

January 26, 2021

TO: Meg Beekman, Community Development Director

FROM: Haila Maze, Principal Urban Planner

RE: Brooklyn Center Opportunity Site Engagement Summary to Date

Background and Purpose



Pre-2018 Opportunity Site Planning

The Opportunity Site is an approximately 80-acre area west of Hwy 100 and east of Shingle Creek Parkway, between Bass Lake Road and Summit Drive.

The City first began planning for redevelopment of this area in the early 2000s. In partnership with the Metropolitan Council, the area was included in a regional study designed to examine how aging retail centers could redevelop to better serve the communities they are in. The resulting study introduced the concept of a mixed-use, walkable, town center as a vision for the area.

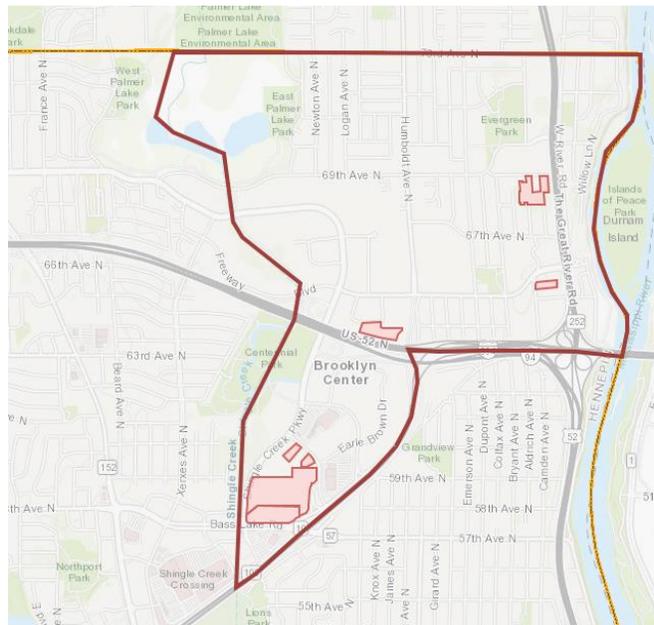
In 2006, the City commissioned Damon Farber and Associates to prepare a master plan for the area that is now known as the “Opportunity Site”. The plan identified a series of redevelopment concepts as well as created design guidelines for the new development. The 2006 plan continued to support the vision of the area as a cohesive mixed-use neighborhood and city center and proposed a mix of housing types and densities as well as new commercial development.

The Great Recession stalled the City’s redevelopment plans; however, reduced property values allowed the City’s EDA to acquire 31 acres of property within the Opportunity Site between 2008 and 2013.

Additional acquisitions occurred after that and by 2018, the City’s EDA owned approximately 35 acres of the 80-acre Opportunity Site area. The rest of the parcels are privately owned by various entities.

In early 2018, the Treasury Department rolled out the Opportunity Zone program, asking Governors of each state to submit census tracts into the program. The program was designed to provide capital gains tax relief on investment capital that supported development within

Brooklyn Center Opportunity Zone



designated Opportunity Zones. Minnesota Counties were tasked with identifying eligible census tracts for the program and submitting them to the Governor’s office. Hennepin County provided eligibility criteria to its municipalities, which included low-moderate income census tracts with redevelopment opportunities. Brooklyn Center submitted two census tracts, but only one was selected. The selected census tract includes much of the northeast quadrant of the City as well as the area the City had been referring to as the “Opportunity Site”. In May 2018, the Governor’s office submitted the selected census tracts to the Treasury Department.

Alatus Development Plan

In April 2018, the City entered into a Preliminary Development Agreement with developer Alatus that would allow them time to develop a master plan for the EDA-owned 35 acres within the Opportunity Site and to conduct due diligence on an initial phase of that development.

Prior to this, the City Council had solicited interest from developers to propose their vision for the site. Three developers came forward with concepts and after meeting with two of them, the Council selected Alatus because their vision aligned with the City’s 2006 master plan vision to create a mixed use, walkable town center that existing residents could benefit from and utilize.

By early 2019, Alatus had refined their overall concept for the site and were moving forward with early planning for an initial phase of development that would include approximately 300 units of housing and a mix of commercial on the ground floor. The concept was presented to Council and direction was made to renew the Preliminary Development Agreement with Alatus.

City-Led Master Plan

This agreement redirected control of the vision for the city, with the City taking the lead on master planning for the site, in partnership with Alatus, and incorporating the larger 80-acre Opportunity Site into the master plan. Alatus for their part in the agreement was tasked with implementing an initial phase of development and continuing their work to bring a development forward.

