



# A Vital, Vibrant City for Everyone

How Margaret Jones – Saint Paul’s 8 80 Vitality Fellow –  
spread a forceful vision of equity, prosperity and fun

By Jay Walljasper

“A livable city  
has to be  
livable for all.”

– Saint Paul Mayor  
Chris Coleman

It’s a brilliantly blue December day, and a happy crowd in downtown Saint Paul is dispelling the myth that Minnesotans hibernate all winter long.

Smiles arise as people sip hot chocolate, build a snowman, cluster in threes and fours on the sidewalk for animated conversation, gobble gourmet food truck burritos at café tables, lounge in bean bag chairs, and toss wood batons in the hopes of knocking over wood blocks in a game of kubb, a Scandinavian pastime that looks like a cross between bocce ball and supersized dominos.

Melissa Cortes watches as her brother Gabe gets the hang of kubb under the direction of a veteran player from the Saint Paul Kubb Society. “A friend told me about this on Facebook, so we came downtown for a day together. It’s been a lot of fun.”

A young woman hands out bright orange buttons that declare “I’m Making Saint Paul Better.” That’s the answer to a question asked by almost everyone passing by – “what’s going on here?” Most visitors, after looking around a bit and grabbing refreshments, stop at a table covered with large sheets of paper to record their ideas about what they’d like to see more of downtown: “green space,” “great buildings,” “public art,” “music,” “playgrounds.”

“Some of the people here have corner offices, some spend the night at the Dorothy Day Center shelter,” observes Nora Riemenschneider, economic development program coordinator for the City of Saint Paul.



The Most  
Livable City  
in America

One of the organizers of this event, Margaret Jones, who tends a sidewalk fire pit, is delighted with the results of this pop-up festival. “Oh my god!” she exclaims, introducing a young man to everyone within earshot. “This is John, who has a culinary arts degree and is visiting from Florida on a business trip, and he’s never had s’mores before.”

This location, an empty field next to the Central Station light rail station, was picked to celebrate Saint Paul’s commitment to being America’s Most Livable City because it’s currently one of the city’s chief trouble spots. As the city’s 8 80 Vitality Fellow, it’s Jones’s mission to foster positive public activity – events, programs and innovations that foster wide social connection among everyone in the city.

In 18 months as Saint Paul’s Vitality Fellow – the first-of-its-kind position in city government anywhere – Jones uncorked a stream of placemaking initiatives, including a speakers’ series that attracted 1,200 participants from 105 local organizations and an advisory team charged with disassembling silos inside city hall. She was directly involved in more than a dozen major community-building projects, ranging from the police department’s successful campaign to boost pedestrian safety to the restoration of a wetland in a lower-income neighborhood with new affordable housing nearby.

“The 8 80 Fellowship is like a snowball that starts small at the top of the hill and gains size and momentum as it rolls down, its impact growing into the future,” says Max Musicant, a placemaking consultant who worked on the pop-up festival.

## A bold vision that captured Saint Paul’s imagination

Saint Paul Mayor Chris Coleman declares, “Margaret really gets the creative juices flowing around the city, stimulating a vision where people can see in their minds what we can create together. She has done a great job of bringing this spirit to many people living here.”

“Vitality” is a common refrain voiced by community leaders, political officials, and everyday citizens across the country to describe what they want for their hometowns. But the “8 80” part of Jones’s job is a genuinely fresh idea. It refers to the simple principle that communities should pay attention to the needs of all residents in their policies and strategic objectives.

In practical terms it means that the city should be designed and managed so that you feel no qualms letting your eight-year-old son bike to school or your 80-year-old grandmother walk to the grocery store. Age, race, economic status, or level of physical ability should make no difference in your quality of life when it comes to issues like traffic, safety, crime, economic opportunity, and great gathering places in your neighborhood.

A strong element of the 8 80 Vitality campaign is offering residents a choice of safe, convenient ways to get around and enjoy their city. “We’re focused on the entire picture,” explains Mayor Coleman. “This isn’t about getting rid of cars, but making the experience of the driver better. We want to make the experience of the pedestrian and the bicyclist better too.”



## Saint Paul Comprehensive Plan

In a stroke of luck, the 8 80 Vitality Fellowship coincided with the initial phase of the city’s new comprehensive plan, which guides directions and decisions shaping the city’s future until 2040. “Margaret had a big hand in ensuring that vitality was embedded in the comprehensive plan,” explained Planning and Economic Development Director Sage-Martinson. “She helped us get really important feedback from diverse sources, engaging a broad demographic to provide input.”

