

**Neighborhood Planning  
for Community  
Revitalization**

**Accessing Housing Data in  
Saint Paul and Ramsey County,  
Minnesota**

A CONSORTIUM PROJECT OF: Augsburg College; College of St. Catherine; Hamline University; Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs; Macalester College; Metropolitan State University; Minneapolis Community College; Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program; University of Minnesota (Center for Urban and Regional Affairs; Children, Youth and Family Consortium; Minnesota Extension Service); University of St. Thomas; and Minneapolis community and neighborhood representatives.

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330 Humphrey Center**

**Accessing Housing Data in  
Saint Paul and Ramsey County,  
Minnesota**

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November 1997

*This report [NPCR 1077] is also available at the following internet  
address: <http://freenet.msp.mn.us/org/npcr>*

November 1997

Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization (NPCR) supported the work of the author of this report but has not reviewed it for publication. The content is solely the responsibility of the author and is not necessarily endorsed by NPCR.

NPCR is coordinated by the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs at the University of Minnesota. St. Paul projects are funded in part by St. Paul Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), The St. Paul Foundation, and St. Paul Companies. Minneapolis projects are funded in part by an Urban Community Service Program grant administered by the U.S. Department of Education.

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## **Executive Summary**

Within the Summit-University and Lexington-Hamline neighborhoods of St. Paul, numerous non-profit organizations provide affordable housing and work to expand housing choices for low-income residents. Assessment and planning strategies have been hampered for many of these organizations by the lack of timely and accurate City and County-based housing data. In order to find more efficient ways to gather City and County data and to gain a clearer picture of the housing situation in the neighborhoods, Rondo Community Land Trust<sup>1</sup> initiated this research project to address public data gathering and mapping issues. The objective was to investigate the feasibility of creating a database that integrates St. Paul and Ramsey County data to allow easier access for neighborhood groups and the general public. Options for mapping this data were also examined.

In conclusion, St. Paul and Ramsey County are host to numerous data systems maintained by separate departments. Although some areas are working to facilitate data linking for internal use, it is unclear when or if a comprehensive, publicly accessible database will become a reality. This report presents the housing information maintained by various City and County departmental data systems and suggests how to best access it currently. For future work on this issue, a coalition composed of numerous housing organizations should target policymakers to alert them to the importance of neighborhood-level data access. On the City and County level, local government has already created a multi-participant initiative to address geographic mapping capabilities, and this model may be appropriate for addressing data sharing and access issues also.

### **Data Collection: Introduction and Background**

Although this research project focuses on St. Paul's Summit-University and Lexington-Hamline neighborhoods, access to accurate, efficient City and County-level data is essential for most community-based housing organizations. The need for an adequate supply of quality, low-income

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<sup>1</sup> Rondo Community Land Trust (CLT) provides quality, permanently affordable housing for low-income, multi-generational households by retaining ownership of the real estate (the land) and selling the improvements (the house) to families earning less than 80% of median income. Upon selling the house, the owner may take out their original investment, the money paid on the mortgage plus only 25% of the appreciated value, thereby keeping the house affordable for the next family. Since its inception, Rondo CLT has moved, renovated and sold five single-family homes and continues to pursue rehabilitation projects, focusing primarily on vacant houses or houses that would otherwise be demolished (Rondo CLT General Information).

Also, special thanks to the Summit-University and Lexington-Hamline Housing Working Group for their input into the project.

affordable housing in central city neighborhoods is often unmet by the private housing market; therefore, cities often work closely with local non-profit housing organizations to fill this gap. With scarcer resources, cities and funding sources are requiring collaborative, targeted housing rehabilitation and development with programs such as the St. Paul City Council's *Capital City Development Program* proposal.<sup>2</sup> It is imperative that community groups are able to efficiently collect public data in order to assess and strategically plan neighborhood development efforts and to relay this information back to public staff and funders.

Organizations collect public data for many purposes. Inquiry into the status of a vacant building provides one example of this data-gathering process. Within the Summit-University and Lexington-Hamline neighborhoods, at least 45 buildings, mostly residential, are listed on the City's official vacant building report.<sup>3</sup> Before purchase, an organization must determine whether a vacant building is a feasible project to pursue; therefore, multiple public departments must be contacted for information. For example, the owner's name and address allow an organization to determine the owner's willingness to sell the property. The assessor's market value of the land and building as well as any amount of delinquent taxes allows the non-profit to evaluate the subsidies needed to make the project feasible. Identifying all parties of interest or any liens outstanding may illuminate additional costs involved in the purchase of the building. A non-profit often has limited time within which it can successfully gain the owner and City Council approvals needed to purchase the home as well as determine potential funding sources. In the current environment, it is difficult to gather a quick, complete picture of the status of a vacant house.

