

The Western Park Neighborhood Assessment

Executive Summary (By Ken Ford, Urban Planner)

Just over three thousand folks live in Western Park Neighborhood just west of the capitol area at the heart of Saint Paul. A number of them participated in one way or another in this assessment, undertaken with some of the neighborhood's community partners, "to build the case for initiatives to promote the neighborhood's stability and quality of life."

The Western Park Neighborhood extends west from the capitol area near the heart of Saint Paul. Marion Street is its eastern end, Dale its western edge, and University Avenue and Interstate 94 its northern and southern boundaries. The neighborhood is divided east and west by Western Avenue, and while the two halves share many characteristics, institutions and facilities, they are in some respects distinct.

Opportunities for action drawn from the assessment are outlined here. An overview of the neighborhood that follows provides background for the action steps and will provide a bridge to the much more detailed information presented by the many chapters of the assessment report.

Action for the Neighborhood and Its Partners Now

The last chapter of the assessment, "Recommendations for Action," is not written yet. Assessment participants have intended from the beginning that action decisions would come from the neighborhood and its partners once the assessment's perspective was available.

This comprehensive, and in many places carefully detailed, overview of the neighborhood is an invaluable resource. It demands attention now by groups and individuals within the neighborhood, and by community partners. The voices of those who carried out the assessment are heard directly throughout the report. Their enthusiasm and dedication show that the will and energy are there for the steps that will continue the momentum of Western Park Neighborhood's inspiring journey.

The Public Realm

The public space matters to everyone. How well it meets needs for movement, connection, rest, and recreation affects well-being for residents and visitors. It also affects the willingness of property owners and community partners to make investments that secure the neighborhood's future. The Western Park Neighborhood has learned this well from experience. The public space also is a tangible aspect of the neighborhood that readily engages the interest and imagination of residents and may provide, therefore, the strongest point of

departure for community action. The assessment suggests clear opportunities for new steps that would build on and secure the gains of the recent past.

The Public Realm: Improving Safety and Connections

Key open spaces need to have designated and understood uses in order to promote public safety. Conditions of public space do have an impact on promoting or discouraging illegal behavior.

Officer Steve Parsons, Observations, 4.3.5

The assessment's analysis of Green Infrastructure provides clear information and direction for steps that would improve safety and further secure the public realm. Some of these are closely related to Western Avenue improvement and could be carried out under a Western Avenue-focused initiative:

- Address each of the points where dangerous conditions are identified in the analysis—at the western end of the sculpture park, at the corners of the playing field, at the Western Avenue crossing, and on the walking paths in Central Village.
- Aim for public pathways as visible and attractive and safe as those in the heart of Central Village Park or the best of Fuller and Aurora traditional streets throughout the neighborhood.
- Make the Western Avenue corridor from University Avenue to Selby Avenue a beautiful and inviting route for pedestrians, cyclists and cars with good safety for crossings. (“Blooming Saint Paul” could have a wonderful neighborhood application here.)
- Continue to apply *Design for Public Safety* standards in all physical improvements, including any approvals of private development.
- Improve definition of parking/no parking areas.
- Review the current status of the Weed and Seed program and explore with its representatives and representatives of the Saint Paul Police Department further steps needed to reduce crime in the neighborhood.
- Prepare a strategic plan that sets priorities and identifies the resources as a basis for securing partnership commitments and getting action underway. (Such a strategic plan could include the Western Avenue improvement outlined below initiative as well.)

Likely partners for improvement of safety and connections include:

- The Saint Paul Department of Public Works
- The Saint Paul Police Department
- The Summit University Planning Council
- The Weed and Seed Program
- The owners of Hanover Townhomes and other private properties adjacent to problem areas including homeowners in Central Village
- The Union Gospel Mission
- The Asian Market on Western Avenue

The Public Realm: Western Avenue

The design and condition of Western Avenue...can facilitate or thwart connection, it can promote or jeopardize public safety, it can manifest or contradict a positive community identity.

