

The road to a revitalized North Minneapolis must be paved by those who live here

By David Pierini, Staff Reporter

Take a look at North Minneapolis in this moment.

Then, look at it 10 years into the future through the lens of investment and development now underway on a scale once dedicated to other parts of the city.

The amenities to follow paint an exciting picture: jobs, more housing, a new music venue, light rail train, a sports training center that includes an Olympic-size swimming pool, a four-story glass building for an expanding Juxtaposition Arts, restaurants for dining in the evening and a growing Black and diverse middle class. The investment is long overdue and North Minneapolis longs for a quality of life enjoyed by other communities. The question on many minds starts with what becomes of North Minneapolis when the dust of construction settles.

Skeptical residents worry gentrification will follow and make the Northside unrecognizable. The fear is outside developers will buy up and demolish cheap homes to make way for tony, high-rise apartments for upwardly mobile whites. Lower income residents, unable to afford soaring rent and property taxes, will flee their homes in search of cheaper housing.

"These changes are for people who aren't here yet," said Lynn Crocket, a longtime Northsider and a reliable seat on various local committees. "I'm skeptical because they (politicians and developers) always paint a pretty picture, then when you hang the picture it comes back insufficient funds. Don't drink the Kool-Aid."

But there are others who see the possibility of creating a real Wakanda where progress is not predatory, but thoughtfully designed to truly benefit Northsiders.

Optimistic community leaders believe that with genuine community input, a thriving North Minne-

apolis will rise thanks to its own creative genius, visionary entrepreneurs and civic-minded activists. Northsiders will see themselves each time they pass some new amenity because they shared in its design.

North Minneapolis will build its own wealth for generations to come.

"We're going to get some of the things we deserve," said Markella Smith, one of the residents active in shaping how the former Upper Harbor Terminal impacts the Northside. "It almost feels like we've been forgotten. There's the lack of healthy food, a lack of shops ... (right now) you have to leave (North Minneapolis) to have any kind of experience. The energy around us is changing."

Fear and optimism

North Minneapolis and many Black city dwellers hold a deep distrust in development after watching "progress" decimate its vibrant communities. North shares a highway with the Rondo neighborhood in



A bird's-eye view shows the future V3 Sports Center, which will house an Olympic-size swimming pool.

St. Paul, a once bustling Black community torn apart to make way for I-94.

North Minneapolis has also seen parts of its community fragmented by road projects, including I-94 and the Olson Memorial Highway. The flow of investment dollars dried up and were redirected to the suburbs growing rapidly from white flight. Black and Brown business owners, the key to creating a local economy, are in constant stall, unable to get loans from banks because of unjust lending practices. Left to struggle with poverty, crime, few jobs and a lack of resources to improve quality of life, gentrification can strike again when outside developers buy up cheap land for projects that price peo-

ple out of their homes.

Projects big and small will soon transform whole blocks and replace vacant buildings, run-down homes and boarded-up storefronts.

One of the biggest is the controversial Upper Harbor Terminal, a 48-acre site along the Mississippi River that is being redeveloped with a park, housing and a performing arts venue ... the latter of which has caused the most angst for many residents. Project planners and residents who support the project say the city is genuinely listening to the concerns of Northsiders. But Sebastian Rivera, an artist who has advocated against the project, is skeptical of developers' intentions when they sit at the table with residents.

"It is so disingenuous when they say we want to involve you in it, when they already have a set of developers with numbers in mind, margins set and dates already in place," Rivera said.

Another transformative project is an extension of the light rail's Blue Line, which would link nearby suburbs and North to the downtown. After a failed effort to locate the light rail extension down the median of the Olson Memorial Highway, transportation officials are now deliberating over two other routes in North Minneapolis, West Broadway Avenue and Lowry Avenue.



A rendering showing a light rail train traveling Lowry Avenue North.



Juxtaposition Arts will break ground in September on a new headquarters at West Broadway and Emerson avenues.

Train lines in other Twin Cities communities have spurred housing and commercial developments, and properties in North Minneapolis have been hot investments ever since a Blue Line extension was proposed. Not one shovel of dirt has been turned on the Blue Line extension, yet its mere proposal was enough to spark concerns of gentrification.

Local residents were given opportunities through community meetings to propose ideas for train stop areas and urge officials to protect neighborhoods where many people were spending more than 50 percent of their income on rent. But while that was happening, speculators bought homes and apartment complexes. Property taxes went up 60 percent and in some cases, homes were demolished for high-rise apartments. Renters in some buildings on Glenwood Avenue saw rent increases as high as \$300 per month.

Countless residents left the neighborhood in search of rent they could afford. Last fall, transportation officials scrapped the Olson Highway route to look elsewhere in North Minneapolis.

"We've already experienced the detriment of the project and now we're not going to receive the benefits," said Harrison Neighborhood Association Director Nicole Buehler for an article on the Blue Line ex-

tension that was published in May. "How are you going to make us whole? Now do we make sure what happened in Harrison doesn't happen elsewhere in North Minneapolis?"

