

Community Conversation: Midway Center Redevelopment

DRAFT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On Tuesday, August 11, the Union Park District Council hosted a community meeting to discuss the redevelopment of the Bus Barn/Midway Shopping Center site, particularly in light of accelerating negotiations regarding the potential for a new Major League Soccer stadium to be built on the site. This conversation was not framed as a referendum on the stadium or other development ideas, but instead focused on hopes and fears about how the entire 35-acre site could be developed to realize its full potential, with or without a stadium. To facilitate the meeting, four key areas were identified to structure the feedback:

- Traffic/Parking
- Financing
- Stadium Usage
- Surrounding Development

The meeting on August 11 generated thoughtful, meaningful conversation among residents. It did not, however, represent the views of all neighbors, nor did it seek to create any kind of consensus. The key themes listed below represent topics or questions that were raised. Union Park District Council strongly supports continued meaningful engagement with local neighbors with targeted outreach to our communities of color and recent immigrants.

Traffic and Parking Themes

- Neighbors at the meeting are worried about traffic and congestion, particularly if a stadium is built. Event days (such as game days or State Fair days) will generate significant spikes in traffic and many residents fear gridlock.
- Public transit is well supported by participants, and viewed as an essential piece to manage increased usage and density in the area.
- Not surprisingly, parking is a significant concern for neighbors. There are mixed views about how best to address and pay for parking. However, based on the conversation, it appears safe to say that:
 - No one wants significant additional surface parking
 - Many neighbors are worried about the impact of additional development on already scarce neighborhood street parking
 - Everyone supports the goal of shared parking
 - Some felt that offering free or reduced-rate transit on game days is an appropriate way to reduce parking pressures
- Several residents present raised concerns that are not directly a part of redevelopment, but will clearly continue to fester as transit-oriented development draws more people to the site. These include the potential connection of Ayr Mill Road and the capacity of I-94 access routes.

Financing

- Both participants and facilitators of this community conversation struggled to fully understand the potential financing tools and options that may be part of any future development at this site. The district council seeks additional education and examples to explain different types of public financing, how they might be applied, and how they would impact Saint Paul taxpayers.
- Public investment in the redevelopment of this site is contentious, and the potential of a stadium on the site adds to the controversy. Many residents are adamantly opposed to any public funding supporting another stadium in the Twin Cities, while others view a modest public investment as key to gaining amenities and community consideration in the planning process. Many neighbors recognize the opportunity for a net positive return on investment, but have no data or facts with which to gauge whether this project would generate such a return.
- Some neighbors fear that public investment would not benefit the immediate community directly. For example, they worry the stadium will only be visited by suburban fans (perhaps due to high prices) and that redevelopment would focus solely on catering to these fans. They worry the stadium and/or redevelopment would not address the needs and interests of our diverse neighborhood, and would displace lower income residents and small businesses.

Stadium Usage

- Neighbors participating in the conversation had many hopes and fears about how a stadium might impact the local community. But with few details and many unknowns, it is difficult to make a meaningful assessment of the impact of a stadium on the adjacent neighborhood.
- Those present hoped the stadium would be able to accommodate more than just home soccer matches, with many asking how the facility would be used on dates the team isn't playing on site. Additional uses that were proposed included concerts, local high school or college soccer matches, and youth athletics support. Some suggested the stadium complex could also incorporate plazas or public spaces that could be used for community events such as festivals, farmers markets, public parks, or local music.
- At the same time, many aired fears about how intense use of the site could have negative impacts on the immediate neighborhood. In addition to traffic and parking mentioned above, residents worried about noise and bright lights. There were concerns about design, public safety and trash, and hopes that the overall complex would appear welcoming and friendly. There is significant fear that the stadium would not be accessible to the community, and therefore, the neighborhood would not benefit from it.
- Finally, some residents asked what would happen to a stadium if the team moved or became financially unsustainable, and what contingencies the city would have in place to address this.

Surrounding Development

- There appeared to be strong support for comprehensive planning of the entire Bus Barn/Midway Center site. Union Park District Council has gone on record as advocating for a comprehensive master plan for the entire 35 acres of the super block, and the neighbors present support this holistic approach.

- Many residents appeared to favor mixed-use and transit oriented development, although the comments indicate there is a wide variety of interpretations about what is meant by “transit oriented development.” Several ideas and suggestions were shared about the potential for development beyond the stadium. These included housing, retail, and job centers.
- Several neighbors present represented a variety of concerns related to local businesses. They worry existing local businesses could be forced out through the redevelopment phase or due to higher property values (creating increased rent and property taxes). They want to make sure that any new development includes significant local businesses and not solely national chains.
- Public and green space was supported by several participants and viewed as a much-needed improvement to the existing sea of concrete on the site.
- Several residents asserted the stadium would be a catalyst for future development. They worry it will be many years before development of the site occurs without the stadium. Those who didn’t support this pointed out that if it was wrong and the stadium did NOT serve to accelerate additional development, we could be left with a sea of surface parking surrounding the stadium for many years.

Key Questions

While answers to the questions below may not be known for some time, they represent some of the key issues the neighborhood has prioritized in conversations to date.

- How will the city pursue and lead a comprehensive planning process to create a holistic approach to the multi-year, mixed-use redevelopment of the entire superblock?
- What changes will be made to roads, streets, traffic controls and public transit to manage the challenge of increased activity and special events on the superblock site (i.e., 18,000 people arriving for a soccer match)?
- How will parking be addressed to support the comprehensive development of the superblock site and protect neighborhood/residential streets from overflow?
- How will redevelopment of the superblock improve safety and access for bicycles and pedestrians?
- What specific public investment tools will be used to support the redevelopment of the site?
- What models indicate the public investment on the site will have a net positive impact on the city and neighborhood?
- What can or will be done to protect existing local businesses and make the redevelopment of the site attractive to new local entrepreneurs?
- What commitment can stadium developers make about working with the neighborhood regarding issues such as special events, noise, lights, and ongoing relationships with neighbors?
- If a stadium is built, how would it be used beyond MLS games? (i.e., Concerts? Youth events? College or high school soccer? Community access?)
- If a stadium is built, what commitment will the MLS team owners make to provide benefits to the diverse neighborhood residents and small business owners? (i.e., Free or reduced rate tickets to games? Soccer clinics? Support for youth soccer programs at nearby schools and playing fields?)