

Five Blocks: Milton to Dale St.



Moriah Baltz and Celeste Knudsen

Abstract

This research project seeks to investigate how the installation of the light rail extension along University Avenue in St. Paul is affecting the surrounding community. The light rail extension, known as the Central Corridor (Green) line, was designed to connect downtown Minneapolis and downtown St. Paul. The Central Corridor has currently moved through all of its planning stages, its construction and is scheduled to open in June of 2014. Built to primarily run along University Avenue, the installation of the light rail extension inevitably has, and will continue to have, an effect on the surrounding communities. In addition to the changes that took place throughout the duration of the construction period, the surrounding community will face changes as it becomes a transit hub with the possibility of gaining an influx of new residents and businesses once the light rail opens. Through interviews with current businesses and community organizations as well as current market value data analysis, our research project aimed to indicate how the Frogtown/Rondo Community along the corridor is changing and how the current residents and businesses expect to be affected in the future. Our research gathered information during the construction phase to indicate future potential change in the focus area of University Avenue from Milton to Dale Street.

Background



The Mod Marketing Team. 2012. Graphic.

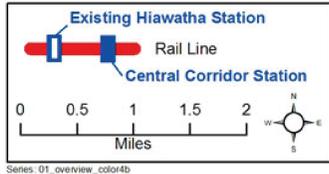
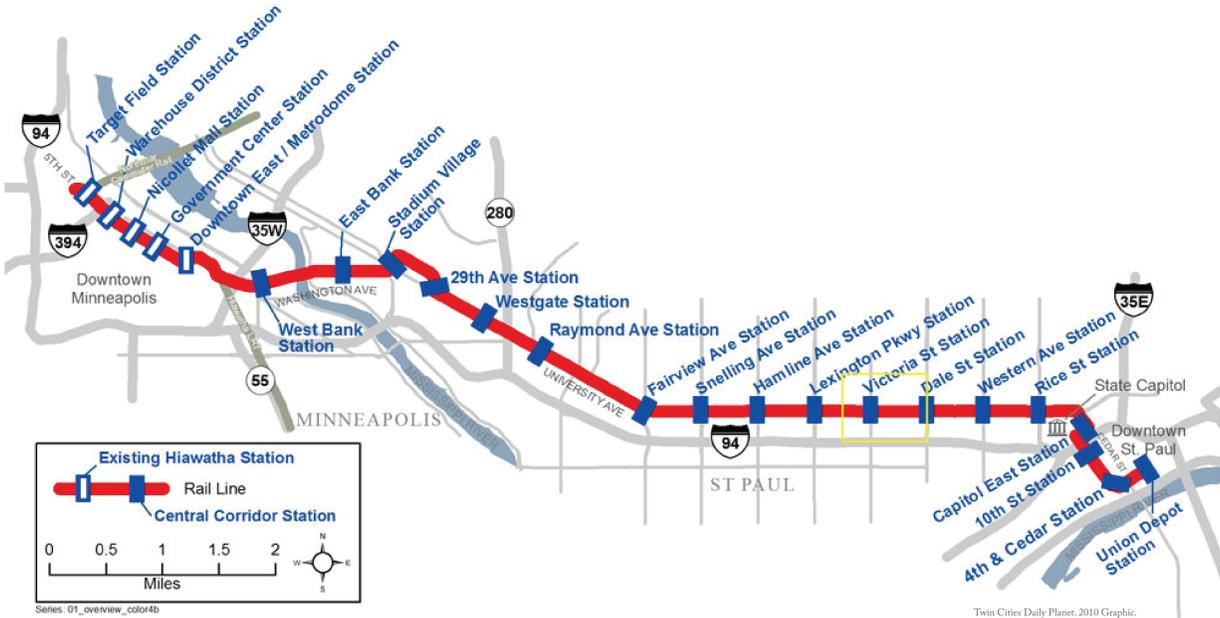
Frogtown encompasses the Lexington Parkway Station, Victoria Street Station, Dale Street Station, and the businesses north of these stops. Frogtown was settled between the 1860s and 1880s as the city's population grew. It extended past its downtown limits due to primarily Polish, German, and Irish immigrant workers taking jobs in the nearby railroad industry. The swampy terrain inhabited by many frogs served as inspiration for the area's naming. In the late twentieth century, immigrants from Central and South America, Africa, and Southeast Asia populated the region, contributing to the ethnically diverse community seen today. This diversity translates to a wide range of shops, restaurants, and other cultural businesses seen in the Historic Frogtown section of University Avenue.