Within this framework Rondo Community Land Trust (CLT) initiated this research project to find more efficient ways to gather housing data from St. Paul and Ramsey County. The ultimate goal was to work with the City and County to determine the pieces necessary to integrate their data systems so that a single database would allow government staff as well as the general public to obtain easier, complete access to property-related data.

### **Data Research Process**

As the first step in defining the data research project, Rondo CLT and other non-profit housing groups in the Summit-University and Lexington-Hamline neighborhoods identified the

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<sup>2</sup> The Capital City Development Program was proposed by two St. Paul City Council members and is currently in policy discussion stage. See Appendix I for the original proposal as well as Rondo Community Land Trust's response.

<sup>3</sup> As listed on the St. Paul Public Health Vacant Building Quarterly List ending March 31, 1997.



specific information needed to assess the feasibility of purchasing and rehabilitating a house. The data fields are listed as well as the City or County department that originates or maintains this information:

| Source   | Data Gathered   |
|--|---|
| Ramsey County Property Records and Revenue<br>(general information line) | Owner of Record and Address<br>Taxpayer and Address<br>Market Value of Land and Building<br>Current Property Tax Amount<br>Tax Status (i.e. are taxes paid to date)<br>Homestead Status |
| Ramsey County Property Records and Revenue<br>(delinquent tax line)      | Total Delinquent Tax Amount   |
| Abstract and Torrens Department  | Liens Outstanding   |
| St. Paul Zoning Department   | Zoning Status   |
| Public Health Vacant Building Department                                 | Vacant and Boarded Building List<br>Legislative and Council Hearings<br>Demolition Dates  |
| License, Inspection and Environmental Protection                         | Permits Issued (within 12-24 previous months)   |
| St. Paul Water Utility   | Water History   |
| Sewer Utility  | Sewer History   |
| Planning and Economic Development (PED)                                  | Owned by Housing & Redevelopment Authority?<br>Soil Tests Conducted?  |

In determining the direction of the data project, Rondo CLT met with University staff and identified the following hierarchy of alternatives:

- Do nothing and continue to collect data from each public department.
- Obtain computer disks and/or data printouts from each public department to create an organizational database with updates every six months.
- Investigate computer mapping options offered through the City and County so that neighborhood data is placed geographically on a map rather than supplied in textual form.

- Catalyze the City and County to integrate their data systems to allow City/County staff, outside private organizations and the public to efficiently access public data.

A number of neighborhood groups have created organizational databases utilizing public data. Rondo CLT, however, chose to focus on the integration of a City and County database as its first project goal in order to determine whether this public information, used by many, could be supplied more effectively. Second, while computer mapping is a powerful analysis tool for neighborhood-level decision-making, an examination of publicly supplied mapping options was secondary to the database project.

While meeting with its St. Paul City Council and Ramsey County Commissioner representatives to discuss the feasibility of a database, Rondo CLT was asked to determine what types of data systems were being used within the various departments listed above. This research consisted of phone interviews and on-site visits with staff or computer personnel. Rondo CLT initially believed that the City and County maintained two separate, but individually complete data systems; however, in reality many departments within the City and County support their own data systems with limited sharing between. Following is a brief recap of the data systems used within City and County departments as well as the best way to currently obtain this information.

#### **Overview of City and County Data Systems<sup>4</sup>**

##### *Ramsey County Property Records and Revenue (PRR)*

Data gathered<sup>5</sup>:

- Owner of record and taxpayer
- Taxpayer address
- Current market value (land and building)
- Taxes and whether they are current
- Homestead status

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<sup>4</sup> Note: this layout is simplified and does not encompass all data maintained within these departments nor does it include all City and County departments. Based on information gathered in February 1997.

<sup>5</sup> "Data gathered" refers to the pieces of information that Rondo CLT and other housing organizations denoted as necessary when pulling information on a rehabilitation project. These public departments maintain more data than indicated in this report.



Historically, the County's tax data has been stored in a COBOL record format designed in the 1970s (it is not a database). Departments have used the data by extracting and converting it to formats that match their capabilities, and most use the data as a starting point for different purposes. For example, some departments obtain disks to create their own databases or generate labels for mailings. Currently, various parts of the system have been converted to an Oracle database system, and PRR runs a dual system (COBOL and Oracle) to ensure that the newer system functions properly.

