



A NORTH MINNEAPOLIS
DIALOGUE ON THE RIVER
WITH THE MCKNIGHT
FOUNDATION: A SYNOPSIS

The Public Policy Project: James Trice and Sam Grant
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Introduction

The McKnight Foundation contracted with The Public Policy Project and the Minneapolis Riverfront Corporation to host a dialogue on the Mississippi River with a diversity of stakeholders from North Minneapolis. The event, on August 4, 2017, engaged people in table talk, over excellent, nutritious food provided by a North Minneapolis Catering Company – Breaking Bread Café Catering Services.

Twenty-five community residents and professionals participated in a two-part dialogue on the river: the first part was composed of table talks, answering three questions about the environment, the community and priorities to address the intersection of these; the second part was a open dialogue to learn-together from the perspectives raised in small groups.

When asked what we mean by ‘environment’ respondents highlight the significance of the ‘social environment’ – the broader context of how we live and what shapes livelihood realities in North Minneapolis. The issue of structural violence and structural racism figured prominently in the discussions. The lack of access to affordable housing, living wages, transit-system injustice, quality education across the lifespan, lack of lighting, persistent economic hardship for a majority of residents are all considered primary environmental issues.

Environmental issues, from the perspective of a historically disadvantaged and culturally disrespected community are framed very differently than such issues in the so-called “mainstream”. Given the demographic transition in the region, we should perhaps call this the ‘fading environmental mainstream’. Stakeholders envision a new sense of the environment which is much more holistic – and recognizes the lack of affordable housing that is safe as an environmental issue just as much as sea level rise or the most endangered species. Further, the perspective of voice is significant among stakeholders. Direct involvement of those impacted by environmental injustice is mandatory for any form an effective response.

People in North Minneapolis are doing amazing environmental work – including mattress recycling, growing salads to sell at Twins games, growing abundant healthy food within the boundaries of North Minneapolis and expanding the capacity and connection among many initiatives involved in local food systems work. People are building model zero carbon homes, teaching youth urban design, teaching youth to grow food and build hoop houses, development social enterprises to employ the long-term under-employed, fostering strategies that build community wealth and much more.

At the same time, people named some of the critical challenges that limit community health and wealth – such as the overabundance of vacant lots and the lack of power of residents (currently) to play a governing role in terms of how those vacant lots are developed. Respondents advocated for more investment in urban agriculture and shared ownership opportunities of vacant land that may contribute to the development of a local food system here. People suggest promoting the Farmers Market and integrating community clean-up efforts with our strategies to deal with vacant lots and urban agriculture.

Among the key environmental psychology issues, people discussed the incessant advertising of menthol cigarettes, the persistent and nagging hopelessness – and the many ways that structural racism fosters patterns of marginalization and unnecessary hardship. People envision a future in which ‘junk targeting’ – such as the worst forms of cigarettes and alcohol, pawn and rent-to-own shops are no longer as prominent, and in which the community has engaged partners to design and deliver on its own chosen path.

The prevailing ‘non-profit industrial complex’ is recognized as an impediment to the well-being of the community. This perspective calls to mind John McKnight’s important finding in his 1993 book – *The Careless Society* – in which he finds an inverse relationship between community ‘helping institutions’ and community development. Stakeholders came to this same conclusion on their own, and suggest that ‘the people’ directly must decide and deliver on the future they want.

They do not see a way that development can, if ‘institutionalized’ support effective community development.

Further, respondents recognize the high importance of direct youth engagement in shaping the future of the community. Right now, it is normal to see adults and kids comfortably throwing trash on the street. We act like throwaway people because we have been treated as such for far too long.

We must take responsibility to clean up our community and make a commitment to beauty and health as a whole community. Further, we must respect and engage the environmental justice leaders within our community, such as Roxanne O’Brien who did the early work to help us recognize the profound intersectionality of environmental justice with economic justice and community health and power.

The community asked many important questions in our one to one conversations about why this and why now (The Public Policy Project and the McKnight Foundation asking us to connect environment to the day-to-day issues focused on). The dialogue provided an opportunity to develop coherence around this question. While it has taken us longer than desired to get here, we are now recognizing the need for a holistic, whole systems approach to community change that focused integrally on community and environmental health, environmental justice, economic justice, deeply democratic community engagement, and the development of infrastructures and mechanisms owned and controlled by the community that foster sustainable returns to community health and wealth from our endeavors.

The dialogue planted seeds in the ground, with each other and with the McKnight Foundation. We intend to nourish these seeds to grow and serve our common dreams for environmental and community health and wealth in North Minneapolis.

