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TO: Access Minneapolis Project Steering Committee
FROM: David Fields, Community Development Coordinator
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I am taking this opportunity to provide Elliot Park Neighborhood's response to the recently released administrative draft of the Downtown Action Plan portion of the Access Minneapolis study. Specifically, I am offering observations on the "Downtown Streets Strategy." I will, however, append a few comments on areas of concern and priorities for Elliot Park that, I understand, either still are to be addressed by the study or might be overlooked in the study.

The progress on the study, both in comprehensiveness and detail, is to be commended. Elliot Park is especially appreciative of the apparent influence of Fred Dock and his Meyer, Mohaddes associates on the plan. Mr. Dock was a consultant on our neighborhood's own Master Plan, completed in 2003. And his recommendations for a re-knitted "hierarchy of streets" in Elliot Park and East Downtown are reflected in the Access Minneapolis planning.

Although my comments here are restricted to Elliot Park and East Downtown, I also am very much aware of the improvements recommended for the Downtown Core streets for traffic flow and transit accommodation. Obviously, the entire Downtown network is all of a piece; and however transportation/pedestrian connections are patterned in East Downtown influences the pattern in the CBD.

Two-Way Streets

Elliot Park is especially pleased to see the recommendation for converting certain current one-way streets to two-way streets. The one-way pairs represented by Portland/Park; Tenth/Ninth/Eighth/Seventh have had a negative impact on the livability of Elliot Park neighborhood. This fact has been emphasized again and again in the planning documents EPNI has produced the past several years. The traffic movement hierarchy represented by these one-way pairs reflects a view over the past three decades of Elliot Park and East Downtown as merely pass-through neighborhoods for moving traffic in and out of the core Downtown and to and from the Metrodome. The result has been an East Downtown that is a burned over district of surface parking lots,

and mega-structure parking ramps, a landscape cut through by wide feeder streets with traffic speeds inimical to any kind of pedestrian-level street life.

Elliot Park is neighborhood, with a historical, residential, business, and pedestrian fabric distinctly its own. New high density residential development along the Fifth Avenue to Portland to Park blocks between 7th Street and Grant Street (Grant Park Homes, Skyscape, Sexton, the proposed 1010 Park) is creating a need and a demand for a more pedestrian-friendly environment and better traffic distribution patterns. Already, Portland and Park Avenues in their present configurations as too-wide one-way street pairs, designed only to get people through Elliot Park as fast as possible, is an anachronism: it discourages the new residents in the area from walking the neighborhood, cutting off the west sector of Elliot Park from the heart of the neighborhood to the east. If this pattern is allowed to persist, it will contribute more than any other factor to discouraging the development of an integrated Elliot Park neighborhood along the east-west axis of the streets from 17th to Eighth.

As one alternative of the draft plan suggests, both Portland and Park should be converted to two-way streets. This would achieve several objectives: slow down traffic; embolden pedestrians to actually cross the streets; ensure increased accessibility to new local residential and retail development.

The same can be said of the recommendation to convert Ninth Street into a two-way with travel and bicycle lanes and parking. Ninth Street features some of the most impressive of Elliot Park's "Ninth Street Historic District" residential structures. There is no reason it has to be a one-way into the Downtown Core. Traffic levels are never even close to being at the volume requiring one-way capacity (the same, by the way, can be said of both Portland and Park, even at rush hour traffic volumes). The Elliot Park Master Plan spotlights Ninth Street as a true neighborhood-level connector street, serving a multi-functional purpose for automobiles, bicycles, transit, and pedestrians alike. Future in-fill development along the Ninth Street corridor, from North Central University and Elliot Park itself, into Downtown calls for neighborhood-scale mixed use that will complement the existing historic structures and create localized centers of activity. Slower automobile movement in two directions, wider sidewalks, and streetscape improvements are what is needed to achieve this along Ninth Street.

The recommendation for making Eighth Street a two-way with single lane flow in both directions for both automobiles and transit is also welcomed. Again, there is no reason for justifying Eighth Street's pretense to being an overly-wide one-way feeder to accommodate entrance to TH 55. This is especially true east of Chicago, where presently Eighth Street completely discourages access to the amenities and attractions of Elliot Park itself. No other influence has been so great as the vast width of Eighth Street and the speeding traffic it accommodates in creating a disconnected fabric in this sector of the neighborhood (except perhaps for the tangled mess of the TH 55 and I-94/I-35E portals on the east edges of Elliot Park).