Ramsey County Property Records and Revenue maintains an extensive amount of information related to individual parcels. Some other city-based data, such as building permits, are also listed within the PRR data fields. The public can access Property Records and Revenue data through a number of means. First, PRR offers an operator phone line for property information requests. The service is free; however, each call is limited to three properties. The process can become time-consuming. For example, an inquiry into all 45 vacant properties within Summit-University and Lexington-Hamline would necessitate 15 phone calls. Property Records and Revenue operators can also fax a print screen of the property tax information for a charge of \$1.00 per page. Also, property information can be accessed at a terminal in the PRR department downtown St. Paul for a \$25 per hour fee.

The public can also purchase assessor data to create an organizational database. The fee is approximately \$45 per hour + \$1.25 per disk for downloading data plus additional charges for any statistical work done (such as determining median sales price for houses in a particular neighborhood). Data is supplied in ASCII/database format and can be imported into various database software packages, such as Microsoft Access. The county quotes a three to five-day turnaround time; however, it may take up to two weeks to receive data. For more information, contact Karen Beaudette, Ramsey County Department of Property Records and Revenue (612-266-2177).

#### Planning and Economic Development (PED)

Data gathered:

- Buildings or land owned by the Housing & Redevelopment Authority (HRA)
- Any soil tests conducted on property owned by the HRA

If the Housing and Redevelopment Authority own a building or lot, the HRA appears as the Owner and Taxpayer in the Ramsey County Property Tax records. This information can be accessed as described above. Soil tests are performed on some of the properties owned by the HRA to determine whether the lots are buildable. If tests have been done, this information is maintained in hard files within PED and can be requested by calling the PED office.

### Torrens and Abstract

Data gathered:

- Outstanding liens on property

The Torrens and Abstract departments hold information related to titles such as mortgages, deeds, transfers of property and outstanding liens. Torrens maintains the certificate for the current fee owner, while Abstract maintains a history of every transaction ever recorded on the property. The best way to pull this information is to go to the offices, located next to one another, in the Ramsey County Government Center West, downtown St. Paul. Any judgments made against the property are filed separately within the district court.

This research report looked primarily at the process involved in pulling Abstract information where information recorded within the last five to ten years is computerized. Two computers are used to access data: one pulls the property's legal description and the other uses the legal description to pull actual document numbers from the Legal Track Index. The Abstract books are then referenced using these document numbers.

### License, Inspection, and Environmental Protection (LIEP)

Data gathered:

- Building Permits issued

There are a number of different systems currently used in the LIEP offices (including inspections, permits and dog bites). LIEP is developing a department-specific system that would integrate its numerous systems into one. The system will be composed of many "modules" such as those for gambling, business licenses, and accounting; however, it is not yet operational and will take a few years for all the modules to become functional.

Of the departments researched, LIEP's developing data system has the capacity to be the closest to a partially integrated city-level database. One of its support modules is an address

database that has the potential for a central address directory. This directory could provide a link between departments that are addressed-based such as Public Works, Water, Fire, and PED. "Pointers" (software that matches 770 Laurel West with West 770 Laurel and other types of configurations) must be built in order for other departments to potentially interface with the system. Nothing has been done to develop the central database, however, and there appears to be no strong commitment to do so.

Currently, permit information can be accessed by calling or visiting the LIEP offices. Permits from 1991 forward are kept on their computer system. The Ramsey County Property Records and Revenue data system also cross-lists building permits issued in St. Paul.

### Zoning

Data gathered:

- Allowed land use

The department does not use an existing computerized data system because zoning changes have not been updated consistently and the system contains errors. The staff references maps and books to confirm a property's zoning status. The public can determine allowed land use by calling the department. For zoning on numerous properties, it is best to visit the office in the City Hall Annex (11th floor) and to review the information manually.

### St. Paul Water Utility

Data gathered:

- Water History on property

The St. Paul Water department maintains several databases that can be accessed by other public departments through Telnet. The water department also connects with Public Works and their Geographic Information System (GIS) for mapping. The public cannot directly access water data via computer, so a water service history, including previous shut-offs, can be obtained by calling the general line (612-266-6350). The history generally goes back one and a half years. For large requests, it is best to fax or mail a listing of the addresses desired. For additional water service information such as pipe dimensions and location, contact Engineering.