Vision for Western Avenue: Connecting Selby to University, 5.2.7

Moving forward on the vision for Western Avenue outlined here could help reduce the isolation of the neighborhood, strengthen connections between the western and eastern halves, and help secure all sections of the neighborhood. It would strengthen connections to Central Village and Western Sculpture Park, to Rondo Education Center, to neighborhood churches, to the community center and playfield, and to many more destinations. The neighborhood would be safer. The Western Avenue work would include:

- Improvements to the street and sidewalks
- Landscape enhancements
- Way-finding improvements and signage
- Safety provisions at pedestrian crossings
- Careful integration of the Asian Market and any new use for the adjacent vacant land now for sale
- Planning for ongoing use, maintenance and continuing improvement

Likely partners for a Western Avenue Project would include:

- The Saint Paul Department of Public Works
- The Saint Paul Department of Parks and Recreation
- The Selby Area Community Development Council
- The Summit University Planning Council
- The owners of land adjacent to Western Avenue including the Union Gospel Mission, the Asian Market and commercial interests on University Avenue
- Public Art Saint Paul
- Foundations, especially those already investing in other neighborhood facilities

The Public Realm: Western Sculpture Park

In a project that began with neighborhood initiative, unused public park space that invited unwanted behavior was transformed into a major sculpture park. The assessment makes clear that the impact of this unusual amenity has been strongly positive in many respects.

More than anything, I find that people are awed by it...I remember there were always police cars there and that kind of thing, I think it's really changed the atmosphere of the area.

Juli Nelson, Observations, 4.3.5

This assessment suggests that Western Sculpture Park's potential will be better realized as

- It is more fully used as a focus for arts activities and other programming that benefits people of every age throughout the neighborhood;
- It is enhanced with some amenities like seating and gardening opportunity;
- It's north and south edges are improved with more openness for the adjacent apartments;
- It is further integrated into a safe system of walkways through the neighborhood and becomes a natural extension of the pathway system already in place in Central Village;
- It becomes a recognized cultural destination for the broader Saint Paul community; and
- It has an operating endowment to secure continuing management and programming.

Partners for the community in the sculpture park include:

- Public Art Saint Paul
- Foundations
- Participants/supporters of the Downtown Cultural Corridor
- Franconia Sculpture Park

Reaching a little farther afield, one wonders if a partnership effort here, both for exhibition and programming, might include the College of Visual Arts, the art department of one (or more) of the city's universities, or a local corporation that maintains a significant art collection.

Cleanliness, Generally

If you drive around the community and ...you don't see broken down cars, flat tires, people hanging out in parking lots loitering, you think—'ah--this is a nice place.'

Walter Battle, observations, 4.3.6

Assessment participants have pointed out that simply cleaning up on a regular basis would help a great deal. Can the neighborhood strengthen its participation in the district's annual cleanup day? Are more frequent neighborhood-organized cleanup efforts a possibility?

Likely partners for clean-up efforts include:

- The Summit-University Planning Council
- Managers of rental property
- Owners of commercial property on Western Avenue and University Avenue
- Sears/Kmart
- The Fuller-Aurora Neighborhood Association
- All area residents

Neighborhood Edges

Adjacent commercial development impacts the neighborhood on its western, northern and eastern boundaries. Recent improvements in the University Avenue commercial area have strengthened this edge while they have raised the common issues of parking and protection for residential area. The Sears block to the east is the most likely candidate for significant redevelopment in the near future. The neighborhood and its partners will need to:

- Take an active interest in any development proposals for the Sears block (or any portion of it) and, ensure there's good attention given to visual and pedestrian connection to the sculpture park.
- Monitor changes in commercial development on University Avenue with particular attention to parking that may affect the neighborhood and protection for the residential quality of property to the south of commercial blocks or half-blocks.
- Monitor any proposals for redevelopment or further development of the commercial node at Dale Street (Unidale Mall).

Likely partners for the neighborhood in addressing these concerns include:

- The Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board
- Sears/Kmart
- University United
- The City of Saint Paul Department of Planning and Economic Development
- The City of Saint Paul Public Works Department
- University Avenue commercial owners.

Activities for young people

There's not a lot of mystery to it. We need things for a kid to do.

Louis Henry, 4.3 p. 4

The large number of young people in this neighborhood is well documented. Many are in single-parent households, and/or households with very low incomes and, therefore, particularly dependent on the immediate neighborhood for recreational and cultural opportunity. Participants in this assessment see constructive activity for children and youth as one of the most important contributions that can be made to the well-being of this community. There are things to do:

- Support The Union Gospel Mission restoration of the Ober Community Center and playfield and development of new programs.
- Explore the possibility of some recreational programming for the area by the Saint Paul Department of Parks and Recreation.
- Identify adults in the neighborhood willing to initiate new play, sports or art activities for young people
- Explore means for establishing participation for area young people in recreational/sports programming outside the neighborhood, particularly in the Summit-University area.