I am not certain from the draft recommendations whether those recommendations really mean that Tenth Street should be a two-way. Elliot Park has been historically told that there is no way Tenth Street can be a two-way before Park Avenue because it is serving as a feeder to the freeway and high-volume traffic movement on Portland and Park. However, if indeed Portland and Park could be considered for two-way status, then there is no reason to maintain Tenth Street as a one-way beyond Fourth Avenue. (Presently it doesn't even serve its purpose well as a one-way to Fourth and access to I-35 because the south lanes get diverted to the continuing local street network). The fact is, Tenth Street is a neighborhood level street, certainly from Fifth Avenue east, and, in light of plans for the "Drake Block" and the "Triangle Park," very arguably even from Fourth Avenue. The street presently is irrational. It already has been narrowed by public works resurfacing a few years ago, taking on the aspect of the neighborhood level

street it really is instead of a “feeder” to Portland and Park one-ways. When Skyscape Condominiums comes on line in mid-2007, the southern lane of Tenth between Portland and Park will essentially be slowed-down access to the parking for that development. And, most absurdly, Tenth abruptly ends as a one-way at Park, leaving what I have estimated (spending many hours standing outside the offices of EPNI at 719 Tenth Street over many years) to be about half the cars inadvertently continuing the wrong way in the south lane toward Chicago Avenue.

The draft recommendations for a re-patterned street hierarchy suggested in the Access Minneapolis Plan would contribute immensely to reclaiming Elliot Park and East Downtown as true neighborhoods with promising new residential and commercial development that can only expand the resources of all of Downtown Minneapolis. These more deliberate, flexible and multi-use transit/pedestrian patterns are perhaps the most important “table setting” elements for bringing people into our Downtown and keeping them there.

Pedestrian and Bicycle Networks

As indicated in my comments so far, conversion of streets to two-way, multi-functional transit corridors for local access would be the most important first step in making our Downtown streets more accommodating to both pedestrians and bicycles. The suggestions for pedestrian and bicycle networks forwarded in the draft plan can only be enhanced if the street conversions are adopted.

The bicycle connection envisioned between Loring Park and Elliot Park along the south edge of the neighborhood reflects a recommendation in our own neighborhood Master Plan. Somehow, the former connections in this area, interrupted by both the Convention Center expansion and the freeway ditch, need to be restored. A greenway-bicycle path roughly following the meanderings of 16th and 17th Streets East, continuing to 11th Avenue and then toward the river and Cedar-Riverside as a “rounds” would be a great way to increase casual circulation east to west. As to other patterns of bicycle use in Elliot Park, it is hard to identify them. Certainly streets such as Park, Chicago, Portland, Ninth are suitable for more intense “commuter” bicycling. It must be observed, however, that given the proximities to Downtown and Riverfront centers, residents in Elliot Park have not exhibited the flair for recreational bicycling that one might see, for example, in the lakes neighborhoods of the city.

The bicycle network alternatives “A” and “B” appear to effect how Portland might be configured to accommodate parking and bicycle lanes as a two-way or one-way street. The priority of Portland being converted to a two-way is greater than allowing for bicycle lanes or not. This is true, too, of Park, which if anything is more important to reconfigure as a two-way street than is Portland. This is because Park is closer to the center of Elliot Park, and features the unique bend at Tenth Street (as a result of the grid clash), offering view corridors for orientation that require slower, more casual and observant traffic navigation.

Pedestrian-ways in Elliot Park are still to be defined, largely because of the obliteration of most existing ones by the daunting street traffic patterns and presence of innumerable surface parking lots. One big revelation of Elliot Park’s master planning process was that savvy residents of the neighborhood have identified pathways for walking that do not necessarily conform to sidewalks. We call these “inner” or “through-block” connections, primarily using some of the weird alley meanderings in Elliot Park. For this reason, EPNI is encouraging mid- and inner block green spaces and “interstitial” pathways as new developments are proposed. These offer opportunities to explore and navigate a neighborhood on a more familiar level rather than just on directed-traffic sidewalks. Nonetheless, reclaiming Elliot Park’s sidewalks to be more enticing for foot traffic is absolutely necessary. And this goal again ties into conversion

of the daunting one-way traffic pairs to less intimidating two-way local streets. There is no question that Park, Portland, Chicago, 11th Avenue, Tenth Street, Ninth Street, and Eighth Street should all be more inviting to pedestrians. Anecdotally, I will provide an example of why this is so necessary. Recently a restaurateur wanted to erect a free-standing “neighborhood” restaurant at the southeast corner of 8th Street and Park. He wanted to offer some 50 surface parking spaces to serve the potential customers because his business plan—modeled on suburban retail—envisioned customers driving to his restaurant. When asked about potential walk-in customers, given the proximity to new residential development and HCMC, he dismissed the probability because he didn’t think people would walk even a few blocks in Elliot Park and East Downtown because of hostility of the environment to pedestrian traffic. He himself lives in Grant Park Homes in Elliot Park, yet asserted he wouldn’t want his wife and children walking the three blocks to his proposed restaurant for fear of being run over by speeding cars on Portland, Ninth, and Eighth; and because the entire area does not give the impression that there is any pedestrian access to anywhere.