Historic Rondo is a less easily definable area, but in the context of recent district branding efforts for the light rail transit, it consists of the Lexington Parkway Stations, Victoria Street, Dale Street Station, and the businesses south of these stops. The Rondo neighborhood was a vibrant, prominently African-American community formed after the Civil War. In the 1960s, Interstate I-94 was routed through the neighborhood. Many homes were demolished and the neighborhood was divided as a result of the construction of I-94. The current area has been incorporated into the neighborhood Summit-University; however, many community organizations have worked to keep the spirit of Rondo alive. Rondo Days was started in 1982 as an annual festival in July that commemorates the neighborhood and community of Rondo. Aurora/ St. Anthony Neighborhood Development Corporation has worked to preserve the history of the area and generate new interest in building up a strong sense of community in the Rondo neighborhood.



STOPS-FOR-US Campaign

When the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) was released in April 2006, there were no light rail stations planned for the intersections of Western, Victoria, and Hamline along University. These "missing" stops became a concern for community members along University because there were a disproportionate gaps in between stations in the central section of the light rail (between Snelling and Rice). The community argued that it was being targeted because it has the most ethnically diverse population and the highest poverty rate along the corridor, but has the greatest need for an equal number of stations because it is the most transit-dependent community of the St. Paul portion of the line. The Stops-for-Us Coalition was organized by community organizations to create a unified voice for the community to promote the importance of adding these three stops to the central corridor. Although the Met Council initially claimed that the central section of the corridor would not suffer disproportionately to the construction of the light rail in the Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement (SDEIS), it amended the Central Corridor Project scope and budget in February 2010 to include the three missing stations (District Councils Collaborative of Saint Paul and Minneapolis). The victory of the Stops-for-Us Coalition stands as an example of the importance and power of community involvement in transit planning.



Series: 01_overview_color4b

Twin Cities Daily Planet. 2010 Graphic.

Methods

To gather qualitative data of the study area's perception of the light rail and its effects on the community, we interviewed 3 business owners and 3 community leaders in our site. Our interview questions asked both how the interviewee perceives the changes in their personal organization/business as well as if the population they serve has changed.

Has the light-rail construction *changed your business sales*, and if so how?

Have families expressed *concern about changes* in property value?

What is your *perception* of how the light-rail construction will affect the commercial industry and community of the neighborhood?

Have there been any comments about *accessibility*?

Has the *population you serve changed* in the past few years?

Results

Overall, the interviewees, both residential and commercial representatives seemed cautiously optimistic of the light rail's future impact on the community. While there were many concerns surrounding how construction had been handled or how future changes may be carried out, the inevitability of change has certainly been accepted, even if not warmly welcomed. There is a certain sense of the community holding its collective breath, waiting for more information to become available. Will businesses and organizations be attracted to University Avenue? Will they contribute to positive change in the community, providing job opportunities and helping contribute to a strong sense of character, unity, and community? The biggest priority among business owners and community advocates alike was maintaining the neighborhood's unique and diverse identity through all of the changes that have and will take place. While no one is sure what the future holds, there is certainly a hope that the light rail will influence positive growth in the community and help to preserve its diverse history while also creating a prosperous, healthy future for the Frogtown and Rondo neighborhoods.

While some were more certain of the eventual out pricing of local businesses, there are also the successes of the community to take into account. As Donna Evans and Isabel Chanslor mentioned, the Stops for Us campaign was a successful action carried out by the community. It was an issue that affected both businesses and residents, and they were able to champion a cause together. The action on the part of businesses to sue the Metropolitan Council after the 2009 Final Environmental Impact Statement also showed initiative within the community to affect positive change. Perhaps with a business association similar to Lake Street Council, such as the one Ms. Chanslor envisions, local businesses can act together to keep a spot on University Avenue. By having shown they can unite to make their voices heard and change the plans of the light rail already, the local businesses and residents have proven that by pooling their efforts together, they can alter what was thought to be a decided outcome.



