of a cultural center in the Hamm's Brewery space, as well as other potential facilities such as a museum dedicated to the Swede Hollow area, a café and exhibit space for local artists, an area that could serve the need for community meeting spaces, a performance space, etc.
15. Support local businesses; encourage them to stay in Railroad Island and maintain and improve their properties/businesses and to become involved in community activities.
16. Promote the renovation of historic buildings so that they meet new code standards, while encouraging new construction.
17. Transform vacant land into "pocket parks" which can be used for a variety of recreational activities or community gardens or opportunities for new owner occupied housing or needed commercial parking. The pocket parks should be designed with CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) standards and maintained by the community.
18. Work with residences and industrial/commercial establishments to soften the edge between residential properties and industrial and commercial uses through landscaping, decorative fencing as a visual barrier, and other techniques to provide a buffer.
19. Attract new businesses to create employment opportunities in the area; work with existing businesses to retain jobs.
20. Provide wireless connections for internet users.

Infrastructure

Many of the blighting influences that have had a negative effect on property values in the area have been removed. On the west side, a large slag heap has been replaced with the Williams Hill Business Center. The north side has also been cleaned up; two junk yards and a solid waste transfer station have been replaced by Phalen Boulevard Parkway, and Westminster Junction Business Center. The primary focus now should be on improving Payne Avenue between Phalen Boulevard and East Seventh Street and creating a gateway at the intersection of Payne Avenue and East Seventh Street:

21. Reconstruct Payne Avenue from East Seventh Street to Phalen Boulevard, incorporating recommendations of a neighborhood task force on streetscaping improvements such as a historic lighting system, traffic calming features, greenery, and pedestrian and bicycle safety features such as revised traffic signals, new sidewalks, bumpouts and a planted center median. Payne Avenue Bridge over the railroad tracks (Bridge #62544) should also be improved to incorporate historic style lighting, decorative rails, and visually-interesting piers and beams. The community will work with Public Works to develop a reconstruction plan, develop a maintenance plan, and adopt the above-standard improvements or establish an above standard maintenance district.
22. Establish an attractive and unique "gateway" to Railroad Island that reflects its multicultural history. The theme of the gateway design should be carried through Payne Avenue when the street is reconstructed. The community will work with the City during the design process; an active community-based organization will maintain the above-standard improvements by establishing an above-standard maintenance district.

23. Reconstruct the East 7th Street bridge that connects Railroad Island to Downtown St. Paul to be more attractive and pedestrian-friendly and to correspond with the bridge across the Bruce Vento trail immediately to the north.

Environment

Railroad Island has distinct natural assets. Swede Hollow Park is a unique natural amenity that had been underutilized. Over the past decade, access, lighting, landscaping and activity areas have been greatly improved. These improvements complement the Bruce Vento Regional Trail system. A passive greenspace will be created on the Rivoli Bluff Street Sweeping Site (on the western end of Minnehaha near Rivoli), where the currently sandy soil will be stabilized. Swede Hollow Park has new pedestrian trails that connect with three regional walking and biking trails, which are the Gateway trail, the Phalen-Keller Trail, and the Mounds Park/Great River Road trail, as well as to the Bruce Vento Nature Center, and soon to downtown St. Paul. The community seeks to work with governmental entities and neighborhood-based organizations, such as the District 5 Community Council, District 4 Community Council, and the Friends of Swede Hollow, to maintain and improve the park. The following strategies will enhance the natural assets and make Railroad Island a more attractive community.

24. Encourage railroad companies to create landscaped buffer areas and remove debris from railroad properties.
25. Create visual connections in the neighborhood by establishing a network of linked open spaces and gardens and establish a plan to maintain them.
26. Encourage guided walking tours in Swede Hollow Park to introduce the reclaimed park to residents. Emphasize not only the historic significance of the park, but also its current status as a uniquely rich and beautiful urban park.
27. Create a “lookout” over Swede Hollow Park with an historic marker, which will be located across from the intersection of Tedesco Street and Payne Avenue. An organization in the community will adopt and maintain the marker.
28. Protect all parks and publicly owned green spaces from non-park related development and/or neglect.
29. Promote anti-littering campaigns involving residents, homeowners, and business owners and employees.
30. Create better signage to mark trail entrances and distance.

Safety and Social Issues

While residents of Railroad Island recognize the many benefits of the area, they also recognize that there are social problems in the area that must be addressed. With assistance from the City of St. Paul, the community believes that Railroad Island is at a point where intervention can make a huge difference in turning this neighborhood around. The community seeks to work with the City and non-profit organizations to continue to market, maintain, and improve youth programming and services in the area. Following are recommended strategies:

31. Work with the City on strategies to keep area streets clean and attractive.
32. Promote social integration across cultures and ages through community events that showcases the various cultures represented on Railroad Island.