Likely partners include:

- The Union Gospel Mission
- The Summit University Planning Council
- Area churches
- The Saint Paul Department of Parks and Recreation

Cultural Programming

We have a richness in the community –a foundation of arts for social movement and change. The park is positive for the community. Some pieces [in Western Sculpture Park] are from artists in the community.

Toni Carter, Neighborhood Capacities, 6.1.2

Because of the unusual amenity of Western Sculpture Park, and because of interests and skills identified in the population, programming for arts-related activities is an identified opportunity.

- Complete the survey to locate residents with arts-related interests and skills suggested in the assessment.
- Create a neighborhood coalition of these interests to support local programming.
- Explore arts programming for the sculpture park with the Saint Paul Public Schools and with private schools, particularly with nearby schools that serve neighborhood children.
- Explore possible programming with the new library to be built at University and Dale.
- Support the Ober Community Center and ArtsUs in programming activities.
- Increase support for Public Art Saint Paul's management of the sculpture park exhibition program and develop community arts activities related to the exhibition.

Partners:

- Public Art Saint Paul
- ArtsUs
- The Ober Community Center (Union Gospel Mission, Bethel University, Crown College and the International Academy)
- The Saint Paul Public Schools
- The Saint Paul Public Library
- The Martin Luther King Center
- Farm in the City

Housing

The actions for improvement of the neighborhood in all other categories will strengthen housing by improving confidence in the area generally. Suggestions directly related to housing include:

- Make home improvement resources—low-cost loans and education—available to area owners.
- Apply more stringent or concentrated code enforcement where it is indicated.
- Add housing in a way that increases overall attractiveness as suggested at the eastern end of the Fuller Apartments complex.
- Link appropriate candidates in the neighborhood with training and assistance to enable home ownership.

Likely partners for housing actions include:

- The Selby Avenue Community Development Corporation
- City of Saint Paul Property Code inspections
- Area property owners, particularly the owners of apartment complexes
- The Saint Paul Public Housing Agency
- The Summit University Planning Council
- Habitat for Humanity

Responding to Social and Economic Need

Questions of economic opportunity and social service needs are raised in the assessment. Precise information about the nature and scope of needs within the neighborhood, or the adequacy with which they are met, could not be obtained within the scope of the work. The agencies and resources that residents rely on to meet these needs are mostly—not entirely—outside of the neighborhood. There is opportunity for further work:

- Undertake an additional assessment targeted specifically at identifying un- (or inadequately) addressed social needs, including child care, parenting skills, job readiness training, employment support and English as a second language.
- Engage appropriate agencies and individuals and organizations within the neighborhood to identify ways to better connect neighborhood need with resources in the community, or to provide services within the neighborhood.
- Target a specific need, such as childcare, that is known in the community; identify resources within or near the neighborhood and the possibilities for more effective delivery.
- Monitor any development proposals for the Sears block and University and Western Avenues for job opportunities they might bring (or that might be retained) for neighborhood residents.

Possible Partners:

- The Wilder Foundation
- The Saint Paul workforce Center
- The Summit-University Planning Council
- The Saint Paul Public Schools
- Neighborhood churches

- The Union Gospel Mission

The Western Park Neighborhood: An Overview

History

The Western Park Neighborhood was part of the Rondo neighborhood, an integrated and tightly knit neighborhood from the 1920s through the late 1940s. Low incomes and declining property conditions characterized this portion of the Rondo neighborhood by the late 1940s. Urban renewal and the location decision for Interstate 94 destroyed the heart of the Rondo neighborhood, removed any historic fabric from most of the Western Park Neighborhood, and isolated it from neighborhood to the south. It also made way for the housing opportunities that serve the area's population today. The neighborhood's history extending back to an encampment site for fur traders, outlined in this report, is significant for the neighborhood's image and self-understanding today.