Throughout 2019, the City, along with its consultant team, worked to develop the Opportunity Site Master Plan. This was a multi-phased approach that involved a combination of technical assessment, initial community engagement, feasibility analysis, and further community engagement to continue to refine the plan.

In November 2019, the City purchased the 9-acre former Target site, within the Opportunity Site master planning area. The property was purchased soon after the store’s closure, in order to hold it for redevelopment that aligned with the master plan.

Approach to Engagement

The scale and reach of community engagement on this project has exceeded that of any past effort in the City's history; however, the intent with this project is to ensure that the outcomes truly benefitted the residents of Brooklyn Center, and this necessitates a much deeper, more inclusive engagement strategy.

From the beginning, the engagement approach was intended to support this vision through an in-depth, inclusive process that connected with diverse groups and views throughout the city.

Principles guiding this approach included:

- Consistency with city goals and policies, including the new city comprehensive plan.
- Ensuring the development provided direct access and benefits for city residents.
- Authentic engagement to connect people with the decision-making process.
- Meaningful opportunities to influence outcomes for the plan and the site.
- Transparency in decision making, to build trust and accountability.

While these principles have remained, the approach to engagement has evolved and changed since then, in response to feedback on effectiveness, and changes in external conditions.

Initial Engagement Plan: Spring-Fall 2019

Approach

With the many topics and issues to be considered, it was decided that an in-depth learning experience would be an appropriate way to bring the public into the planning process. As a result, the engagement process began with a series of hands-on workshops facilitated by LISC, which educated participants on the development process and explored options for the site. The outcomes of this process included a list of recommended community priorities and benefits to be included in the project. The final report, which was produced through a consensus-building process by the community, is attached to this summary.

Subsequent events, outlined in an engagement plan developed in Spring 2019, built upon this work by sharing out these ideas for review, input, and further comment.

Communicating About Opportunities

Strategies to communicate about opportunities for engagement included:

- Event flyers and mailed postcards
- Social media updates
- Website postings
- Media advisories and press releases
- Information shared through community-based groups
- Email updates via City systems and lists
- Information available in public buildings
- Updates shared through neighborhood association networks and meetings
- On-site signage
- Joint communications with other partners working in the area
- Direct invitations to key stakeholders

In-Person Engagement Activities

A focus of the engagement approach was to provide multiple opportunities for people who may not otherwise know about this project to participate, learn, and provide input. This included:

- Corridor Development Initiative Workshops, March 20, April 3, April 17, and May 1, 2019

- Brooklyn Center Health Fair Pop-up, April 27, 2019
- Multicultural Advisory Committee Workshop, May 28, 2019
- Earle Brown Days Pop-up, June 22, 2019
- City Council Presentation, July 1, 2019
- Second Saturday Market Pop-up, July 13, 2019
- APA Minnesota Brown Bag Lunch, July 16, 2019
- Youth in Governance Day with Brooklynk Interns, July 22, 2019
- National Night Out with Brooklynk Interns, August 6, 2019
- Second Saturday Market Pop-up, September 14, 2019
- Empire Media Podcast, Voice of Hope with Pastor Loveth, September 17, 2019
- Becoming Brooklyn Center Open House, Opportunity Site focus, September 19, 2019
- CEAP Farm Fresh Fest, September 20, 2019
- Community Band & BBQ, September 21, 2019

Online Engagement

In addition to the events, an online poll was circulated on the City's Polco survey platform throughout July 2019. Project information was shared via a newly developed project website and social media. This resulted in numerous online social media postings (on both city and neighborhood social media accounts), and an additional 80+ people signing up for project updates.

Youth Engagement

The city's Brooklynk interns, a cohort of local high school students paired with city departments, were used at several events to both provide input and collect input from others. The hiring of a temporary intern, also focusing on youth outreach, followed the conclusion of these internships. This involvement resulted in the recruitment and participation of youth in engagement, including their perspectives about what is important for the project.

Results of Engagement

By the end of this stage, there were over 1,000 direct engagements with residents and other community stakeholders. While participants were not asked to identify themselves directly, around one third to one half of participants were estimated to be people of color. By comparison, approximately 57% of the total population in Brooklyn Center, and 45% of the adult (18+) population, are people of color (Source: US Census 2013-2017 American Community Survey).

How This Impacted Plan

The following general themes have emerged from the engagement to date. More specifics are available in individual event summaries. Below is a summary of these themes and how they are addressed in the master plan.