Sewer Utility (a Division of St. Paul Public Works)

Data gathered:

- Sewer history

Sewer Utility uses a Filemaker-pro database to track new sewer lines, cutoffs, reconnections, repairs and permits. Older information is obtained by searching original permit books or microfiche. Public requests can be called in (612-266-6234) or faxed, and the sewer history can generally be faxed or picked up. For large requests, the documents must be picked up and a fee is involved.

Public Health Vacant Building Department

Data gathered:

- Vacant and boarded building list
- Legislative and City Council Hearing Dates
- Demolition Dates

The vacant building list is word processed and updated quarterly. It is available by mail (\$7 fee) or by pick up at the Public Health offices (\$4 fee). Non-profits may also contact their City Council representative or building inspector. Legislative and City Council hearing dates as well as demolition dates can be obtained by calling the department (612-292-7771) or by reviewing the minutes from City Council meetings.

Information Services Division (IS) of the Department of Technology and Management Services

The IS Division is listed here because of its obvious connection to the focus of this project. The IS Division was officially formed as of January 1997 in order to coordinate a more comprehensive information services strategy within the decentralized environment of St. Paul's local government. Some of the departmental goals include creating standards for greater *potential* data sharing between departments; helping to identify areas where there are agreed upon corporate standards; and extending the city's existing and potential network to unserved and underserved locations. Among other projects, the IS Division is assessing Geographic Information System (GIS) use within the city. The goal is to determine at what level various departments use GIS and to expand its use in areas where feasible. IS will then make recommendations for logical next steps and develop longer-term strategies for public GIS use.

## Data Issues

The research project's initial goal to catalyze the integration of City and County databases for easier public access was not realized, partly because of the numerous departments that maintain separate data systems and records. While some departments like License, Inspection and Environmental Protection are looking at ways to cross boundaries to offer some centralized data access at the city level, the overall push for data integration is slow. A number of issues face the City and County and seem to hamper a concerted effort to fully integrate systems. First, policymakers may not realize the importance of efficient data access for outside groups and the community, and therefore do not allocate enough funding or consider it a priority. Second, data integration is a major undertaking. The process is slow, and many public managers do not see the benefit of committing staff time and budget to pursue the task, especially without support from policymakers or other departments. Also, departments often lose interest in issues once they cross departmental boundaries. Next, there does not appear to be a politically strong department or group to take the lead in integration. On the city level, the Information Services division was created to bring a more comprehensive IS strategy to St. Paul; however, the department's newness and its "cooperative-process" philosophy may mean that IS will not be the aggressive leader in pushing St. Paul's data system technology. Finally, numerous internal data issues must be addressed before any major steps can be taken. For example, what data standards should be used? Who "owns", maintains and updates the data? What information is available in what form? Is information free or fee-based? Is data referenced by an identification number or by an address?

It may take years for the City and County to sort out these issues. In the meantime for easier access to portion of the needed data, Rondo CLT will contract with REMAP Corporation. REMAP is a private company that offers a user-friendly, on-line property information service that utilizes daily updates of general County Assessor data. The service allows the user to search tax records for specific properties, displays a photo of each property and maps it within a parcel or street map. Census demographics are also available. A monthly fee plus an initial hookup charge allows unlimited access. For more information contact John Thuente, REMAP Corporation (612-659-9232).

Finally, one weakness with the structure of this research project was that the magnitude of the original goal was undertaken by a single organization. This representation was not strong

enough to send a clear message to policymakers that open, efficient access to data is important for the community.

### Mapping and Geographic Information Systems

A second objective of the research project involved mapping housing data within Summit-University and Lexington-Hamline by developing a parcel-level base map to overlay the following information: vacant and boarded buildings; vacant land; bank/HUD/County Foreclosure sales; and the development goals of other neighborhood housing groups. The purpose was to aid housing organizations in making informed decisions regarding neighborhood needs especially in light of proposals such as St. Paul's *Capital City Development Program* that requires geographic targeting of development projects as a prerequisite for funding.

The first step was to determine whether a neighborhood-level map could be provided by the City or the County using Geographic Information System (GIS) computer mapping capabilities.<sup>6</sup> GIS technology "allows governments to map their data and to analyze their spatial structure", and "provides support for the day-to-day operations of governments and utilities as well as providing a tool for management and policymaking analysis."<sup>7</sup> Two cities serve as examples for opening access to public information through mapping: The City of Minneapolis and The City of Oakland.<sup>8</sup>

- *Minneapolis Public Works Print Room* (612-673-2431) offers the public a wide variety of parcel-level mapping options at a minimal cost. The print room utilizes data from the city assessor, voter registration, the census, licensing, fire and other departments. A few examples of the Print Room's mapping capability include: Homestead Status and Condition maps available at the neighborhood or County level; Zoning maps, Property Use Codes; Residential value change and market value of residential properties maps. Maps range from \$10 for pre-made or "Cookbook" maps based on commonly requested information to \$35 for extensive custom maps.