People

The 3,000+ residents of the area live in some 180 households. Some of them have deep roots and long commitment here, but many will stay for only a while. At census time, ninety percent of the residents of the eastern portion had lived at their current residence less than five years. Central village is characterized by its center of owner-occupied single-family homes. Data from 2002 shows 94 homeowners in this western portion and 57 in the eastern portion. Renting households predominate in both,

representing 87 percent of the households.

Household incomes vary widely. Twenty five percent of the households in the eastern portion and 12 percent in the western portion had incomes above \$50,000 as of the 2000 census. Low-income households predominate overall, and the level of poverty is high. Two public housing high rises account for most of the area's high senior population and in part, as well, for a significant number of residents with disabilities.

Median household income in the eastern portion was \$14,423 as of the 2000 census, compared with a city median of \$38,774. Median income for the census tract that includes the western portion was \$24,375, a figure that may be a little lower than the actual value for the neighborhood section because the tract includes the Liberty Plaza block south of I-94. The census identified 302 children in the eastern portion in households with incomes below the poverty level—a decline in this value of 24 percent since the 1990 census. There were 211 children in below-poverty households in the tract that include the western portion, a decline here of 14 percent over the decade.

Racial and ethnic diversity is a feature obvious in the neighborhood, apparent in the statistics, and often raised as a strength in assessment comments. The population of the eastern portion

was predominantly black in 1990, the population of the western portion characterized by nearly equal black and white components with a substantial Asian group. As of the 2000 census, the black population of the western portion was even higher (883), but a substantial increase in total population included a large Asian group (479). By 2000, black, white and Asian residents represented roughly equal shares of the population of the eastern portion (489, 463, and 451 persons respectively).

Children and youth under 17 make up over one third of the population of the neighborhood.

Central Village

An outgrowth of 1960s and 70s urban renewal, Central Village is a suburban-style enclave with an integration of public park space and single-family residences unusual for an inner-city neighborhood. Many beautiful private gardens complement the large open green spaces. The active volleyball and playground and walking areas testify to the significance of this intimate public-private integration. It is a green oasis between one of the city's major commercial streets and interstate 94. Points of stress that could be threats to the future quality of the area include some out of-sight walkways that can invite unwanted behavior, some individual properties that are not adequately maintained, the character of Western Avenue at the eastern edge, and the impact of changes in commercial uses on University Avenue—as well as the overall health of the larger neighborhood.

The households in the extensive and varied, mostly rental, housing in the blocks south of Central Village benefit from the park. Housing here is, for the most part, well maintained

Western Sculpture Park

Western Sculpture Park is an innovative partnership response to a neighborhood's concern for its unused public space. Art on a grand, easily accessible scale including sculptures from outstanding nationally and internationally recognized artists are here in a well-designed setting providing the front yard, back yard, neighborhood resting place, playing area and inviting pathways for residents. The park is a story of vision, risk, determination and success. Increase in property values, and new confidence among residents and property owners, evident throughout this report, have to be credited in part to this surprising development.

An increase of 89 percent in the value of owner-occupied homes in the eastern portion of the neighborhood between the 1990 and 2000 census counts is striking. There was a tightening of the market generally for city neighborhoods over this period, but a check of eight inner city census tracts shows only three with increases over 50 percent and none other as high as 89 percent. There are un-analyzed factors that make it impossible to draw a clear conclusion about the influence of the park, but it is hard to doubt that the transformation of an isolated, unused open space associated with criminal behavior and the striking increase in house value are to some degree related. This is

strongly supported by the testimony of assessment participants recorded here, including residents and rental property owners.

Western Sculpture Park is not visible to most of the city's population on their normal routes, and not well known. In fact, it is not clear that residents of the western portion of the study area are much aware of the sculpture park or take advantage of it. Opportunities to raise awareness and use within the neighborhood and to raise its profile in the broader cultural community are important. Adoption of the park by the Celebration of Hmong Art and Culture as the site for their annual event, and other experience with arts programming in the park, point to further opportunities that surely exist for sharing this resource and bringing new attention to the Western Park Neighborhood in the process. New decisions and new initiatives are needed to ensure the continuing viability of the park and support its potential broader contributions to the neighborhood and the city.

Green and Safe Connections

Central Village and Western Sculpture Park are but two major nodes in a green network that extends throughout the neighborhood and includes other park space, a playfield, street trees and private landscaping.

