**Tuesday, April 30, 2013**

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

**Developers Roundtable**

**Attendees:**

Developers

Colleen Carey (Cornerstone Development), Gina Ciganik (Aeon), Wendy Holmes (Artspace), Karen Reid (NeDA), Mark Fabel (McGough), Ron Mehl (Dominium), Kit Richardson (Schafer Richardson), Jim Stolpestad (Exeter Realty)

Project Staff/Consultants

Lucy Thompson (PED), Marie Franchett (PED), Jeff McMenimen (HKGi), Jeff Miller (HKGi)

**Input from Developers:**

***Building Heights***

* What are the limits on building heights? *WSF Master Plan limits heights to 6 stories. T3 zoning permits maximum heights of 45-55 feet.*
* Questions about the difference between viewing tall buildings in downtown from the West Side versus having tall buildings in the WSF? People value views of a building skyline.
* Developers’ experience in Minneapolis has been that there is a perception that stick-built buildings are inferior. Since shorter buildings are typically stick-built, restricting building heights could result in the perception of inferior buildings being built in the WSF.
* Limiting buildings to 6 stories creates a different type of neighborhood that is human-scaled. However, cities such as Vancouver (Canada) have been successful with taller buildings that create a human-scaled neighborhood by using upper floor stepbacks on a 2-3-story plinth.
* Developers generally felt that encouraging a variation of building heights would be appropriate for the WSF. The current WSF plan seems to guide development of buildings that are generally similar in height throughout the area, similar to the Upper Landing’s residential buildings. The Upper Landing has received criticism for its monotonous character, in part, as a result of all of the buildings being generally the same height and giving the neighborhood a cookie-cutter feel.
* From a developer’s perspective, it is important to know what building heights are going to be allowed without a fight with the neighborhood and City.
* Could more floors, which would be filled with active space, be added on top of the existing U.S. Bank parking ramp?

***Property Control***

* What authority does the Saint Paul Port Authority have over WSF properties? Do they have any sort of on-going legal rights?
* What land is owned by the City’s HRA? Would the HRA get involved in properties it doesn’t own?
* The presence of large property owners in the study area could be a barrier to attracting new developers to look at properties in the WSF.

***Unclear Development Context***

* What kind of environmental contamination exists on the Trooien properties?
* What are the long-term plans for the airport – amount of air traffic, expansion plans, etc.? Are there any nuisance issues, such as noise? Are there building height restrictions?
* What kind of industrial uses exist in the WSF area today? Are there nuisance issues?
* There are perceptions that the WSF land is tied up by a development agreement between the HRA and one property owner. There is a perception that the City controls all or most of the land in the WSF area today. How would a developer go about acquiring property in the WSF today? *Much of the land within the original 50-acre area was covered by a master development agreement between the HRA and Trooien. This is no longer the case.*
* The WSF area seems like it is an isolated island surrounded by uses (e.g. industrial, airport, regional park) and infrastructure (levee, roadways, railroad) that act as barriers and make riverfront neighborhood development more difficult. The City needs to show how this area will be connected to the neighborhood in the future and not remain isolated.
* It would be beneficial for the master plan to look at the areas surrounding the WSF, e.g. the areas just across Wabasha Street, Plato Boulevard and Lafayette Road.
* General perception of the WSF is that there’s nothing there right now, e.g. lack of destinations, streets and green spaces.
* Brownfield cleanup needs are generally viewed as a reasonable and predictable process by developers today.
* Consider expanding the WSF study area boundary south to the railroad line to encompass the whole Flats area below the bluff. Maybe show a lighter gray line that surrounds the WSF study area that has already been defined to indicate the appropriate context area.

