

Fridley Corridor Housing Initiative: Revitalizing University Avenue

Final Report

December 6, 2007



Summary

The Corridor Housing Initiative (CHI) partnered with the City of Fridley HRA, City Council and Planning Commission to facilitate a series of community workshops to establish:

- Provide strategic focus for the development of University Avenue parcels owned by the Fridley HRA.
- Strengthen participation and community involvement to form city goals for development along University Avenue.
- Present development objectives for University Avenue as recommendations to the Fridley Housing and Redevelopment Authority, City Council and Planning Commission for consideration.

The collaboration between the Corridor Housing Initiative and the City of Fridley came through funding from the Family Housing Fund and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation to serve as a demonstration project to determine whether these technical resources and approach would be useful in a suburban context. The City of Fridley provided in-kind staffing support.

The CHI community process consisted of four workshops, held on July 19, August 16, September 6 and September 20, 2007 at the Fridley Community Center. Approximately 50 community participants attended the workshops, aimed at strengthening their design and development literacy, articulate community values for future development, and assess likely development scenarios that could meet those values. The process involved a technical team of designers, developers, facilitators and city staff to inform and support participants as they explored ideas. Resulting from the process was an increased confidence by participants about possible development directions for the area, and strategies for getting there. The purpose of the CHI process was to identify a range of development options that met community goals and market viability, rather than landing on one specific development direction or product.

Workshop I: Revitalizing University Avenue

(July 19, 2007)

Participants gathered ideas on what makes University Avenue interesting, what they wanted to achieve through development along University Avenue, and what were their concerns about redevelopment in the area (see University Avenue Development Wish List in attachments).

Workshop II: Development ABC's

(August 16, 2007)

Participants explored a variety of development options for the University Avenue sites, using blocks to create a massing, and running the option through a financial analysis tool to determine if it was a feasible scenario. Sketchers were also on hand to draw what that development could look like given design preferences expressed by community members (see University Avenue Block Exercise Summary Sheets in attachments). Design and development experts were on hand to share ideas and insights.

Workshop III: Moving Forward!

(September 6, 2007)

A panel of developers and commercial brokers met with participants to explore the opportunities and challenges for development along University Avenue, and consider options for revitalizing the area (see Panel Discussion Meeting Notes – September 6, 2007 in attachments).

Workshop IV: Framing the Recommendations

(September 20, 2007)

Participants worked to build consensus on recommendation to the Fridley City Council and HRA Commissioners on development objectives for publicly owned sites along University Avenue (see Fridley / University Avenue Development Guidelines in attachments).



Through the discussions three core themes emerged for Fridley and the revitalization of University Avenue:

1. Strengthen the identity of Fridley / University Avenue as an important Gateway to Fridley,
2. Build connections from University Avenue to other parts of the city, and
3. Revitalize University Avenue to be a vital and viable district.

Participants discussed a variety of topics revolving around the potential use and strategies for development, including:

Opportunities	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Important gateway to City of Fridley - Strengthen identity • Major transit corridor, within half-mile radius of Northstar Commuter Rail Line • Location and access to shopping, amenities, and job centers • Fridley is hub of medical facilities and resources • Senior Housing – Provide housing options for people that would like to move out of larger homes (strong senior demographic). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University Avenue (state highway designation) limits access for commercial uses • Fence along University Avenue • Shallow sites limit development options - important to design transition to single family residential • Desire for city center (restaurants and community gathering places) • Maintain commercial vitality and reverse the blight • Due to the land values, single family homes were not seen as viable.



Considerations for Success

- Need to be able to live by it (close proximity to single family residential)
- Option to move the frontage road to serve as buffer / transition
- Build higher buildings closer to University Ave to limit impact on single family homes behind.
- Current four story height level limit in zoning code (no plans to change)
- Underground parking is desirable for residential and office use
- Want durable buildings, well designed with quality materials

Strengthen Connections with Other Amenities

- Extended Medtronic Parkway (outlined in the revised comprehensive plan) would enhance accessibility to the area.
- Northstar Commuter Rail station area – Establishing walkable routes to the station area could lead to stronger housing market for the University Avenue sites (located within a half-mile radius of the station area).
- Bus access along University serves as a feeder to Northstar and into downtown Minneapolis.
- Strengthen connections with other parts of the city (especially parks and other natural amenities, and retail areas).
- Desire for city center – gathering area for retail and restaurants somewhere in the City of Fridley (the University Avenue sites are not the ideal location due to access limitations).
- Market Fridley as a Medical Hub – good way to recruit medical companies and offices into the area, and provides a “promotional hook.”