Parking

If there is one overriding theme to the sentiment of Elliot Park concerning transit connections in the neighborhood, it can be summed up as: Start emphasizing pedestrians and deemphasizing automobile traffic. This pertains to the parking situation, also. It isn’t just the surface parking lots occupying so many promising parcels for the sake of accommodating Downtown commuters and Metrodome patrons that hurt Elliot Park. The street parking provisions also sacrifice residential and retail development to the quarter-gulping addiction of the City to put the Jesse James to transient visitors every day, often for up to 18 hours a day. Ten-hour meters flourish like weeds throughout the neighborhood. Meters that serve no purpose except on the rarest of Vikings game day sellouts, extend even beyond Tenth Street along Portland and Park. Residents of the many apartments have to fight for critical parking because otherwise they have to plug parking meters until well into the night. Visitors to Grant Park Homes have to plug meters constantly when invited into the neighborhood. How Elliot Park has been exploited by street parking policies is another chapter in the scandal of how the neighborhood has traditionally been dismissed as not worth living or working in. *If parking is continued along Portland and Park, Ninth and Tenth Streets, it should be more lightly and flexibly metered—and metered parking should be eliminated south of Tenth Street. The neighborhood would be glad to work with the City to inventory and re-evaluate the street parking policies and configurations through Elliot Park.*

Transit

Much of the new development EPNI is helping to guide and itself will be proposing in the neighborhood and in East Downtown is predicated on the goals of Access Minneapolis—to increase the options for the movement of human traffic. LRT is an undeniable boon to all of Downtown. However, much of Elliot Park feels cut off from convenient access to the Downtown East LRT station. This is partly due to issues addressed above—the wide one-way pairs cutting through the neighborhood east to west. Part of this isolation is due to the megalithic barriers the HCMC complex present to recognizable and easy access to LRT. Improved pedestrian connections and way finding elements along Chicago and Park (see the East Downtown/North Loop Plan recommendations, as well as Elliot Park’s Master Plan) constitute a public realm initiative that should have high priority. Chicago Avenue reputedly is a major transit corridor (the bus line that runs on it I believe is the second most used in the Metro), yet you wouldn’t know it by how it runs through Elliot Park. Astonishingly, there is not even a direct connection between Line 5 (or any other north-south line that runs into Elliot Park) and the Downtown East LRT Station! Presently, riders are expected to disembark the bus at Chicago and 7th Street to walk the two blocks to the station because the buses turn into Downtown on Seventh. Why have such a primary bus line

connector that runs all the way from Bloomington if it can't even make it to the portal LRT station to Downtown? Elliot Park has lower income residents, students, and an elderly population (Augustana Care, the MPHA towers) who deserve much more direct and convenient bus connections.

Attendant to this, it is the consensus of Elliot Park residents and workers that the Downtown Fare zone should be extended to all of Elliot Park Neighborhood. Presently, like the Line 5 Bus That Just Couldn't Make It To LRT, this zone irrationally ends in the middle of the neighborhood. All Downtown Neighborhoods previously deemed peripheral to the CBD (Elliot Park, Loring Park, the North Loop; and now I would include East Hennepin) should be included in the Downtown Fare Zone. It is ironic that the population that dominates in the eastern sector of Elliot Park, outside the Downtown Fare Zone, is an elderly, student, and lower-paid worker population that deserve ready access to cheaper bus fares to navigate into Downtown. At least if all the current bus routes are going to turn into Downtown rather than also go to LRT or the River, those riders who live in east Elliot Park Neighborhood could get a break by paying Downtown Zone fares.

Freeways

Elliot Park is realistic. Freeways into and out of Downtown are here to stay, and they expedite access to Downtown, helping both residential development and commerce. The theme, as stated above, is how to handle this access on the local streets of Downtown neighborhoods. It is entirely understandable that both Fifth and Fourth Avenues remain one-ways, at least in the southern sector of East Downtown to filter and direct the traffic volumes. What to do about the knotted up strands of freeway and TH 55 accesses on the east end presents a real conundrum. The East Downtown/North Loop Master Plan consultants commented that this area of Downtown (including the Metrodome labyrinth) presented the most challenging problems to solve in order to bring more rational design to the sector. And this will become more imperative as East Downtown develops, the Central Corridor LRT line is built, and decisions about the future of the Metrodome are made. The one on-going problem the freeway presents to Elliot Park is the challenge of connections between Downtown/Loring Park/Stevens Square presented by the swath the freeway cuts from Tenth Street to 17th Street (see comments on Tenth Street under Downtown Street Strategy above).

EPNI welcomes the chance to participate in Access Minneapolis, which promises to result in an action plan that will contribute greatly to the renaissance of Downtown Minneapolis. We look forward to future opportunities to address further the issues of this planning as they affect not just Elliot Park, but all of Downtown.