Efforts are underway to write a happy ending to this development story.

Smith said community input has reshaped Upper Harbor Terminal plans to include more affordable housing, jobs for local residents and \$3 for every music venue ticket sold to help Northsiders with wealth creation or if they get displaced.

Community leaders and Northside politicians are trying to bring forward anti-displacement measures that minimize gentrification. Local groups are also trying to beat speculators to the punch, buying buildings and vacant land.

There is economic activity where Northsiders or Northside institutions call all the shots and focus on serving its neighbors and preserving local cultural identity.

Next month, Juxtaposition (JXTA) Arts breaks ground at West Broadway and Emerson avenues on a glass, four-story headquarters with an overhang similar to the downtown's Guthrie Theatre. The non-profit arts organization has been a Northside pillar for 25 years training and employing young artists in everything from graphic design and screen printing to organizing and community engage-

ment.

JXTA artists have a variety of places in North Minneapolis. A Mississippi River viewing platform recently opened with design and work from Juxta. It also painted a mural at Cub Foods, which had been shutdown for several months after it was damaged in last summer's civil unrest that followed the police murder of George Floyd.

"JXTA sits alongside other organizations in the city, setting an example of the endless possibility of investing in what other folks may deem as undervalued," said Gabrielle Grier, JXTA's managing director.

Up the street, the landmark Capri Theatre recently completed a renovation that now includes a teen tech center and community room that can host up to 125 people. V3 sports, founded by Erika Binger in 2007 to teach local kids swimming and triathlon training, took over an old warehouse at 701 Plymouth Ave. in 2017. It raised the money to purchase a swimming pool that was used earlier this summer in Omaha, Neb., for the U.S. Olympic Trials. The 50-meter pool was shipped in pieces to North Minneapolis afterward and will be at the heart of a sports center that will open in a few years. In the Camden neighborhood, Houston White is expanding his HWMR barbershop to include

a cafe, the Get Down Coffee Co. North-Point Health and Wellness Center recently broke ground on an expansion that will double the size of the campus to include dental service, a food distribution center and drop-in daycare center.

A building renovation at 927 West Broadway Ave. will eventually house North Minneapolis-based TRI-Construction and a planned Black-run credit union. The renovation design was done by local architect Jamil Ford and TRI-Construction is contracted for the buildout. The Jay & Rose Phillips Family Foundation bought the building and entered a finance agreement with TRI-Construction to buy out the foundation over 10 years.

Ford also formed a group, Baldwin Group LLC, that purchased 4140-4146 Fremont Ave. N from the city for \$1. A vacant 1920s-era building on site is getting a makeover to host a black box theater, cafe and art gallery. TRI-Construction will also get the contract to renovate the space.

Calvin Littlejohn, a lifelong Northsider and CEO of TRI-Construction, says he can drive anywhere and judge a community's health by its business sector. He sees Somali and Latinx businesses on Lake Street springing to life. He sees how the Hmong community in St. Paul has used their businesses to propel forward a thriving Hmong culture.

"But when it comes to the Black experience, our businesses are missing from the economic circle," said Littlejohn. "How do we empower ourselves to afford the changes that are coming?"

"How are we going to improve our Black-owned businesses? Where we need to have conversation is around pushing banks on lending to Black-owned businesses at a reasonable rate. Once we get that focus on that, it starts to turn around, be it jobs, housing, the ability to have a middle class income," said the developer.

TRI-Construction offers "good middle-class jobs" and has a workforce that is 65 percent minority.

"That's \$60,000 to \$70,000 per year going back into those homes and trickling back into the community," said Littlejohn. "That becomes real economic change."

Littlejohn sees Black developers gain a stronger foothold, but it's still a long road because of how "difficult it is to change the narrative" around lending to minority businesses.

"If you don't uplift our businesses, there will be displacement, gentrification and disinvestment," he said.

There are a handful of non-profit organizations also working on solutions.

In 2020, a group of business leaders led by retired U.S. Bank executive Dorothy Bridges formed the African American Community Development Corp. (AACDC) to address inequality, a lack of shared prosperity and expand economic development opportunities for African American across the Twin Cities.

It seeks to advocate and influence economic development in Black communities, bringing residents together to plan commercial and residential development for their areas. It will work to attract investment in these communities to create jobs, wealth in Black households and influence business and political leaders.

"The decisions for what development looks like are made by a few people who have sway and influence in getting a deal made with the city or county," said Bridges, the AACDC founder. "This creates a barrier for African-American developers or developers of color. We want our communities to have the opportunity to shape before the shovel."

Property ownership only increases the negotiating power of a community. Earlier this year, Pillsbury United Communities (PUC) launched a program called Justice Built Communities. PUC, which owns North News, is in the process of purchasing vacant land and buildings as a way to inform redevelopment plans that are community-centered. The program would guide and help Black-owned enterprises get established and grow.

