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West Side Flats

Master Plan and Development Guidelines Update

Thursday, September 12, 2013

West Side Flats Master Plan and Development Guidelines Update Community Task Force Meeting #6

Attendees:

Community Task Force (CTF) Members

Attending:

Betsy Reveal (Chair), Karen Reid, Lorrie Louder, Gjerry Berquist, Jim Miller, Carol Swenson, Mason Wells, Denise Rene Hannah, Irene Jones, Tony Kuechle, Benjamin Mike, Jessica Treat

Project Staff/Consultants

Lucy Thompson, Jeff McMenimen, Jeff Miller

Guests

John Anfinson, NPS

Meeting Notes:

1. The meeting notes from the 7/25/13 and 8/1/13 meetings were accepted as written.

2. John Anfinson (NPS) – Presentation/Discussion

- John gave a brief presentation of the purpose and key findings of the Friends of the Mississippi River's proposal to name the Mississippi River Valley at Saint Paul as one of the 10 Most Endangered Historic Minnesota Properties. The nomination was prepared in response to the Bridges of Saint Paul, a high-density project with very tall buildings proposed in 2006. He presented the national perspective on the significance of the Mississippi River valley.
- The river valley along the West Side Flats is an iconic, historic landscape, one that is unique on the Mississippi River. John recommended the group identify what is most powerful about that landscape, determine which views are most important to preserve it, and then protect those views.
- John said that any development needs to complement the river and the landscape.
- The National Park Service (NPS) is working on a view shed analysis of the Mississippi Corridor. This study includes the river valley in the West Side Flats study area. The study is on-going and due for completion by the end of the year.
- There will be an opportunity for public comment on the view shed analysis.
- It was mentioned that the West Side Flats project conducted a public open house, during which the community was asked to weigh in on significant views (to and from)

within the river valley. This information has been utilized in the West Side Flats master planning study.

- The Wabasha Flats project offers the ability to see what effect building height has on views within the river valley.
- The 1908 view of the West Side Flats from Prospect Bluff illustrates more building height and variety than the 2007 view from the same vantage point. Additionally, the building heights in the Flats (1908) appear to be similar to those across the river in the Lowertown area.

3. Building Height Discussion

- The group reviewed the building height/massing study views prepared by the consultant team. The building heights displayed represent maximum heights allowed under current and proposed zoning changes.
- Currently, underlying zoning controls building heights along the river.
- In the building height/massing study, could the height of each building (in feet) be indicated right on the building?
- The Google Earth background looks flatter than it is in reality.
- The question was raised – can the Master Plan recommend zoning changes? The answer is yes – the plan may recommend zoning changes. Zoning recommendations will be discussed at our next Community Task Force Meeting.
- It's important to understand the impact of potential building heights at street level.
- The buildings along Wabasha Street look too tall. They are illustrated at 100 feet tall, allowed with a conditional use permit (CUP).
- The massing model makes the project site look larger than it is. One can see across the site today. This is mostly due to several vacant sites and low-rise buildings that exist in the area today.
- Views in and of the area will change in the West Side Flats when the planning area is developed. What building heights are acceptable?
- Building heights should be determined by the heights of trees in the river valley. Average cottonwood tree heights in the Mississippi River valley can reach well above 100 feet in height.
- Views between the buildings are an important factor to consider. Primary view corridors should be protected. The finer grain of roadways, along with the landscape easements, should help maintain views of the bluffs and the downtown skyline.
- The West Side Flats apartments are 6 stories: 5 stories of "stick-built" on top of a ground story of concrete-built construction.
- The plan should offer the flexibility for buildings to be designed taller (10 stories) but thinner, with more green on the ground and views between the buildings. How does the building address the streets in this scenario?

- Parking will be a challenge in the West Side Flats due to high groundwater. Creative solutions to parking will have to be designed into each development project. The Upper Landing project offers some ideas for how parking can be resolved.
- Can the plan recommend more open space and parks? How about providing another greenway east of Robert Street, similar to the one shown between Wabasha and Robert streets? This would provide more opportunities for river connections and view corridors; however, it would displace developable land.
- John asked the question – what kind of neighborhood are we trying to build here? It was explained that there had been much discussion concerning this early in the planning process. The vision statement and guiding principles provide a sense of that future neighborhood – mixed use, urban neighborhood with various districts including employment, housing, commercial/retail land uses. This neighborhood will be developed more densely than it is today and would likely not include single-family detached homes.
- John suggested another way to look at development is to ask: “What would cause a loss of integrity of the resource (landscape) here?”
- One Task Force member suggested that Wacouta Commons offers a good vision of block size and scale of development.
- It was suggested that the plan should allow a variety of building heights. Taller buildings should be considered if they are designed to be not too massive. Density will be required to support a sustainable future for the West Side Flats.
- Can we look at the NPS view shed analysis and use it to shed light on building heights here? The NPS study may not be completed by the time the West Side Flats Master Plan will be; however, it may still be utilized to help determine building heights in the river valley.
- The rules and regulations for the Mississippi River Critical Area may affect the building heights in the area.
- If taller buildings are allowed along the outside edges of the project area (i.e. along Plato Blvd and Wabasha Street), this will create a wall along the outside of the neighborhood. Plato, especially, is an important “seam” between the Flats and the rest of the West Side. Buildings should scale down in height along these edges.
- How high is too high? It was suggested that the tallest buildings should be located along the river, Wabasha and Robert streets.
- Taller buildings located along the river would tend to privatize the riverfront. Stepping building heights back from the river will extend the value of the river amenity deeper into the West Side Flats.
- Buildings should be stepped back along the riverfront and along major corridors to allow more views to more people of the river and the bluffs.
- Is there an opportunity in the plan to control building design? Can the plan recommend design strategies that encourage sustainable design solutions? Some of

this is addressed in current City regulations. The development guidelines will bolster these ideas.

- The plan text should talk about the Mississippi River Valley as a valuable asset and identity maker for the West Side Flats. It should express the river valley's framework – an iconic landscape.

4. Development Guidelines Discussion

- The document should provide photos of the west side of the river, not the east side.
- Lighting guidelines should require glare-free lighting and address night sky concerns.
- The plan/guidelines should discuss the need to connect pedestrian systems to regional systems.
- Concern regarding push buttons at traffic signals. Traffic signals should include the automatic countdowns.
- The guidelines should include photos of people of diversity (people in wheel chairs, people of color, diverse nationalities, ages and genders)
- Use the term "bike share" instead of "Nice Ride"
- Include provisions for heated transit shelters.
- Include provisions to integrate public art with transit shelters.
- The guidelines should address wayfinding. This could be done at transit hubs and in open spaces. Wayfinding could be integrated with public art.
- Be more clear on the structural soil requirements.
- Utilize local (West Side) images to illustrate ideas – i.e. local furnishings, lighting, etc.
- Reference "complete streets" in the language.
- The guidelines should encourage the minimization of turf as a groundcover.
- What defines a "taller" building?
- Do the guidelines guide building height on the ground floor? In particular commercial uses?

Next Steps

- The Community Task Force will meet again on September 23rd, 6-7:30 PM at NeDA to finish discussing the development guidelines and begin review of recommended zoning changes.