Strategies for Moving Development Forward

Community members were unified in their interest to attract good development that strengthened University Avenue as a gateway and window into the City of Fridley. Throughout the process there was an increasing awareness of the need for public resources to fill financial gaps to make a development project viable (stemming from the added costs of demolition and land values), and a positive addition to the future of the City. Participants agreed that it would be worthwhile to wait until more sites could be acquired by the City of Fridley HRA to enable even greater positive impact to the area, and to provide a more cohesive development strategy. Many voiced support for finding ways to gain additional public resources to invest in the area. It was noted at both the developers’ panel and by city staff that public resources are available from regional, state and federal sources for affordable housing, but not explicitly for senior housing. Examples of possible sources for affordable housing resources include:

- United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
- Minnesota Housing Finance Agency
- Metropolitan Council (Livable Communities Demonstration Project)
- Anoka County Community Development Block Grant
- Fridley HRA
- Private foundations

Another option is to create a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district to capture future tax revenue to leverage redevelopment.

Concern was also expressed about sitting on the sites for a long period of time, allowing them to continue to deteriorate. One way of avoiding this situation is to move forward with an incremental strategy to develop one or two of the sites while the City HRA continued to work to acquire additional adjacent sites. Another suggestion was to identify a temporary use for the sites

(i.e. outdoor market area), but that would require demolishing existing buildings, which would complicate the option of creating a TIF district (prematurely initiating the timeline for development to occur).

To attract the right developers to the area, and to merge public and private interests, the developer panel suggested that the City submit an RFQ (request for qualifications) rather than an RFP (request for proposals) for the University Avenue sites. Developers are more apt to respond to an RFQ over an RFP because of the intensive work it takes to submit a specific proposal. The RFQ provides the opportunity to create a working partnership between the City and developer, and typically results in a much better end product.

Conclusion

The Corridor Housing Initiative submits the following recommendations to the City of Fridley City Council and Housing Redevelopment Authority (HRA) for your consideration regarding the publicly owned sites along University Avenue:

The City of Fridley, Minnesota is located just north of Minneapolis on the east bank of the Mississippi River. Our community is home to approximately 27,000 residents, 900 businesses, including the Medtronic headquarters, Unity Hospital, and a variety of other medical facilities, and soon to have a new Northstar Commuter Rail Line station area.

In 2007 the City of Fridley and Fridley Housing Redevelopment Authority purchased a variety of parcels along University Avenue between 61st Street and 58th Street to revitalize one of the most important gateways into the city. The sites along University Avenue face critical challenges, such as shallow parcels and limited access, which will require creativity on the part of developers, or the ability to acquire additional land for development projects. The City of Fridley worked with the Corridor Housing Initiative to create the University Avenue Development Site Information Sheet as part of this commitment to the street and its future development.

Assets

The City of Fridley is

- actively supportive of new developments along University Avenue that respond to these guidelines;
- centrally located, with easy access to downtown Minneapolis, convenient freeway access, and a station area for the Northstar Commuter Rail Line coming soon;
- supported by an active, engaged business community, institutions, and residents;
- ripe for new investment with several developable sites that are publicly owned;
- home to a variety of medical facilities and businesses, as well as excellent public schools and parks; and
- a proven partner for working effectively with developers to achieve development goals.



Guidelines

I. Strengthen the Positive Identity of Fridley

- A. Incorporate design elements that help to enhance the visual appeal of the area through plantings, public art, ornamental lighting, and other interesting features.
- B. Provide landscaping and new fencing along University Avenue.
- C. Increase the scale and density to offer a more concentrated mix of uses and intensified development strategy.
- D. Orientation of the buildings should face the center frontage road, while providing interesting back sides to University Avenue, or providing a double front to University Avenue and the frontage road.



II. Create Connections

- A. Consider opportunities for strengthening access and connections between new developments and other nearby amenities, such as trail systems, transit (including the Northstar Commuter Rail Line station area), retail areas, parks, and job centers.
- B. Create engaging pedestrian-friendly street level.



III. Encourage Development and Revitalize University Avenue

- A. Strong support for:
 - Senior housing, and assisted living options,
 - A mix of housing choices to accommodate a range of household incomes and sizes ,
 - Office building, and
 - Mixed-use buildings (e.g. office, residential, services, and restaurant).



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Attachments:

I. Overview of the Corridor Housing Initiative process

II. University Avenue Development Wish List

III. University Avenue Block Exercise Summary Sheets

IV. Panel Discussion Meeting Notes – September 6, 2007

V. Fridley / University Avenue Development Guidelines

VI. Map: City of Fridley – Parcels with Medical Facilities

VI. Attendance / Contact list for Fridley CHI workshops