## The “Stop For Me” Campaign

More than 4,500 Americans are killed every year crossing the street, a death toll higher than either 9/11 or the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. In Minnesota, pedestrian deaths reached a 25-year high in 2016, but they were down 50 percent in Saint Paul. That good news is partly due to the city’s “Stop For Me” campaign, where police officers sponsored 60 events on street corners throughout Saint Paul to drive home the message that Minnesota law requires motorists to stop for pedestrians at intersections, even when there is no crosswalk marked. Jones was part of the project’s planning committee that met monthly. “The 8 80 philosophy has been instilled into the police department,” remarks Sgt. Jeremy Ellison, who works with neighborhood leaders on traffic safety issues. Jones also hit on the idea of sticking “I Stop for Pedestrians” bumper stickers on most city vehicles.

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– Councilmember Amy Brendmoen



## River Balcony

Vibrancy flows into cities in modest trickles (like community gardens sprouting all over town for which Jones organized a bus tour) and in huge streams – like the visionary project to erect an elevated 1.5-mile pedestrian promenade downtown with a breathtaking view of the river from the Science Museum to Union Depot. “The 8 80 aspect of this is having more to do for everyone – sitting, walking, seeing one another in a place that’s beautiful,” Jones envisions.

The 8 80 idea captured Saint Paul’s imagination in May 2014 when hundreds of local residents turned out to hear Gil Penalosa – former parks commissioner of Bogota, Colombia, and a globetrotting consultant on urban livability – at 17 different appearances during a placemaking residency, organized by the Saint Paul Riverfront Corporation.

It’s not crazy to think that Saint Paul could be seen as one of the world’s truly great cities, announced Penalosa. “Transformation often happens very fast. Thirty years ago no one would have ranked Melbourne, Australia, as one of the top 400 cities in the world. Even the local newspaper described its downtown as an ‘empty, useless city center.’ Now many of us think it’s one of the top four or five cities.”

**“The fellowship allowed us to take the 8 80 ethos into every project in every neighborhood.”**

– **Jonathan Sage-Martinson**, City of Saint Paul  
Planning and Economic Development Department Director

Mayor Coleman was one of many excited by the 8 80 vision. For too long we’ve thought of ourselves as “pretty darn good here,” Coleman said at one of Penalosa’s talks – now we need to make a bolder statement about who we are and where we are going.

That was the genesis of the 8 80 Vitality Fund, a \$42.5 million investment over three years, focusing on infrastructure and public space improvements to enrich the lives of all city residents. Among projects being jumpstarted are the River Balcony to open up more public space with views of the Mississippi, the Grand Round pedestrian and bike parkway weaving all around the city, and a string of new community spaces in lower-income neighborhoods along the route of the Green Line.

## Connecting people all over town

“A livable city has to be livable for all,” Mayor Coleman asserts. “That’s why I love Little Mekong Plaza on University Avenue, to name one project, because it’s a good example of a public-private partnership and a lively public space that adds to the diversity of our city. It will be a great gathering place where we can get to know each other. And then there’s the Palace Theatre, which is a place for a different arts crowd than the Ordway.”

While the 8 80 Vitality Fund was a one-time infusion of funding, the goal was to ensure that the 8 80 principles were embedded throughout the city. That’s where the 8 80 Vitality Fellowship comes into play. “We wanted to make sure the 8 80 idea continued in the day-to-day workings of the city after there was no longer money in the fund,” explains Riemenschneider, who coordinates the city’s 8 80 programs. The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation provided funding for the 8 80 fellowship position.

Jones was tapped for the job on the basis of her experience as executive director of the Lexington-Hamline Community Council, serving a mixed-income, racially diverse section of the city where she worked closely with local businesses and city departments like police, parks and public works.

## Willow Reserve

Willow Reserve is a 23-acre nature area rich in wildlife that is being ecologically restored in the city’s lower-income North End. “A hidden jewel, I was blown away about just how amazing it is,” is how Jones describes it after helping host a well-attended pop-up event to bring neighbors into the planning process for the project and new housing nearby to be built by Habitat for Humanity. “This is another example of how the Fellowship infuses the whole city with a new energy about looking at the assets we already have and connecting the dots for everyone – that’s the whole idea of 8 80,” declares Riemenschneider.

“When I joined the city, I noticed a real openness and support from the top,” notes Jones. “That’s how I was able to make connections, linking people across city departments and going out into the community to make presentations and host events. We strengthened relationships with residents who want to help make the city a more equitable and fun place. This all helped instill and embed 8 80 Vitality values at all levels of the city’s work.”