Isabel Chanslor

U7 Project Manager
Neighborhood Development Corporation

Isabel Chanslor commented that businesses had come to her organization with concerns about their *rents going "much higher than the traditional annual increase."* She noted that, while construction is over, businesses will be recovering from the effects of the construction coupled with the economic recession for many years to come. She made several comments about the difficulties businesses in Saint Paul had during the months of light rail construction in terms of staying accessible to customers and keeping a steady source of income.

Ms. Chanslor mentioned the concerns of gentrification and local businesses being priced out of the neighborhood, as well as concerns over changes in density as more multi-floor residential developments like the Lyric at Carleton Place are developed and debut on University Avenue. In terms of development of properties on University, she stated *"this is the highest number of building permits the city has received, the percentage is just huge... it really just shows the signs that people are making investments quickly."* She mentioned that it had been difficult for her to find properties for sale on University for clients. She feels the "mom and pop operations" are what University is known for, and those are what "build the character of University," and asked "fifteen years from now how many of those business...are still going to be around?"

She had hopes that the light rail would bring a new customer base to business operations on University and stated *"They [the businesses] are really excited. And they've made some huge investments.* We have business owners who put in lots and lots of money last year into expanding their business, into their facades, into becoming energy efficient, in finding new locations for their business that would give them a lot more visibility." And that overall, while the population she serves hasn't changed, their clientele has grown.

Keoni Nguyen

Business Owner
SugaRush

Keoni Nguyen, owner of SugaRush, was less optimistic about the future of his business after the completion of the light rail's construction. He stated that sales had actually gone down post-construction because during construction "the traffic is slower, people have the tendency to look around" and take notice of his business. He said, *"University was never a friendly street to start with, so it's going to take a minute for people to come around."* When asked if the population he served had changed in the past few years, he said "I see a lot younger crowd moving into the neighborhood... So it's taking a turn-around. *I'm hoping that the locals will stick around."*

Later in the interview he expressed concerns that soon the owner of the building SugaRush is located in will charge higher rent and will eventually sell the building to a developer, though he felt that this would happen sooner to buildings nearer to stations. He expressed the difficulties of owning a business in general, and stated that while the Forgivable Loan offered by the Neighborhood Development Center had helped, it didn't justify the damage incurred by the light rail.

Jason Tanzman

Development and Outreach Director
Cycles for Change

Jason Tanzman, the Development and Outreach Director at Cycles for Change, was more supportive of the light rail installation. As a transit advocate, Tanzman was looking forward to the light rail's ability to bring people to the corridor and, potentially revitalize the local economy. Tanzman recognizes a need for the light rail by stating that "there's a lot of people on [Cycles for Change's] staff, and community of volunteers, participants in [Cycles for Change's] programs, *living without a car both by choice*, ethical, health reasons, as well as lack of income, lack of a job, that type of thing. [Cycles for Change has] a huge ideological alignment with people who are promoting transit, [and] want to improve public transit." Although the light rail installation makes biking along University more difficult, Tanzman recognizes that the Twin Cities need to improve their transit system.

Although Tanzman is primarily optimistic about the light rail installation, he does admit that *"development*

can be this mixed bag, where there can be really good things... [we] want more people, but we don't want [businesses] getting priced out." He states that rents haven't gone up a ton yet and, if they do, it will be in couple of years. He believes that the fear of raised rent along University Ave is a valid one. In addition, Tanzman reflects on how the city planners and government officials in charge of the light rail did not do a good job taking the community's input into account. Tanzman iterates the importance of involving community members throughout planning processes.