Like the Phillips Foundation finance agreement with TRI-Construction at the 927 Building, Justice Built Communities would negotiate an agreement to turn the land over to the local enterprise to build generation wealth.

So far, PUC has raised \$6 million for the program and intends to raise an additional \$14 million.

"This is an opportunity for North to set its own trajectory," Adair Mosley, PUC president and CEO said. "The pace will be driven by community and that will allow us to ensure voice, ideas and aspirations are baked into (development projects)."

North 2031

Only time will answer what becomes of North Minneapolis with all that is underway.



NorthPoint Health and Wellness recently announced plans to double its campus to include dental services, a day care and food pantry.

Bridges believes North Minneapolis will "no longer be a community of deficit" or at least headed in a more vibrant direction 10 years out.

Artist and youth worker Akim Anderson said community engagement seems like a box that planners check on a to-do list. The intent seems good on the surface, he says, but when he looks deeper, he doesn't see Northsiders involved in the planning.

"When you're not being asked for your input, you come to the question who are these projects for," Anderson said. "There are things happening on an everyday basis that are not getting addressed; the joblessness, violence, a lack of quality food and then we're talking about these projects. How are we going to get there when we can't get these other things right?"

"Is this what people want or need at this time? I'm not sure the answer is yes."

Anderson says his roots in North Minneapolis go several generations deep. His hometown is a badge of honor that he wears. When he learns of some of the local organizations working to keep North Minneapolis from gentrifying, he says he is encouraged.

"In this capitalist system, it's a start," said the longtime Northsider.



A rendering showing a light rail train traveling towards downtown on West Broadway Avenue.



A rendering of what an elevated light rail track might look like on West Broadway Avenue.

New group is a voice of 'responsible development'

If Northsiders see themselves as powerless to the forces of gentrification, a team of business and community leaders have emerged to help residents claim a place at the drawing board to decide how best to revitalize their North Minneapolis.

The formation of the African American Community Development Corp. (AACDC) arrives at a critical moment as infrastructure projects search for a home in long-neglected North Minneapolis.

"There's a need for an organization to focus on economic development and wealth building that engages the community so that we have an opportunity to shape before the shovel," said Dorothy Bridges, a longtime banking executive who founded AACDC and now chairs its board. "Whenever North Minneapolis is mentioned, it's about crime, poverty and a lack of resources. I just want the narrative to change. We should be writing our own story."

Community development corporations often get confused with economic development corporations. Each focus on development and wealth building.

Community development, however, intentionally brings local residents into the process of making a better place to live and work. It is more holistic with empowerment, social justice and self-determination baked into the urban planning process.

AACDC seeks to be a powerful intermediary and help residents dismantle barriers and gain influence in community development decisions that bring proper returns on investments in the Black and Brown communities.

It will support commercial and residential development projects that share in the mission of creating jobs for local residents with livable salaries that allow for the building of household wealth.

Among AACDC's goals is to increase affordable and middle-class housing historically Black communities by 500 percent and increase African-American household wealth by 200 percent.

"We have to help create the right en-



Dorothy Bridges



Erin Horne McKinney

vironment, create a Wakanda in North Minneapolis," said AACDC President and CEO Erin Horne McKinney, a North Minneapolis native and a former senior advisor to two mayors in Washington D.C. "How do we put all the pieces in place? Our mission is to make sure we are advocating at all levels."

Bridges, who until recently lived in

the Hawthorne neighborhood for 17 years, is a member of the US Bancorp's board of directors. She has more than 40 years of banking experience and focused largely on commercial and community development lending, including to minority, small business and other markets. *Ebony* magazine in 2018 named her part of the *Ebony* Power

100 for her work in banking and community development.

Not long after her 2018 retirement as a senior vice president from the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Bridges was on a taskforce to talk about development in North Minneapolis. Everyone at the table shared ideas and Bridges suggested a community development corporation for Minnesota's Black communities.

The idea stuck in the mind of William English, the consulting project director for the North Job Creation Team, who was at the table that day. He called Bridges to encourage her to form what is now AACDC.

The inaugural board, chaired by Bridges, includes Steven Belton, vice chair, Keith Baker, secretary and Kenya McKnight-Ahad, treasurer. English has a seat on the board that includes Tim Baylor, Shannon Lemon, the Rev. Jerry McAfee, Adair Mosely, Anisha Murphy, Ravi Norman, Shauen Pearce, Matthew Ramadan, Markella Smith and Make Zulu-Gillespie.

AACDC formed just before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down all non-essential businesses. Horne McKinney, a North High graduate, had returned to Minnesota to wait out the pandemic with family and wound up staying to be the organization's first president and CEO.

COVID-19 exacerbated and shined a light on the disparities in Black and Brown communities. Then on Memorial Day 2020, a Minneapolis police officer killed George Floyd in his custody. Floyd's murder was a signal to Horne McKinney that AACDC formed at a critical time.

"All of those things expedited our efforts, that we need to be ready to go right now to serve our community and be the voices of responsible and intentional development," she said.