



'Where the biggies leave off...'

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As revised Comp Plan nears release, city pays PR firm \$80,000 to sell it to critical citizenry

By Michael Wilson

What would you do if you devised a top-secret plan to remake the face of the entire city -- 265 pages comprising 14 goals, 11 topics, and 97 policies -- and parts of it met with withering criticism from broad segments of the citizenry when you rolled it out for comment?

You might conclude that top-down policy-making wasn't an effective way to gain citizen buy-in, call a halt to the process, and truly engage the city's residents with something more than just Post-It notes.

Or, if you were Minneapolis long-range planners or top city officials determined to create their own version of an urban metropolis, you'd spend \$80,000 (plus \$20,000 in "expenses") on a public relations firm to help you "reframe the narrative" and ram the plan through to adoption.

And emblematic of the secrecy and dissimulation that had characterized the whole process, you would flat-out deny that you were hiring a PR firm after the contract with that firm had already been signed.

What's going on here, of course, is the rewrite of the city's Comprehensive Plan, required of all Minnesota municipalities every ten years. In the seven-county metro area, the Met Council is charged with furnishing the 283 municipalities with 20-year projections for population growth and data on a whole host of planning categories. The municipalities must respond with updates to their comp plans for accommodating the projected changes over the next ten years. St. Paul, Edina, St. Louis Park -- everyone's rewriting their comp plans.

Minneapolis this time chose to go way beyond the requirements of state law and tackle some persistent issues, most notably the pervasive shortage of affordable housing. This rewrite, called Minneapolis 2040 because of the 20-year span of the data set prepared by Met Council, is "the first Comp Plan to use an equity lens, to think about how to give greater access and agency to residents who have been marginalized or ignored in previous plans," Paul Mogush, principal project coordinator in the city's long-range planning division, told Hill & Lake Press in May.

"It also seeks to remedy policy, planning, and other regulatory instruments that have perpetuated disparities, driven disinvestment, or treated particular groups (based on race, income, or geographic locations) differently because of historic practices such as redlining, racially restrictive covenants, and other racially-based policies," Mogush said.

That's a goal with which most can agree. The issue is, how do we get there?

As it quickly became clear when Minneapolis 2040 was publicly unveiled in March, planners want to



Former City Council Member Lisa McDonald, co-founder of Minneapolis for Everyone, spoke on September 18 at a press conference in the Loring Park neighborhood. (Photo: Michael Wilson.)

accomplish their goal by creating vast amounts of new housing through an unprecedented up zoning of the entire city. Four- and six-story buildings would line all "transit routes" through the city, including West Franklin and West 22nd Avenues in Lowry Hill and Kenwood. Thirty-story residential skyscrapers would be encouraged south of the Greenway in Cedar-Isles-Dean.

The unanticipated bombshell: fourplexes.

But the biggest bombshell -- leaked a week before the plan's official unveiling, to the great consternation of the city's planners -- was "fourplexes," multifamily buildings which would be allowed on every single residential lot throughout the entire city. In two of the three new residential district categories lots could also be combined so that even larger multiple-family buildings could be constructed.

As people dug further into the plan they saw that all the Small Area Plans, carefully crafted by neighborhood associations with city guidance, were to be overridden. This fits with the message neighborhood associations have been getting from City Hall that top leadership aims to marginalize them. The Shoreland Overlay dis-

trict was not mentioned, not even once, in the entire plan.

Explicit in the plan was getting people out of their cars and onto bikes, walking, and riding the bus. Creating walkable neighborhoods is a goal most can share, but a major problem is that the city does not control transit. The Met Council does, and they are strapped for funds. It's hard to think of going carless given the transit system we're currently stuck with for the foreseeable future.

Hennepin County currently takes in about \$125 million a year from the half-cent transportation sales tax, but commissioners are choosing to spend it all on Southwest LRT, for which the county now bears total financial responsibility. The bus rapid transit D Line, planned to run from Brooklyn Center to Mall of America through the heart of north and south Minneapolis, is currently shelved for lack of \$35 million to fully fund it. Meanwhile, Hennepin County commissioners voted 5-2 on May 31 to give SWLRT another \$204-million budget bump. So much for spending wisely to put mass transit where masses of Minneapolis people actually live, work, shop, and play.

Most troubling to many was the way the plan's focus on inequities and racially-based policies became a dog-whistle for some in the white community to attack others in the white community as elitists and racists who want to keep "renters" and "those people" out of their neighborhoods, all under the pretext, they charged, of preserving the status quo and protecting property values.

Minneapolis: city of 10,000 comments.

Residents of the four Hill and Lake neighborhoods were particularly targeted, and they -- along with thousands of others -- let their reactions be known. Planners said they wanted comments, and they got them: over 10,000, far more than they ever anticipated. Planners promised to read and process every comment, but to date they have refused -- despite formal data requests -- to release a work plan detailing how they are doing so. So much for citizen input.

The revised Minneapolis 2040 draft is due for release soon, perhaps next Tuesday, September 25, at the 5 pm meeting of the Neighborhood Community Engagement Commission meeting at the Central Library. No one knows for sure, which is part of the Goff PR firm's game plan.

As a Cedar-Isles-Dean resident said at the September CIDNA board meeting, "The city sends out rafts of postcards and letters for all manner of hearings and public works activities, but they can't communicate with us directly about something as critical as remaking the entire city?"

Goff's communications strategy for release of Draft 2, dated August 15, calls for tight control of the public process for reviewing and commenting on Draft 2. Marketing materials will be created, including "social media content calendar with suggested posts" and "content for Council Member electronic newsletters."

After release of Draft 2, media blitz begins.

Goff-coached planners will have "embargoed conversations with reporters in advance of the release of Draft 2". (They haven't contacted Hill & Lake Press yet!) After release of the plan the blitz begins with "press releases, social media, website updates."

Keenly aware that the end goal is to get seven

Council members to vote to adopt the plan, Goff counsels singling out the good guys for preferential treatment: "News conference with supportive Council Members and third-party validators."

One of the primary goals is to "demonstrate that city staff have seriously considered public comments" and "will be considering ways to incorporate changes into the plan to reflect this robust public feedback."

A key strategy tactic is to "identify third-party validators who can publicly support key elements of the plan ... and develop shared messaging." (The HLP editorial department is checking their VMs.)

Tweaks to the plan have made it into the news,

whether intentionally or leaked. On September 14 the Star Tribune reported that Draft 2 will call for only triplexes on 40-foot lots. Left unsaid is that fourplexes and combined lots for bigger buildings will still be allowed everywhere else in the City.

Could we have ended up with a better comp plan update, with widespread citizen buy-in, if city planners had used a bottom-up strategy instead of a secretive top-down strategy? We don't know. What *is* clear is that all Minneapolis residents need to pay close attention to Draft 2 and make up their own minds, independent of the spin that the city's PR firm will put out there. And continue to make your voices heard.