“I get calls from the strangest places and from people all across different disciplines, and they’re calling to ask me to help them get something going,” she said describing her position in an interview with *Governing* magazine.

“The idea of an 8 80 Fellow at first glance seemed like a classic boondoggle,” recalls Saint Paul Chamber of Commerce President Matt Kramer. “But what Margaret did was to take the liberty to have conversations about what people want for the city. She gave people a focal point for looking at things differently, making new connections and helping new things happen.”

Councilmember Amy Brendmoen agrees: “As 8 80 Vitality Fellow, Margaret has shown us new and creative ways to engage residents and visitors in Saint Paul. From bringing the Little Box Sauna to Como Lake to celebrating the Willow Reserve restoration effort with North End neighbors, Margaret has a unique ability to think outside the box to find ways to strengthen our community.”

Similar praise comes from Mangala Sharma and Melvin Giles, who work at the grassroots level to improve life in Saint Paul. Sharma, a social worker at the largely East African Skyline Tower high-rise residence, notes, “Margaret has been a bridge between people here and people outside. She comes to all of our meetings and connects us with resources that are beyond our scope.” Says Giles – longtime activist in the African-American Rondo neighborhood who is working with the Friendly Streets Initiative to create a land bridge over the I-94 freeway – “It’s really great to have someone in City Hall so closely connected to the community. The 8 80 Fellowship helps provide space for conversations and is a great ally for win-win situations.”

## A Livable Community for People of All Ages & Incomes

One of the first things Jones did inside City Hall was organize an 8 80 advisory team, drawing representatives from 12 of the city’s 14 departments, ranging from safety and inspections to the library. This group was instrumental in drafting Saint Paul’s “Working Principles for Vibrant Places and Spaces,” which the mayor sent out to all city employees.

- Ensure Saint Paul puts people first
- Encourage vitality through investment, private and public alike
- Create accessible places where people want to connect and spend time
- Promote healthy living
- Celebrate the city’s cultural diversity

Planning and Economic Development Director Jonathan Sage-Martinson points out a poster of the principles displayed in his office and adds that many of his colleagues have them posted at their workstations as well. “Margaret has done a great job of getting many of the 3,000 city employees to think differently about how we approach projects, partnerships and initiatives.”



### Grand Round

One hundred twenty-five years after it was conceived by Horace Cleveland (often ranked second to Frederick Law Olmsted as America’s greatest landscape architect), Saint Paul is completing a 27-mile parkway winding throughout the city that will pleasantly accommodate walkers, bicyclists and motorists. “It’s a place a person of any age and ability can enjoy,” says Jones. “In the conversations we initiated about this, it became clear there’s a new level of urgency and importance to do things that are fun in the city. Attitudes are shifting in how we look at and build for the future.”

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– Saint Paul Mayor Chris Coleman

The speakers’ series curated by Jones seeded plenty of new ideas throughout city hall and the community as well as sparking discussion among people from many different disciplines, departments, organizations, and neighborhoods. The roster of 14 speakers included: psychotherapist Mindy Fullilove on “Restoration Urbanism;” photographer Wing Young Huie on “We Are the Other;” former Chicago and DC transportation commissioner Gabe Klein on “Start-up City;” Margaret Lamar and Andrew Moore on “Cities Connecting Children to Nature;” James Rojas on “Community Visioning Through Civil Rights, Art and Play;” and a return engagement by Gil Penalosa.

“When I travel and talk about what’s happening with 8 80 in Saint Paul, people get really excited,” Penalosa says. “This is not just some mayor signing a pledge. This is where resources are being put



## Safe Summer Nights

An important 8 80 goal is to erase the image of city government as a distant, faceless institution disconnected from people's lives. The police department's Safe Summer Nights helped accomplish this with festive barbecues (complete with portable climbing walls and police horses) every Thursday evening from June to August at various parks and recreation centers. Jones was often on hand along with people from other city departments, who found these great opportunities to welcome residents' ideas for the comprehensive plan.

in to make a friendly community for people of all ages and incomes. And Margaret is very aware of the equity issues, which is a big issue in Saint Paul."

Thinking over the fellowship's work, Mayor Coleman highlights what he would tell other mayors interested in starting such a program: "How people feel about their community is important for where they want to live, work and invest. Millennials, in particular, are looking not just for a job but for a good quality of life. We need to think about what kind of community people want to live in – they want safe streets for kids, safe streets for seniors."