- **Create indoor and outdoor spaces for community activities.** The plan envisions a series of attractive and inviting public spaces and facilities that would be available to all residents for formal and informal activities. This includes walkable downtown area district and a connected series of parks and open space amenities.
- **Make housing options and small business spaces accessible and affordable to the public.** The plan provides for a range of housing and small business spaces, with a focus on affordability. This includes specific goals for housing affordability, as well as prioritizing accommodation of small local businesses via an entrepreneurial market.
- **Build upon the asset of the city's cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity.** The plan envisions open, accessible, safe, and welcoming spaces that include elements reflecting diverse identities. Multicultural event spaces, markets, and public art were also identified as priorities.

- **Counteract disinvestment to strengthen the city's economic and tax base.** The plan is designed to be economically feasible, to attract and leverage private investment on the condition it is consistent with other project goals.
- **Connect this to the community, physically and socially.** The site design in the master plan includes connectivity to existing area sidewalks, trails, and transit networks, to make it part of the larger community. The plan also supported a vision of a site in which all residents could take pride.
- **Support environmental sustainability.** Improvements to the site consistent with the plan would create a much greener, more sustainable space. This includes more trees and landscaping, district stormwater amenities, a walkable neighborhood area, and mix of uses.

Feedback on Process

While effort was made to ensure a diverse representation of participants in the engagement process, concerns were raised that the engagement process had not been extensive or inclusive enough. The city wished to go further to ensure that all voices are heard. To this end, the City and its partners met to develop a subsequent stage of public engagement for the Opportunity Site, described below.

Revised Engagement Approach: Winter 2019- Spring 2020

Approach

This stage of engagement was designed not only to broaden outreach but to put more control of the process in the hands of the community. The intent was to ensure the plan was designed to be truly accountable to the public in terms of delivering on benefits.

To provide more focused guidance for this effort, the Opportunity Site Working Committee was formed. Comprised of a range of community partners (including ACER, CAPI, OLM, LIBA, Alliance for Metropolitan Stability, Brooklyn Bridge Alliance, and others), this group was focused on informing and facilitating the public engagement process. These groups were chosen to reflect the broad diversity of the city, via groups that work directly in the community.

Working Committee Outcomes

This group met regularly – as frequently as weekly – from September 2019 to February 2020, advising on both the plan itself and the engagement process. Needs identified by the working group, and how they were addressed by the process, included:

- **The need for clear understanding of the impacts of the project, particularly potential for gentrification and displacement.** Based on this, the project added a new housing study process to inform the plan and broader city policy on a range of housing policies and priorities. This is currently underway, along with studies of traffic, stormwater, and financial impacts.
- **The need to communicate information about the plan to the community clearly and consistently, so people can understand what they are engaging about.** This was addressed through the development of plan summary documents to help explain plan concepts to the public. A “meeting in a box” tool was designed to put this in a format that was useful to community partners in sharing about the project.
- **The need to ensure the language of the plan is inclusive and reflects community values.** The working group reviewed the plan together, section by section, via a series of facilitated workshops. This resulted in numerous changes to plan language and direction – particularly focused on identified desired community benefits.

- **The need for an ongoing accountability framework through plan implementation.** This was addressed through the development of a community benefits section of the plan, and the initiation of a plan to develop an equity checklist (described further below).
- **The need for more and deeper engagement.** It was determined that partners who know the community best were the ones situated most ideally to do community-based engagement. This resulted in the proposed approach described below.

Partner-Led Engagement

To refocus and expand engagement, an offer was extended to working committee participants to facilitate community-based engagement activities. The format of this was designed to be flexible, so that they could be customized to the specific style that was most accessible, welcoming, and relevant to the targeted populations. As identified by the Working Committee, these populations included youth, renters, communities of color, and low-income communities – including West African, Latinx, African American/Black, and Hmong/Lao communities.

City staff extended an invitation to lead community engagement to all organizations in the working committee. While not all were positioned to do this work, the City contracted with several of them to assist with deepening the community engagement work and reaching out to residents who have historically been marginalized in planning and development processes. Results included:

- Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth completed engagement work with young people in the community and presented their findings to the City Council. Engagement method included a series of facilitated small group focus groups, which included 81 youth. Participants ranged from 14-18 years of age, and reflected the broad diversity of the community's youth and were predominantly people of color.
- Paadio Consulting/Jude Nnadi elected to engage with African-born former and current residents of Brooklyn Center. The purpose was to outreach to various African ethnic and country-specific groups, attend in-person events to connect with residents in their own spaces and places, and administer a survey to gather input. Jude Nnadi attended 15 meetings/events and engaged with 300 participants; 127 participants filled out a survey.
- An OLM representative organized two in-person focus group sessions with renters in the community that allowed staff to have deep and meaningful dialogue with people currently residing in Brooklyn Center. All participants were people of color, with a significant proportion identifying as African.