33. Bring together residents, businesses, community activists and law enforcement to create and implement strategies for making Swede Hollow Park welcoming to families and individuals of all ages. The goal would be to eradicate public drunkenness, drugs, littering, as well as shanties and tents used by the homeless in and around Swede Hollow Park.
34. Involve neighbors of all age groups in the community through volunteerism. Facilitate intergenerational volunteer opportunities to enhance the community.
35. Establish partnerships with local businesses, schools, institutions, churches, and civic groups to promote community involvement.
36. Provide adequate police staffing to provide safety in the neighborhood as well as enforcement of laws for nuisance crimes such as those mentioned above.
37. Provide support for establishment and maintenance of Block Clubs and Neighborhood Watch programs.
38. Provide support for recreational services, job training, and employment opportunities for area youth.

Actions Requiring City Leadership

The following actions have been identified as priorities of the community that require leadership or significant participation by city government. Community groups and city departments should implement the projects identified in this summary by applying for city resources in competitive processes such as the Capital Improvement Budget (CIB), Sales Tax Revitalization program (STAR), and other funding sources (such as the State of Minnesota, non-profit organizations and foundations, and private entities), and working through the regular operating programs of relevant city departments.

Public Works

1. Work with the community to develop a plan for reconstruction of Payne Avenue from East Seventh Street to Phalen Boulevard that would incorporate, where possible, the recommendations of a community Streetscaping Committee, and assist with obtaining funding for the project.
2. Implement appropriate traffic calming measures to reduce speeding and cut-through traffic on residential streets.
3. Support the addition of bike lanes, where feasible, and installation of bike racks at commercial sites.
4. Reconstruct the bridge on East Seventh Street that connects Railroad Island to downtown St. Paul.
5. Improve the pedestrian crossing at East Seventh Street and Payne Avenue.

Planning and Economic Development

1. Require the design of new developments to be pedestrian-friendly.
2. Encourage the incorporation of sustainability and green-building principles in new construction and rehabilitation of buildings.
3. Support design of new housing that is appropriate to the surrounding area.
4. Encourage all new development to include high-speed cable wiring for communications. (PED and LIEP)
5. Encourage new development to bury utility lines whenever possible. (PED and LIEP)

6. Promote the rehabilitation of existing housing with the assistance of City sponsored programs. (PED, East Side Neighborhood Development Corporation, Dayton's Bluff Neighborhood Housing Services)
7. Redevelop the Hamm's Brewery site with facilities that would enhance cultural and/or employment opportunities in Railroad Island.
8. Assist local businesses to improve their buildings in a way that enhances their exterior appearance and that is complementary to the historic and residential ambience of Railroad Island. (PED, ESND, DNBHS)
9. Assist the community in marketing Railroad Island to attract new residents.
10. Continue funding for existing homeowners to improve their properties
11. Encourage incorporation of technology infrastructure (such as cell phone antennas) into existing structures if possible. (PED and LIEP)
12. Study the need to downzone duplex-zoned areas to single-family.

Parks and Recreation

1. Protect all existing public parks and publicly-owned green spaces, particularly Swede Hollow, the Police Memorial Garden, and Rivoli Bluff Street Sweeping Site from non-park related development and/or neglect. Investigate potential water sources to keep the stream flowing through Swede Hollow Park. Make special efforts to remove debris.
2. Continue to provide and improve recreational and/or job training programs for area youth.
3. Encourage organized cleanup programs to help maintain a clean and safe environment.
4. Work with community groups to build and maintain new green spaces on Railroad Island.
5. Work with Friends of Swede Hollow to upgrade the lower trail in a way that maintains the natural springs.
6. Assist the community with developing ways to promote the use of Swede Hollow as a community resource.
7. Install more signage to mark trail entrances and distance.

City Council

1. Provide adequate funding for crime prevention and enforcement.
2. Advocate for the city funds and services required to implement this plan.
3. Establish regulations and codes that will address the issues of vacant housing, foreclosures, and absentee landlords.

Planning Commission Findings

The Planning Commission finds that the updated summary of the *Railroad Island Plan* is consistent with the *Saint Paul comprehensive Plan* and other adopted City policies.

Planning Process

The 1994 *Railroad Island Plan* was developed by a neighborhood-based task force appointed by the District 5 Planning Council with assistance from the Department of Planning and Economic Development (PED) and the consulting firm of Sanders Wacker Wehrman Bergly, Inc. It was adopted by the City Council on November 16, 1994 as an amendment to the Land Use Chapter of the Saint Paul Comprehensive Plan. The updated summary was developed by the Railroad Island Task Force with assistance from PED staff in early 2007 and was reviewed and approved by the District 5 Planning Council on March 27, 2007.