Sage-Martinson concurs. "It's a good, healthy, equitable thing to make cities that work for all people. But it's also an economically smart thing to do – it attracts investment, residents, and businesses to help facilitate economic growth."

Although the 8 80 Vitality Fellowship ends in February, its impact will endure through the many policies and decisions it has influenced. "The fellowship allowed us to take the 8 80 ethos into every project in every neighborhood," notes Sage-Martinson.

Several of the practices that Margaret put in place at the city will continue. For example, the cross-department advisory team will continue to discuss citywide issues and workplace efficiencies. Lunch & Learns will continue to be held so that staff can share what they have learned from conferences to enable others to broaden their horizons without leaving their office. Additionally, the comprehensive plan will continue to evolve into a full report with recommendations around issues like aging, accessibility and equity for all Saint Paul residents, visitors and employees.



## Capital City Bikeway

The first leg of a 21<sup>st</sup> century bike network opened downtown last year along Jackson Street and one block of Kellogg Boulevard, which caters less to hardcore bike aficionados and more to the growing numbers of everyday cyclists now appearing on city streets. Borrowing a page from an acclaimed project in Indianapolis, the Capital City Bikeway gives bicyclists space separate from both cars and pedestrians, making everyone happy. "This is what the workforce of tomorrow expects in places they want to live," says Riemenschneider. "It's an economic driver for the city." Jones adds, "The 8 80 idea is that the future is about more than cars. And I am meeting a lot of people who will never ride a bike who like the bikeway because it will ease traffic on the streets, or give their employees a safe way to get to work, or because their kids or grandkids bike, and they want them to stay in town."



## Little Mekong Plaza

More than 12 percent of Saint Paul’s population is Asian-American, and the hub of activity for Southeast Asian immigrants and anyone else who delights in cultural vibrancy is Little Mekong, clustered around the University and Western stop on the Green Line. Already a magnet for its restaurants and annual summer Night Market, the area now sports Little Mekong Plaza, which directly fulfills the 8 80 vision of neighborhood gathering spots. “It’s so important because it’s the only open space up and down the avenue,” says Bao Vang, CEO of the Hmong American Partnership. “The need is really great for places where people want to gather and spend time, both locals and visitors,” says Riemenschneider.

## Griggs Park

“This idea started with the students at Gordon Parks High School, who wanted more green space near their school on University Avenue,” Jones recalls, and residents at Skyline Tower picked up on the idea because they wanted a place for East African elders to walk and kids to play soccer. The result will soon be the new five-acre park on Griggs Street in a neighborhood that has less green space than many other parts of the city. “We’re talking to lots of people about what they want to see in the park,” says Jenna Fletcher, program director of the Trust for Public Land, the city’s partner on the project. “People are excited by this – they really want it to be a gathering place that’s natural, with some open fields that can be used for sports or other things.”

“Highlighting the ideals we all hold for making Saint Paul a wonderful place for people of all ages and backgrounds is what we set out to do.”

– Margaret Jones, 8 80 Fellow

Looking back on everything she undertook in 18 jam-packed months, Jones says, “I feel like I’ve been the city cheerleader, concierge and an ambassador for Saint Paul. Those experiences are part of the reason I have loved this work so much.”

“I was able to step into a role that allowed me to shine a light on all the ways we already do great work every day,” she adds. “Highlighting the ideals we all hold for making Saint Paul a wonderful place for people of all ages and backgrounds is what we set out to do. Bringing people together from across the city to dream about our future together and exploring how we take on the complexities of city building with the conviction of always keeping people first is how we did it. By doing that, we solidify and strengthen relationships into the future and will continue to create places where everyone wants to spend time and connect with one another.”



## Here, There & Everywhere

A crucial role Jones played as 8 80 Vitality Fellow was traveling to events all over town as Saint Paul’s Johnny Appleseed, sowing seeds for vibrant communities. To spread the word about the integral importance of livable, equitable communities to the city’s future, she served on at least eight committees – from the Soccer Stadium Technical Advisory group to the Racial Equity Change Team in the Planning and Economic Development department to the steering committee of the national Walking Summit to be held in Saint Paul next September. She showed up at scores of other gatherings, meeting with all newly hired city employees, local arts organizations, the Mayor’s Advisory Council on Aging, the Mayor’s Council on Disabilities, the Safe Routes to Schools campaign, the Water Resources Work Group – and the list goes on and on. She also traveled to New York City, Atlanta and Philadelphia to let the world know what was happening in Saint Paul.



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