Donna Evans

Member of Frogtown Rondo Action Network

Donna Evans, a member of the Frogtown Rondo Action Network, said that families in her community had expressed concern over changes in property value, and that the Stops for Us campaign had been a result of that. Families had recognized they would be taxed for the light rail, but would receive little of the benefits without added stops along University Avenue, *"they felt like it would be an injustice to our community because it would be like a ride-through from downtown St. Paul to Minneapolis."* She also felt that the construction had often been at the community's expense "not just because it tore up the streets... they really impacted every aspect of our life by putting it here. Businesses closed. Every time we'd turned around, the access to get through the community was being changed. Timely updates were not made....we were disrespected by the very people who were building it."

However, she did state *"we're hoping that it will attract businesses that not only we can spend our money in, but also will hire people from our community to work and it will self-generate the money."* She felt that wealthier people who could afford to buy homes rather than rent them were coming back to the neighborhood, and hoped that she and others could still be included in discussions of community and planning, "let us be a part of it, instead of excluding us, because maybe we can come up with some great ideas that you can implement."

C.J. Turner

Member of Frogtown Rondo Action Network
Aurora/St. Anthony NDC

C.J. Turner stated, "I haven't really come across a person that has talked about the light rail really being an issue. *They're glad that it will be up and running in 2014.*" He thought the light rail might add value to the community by bringing in more people and more businesses, giving the area greater attention. Accessibility issues hadn't been mentioned to him specifically, but he noted there might be issues concerning them in terms of safety around the light rail. He stated that while there hasn't been a change in the population he serves through FRAN and ASANDC, he has known many people that had lost their homes through foreclosure.

Marvin Scroggins

Member of Frogtown Rondo Action Network
Accountant for Aurora/St. Anthony NDC
Member of Rondo Avenue Incorporated

Marvin Scroggins said families in the community had not expressed concern about changes in property values directly to him, but that he had overheard concerns about that and the changes due to tax assessments. He felt that ultimately the light rail would be a benefit to the community by its ability to provide job opportunities and attract organizations to the community. He also stated "I haven't heard concerns but I've seen congestion at intersections where *people aren't comfortable with how traffic [flows]*... that's always a problem when it relates to traffic. There's congestion and confusion."

Otherwise he mentioned that for older people, or those with impairments, the new safety rules could cause problems. Finally, as he had only recently moved back to the community after twelve years away, he felt he couldn't give an accurate statement about recent changes in the population, but he did state that it had changed in the twelve years he had been away. He said, "When I returned in 2010, I started seeing all of the changes and that's when I started getting involved. *To make sure that the interests of the community members were brought to the table and fairly represented."*

Conclusion

At the outset of our research, we had goals of analyzing property data and the stated opinions of community members. Due to limitations of time and resources, we were not able to produce an in-depth property data analysis like we planned for in our proposal but we learned a lot about the limitations and complexity of data analysis. Most importantly, we were able to accomplish our main goal of representing the community's perception of the light rail and its effects on the study area through the interviews we had with business owners and community leaders.

Throughout the process of our research, we were continuously impressed by the community organizations that expended countless hours and resources to empower the residents of the historic Frogtown and Rondo neighborhoods. Both the quantitative and the qualitative data pointed to the reality that change is inevitable and currently happening all along the corridor. The biggest priority among business owners and community advocates alike was maintaining the neighborhood's unique and diverse identity through all of the changes that have and will take place. The dedication and hard work of community organizations centered on supporting community members and allowing their voices to be heard by government and transit planners. As demonstrated through successes such as the Stops-for-Us campaign, the concerns and opinions of community members can be heard and make a difference, but it might require an extra effort for them to be heard. Optimal development can happen when both the community members and planners take initiative to generate relevant feedback and respond effectively.

References

The Mod Marketing Team. District Branding. 2012. Graphic. On the Green Line, Saint Paul. Web. 20 Jan 2014. <http://onthegreenline.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/GreenLineCampaignSnapshot52913.pdf>. Neighborhood Development Center <http://www.ndc-mn.org/>. Aurora St. Anthony Neighborhood Development Corporation <http://www.aurorastanthony.org/>. Twin Cities Daily Planet. 2010 Graphic. < http://www.tcdailyplanet.net/news/2010/11/06/central-corridor-light-rail-researchers-watching-if-its-changing-residents-health >.