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<sup>6</sup>For organizations with a fair working knowledge of Geographic Information System software, free access to computers and GIS software is available through the Borchert Map Library located at Wilson Library at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus.

<sup>7</sup> Craig, William. "The Rising Tide of GIS". *CURA Reporter*, May 1993.

<sup>8</sup> The April 1997 MetroGIS webpage states that it is pursuing an *Interactive Web Index Project*. As of the writing of this report, the web page does not appear to be functional.



- *City of Oakland's OaklandNet* offers another mapping option through its "Map Room" on the Internet. The site contains a "dynamic city map" and allows the user to select a parcel by address or APN number, maps it on a parcel map, overlays an aerial photo and displays basic property information such as the owner, owner's address, zoning and planning area.  
(<http://oaklandnet.com> under the Government Community and Economic Development section)

While many local governments utilize GIS applications and software, the technology is often used primarily for internal decision-making and is not readily offered for public use. The St. Paul Public Works department, for example, has invested large amounts of time and money in Geographic Information System technology and works to encourage its increased use. Public Works does offer some computerized maps such as street maps and parcel maps; however, it is not a print room and is not structured to fill the mapping needs of the outside community. Also, Ramsey County has digitized a base map that covers approximately 171 square miles of land and more than 160,000 parcels. Base map features include parcel layout, lot numbers and easement lines.<sup>9</sup> These departments and others are also involved in an important step toward increasing public mapping capabilities: MetroGIS and the Ramsey County GIS Users Group.

#### *MetroGIS and the Ramsey County GIS Users Group*

MetroGIS is a seven-county collaborative data-sharing initiative organized by the Metropolitan Council and is a region-wide effort to utilize Geographic Information System (GIS) technology to produce computer generated maps based on public data. The Ramsey County GIS Users Group is an "alliance of current and future users of Geographic Information Systems"<sup>10</sup> and is linked to the Metropolitan Council's MetroGIS initiative. The key to any Geographic Information System is a good base of data from many sources; therefore, for these GIS initiatives to be successful, it is important to lay groundwork for sharing data from the County to the municipality level. Within Ramsey County, many municipalities have worked to establish a License agreement to define data sharing arrangements between themselves and the County. The goals of the Ramsey County Users group include providing better service to the public by enabling elected officials to make more informed decisions, having access to an accurate base of GIS data from the County for

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<sup>9</sup> MetroGIS Web Page, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

downloading via modem, and to link departments and groups to enable simple and rapid transfer of information.

MetroGIS and the Ramsey County Users group include representatives from cities, townships, universities, watersheds and school districts. These groups are addressing many data issues through MetroGIS' advisory team organizational structure. The *data content team* identifies the types of data and characteristics most useful for GIS users. The *standards team* develops standards to facilitate data sharing. The *data access team* looks at data access and security issues, while the *policy team* pursues political and financial support for sustaining MetroGIS. The initiative is a step in the direction of comprehensive data sharing and efficient access to data. For more information on MetroGIS or the Ramsey County GIS Users Group, consult the MetroGIS web page at:

#### *Rondo CLT map*

Because flexible, inexpensive computer mapping options were not available within St. Paul and Ramsey County and because Rondo staff does not have a working knowledge of GIS software, this research project created a base map utilizing a Planning and Economic address-based parcel blueprint originally drawn in the 1960s. The blueprint was reduced to fit on a 36"x48" foamcore presentation board, laminated and mounted. Currently, vacant land has been plotted within the neighborhood, and vacant buildings plus additional information will be plotted on acetate overlays.

#### **Recommendations**

Public data access issues become complex as they cross departmental and jurisdictional boundaries. Following are recommendations for neighborhood groups interested in addressing these issues:

- *Neighborhood Group Coalition or Taskforce*: Neighborhood groups from across the St. Paul and other Ramsey County municipalities must address this issue together in order to make an impact. A coalition or taskforce can more thoroughly determine common needs among and prepare multiple strategies for addressing the City and County. A single organization's inquiry into the current status of the City and County's data structure will not be enough to catalyze change.

