

Community Planning and Economic Development Planning Division Report
SMALL AREA PLAN

DATE: November 27th, 2006

PROJECT NAME: Nokomis East Light Rail Transit Station Area Plan

SUBMITTED BY: CPED-Planning Division

CONTACT PERSON AND PHONE: Michael Larson, Principal Planner, 673-2423

WARD: 12

NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZATIONS:

Nokomis East Neighborhood Association (NENA)

MINNEAPOLIS PLAN DESIGNATIONS:

Transit Station Area: 50th Street/Minnehaha Park and VA Medical Center Stations

BACKGROUND:

The *Nokomis East Light Rail Transit Station Area Plan* is a proposed policy framework for the future of the area served by the 50th Street/Minnehaha Park and VA Medical Center LRT stations on the Hiawatha Line. The plan, which was largely funded by Hennepin County, is the last of the station area plans to be completed for the Hiawatha LRT line. It provides guidance on land use, urban design, and public infrastructure. Like other small area plans, it will serve as the primary guide for Planning Commission review, zoning changes, capital investment, and housing and commercial development activities in this part of the city. It will also inform the revision of the City's comprehensive plan.

The planning process lasted over a year. It formally began with the first steering committee meeting on November 30th, 2005. The steering committee was comprised of neighborhood stakeholders who provided input and feedback on public involvement components, planning principles, and draft work products. Five major public meetings were held in addition to a series of steering committee meetings. An open house was held on May 11th, 2006 to present final plan components. In June, a draft of the plan was distributed to the steering committee for review. Following substantial revisions to the document, the final draft was released for 45-day review on October 1st. During this review period, Nokomis East Neighborhood Association (NENA) sponsored another open house on November 2nd to solicit comments on the document. NENA has forwarded a significant number of comments as well as recommended changes for City consideration. CPED-Planning staff has responded to all comments (attached) and concurs with most of the neighborhood association's recommended changes.

PLAN SUMMARY:

Creating a physical sense of connection between the stations is a challenging main

objective of the plan. The two stations are approximately 0.8 miles apart from one

another. Three distinct physical segments of roughly the same length divide the area. At

the southern end, the first segment is on VA Medical Center property. Here, wide open spaces include park-like areas and large surface parking lots. While the parking areas are well landscaped, large surface lots are relatively unfriendly to pedestrians. Steps should be taken to ensure that future VA development is at a scale and orientation that encourages pedestrian activity along Minnehaha. The second segment is along Minnehaha where LRT travels in the street between 54th and 52nd Streets. Here is where old motels, automobile repair uses, and small homes are being replaced by urban residential development. The third segment is Old Hiawatha where residential uses face a frontage road and sound wall behind which light rail travels.

Key recommendations of the Nokomis East Light Rail Transit Station Area Plan include the following:

- Creating a better sense of connection to the neighborhood and Minnehaha Park at the 50th Street Station through adjacent redevelopment and an improved at-grade crossing of Hiawatha.
- Ensuring that redevelopment along the narrow Minnehaha right-of-way (where LRT travels) is an attractive and pedestrian-friendly urban district, serving as a gateway to the City.
- Encouraging focal points of mixed housing/commercial uses at the 50th Street Station and at the intersection of 54th Street/Minnehaha.
- Replacing the frontage-road feel of Old Hiawatha with a greener, more pedestrian-friendly corridor south from Minnehaha Creek connecting to the more urban district of Minnehaha Avenue.
- Integrating density into an area that includes both vacant state-owned land and single-family homes in the "Yardville" area.

Areas of policy concern/implementation are addressed in the table of comments/revisions that accompanies this staff report. Some of the key issues:

- Vehicle access, parking and alley use for development fronting Minnehaha.
The presence of light rail down the center of a narrow Minnehaha ROW, and the awkward intersection at 54th & Minnehaha, create unique challenges. The plan identifies the need for a sidewalk easement and supports the dedication of additional ROW for parking bays. Feedback from NENA, a major property owner, and Public Works indicate that this is a workable option. It is reflected in recommended changes to the plan's text.

Concern exists over increasing reliance on the alley for access to off-street parking. Although the consultants and staff do not envision the need to widen of the alley to improve flow and reduce conflicts, the plan has been revised to suggest that further analysis of overall traffic impacts is appropriate. Curb cuts on Minnehaha to reduce traffic volumes on the alley are not recommended.

- Height guidelines
NENA has recommended that the upper limit on height guidelines be reduced by one story in some cases. There is the perception that five story buildings are inappropriately tall along

Minnehaha and that four story buildings are inappropriately tall at the 50th Street Station. No change is recommended, as Section 3.1.3 of the plan addresses contextual issues related to scale. Depending upon the ultimate size and configuration of a site plan, as well as the design of a building, greater height may or may not be appropriate.

- Future use of publicly owned land and right-of-way in the "Yardville" precinct
Vacant land owned by Mn/DOT presents opportunities for some kind of development adjacent to Riverview Road and 54th Street. Since the size the configuration of the available parcels is not ideal, the quality of development outcomes will depend upon the extent of adjacent property owner participation. Regardless, any future infill development should be reviewed in the context of future opportunities.

Staff is recommending modification to the Yardville section of the land use maps, as they are someone misleading. Since the planning process did not resolve many aspects of redevelopment in Yardville, outcomes are more appropriately described in the text than in the maps. Yardville represents open space in a public ROW currently enjoyed by adjacent residents. It also represents an opportunity to buffer Hiawatha Lane homeowners from what may be an increase in density to the east. Rather than attempt to identify specific open space configurations/uses on the land use map (currently identified as "promenade" and "open space"), staff is recommending that the Yardville ROW simply be identified as "Yardville ROW". Possibilities and objectives for open space components are described in the text and illustrated in the plan through the inclusion of renderings and images of development.

FUTURE RELATED ACTIONS:

City Council action

Adoption of a small area plan requires action by the City Council. Following action by the City Planning Commission, staff will forward the recommendation of the CPC to the Zoning and Planning Committee for their review.

Rezoning study

Following adoption of the small area plan, a rezoning study is planned for the area, currently scheduled to begin in November 2007.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

That the Planning Commission recommends that the City Council adopt the Nokomis East Light Rail Transit Station Area Plan as a small area plan, subject to the recommended changes identified in the Table of Public/Staff Comments and Recommended Changes.

Reference Materials / Attachments:

- Nokomis East Light Rail Transit Station Area Plan
- Table of Public/Staff Comments and Recommended Changes
- Record of Written Public Comments