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City in America

West Side Flats

Master Plan and Development Guidelines Update

Thursday, March 14, 2013

West Side Flats Master Plan and Development Guidelines Update Community Task Force Meeting #2

Attendees:

Community Task Force (CTF) Members

Attending:

Betsy Reveal (Chair), Irene Jones, Tony Kuechle, Benjamin Mike, Jessica Treat, Ted Schmidt, Rebecca Noecker, Carol Swenson, Karen Reid, Lorrie Louder, Mason Wells, Elena Gaarder, Gjerry Berquist, Matt Grilz

Project Staff/Consultants

Lucy Thompson, Jeff McMenimen, Jeff Miller, Kevin Flynn, Jack Becker

Meeting Notes:

Brainstorm/Visioning Discussion

Community Identity

1. Devastating floods in the 1960s led to the removal of homes from the Flats, the installation of the levee and the development of industrial uses.
2. Thousands of people used to live on the West Side Flats in the early part of the 20th century.
3. One member's suggested vision for the future of the West Side Flats – it should be a vibrant, sustainable, connected, prosperous community, returning to a neighborhood where people once again live, work and play.
4. This is a special landscape. Many centuries ago, there were great waterfalls located in this river valley. The great Warren River, which drained the glacial Lake Agassiz, was the source of water for these great waterfalls. The early natural landscape gives the Flats an important geographic identity as the place where the gorge enters into the floodplain.
5. West Side Flats is a historic place. The future identity should play on its historic past.
6. How do we balance the historic identity of this place with its importance today and in the future as a place for jobs, a robust tax base, and a place to live? Aspire to respect its history without trying to recreate it. There needs to be recognition that the new neighborhood will be different than the historic one.

7. WSF should be a sustainable neighborhood for people with a mix of incomes, not just a new gentrified community.
8. Consider the historic relationship between the bluffs and the Flats. When working on the Green Stairs, people talked about moving between the bluffs and the Flats. There are visual, physical, social and even sound connections between the bluffs and the Flats. People still have a powerful sense of ownership of the Flats.
9. Today, the West Side Flats is just a place for people to pass through.
10. Using a “color” metaphor, the current industrial landscape is brown. It should move toward green in the future – green infrastructure, energy efficiency, water conservation, native plantings, transit, preservation, reuse and recycling.
11. The Flats need to be a destination – e.g. jobs. We need to capture people who will stay and help recreate the community.
12. Consider Robert Street as an important future transit way. What can that bring to the Flats other than just a place for transit to pass through?
13. The current physical design and land uses along the primary corridors contribute to people just passing through the West Side Flats. Consider design treatments and land uses that will slow traffic and create destinations for people to do things in the WSF.
14. It should be a “green community” – clean air and water, trees, nature valued. Strive for zero waste businesses – become a green leader. Create a niche for attracting other green businesses.
15. It could have a year-round health and wellness focus, with outdoor activities, playfields, indoor fitness, trails, cross-country skiing along the river, etc. Embrace the outdoors. Use recreation as a way to connect people.
16. It should have the latest in technology/fiber optics for fast connections to the world through the internet and media.
17. One CTF member saw the West Side Flats as having similar characteristics to a ski resort village – isolated in a valley location where you bring amenities in to serve the inhabitants (circulator bus, shops, services, etc.)
18. The West Side Flats should be a self-sustaining neighborhood. Should not be seen as a tourist destination. Businesses should cater to local residents.

Land Use

1. Need to connect the business area with residents.
2. Is it possible to explore converting the railroad tracks to greenways (rails to trails)?
3. Land uses on the major thoroughfares should be mixed-use. Some questioned whether housing is appropriate on these corridors.
4. Housing should be located on the riverfront with active uses located on the ground/esplanade level facing the river.
5. The original 40 acres (between Wabasha and Robert streets) should be predominantly residential. This will allow residents to take ownership of this area.

Currently West Side residents don't feel a sense of ownership of the Flats because nobody lives there.

6. East of Robert Street, build buildings that can change in land use over time.
7. It's important to retain and grow jobs in the area.
8. Should industrial uses be phased out of the area? Some thought industrial uses should be retained, but make them more visually attractive.
9. The riverfront needs to have public access. Housing at the ground/esplanade level could make it feel too private. Small businesses along the river can take advantage of the vista of the downtown skyline.
10. Tampa Bay has good examples of public waterfronts, among other examples in the country.
11. Consider the needs of seniors – e.g. affordable, accessible life-cycle housing in the area. Intergenerational and cultural housing options should be explored e.g. extended families.
12. Target a job/housing/business continuum that can work together and with the regional destinations (such as Harriet Island Park).
13. Preference for commercial/retail/restaurant space along the riverfront will help create a public riverfront destination – i.e. “Eat Street” in Minneapolis.
14. Provide recreational access to the river; bring people down to the river.
15. Need to balance housing with employment uses in the Flats to make it an 18-hour/“eyes on the street” type of neighborhood.
16. Need more housing to make any housing successful and to support riverfront retail. It needs to attract a market bigger than the WSF area. Promote density.
17. Need to get above the levee for housing to be successful.
18. A mix of uses is important – housing and employment will both be necessary to support retail.
19. Consider tourist facilities and attractions in the West Side Flats (hotel? event center?) that complement downtown attractions (e.g. Xcel Energy Center, River Centre). Don't need to necessarily add new destinations; just capture people who are already visiting the West Side and downtown.
20. “The Bridges” proposal focused on turning the West Side Flats into a major destination with little regard for fitting in with the West Side community. There are problems with creating major destinations adjacent to neighborhoods (Harriet Island Park for example).
21. There is enough land on the West Side Flats to accommodate both future employment and housing uses.
22. The industrial area needs to look and function like more of a neighborhood.
23. Consider buffers between different land uses – greenways, stormwater infiltration areas, streets, etc. There appears to be enough land to do this.
24. Consolidate extra or remnant space (e.g. surface parking) to create green space or use for stormwater management.
25. Learn from Minneapolis where there has been some friction between new housing and industrial uses along the upper Mississippi riverfront.