***Potential Development Tools***

* Are TIF districts established by individual project or by area? *Both are possible in Saint Paul.*
* What is the potential for using TIF districts in the WSF? *The Sherman Associates development project (West Side Flats Apartments) used a housing TIF district. Redevelopment TIF districts could be challenging in the WSF due to the vacant land that already exists in the area and difficulty of establishing blight.*
* It would be good to develop a “tool kit” of potential financing sources to identify how to layer, rather than sequence, them.
* Are there any plans for City acquisition of land? *Not currently.*
* Roseville has developed a form-based code for the Twin Lakes redevelopment area, but this has not worked out well. Form-based codes can be dangerous. As the development market changes, the appropriate development form also most likely needs to change.
* Does Saint Paul have an industrial living overlay district like Minneapolis? *Saint Paul has an IR (Light Industrial Restricted District) zoning district, which is currently being renamed and amended as the IT (Transitional Industrial District).*
* Reduced parking requirements were not seen as a major incentive if transit options are not strong enough, which could be the case in the WSF.
* Consider designating the WSF as a redevelopment TIF district/area upfront rather than addressing this issue with each property owner at the time of redevelopment. This approach would remove the need for each property to get TIF certified. Designation of a WSF TIF district would involve special legislation.

***Improving City’s Vision & Guidance***

* How is the City guiding/controlling new development in the WSF today? *T3M (Traditional Neighborhood with Master Plan) generally west of Robert Street and north of Fillmore Avenue, I1 (Light Industrial) generally east of Robert Street and south of Fillmore Avenue. The West Side Flats Master Plan and Development Guidelines apply to the area between Robert and Wabasha streets with standards for each future block and street.*
* Is there a vision for the riverfront that encompasses both sides of the river?
* In Minneapolis, the riverfront vision is essentially a riverfront land hierarchy that consists of water, public land, road/parkway, private development, which seems somewhat unique. *In the downtown area of Saint Paul, the riverfront hierarchy is generally water, public land (levee and regional park in WSF), private development.*
* What about allowing private enterprises on public property, like Minneapolis allows in its parks? *Great River Passage Plan shows private enterprises on private land right next to the river esplanade (which is located atop the river levee).*
* What is the vision for transportation in the WSF area? It is very hard to see what transportation will be like in this area in the future. *There are several transit-related studies underway that will impact service on the West Side – streetcar, MRT, LRT options being studied for Robert and Wabasha.*
* It would be better for the City to create a master plan with an interesting vision and marketing package rather than a dry planning document.
* There needs to be a pretty picture of the future place, a visual image of the future vision. The master plan definitely needs to have a strong vision and show that the City is committed to providing the appropriate pubic infrastructure, especially streets parks. The current master plan does not grab developers’ attention or show them an exciting and committed vision.
* What developers want to see are: 1) a vision; 2) neighborhood support; 3) infrastructure; and 4) how to “plug in.”
* Land use guidance needs to be more flexible; the current WSF Master Plan was viewed as being too prescriptive.
* A lot of the land in the WSF has been tied up for a long time! It would be helpful for the City to clearly identify what they are committed/willing to do to encourage development. Implementation steps/tools should be identified in the master plan.
* Developers suggested the Plan look at something akin to “performance standards” to guide land use; it’s more about how buildings “perform” (e.g. relate to the street, preserve key views) independent of specific use.
* It would be beneficial for the master plan to identify anchor activities that the City could go after upfront to gain the neighborhood’s interest/support/commitment and start creating a node that could attract developers.

***Mix of Land Uses***

* Developers want to know where commercial/office development would be appropriate in the WSF in the future.
* Vertical mixed-use buildings are still challenging in the Twin Cities market today, so it was recommended that horizontal mixed-use be considered for the WSF.
* Is an employment campus such as U.S. Bank ideal for riverfront development? Some contrasting views but most developers felt that a major employer was an asset for the WSF.
* Developers agreed that the WSF should be a mix of land uses; however, they felt that it should be clear where commercial/office uses are generally appropriate. It would be beneficial to have some assurance of where residential development will remain desirable into the future.
* Consider opportunities for attracting civic/community public art enterprises into new development in WSF. They can catalyze other development or perhaps be part of a density bonus. It appears that the current WSF Master Plan shows only one small site for civic uses. It may be necessary for these types of uses to be incentivized and/or subsidized within a mixed-use development/building.
* Consider the potential for a public library in the WSF. Today, libraries are popular as public gathering space, networking, business incubation, event programming, etc. For instance, the Central Library in downtown Minneapolis seems like it has events almost every day.
* What has been the absorption rate of market-rate rental housing in Saint Paul recently? *The new Lofts at Farmers Market units were fully leased within about 3 months.*
* A range of housing types and affordability should be encouraged.