- *Policymaker Commitment:* Neighborhood groups must tell policymakers of the importance of efficient access to data. While some public departments are pushing for internal linkages, access for the general public must also be considered. Policymakers must show their support before a comprehensive City and County initiative begins to deal with the issues surrounding data integration and access.

Also, a recommendation to St. Paul and Ramsey County:

- *Use of the MetroGIS model for public data access:* The MetroGIS model is an important consideration in the discussion of data integration, access and other issues. The organizational structure, diverse representation, use of data from various sources and data-sharing agreements seem to set the stage for creating a system that also gives the community comprehensive access to City and County data. The model addresses many of the issues that generally hinder data sharing, such as data standards and maintenance. What will it take to simultaneously offer maps and allow users to access the underlying data? Is it a step before, beyond or an offshoot of the existing MetroGIS model? Perhaps MetroGIS users, Ramsey County and St. Paul should consider these questions.

## Conclusion

"...Open and supported access to public records is of great value to citizen participation and informed public service...."<sup>11</sup> Ramsey County and St. Paul are taking steps toward more comprehensive data systems; however, multiple existing systems, politics, and the overall complexity of the task slow its movement. Community groups in need of more efficient and complete access to public data should collaborate and address policymakers with a collective voice. On the other end, local government should look at the existing MetroGIS model to determine whether it is possible to apply its structure and standards to the issues surrounding community data access.

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<sup>11</sup> Craig, William. "The Rising Tide of GIS". CURA Reporter, May 1993.

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**Appendix I: Response to Vacant Housing Subsidy Reduction and Capital City Development Proposal**

To: Councilmember Jerry Blakey  
Councilmember Mike Harris

From: Kris Nelson, President  
Rondo Community Land Trust

Date: April 30, 1997

Re: **Vacant Housing and the Capital City Development Program**

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the Capital City Development Program at today's policy meeting. Enclosed is a draft in which we focus on the vacant and boarded building procedure, the current rehabilitation subsidy levels, as well as the Capital City Development Program.

In particular, we urge that subsidy levels for rehabilitation be set at \$40,000 for single family homes in order for these subsidies to be used most effectively. Within the last few years, Rondo CLT moved five houses to vacant lots within the Summit-University / Lexington-Hamline neighborhoods and rehabilitated the structures. Each home required more than \$20,000 in subsidy and would have been demolished without the availability of higher subsidies. The houses now generate taxes for the city and benefits for the neighborhood.

We would like to continue contributing to the policy discussion surrounding the Capital City Development Program. Please contact us if you have questions or require additional information regarding this draft. Thank you.

**Objective**

The following summary examines St. Paul's procedure for vacant and boarded buildings, addresses the subsidy levels for rehabilitation as set by the *Houses to Homes* program, and reviews elements of the Capital City Development Program. Conclusions are as follows:

1. Rehabilitation and reoccupation of vacant houses must become a city priority.
2. Subsidies must be set at a level that enables quality rehabilitation to occur.
3. In the creation of mini-block grants, STAR funds must be included to allow for resource flexibility, and other issues should be addressed.

### **Vacant Buildings**

According to the recent *Houses to Homes* study conducted by Edward Goetz, there is an average of 475 vacant houses on the Public Health Vacant Building list at any time. These vacant houses tend to concentrate within St. Paul's lower-income neighborhoods where negative impacts such as the depression of surrounding property values and erosion of the property tax base are heightened. Vacant houses are potential assets and resources for the city of St. Paul. Benefits from investments in rehabilitated housing spill over into the community through an improved tax base and a stabilization in surrounding neighborhoods. The costs associated with demolition negate these benefits, yet the current nuisance policy administered by the city of St. Paul aggressively pushes vacant houses to demolition. The rate of demolition outpaces new construction with a widening gap. *It is our premise that the vacant houses within the city are resources to be preserved, and we ask the city of St. Paul to strongly promote rehabilitation and reoccupation as a city priority.* Demolition must be the last resort, not the goal.

The St. Paul Legislative Code outlines the procedure for abatement of a nuisance property; however, it does not outline a clear process for involving outside parties who may be interested in rehabilitating a property should the owner not wish to do so. Structurally sound houses have been demolished in part because outside parties were not able to intervene early enough to save the buildings. We recommend that at the time a vacant building is registered, City Council, neighborhood Community Development Corporations, other housing organizations, the District Council and city departments such as PED are notified as well the owner. At this stage, a joint meeting should be held between the owner of record, Public Health and the notified parties to determine next steps and to create a plan for use and/or demolition. The foundation for this process is put forth in the St. Paul Legislative Code, Section 43.03, number 4, that states, "The period of time the building is expected to remain vacant; and *a plan and timetable for returning the building to appropriate occupancy or use and/or for demolition of the building*". The goal is to work with owners of vacant buildings in order to make an early determination of the status of the vacant structure.