Analysis

Table 1 Environmental Patterns and Proposals

Environmental Pattern	Proposed considerations to address the pattern
Safe and Affordable Housing	We have “affordable housing” in limited supply, and of inadequate quality. We need much more affordable housing across the lifespan, that is affordable, environmentally sound, and aesthetically wonderful.
Black Enterprises	Develop strategies to develop, strengthen and expand Black Enterprises in the community.
Transit Issues	Transportation systems are designed around us not with us. We need a strong transit equity campaign that ensures we can get to and from where we need to go. Too many new jobs being created are far away, and difficult to get to by public transit. Transit-oriented development tends to be done in a class-oriented way that fails to deal with issues of racism and cultural diversity.
Crime Hot Zones	We have less safety, in general, and a relationship with the criminal justice system that reinforces negative patterns in the community. We have a higher police presence, targeting for arrests and incarceration
Feelings of Hopelessness	Too many feel like there is no real options for their futures, largely due to persistent economic hardship. When people who feel this live in close proximity, and face daily realities of exclusion and marginalization – feelings of hopelessness can spread. This makes it more difficult for a community to come together for positive change.
Education	North Minneapolis for too long has been served less well by our metropolitan educational opportunity structures. Stakeholders call for a relevant curriculum, culturally and ecologically grounded, that engages learners across the life span in an approach to education that inspires, builds critical twenty-first century competencies, and fosters a learning-by-doing partnership with our community so that as students learn, the community further develops health and wealth.
Low economic opportunity	We need to generate a base of living wage jobs in the community and in the region for residents, and remove all barriers to equitable employment opportunity.
Lack of Healthy Food	North Minneapolis is in transition from an externally-defined “food desert” to an internally organized “food oasis”. Many positive developments in local food systems have emerged over the past 6 years that provide a powerful base from which to further extend an environmentally sound approach to community development.
Lack of Community Ownership	There is much interest in building community economic power and shared ownership mechanisms. A new credit union, based in North Minneapolis will come on-line in 2019. A training program, focused on Black Cooperative Development was established in 2016, with its first successful cohort now completed. Building an infrastructure for community investment and ownership are commonly recognized as anchor objectives for a strategy.
Vacant Lots	There are over 1700 vacant lots in the community, which if incorporated in a comprehensive community economic and environmental plan could be turned from blight to transformative resource.
Gentrification	The big “G” (elephant) in the room – stakeholders want to see an approach to community development that is not exclusive and inequitable. Gentrification reinforces environmental injustice, and the objectives sought combine environmental justice and health.
No relationship between river and community	Right now, current developments on the River, Washington Ave. and the expressway form a three-layer barrier between North Minneapolis and the Mississippi. Residents envision a future with multiple forms of connection to the river, fostering environmental health, ecological knowledge, community economic opportunity, and increased amenities and aesthetics promoting a high quality of life and enjoyment for all.

Vision

Community residents and professionals envision a new environmental pattern in North Minneapolis, one in which everyone has access to all supports and infrastructure for a high quality of life in a healthy environment.

Pathway

Elements of a proposed pathway to get to this preferred future include the following steps identified below. These steps are not yet organized as a formal proposal. Many stakeholders will convene for one to two meetings between now and the end of September 2017 to more fully flesh out priorities and how to best take action on these priorities with the support of the McKnight foundation, among others.

What some participants described as a “pathway of hope” incorporates a comprehensive community environmental, social, cultural and economic development strategy that strongly connects future developments along the Mississippi River to the overall development of North Minneapolis. How can riverfront development serve as a catalyst for an innovative, culturally-grounded, equitable model of development-without-displacement that is coordinated in a way that benefits all existing residents, including the many at or below fifty percent of the poverty line?

The contributions of community stakeholders are essential to appropriate design and delivery and thus, their time ought to be equitably compensated. Direct investments in community people to design and deliver their own determined solutions is critical. The voice of people most affected is often used to benefit systems of intended care (which often turn out to be systems of harm). We demand to see and partner to deliver on the development of agency among the marginalized, so that we co-create the community conditions we want to for ourselves.

Short-term steps to this future include the following:

- Promoting self-reliance;
- Removing focus on trauma and need to assets and capacities;
- Develop a new narrative within the community that influences the macro-narrative of the region as a whole, in a positive direction (according to us);
- Come together for cooperative change;
- Value and engage all forms of community-based knowledge and coordinate community knowledge production for self-determined community change;
- Determine how to partner with the McKnight Foundation and others to make this all happen.

Over the coming weeks, stakeholders who participated in the Dialogue on the River, will be re-convened to build a common action framework, with specific proposals on what we intend to do in the community and what support we invite from the McKnight Foundation as partners in design and development of a long-term strategy that WILL deliver on the intended outcomes of community and environmental health.

As the community prepares a proposal, stakeholders also request that the McKnight Foundation answer the following questions:

- a) How much is McKnight looking/willing to invest as we embark on this work, and over what period of time?
- b) What investments is McKnight planning over the next 1, 5, and 10 years?
- c) What other foundations are in the Northside Funders Group and how many of them are likely to join with McKnight Foundation's investment here?
- d) What is the main goal or hope that the McKnight Foundation is trying to attain in North Minneapolis?

Finally, the stakeholders strongly express the need for a commitment and a process that holds people working on these efforts in North Minneapolis to be directly accountable to deliver on intended results and learn with us on the way to achieving our vision.

In support of the community

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The Public Policy Project