***Building/Site Design Techniques***

* Consider the possibility of getting surface parking lots off the riverfront, which currently surround the Comcast building, by accommodating parking demand in structured ramps.
* Scissor stairs were mentioned as a technique that allows buildings to be built narrower and with better views; however, they are not permitted in Saint Paul and Minneapolis.

***Potential Development Assets***

* WSF’s location right next to downtown is a selling point! Shouldn’t separate WSF too much from downtown because its location across from downtown and the views of downtown are a benefit. The WSF’s closer access to the river’s edge is also a benefit, compared to downtown’s riverfront edge at the top of the bluff.
* WSF could be viewed as an extension or transition between downtown and more typical lower- density residential neighborhoods.
* Is there potential for U.S. Bank to take an interest in development expansion or other financing in the future? Developers suggested that the City inquire about their plans. U.S. Bank’s potential involvement in WSF redevelopment seems like a missed opportunity.
* The Northwest Area Foundation is located in the Drake Bank Building at Robert St/Plato Blvd. Is there an opportunity to involve them in the WSF redevelopment planning?
* The FOK (Farwell, Ozmun, Kirk & Co.) building appears to have potential for historic renovation/adaptation to residential.

***Comparable Places to Learn From***

* WSF planning and development could learn from Minneapolis’s East Bank (Marcy-Holmes neighborhood) – directly across the river from downtown, connected to downtown, an extension of downtown yet different from downtown.
* Another way to view the WSF’s relationship to downtown is to think about how the East Bank area in Minneapolis was within downtown’s “dime zone.” *The downtown zones are 50 cents today. Saint Paul’s downtown transit zone extends across the river to Plato Blvd between Harriet Island Regional Park and Robert Street.*
* WSF could also benefit from understanding how the North Loop neighborhood has redeveloped next to downtown Minneapolis.
* WSF could learn from the variety of downtown neighborhoods that have been redeveloped along Denver’s downtown riverfront, each with their own unique character.
* “Galvanize” is a new enterprise in Denver that offers space and assistance for business incubation, which could be a model for business incubation uses in the WSF.

***Sustainable Development***

* Consider LID (low- impact development) and the potential for on-site stormwater management. Some of the stormwater management techniques that were recommended for the Central Corridor, but didn’t get implemented, should be considered again for the WSF. There will be a seminar in August at the 2013 Int’l LID Symposium, which will be held in Saint Paul, about urban trees and storm water management in Stockholm, Sweden.
* Consider the potential for using geothermal in WSF. Aeon is installing geothermal for its new riverfront residential development in downtown Chaska because of access to river water and large depth of bedrock.
* Aeon is working on a new development in Minneapolis using the Living Building approach.
* Consider the potential to link a sustainable development approach to establishment of an area-wide TIF district in the WSF.
* Higher- density residential buildings can actually make sustainable building techniques more challenging, e.g. multi-family buildings may require too many solar panels that won’t actually fit on a building’s roof.
* Potential to work with the U of M Center for Sustainable Building Research on sustainability approaches.
* Some concerns from developers with potentially using Saint Paul District Energy for WSF development. Energy-efficiency down the road doesn’t necessarily equate to lowering energy costs because the costs may be dependent upon the specific cost levels tied to District Energy bonding.

***Public Art***

* Marketing and branding of the WSF Master Plan will be critical to its success. Think about tying marketing and branding to artists’ ideas.
* Potential for attracting artists to the WSF but need to think about how to protect their rights to stay as residents long-term. WSF could learn from the Lowertown Redevelopment Corporation’s experience.