### **Subsidies**

The original *Houses to Homes* program included the following objectives: to save existing housing stock, where feasible; to recapture and improve the City's tax base; to increase homeownership opportunities; to contribute to the revitalization and stabilization of neighborhoods; and to address vacant buildings through better coordination and City focus through code enforcement, rehabilitation and demolition. *Houses to Homes* subsidies were established at a level that would allow the creation of high quality housing to attract middle income people to the city and to preserve historic structures. Subsidy levels were set at \$40,000 for rehabilitation for single-family vacant houses and \$60,000 for rehabilitation and conversion of multi-family units to single units.

As concluded in the *Houses to Homes* study, subsidies for rehabilitation do result in a net cost for the city; however, rehabilitation provides benefits that average one-half of the original subsidy (net cost: \$21,866). Demolition is associated with lower upfront costs (approximately \$9,000), and lower property values for surrounding areas. "Although subsidy appears to be a much more costly alternative upfront (\$40,000 subsidy compared to no subsidy for demolition), after a systematic review of costs and benefits, the difference between the two strategies is closer to \$12,000" (\$21-9).



Adequate funding can help insure that vacant buildings are reoccupied. It must be determined whether the benefits derived through rehabilitation are worth the additional expenditure and whether current subsidy levels enable the development of quality housing that best serves the needs of the city and its residents.

*We propose that the Houses to Homes program\* increase subsidies to the levels originally established by the City Council (\$40,000 and \$65,000).*

\*Houses to Homes may be incorporated into Capital City Homes.

### **Capital City Development Program (CCDP)**

As stated in PED's Capital Improvement Program and Budget Process (CIB) Proposal, flexible financing is needed to assist various groups and individuals in undertaking an assortment of home creation or improvement projects. Streamlining the funding procedure by collapsing various programs and funds under one umbrella and disbursing mini-block grants, therefore, will be beneficial. *STAR funds should be included within the umbrella, as these funds are the most unrestricted resources available.* Although the STAR funds are most flexible, the current application guidelines are cumbersome and this has, in effect, reduced the number of applicants to the program. The STAR criteria should be reviewed to determine ways in which the funds can be more readily accessed.

One goal of the CCDP is to "decrease construction costs by eliminating onerous building requirements in an effort to make public resources stretch further". Legislative meetings have been held to address city requirements that add unnecessary cost; however, State Uniform Building Codes supersede City building code requirements. *We suggest, therefore, that St. Paul and other municipalities create a separate task force to make recommendations on possible State code changes.*

Finally, each development project is unique. While predetermined criteria are helpful in defining city parameters, these criteria must be flexible in allowing neighborhoods to define what constitutes a priority. Also there must be adequate PED housing staff to assist the neighborhoods with development proposals.

### **Recommendations**

#### *Vacant Building Procedure*

\* Rehabilitation and Reoccupation of vacant houses should be a city priority, with demolition as a last resort.

\*Create a notification procedure at the front end of the vacant building process. City Council, neighborhood District Councils, Community Development Corporations, land trusts and other groups should be notified during the vacant building registration process. A meeting should be held between these groups and the owner to make an early determination of a feasible plan for reoccupation, rehabilitation or demolition.

\*If rehabilitation or reoccupation is not feasible, salvaging the building materials should be a priority.

*Subsidy levels*

\*As under the *Houses to Homes* program, subsidies for rehabilitation should return to their original levels:

\$40,000 for a single family house and \$60,000 for conversion of multi-family units to a single-family unit.

\*For historic houses, a separate fund should be administered for those projects exceeding the subsidy limits of \$40,000 and \$60,000.