The assessment's careful analysis of this network of connections, with an eye particularly toward safety, reveals a number of spots where access is not inviting and where safety is compromised. These affect particularly the eastern end of Central Village and

the western edge of the eastern portion. They combine with the dangerous and unsightly aspects of Western Avenue to discourage interchange between the two halves of the neighborhood and safe access to the playfield and community center near Western.

Western Avenue

Western Avenue is an important traffic route through the neighborhood. It is a connection to an improving business area on University Avenue and one of the neighborhood's most important connecting links to the Summit-University community south of Interstate 94 including the service-and-retail-rich Selby Avenue and the Rondo Education Center. But Western Avenue does not provide the attractive entrance to the neighborhood it could. It does not provide a safe and inviting connection between the eastern and western portions of the neighborhood, or with the neighborhood to the south. It is a weak link near some outstanding Western Park Neighborhood demonstrations of the value of a safe and high-quality public realm. The results of a western Avenue Visioning Charette held in 2003 are a part of this assessment. This vision for Western Avenue as "A safe, green and amenable pathway" suggests the public improvements, landscape enhancements, and way finding and signage actions that would bring this transformation about.

Safety

Safety was a concern for the assessment, and it is addressed in the careful review of the public realm

where the spaces that provide shelter for unwanted activity—and prevent confidence in safe movement through the area—are identified. Weed and Seed crime reduction program activities targeted here are identified. Prostitution and drug dealing on the streets do not characterize the area to the degree that they have in the past according to many comments, though they are clearly still associated with less exposed areas of the neighborhood and the cars parked in them.

Social Services

One objective suggested for the assessment was an identification of the gap between social services provided and social services needed. Available data shows in detail a population that is known, from its characteristics, to be dependent on a range of social services. Factors that correlate strongly with children at risk of being in the Child Protection System are documented. This includes children of single parents, children with teen parents, and children living in poverty—all characteristics particularly associated with the blocks of rental housing in both portions of the neighborhood. Information that would clarify how adequately the needs of these households are addressed and where the gaps are is not readily available and could not be derived within the scope of the assessment.

Ramsey County, the chief provider of a variety of supports, is able to do little or no community outreach, but responds to needs on a crisis basis. Population characteristics and neighborhood experience leave little

room for doubt that service needs, including adequate childcare, assistance for job readiness and education resources are not fully and adequately met. The relative isolation of the neighborhood, it is suggested, probably means that some connections to resources that could be helpful do not get made.

Social and Cultural Programming

Play, sports, cultural, and educational opportunities for young people in a safe environment are particularly important in the Western Park Neighborhood because there are so many young people in single-parent and other households with limited means for recreation and entertainment opportunities beyond the neighborhood. The City of Saint Paul programs recreational and athletic activity throughout the city, and the question is raised in the assessment of more city programming for the young people of this neighborhood. This is one area where isolation of this neighborhood from the resources of the Frogtown neighborhood to the north across University Avenue and from its own historic community of the Summit University neighborhood to the south may be particularly evident.

The Ober Community Center is well located to serve this neighborhood. The King Family Foundation Child Development Center, staffed by Bethel College, is here, and the Union Gospel Mission, owner of the center, is instituting new programs that include “Pride” (helping adult women succeed. staffed by Crown College), leadership training, and sports and arts programs

for young people. The Minnesota International Academy is restoring the playing field and the Mission plans on restoration of the community center facility, much of which has been unused for many years. They are happy to participate with the neighborhood and other partners in further planning.

Participants in the assessment indicate that a number of artists: “actors, performance artists, musicians; stage designers and technical specialists; authors and playwrights, craftspeople, sculptors and painters, design professional and gardeners” live in the Western Park Neighborhood. Participants suggest that more can be done to involve neighborhood residents in creative activities and to highlight the artistic talents and accomplishments of residents. Examples cited include gardening, singing, story telling and sculpture display. A survey to identify arts interests and skills in the neighborhood is proposed in the assessment but has yet to be carried out. Are the Saint Paul Public Schools making use of the sculpture park to the extent that they could for arts education?