26. Link new housing to workforce needs.
27. Consider incentives for attracting new businesses to the West Side Flats that provide new job opportunities for West Side residents.
28. We need to create a self-sustaining community that doesn't rely on people coming in to make it successful. We need to first meet the needs of the people who live here ("take care of our own").

Built Form

1. Building heights should be limited to height of mature trees in the river flats.
2. Six stories should be the maximum building height allowed.
3. Buildings should have lower-story windows that face the street.
4. Near the river, building heights should be limited to 3-4 stories.
5. At the foot of the bluffs, taller buildings should be allowed.
6. Building form should reflect the organic nature of the river valley – curvilinear rather than hard edges/surfaces. Natural materials and colors should be used.
7. Building height is tied to view preservation in the river valley. The viewshed from Union Depot is an important view. Look at other important viewsheds in the river valley to establish view preservation and building height limits.
8. The National Park Service is conducting a viewshed analysis for the river valley. Utilize this information if possible.
9. Street patterns in and near the river valley were originally laid out to provide views of critical landmarks (Capitol, Cathedral, etc.). Consider this when thinking about building height, massing and creating vistas. New streets should be laid out perpendicular to the river to retain views of and across the river.
10. Consider the Seattle Space Needle concept – provide one very tall structure to provide distant views of the City and river valley.
11. Are there cues that can be learned from the WSF's historic buildings to inform new building heights, massing, relationship to the street, etc.?
12. Future industrial/commercial buildings should relate to the street better than buildings currently do in the industrial park.
13. Consider diversity in architectural materials, massing, etc. – currently buildings in the industrial park look too much alike.
14. Building materials should reflect those on the bluffs – limestone/sandstone?

Movement

1. Consider pedicabs moving between the West Side Flats and destinations downtown.
2. There could be rails-to-trails conversion opportunities in the Flats – converting the rail lines to green corridors with trails in them.
3. How about something like the Minnehaha trolley concept on the Union Pacific rail line that would deliver people to and from downtown to the Flats.

4. There should be an east/west trail in the area focused on commuter bicycling (Plato Blvd?)
5. Consider local movement systems for pedestrians and bicyclists – trails, sidewalks, “woonerfs,” green streets (i.e. Milwaukee Avenue in Minneapolis), etc.
6. Maintain the grid and diversify movement modes.
7. Enhance pedestrian and bike connections between the West Side and downtown throughout the Flats area.
8. Provide connections to transit hubs in downtown (Union Depot, Central Corridor LRT stations)
9. Connect Riverview to Wabasha.
10. Consider circulator shuttles between the West Side Flats and downtown for people who are mobility-challenged.
11. What about gondola connections to the bluffs and to downtown (across the river)?
12. Robert and Wabasha streets are key transit corridors. They should be designed to enhance the transit facilities and pedestrian environment.
13. Need to provide design strategies that slow traffic, making it safer for pedestrians and bicyclists.
14. Look at Centennial Lakes as a model for pedestrian movement – separated trail system from the street systems.
15. Could a trolley run on the railroad bridge?
16. Include wayfinding systems to enhance movement in the area.

Public Realm

1. Make sure future utilities in the area are buried beneath the ground.
2. Provide a comprehensive park and open space system, including pocket parks, neighborhood parks, riverfront greenway, etc. These are important gathering spaces for the neighborhood.
3. George Sherman has explored a sculpture park along the riverfront as part of his project.
4. The Walker Art Center might be interested in an “Open Field” concept in Saint Paul. Maybe the vacant sites in the West Side Flats could host temporary art installations?
5. Consider use of vacant/underutilized sites for temporary park and or community garden spaces.
6. Consider canals running through the area.

Sustainability

1. The Flats could be a demonstration project for cutting-edge environmental practices.
2. Development should be energy efficient.
3. Consider water conservation measures.
4. Green roofs should be promoted.

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5. Make sure fiber optic cables are included in the utilities improvements to serve future residents and businesses.
6. The Flats are really flat. How do we distinguish this place?
7. There may be potential for geothermal on cleaner sites in the Flats.
8. Consider recycling of building materials as older buildings are demolished.
9. Surface parking lots should be considered for other interim uses, such as community gardens.
10. Community gardens should be distributed throughout the development.
11. Consider decentralized energy production – i.e. solar, wind, geothermal, etc.
12. Is there an opportunity to tap in to hydroelectric power?
13. Rooftops should be considered for solar panels and gardens.
14. Is District Energy a potential source of energy for the Flats? Issues to consider – expense, byproducts of wood-burning fuel, etc.
15. The neighborhood should be economically and socially sustainable – need a range of housing options and job types based on the skills of people who live on the West Side.
16. Consider opportunities for cooperative work facilities (i.e. CoCo in downtown Saint Paul) and home occupations.
17. Create opportunities for youth to live and recreate in the neighborhood.
18. What about schools? Will there be a need to provide new schools in the Flats?
19. Consider a “children first” policy (e.g. St. Louis Park).
20. Greater density is needed to sustain the neighborhood.