**Thursday, August 1, 2013**

**West Side Flats Master Plan and Development Guidelines Update**

**Community Task Force Meeting #5**

**Attendees:**

Community Task Force (CTF) Members

Attending:

Betsy Reveal (Chair), Rebecca Noecker, Karen Reid, Lorrie Louder, Gjerry Berquist, Jim Miller, Carol Swenson, Mason Wells, Michelle Grosz, Denise Rene Hannah, Irene Jones

Project Staff/Consultants

Lucy Thompson, Jeff McMenimen, Jeff Miller, Gabrielle Grinde

Guests

Hokan Miller

**Meeting Notes:**

1. **Vision**

* St. Paul Port Authority has concerns about the potential loss of industrial land uses west of Robert Street. (The land between Robert Street and Wabasha Street was rezoned to T3 following adoption of the current WSF Master Plan in 2001. T3 allows residential, civic/institutional, social/cultural/recreational, and commercial uses. Limited production and processing uses are allowed.)
* Suggestion to remove “to the east of Robert Street” from the last sentence of the vision.
* Consider replacing “river flats” term “floodplain.”
* Assertion that the West Side Flats area was not actually a riverfront urban village in the past. Consider removing “once again” from sentence #1.
* Consider reconfiguring sentence #4, which begins with “Reflecting its unique cultural history…”
* In sentence #3, which begins with “The West Side Flats will have …,” it is important to talk about the integration of these elements and how they create a whole place.
* Suggestion that the word “unique” is overused in the vision.
* With these changes, the CTF approved the final Vision.

1. **Guiding Principles**

* Suggestion to remove “east of Robert Street” from principle #9.
* St. Paul Port Authority has concerns about the potential loss of industrial land uses west of Robert Street.
* For principles #4 and #11, it is important to link these elements into the regional systems.
* Suggestion to replace “restore” with “create” at the beginning of principle #8.
* Consider defining “community cultural development opportunities” in principle #10.
* With these changes, the CTF approved the final Guiding Principles.

1. **Building Form Considerations**
   * Some new developments along the Minneapolis riverfront have emphasized passageways to the riverfront, archways through buildings, etc. This type of building form could be promoted for the WSF riverfront.
   * Preservation of views should focus on more than just views of the river. Also should consider views of the bluffs and WSF area itself.
   * It is important to preserve views that enable people to “read” the river valley more than views of the river itself.
   * Some examples of places with great views of the river valley mentioned were the Xcel Energy Center and the Downtowner Car Wash.
   * In response to staff’s presentation of reasons for considering taller buildings as part of future redevelopment in the WSF area, it was asked if “market diversity” implies affordable housing. (Staff responded that taller (versus shorter) buildings can enable a greater range of housing types to be created. Nonetheless, taller/higher density buildings can also enable more affordable housing choices to be created. For instance, construction costs can be distributed across a variety of housing price points within a building, thereby reducing the specific costs of the lower-priced units and making them more affordable.)
   * Does the presence of the airport limit building heights? (Not within the WSF study area)
   * How would a views analysis work with the T3 zoning district? Would it be used to affect building heights? (It could provide opportunities for more objective evaluation of the impacts of specific proposed building heights for the Planning Commission and Zoning Committee. Establishment of views analysis criteria could be approached in different ways, e.g. require findings that show a proposed development project meets the criteria as part of a variance or enable the identification of appropriate conditions as part of a conditional use permit.)
   * Is establishing specific guidelines or criteria contradictory to creating a flexible master plan for the WSF? (Establishment of specific criteria would be part of zoning, not the WSF Master Plan.)
   * How much teeth would views analysis criteria have? (Depends upon the specificity, but could be required in order to get a conditional use permit.)
   * Consider linking potential views analysis criteria with important views within the river valley that are being identified by the National Park Service, which could create a beneficial tool for evaluating proposed building heights.
2. **WSF Building Height Simulations**

* Suggested that simulations of riverfront buildings could show differing heights rather than all buildings at the same height, including multiple heights within an individual building or block.
* The WSF Apartments building that is being constructed by Sherman Associates will be 5 stories at its highest but zoning would have allowed up to 6 stories. The project stayed at 5 stories so that it could use stick-built construction and did not need a CUP.
* Why would developers not build up to whatever maximum building height is allowed, once they have determined that the building will not be stick-built construction? For example, why would they limit a building to 80 ft. when they are allowed to build up to 100 ft.?
* Building heights along the riverfront are an important issue. Prefer limiting riverfront buildings to a height that will prevent them completely blocking buildings behind them. It is desirable to see multiple buildings along the riverfront, not just the buildings that are directly adjacent to the riverfront. For example, think about the views of buildings cascading down the hillsides of Florence, Italy.
* Concerns about the “opposite” sides (river and street) of riverfront buildings not having as high of quality design, such as bulk reduction elements. Focus of riverfront building design should not be limited to just the riverfront façade. It isn’t desirable to have massive building walls along the neighborhood’s streets either.
* Suggested that character districts could be established that relate to preferred building heights, e.g. riverfront district, mixed-use district, etc.
* Prefer lower building heights along the riverfront with stepbacks of upper floors.
* Concern about preserving views from Prospect Park/Boulevard, and that building simulations show buildings blocking views of the Robert Street Bridge, the river and the downtown bluff.
* Suggested that floor area ratios (FARs) may have the potential to control building massing better than height. For example, it may be preferable to have a taller building on a smaller portion of a block than a shorter building covering an entire block.
* Since the current WSF Master Plan limits buildings to 4 stories along the riverfront and 6 stories elsewhere generally, why are we considering a change to this approach? (City staff feels that there is a better understanding today of what developers need for building heights in order to achieve a financially viable development project, including the costs of contaminated soils cleanup.)
* Do we know which sites have contaminated soils? Will the needs for taller building heights essentially be determined by where contaminated soils exist? (Specific info regarding contaminated soils is not easily available until a specific development proposal is made.)
* Saint Paul Port Authority has a lot of information regarding sites with potential soil contamination; however, it exists in large paper files that would require a significant effort to go through.
* Suggested that the project team review the National Park Service’s previous findings regarding the potential for taller buildings to compromise views of the floodplain and bluffs. Gjerry and Lucy will look into finding this report.
* Suggested that it would be nice to see good precedent riverfront buildings simulated on the WSF riverfront, e.g. good examples of riverfront buildings from other cities.
* Suggested that it would be beneficial to create a closer view of the Robert Street corridor (and from the pedestrian’s point of view) looking toward downtown Saint Paul that simulates both new buildings and a new streetscape.

**Next Steps**

* City staff facilitated a brief discussion about the listening sessions being planned for August.
* A draft timeline for the remainder of the project was presented and discussed.