Housing

Central Village Park and its surrounding housing characterize the western portion. At Fuller and Aurora, toward the eastern edge, there are blocks of typical Saint Paul houses built shortly after the turn of the century—an older Saint Paul neighborhood flavor absent from the western portion. Common to both is a substantial supply of housing in

duplexes, townhouses, and large apartment complexes, many built with some subsidy for households of modest income, and, in some cases, owned and managed by the Public Housing Agency.

Large complexes of rental apartments and townhomes surround Western Sculpture Park and extend across the southern blocks of the western portion. These include two large public housing buildings with a high senior population, one in each half of the neighborhood, and public housing duplexes. In addition, there are some newer single family homes among the older ones on Fuller and Aurora, and the newest single family homes recently completed through Habitat for Humanity on Farrington at the southern edge.

There is evidence of substantial reinvestment in many of the single-family homes over the last decade. The Public Housing Agency has overseen major renovation for the public housing complexes in the last two decades. The owner of Fuller Apartments north of the sculpture park was making improvements as the assessment was underway, and has since transferred the property to a group intent on converting the project to condominiums and its (low income) tenants to owners.

Management and maintenance must be the outstanding concerns for the neighborhood’s housing supply—not because they are bad today, but because their relative adequacy is clearly so critical for the community. Saint Paul and this neighborhood are fortunate to have some of the best-

managed public housing in the United States. (Decreases in federal support for public housing that could undercut this resource should be a concern to the neighborhood.) Management of the privately owned rental housing complexes also appears to be superior to much of what has been experienced in past decades in this neighborhood and the city. Rental housing owners should be engaged with the neighborhood and partners in solving problems and planning for the future.

Adjacent Area Plans

The Western Park Neighborhood we know today resulted from the construction of I-94 and plans for the “Western Redevelopment Area.” There’s been no planning for the neighborhood since urban renewal days. Several plans and studies for adjacent areas, completed with little or no awareness on the part of neighborhood residents, however, have implications for the neighborhood. The issues that these plans raise are well summarized in the assessment.

The University Avenue Corridor Study (University United) establishes key guidelines for development on University Avenue. Its proposals alert the Western Park Neighborhood to issues of residential-commercial transition, the possibilities of more intense adjacent commercial nodes, and linkages that could be enhanced with the neighborhood’s interest in mind.

Other studies propose infill housing that might have relevance for the neighborhood, raise the possibility of

major new public transit on University Avenue, and the question of pedestrian and bicycle linkages that might be further studied with respect to the sculpture park and the existing walkway system.

The most significant change anticipated in other plans is probably the redevelopment of the Sears block immediately east of the neighborhood and facing the entrance to Western Sculpture Park. The Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board (CAAPB) has jurisdiction here, and their 1990 plan foresees more intense office-commercial development. An inviting pedestrian connection between the public realm of the capitol area and Western Sculpture Park is supported by the CAAPB, though not reflected in a plan drawing for the site. Though there’s no immediate proposal, intensification of redevelopment around the downtown and capitol areas suggests that change for this block may not be too far away. Western Park Neighborhood will need to pay attention to its priorities for this eastern edge, as well as preservation and enhancement of the job opportunities that the Sears store represents.

Neighborhood Leadership

Residents of the former Rondo neighborhood carried the vision and determination that resulted in the unique neighborhood of Central Village on land cleared through urban renewal. Local residents, through the Fuller-Aurora Association, articulated an early vision, found the partners and took the steps that led to the creation of Western Sculpture Park. Local initiative has driven significant

accomplishment here and is clearly the key for action that will secure the neighborhood's future.

Major "local" civic agency for neighborhood change in Saint Paul lies with district councils and community development corporations. District Councils are important channels for communication, organization, and program resources. The Western Park Neighborhood is within the jurisdiction of the Summit-University Planning Council, but, separated as it is by I-94, the neighborhood has not had an active presence in the Council's work. Improvement of this connection is one clear objective emerging from the assessment work, and one the assessment work itself has helped to fulfill.

Similarly, the Selby Area Community Development Agency has not been active in this somewhat isolated portion of its jurisdiction. This agency, which has the tools and experience for neighborhood-centered development, is willing to help.

These larger-neighborhood players need to be part of the conversation about next steps. Non-profit, institutional and government as well as commercial partners are mentioned throughout this report, and churches, the community center, and other institutions in and near the neighborhood are identified. They represent a wealth of resources and interest and have demonstrated their willingness to come to the table.