*CCDP*

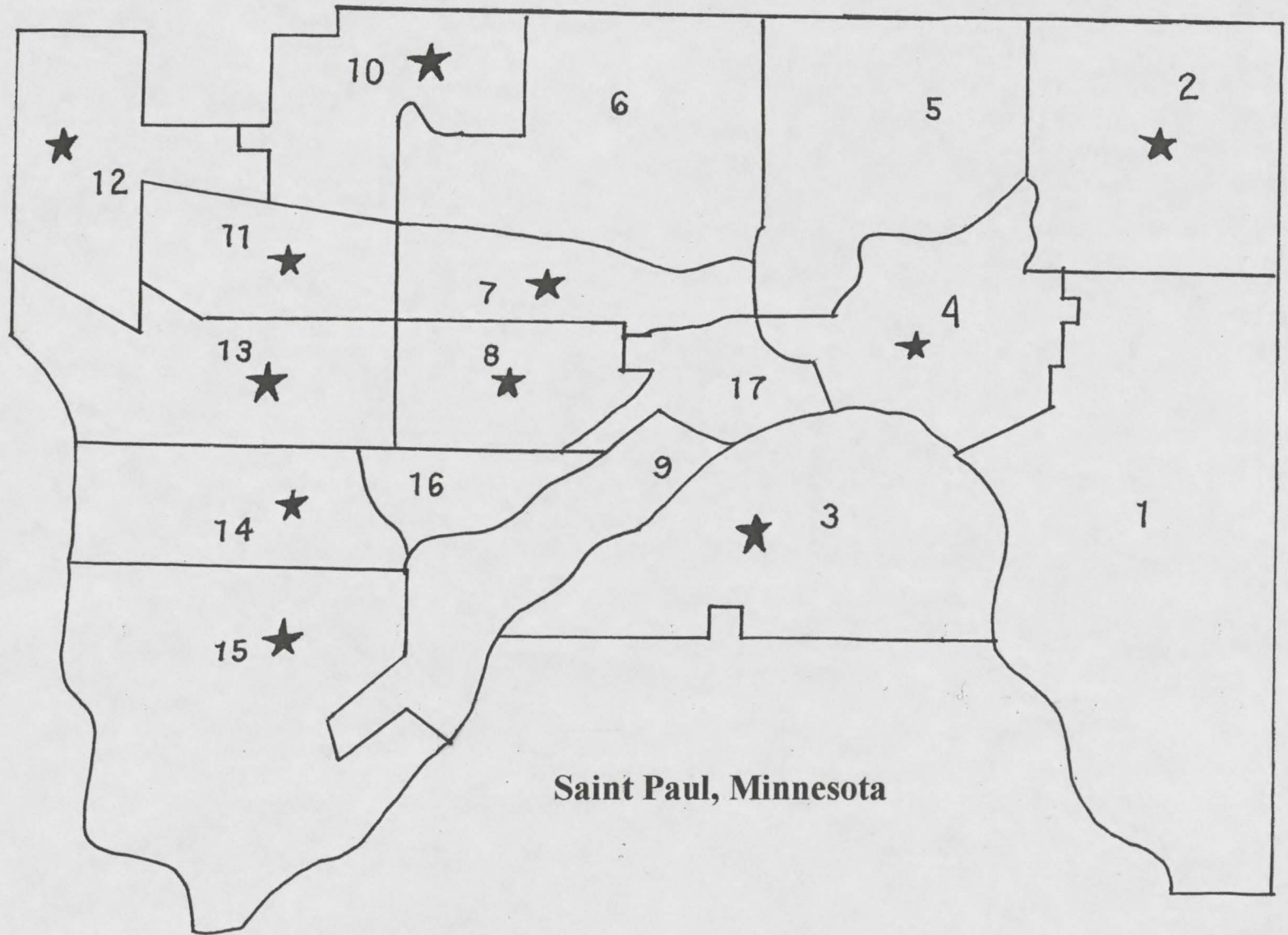
\*Include STAR funds in the Capital City Homes program. Reexamine STAR criteria in order to make this resource more readily available for use.

\*Because State Uniform Building Codes supersede City codes, St. Paul and other municipalities should form a task force to review which state codes could be changed to make them more cost effective.

\*Ensure that there is adequate PED staff to assist neighborhoods with development proposals. Also PED and neighborhoods should use the same type of software package for development projects.

**CITIZEN  
PARTICIPATION  
PLANNING  
DISTRICTS**

1. Battle Creek
2. Greater East Side
3. West Side
4. Dayton's Bluff
5. Payne-Phalen
6. North End
7. Thomas-Dale
8. Summit-University
9. West Seventh
10. Como
11. Hamline-Midway
12. St. Anthony
13. Lexington-Hamline  
Merriam Park  
Snelling Hamline
14. Macalester-Groveland
15. Highland
16. Summit Hill
17. Downtown



**Saint Paul, Minnesota**