Other community partner organizations, such as ACER, CAPI and LIBA, also entered into engagement contracts, but their work was largely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and unable to be completed.

Equity Development Scorecard

Through their conversations, the Working Committee recommended that the City utilize the Equity Development Scorecard to evaluate future development projects on the site. The scorecard is a tool that can be customized for each community and is designed to evaluate and score development. The tool could be customized to reflect the values and goals of the master plan, thus creating a method of accountability to the master plan that would last into the future.

When the Working Committee completed its meetings in February 2020, the intention was to transition that group to an Equity Development Scorecard Taskforce, which would be facilitated by the Alliance for Metropolitan Stability, focused on developing the Equity Scorecard.

Pandemic Era Engagement: Spring-Winter 2020

Impact of COVID-19

By January 2020, a draft Master Plan was completed based on the community engagement that had been done, along with the technical assessment work. An engagement strategy to evaluate the draft plan was developed, the beginnings of which began to be implemented.

Just at the time the partner-led engagement was getting started in February-March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. This disrupted planned events significantly due to the crisis state it brought upon many city residents – and the readjusted priorities of both the city and community partners as they sought to address urgent needs.

As a result, much of the originally planned engagement was cancelled or modified. Working committee partners individually met with City staff in Spring 2020, discussing the need to extend the engagement period to accommodate the fact that people were unavailable to engage in the short term. As a result, while the original intention had been to complete the master planning work by Summer 2020, it became clear that this was no longer possible. The timeline for completing the work has been extended and now a final draft is anticipated no sooner than Spring 2021.

Likewise, the transition into the equity scorecard process was delayed. The Alliance stated that it was no longer able to lead the process, and the City began a search for a suitable replacement to lead the effort so that it could continue based on the Working Committee's recommendation. Brooklyn Bridge Alliance was initially identified as an alternative to serve in this role, though that is currently on hold given the need to further consider options (as described below).

Engagement Results

Due to the pandemic, 2020 engagement was significantly scaled back from the original plan. All in-person engagement attempts were halted for safety reasons. Regardless, some limited engagement continued, including:

- Partner-led engagement identified above via BBA, Paadio, and OLM – largely based on what was achievable when in-person meetings were still feasible
- An expanded visual story map website, to make the plan's online presence more accessible and inviting for comments
- An online comment map hosted on the website, allowing people to review and add comments to various plan elements
- Development of online surveys and meeting in a box tools, for people to review and engage remotely on their own time
- Communications about online engagement opportunities, distributed via direct mailers to residents, social media updates, emails to the community and project partners, and flyer distribution – including at a drive-in movie night.

The project website received significant traffic during this time, resulting around 140,000 total visits. While it was not possible to track all the people who participated during this phase, those who were identifiable brought the total involvement to over 2,500 individuals though the end of this period. This estimate is likely low, because it does not account for anonymous web visitors and those interacting on social media or via informal networks.

Feedback on Process

As heard at the January 4, 2021 City Council meeting, there were significant concerns about the engagement process raised. This included the extensiveness, quality, and validity of the engagement done to date – and the need to refocus the approach going forward. Given this critique, the city is now pursuing plans for a refocused approach to engagement.

Next Steps

City staff has been in communication with the community-based organizations that were involved with the Engagement Working Committee. The intent has been to determine what a community engagement strategy might look like moving forward and when the appropriate time to initiate it would be.

Major considerations identified at this point include:

- **Determining community-based leadership for next stage engagement.** As noted above, the process to do this has been challenged both by lack of capacity for some organizations to take on the role, as well as by the much-larger impact of the pandemic. Community-based engagement leadership has been identified repeatedly as a priority however, so the city will continue to explore options. This will likely be a team effort, since different groups have unique advantages in reaching specific populations.
- **Building and maintaining trust in the city as a partner with community.** Feedback and critiques throughout the planning process point to a stark reality: there are many in the community who do not trust power structures, including the City itself. While there are many justifiable reasons for this distrust, it should not be accepted as a matter of course. Inclusive, transparent, and accountable processes are needed to help build and maintain this – including accountability that extends well into the implementation phase.
- **Building community capacity to understand and influence the plan and future city actions.** This process has pointed to the need to build up the community's capacity to understand and engage effectively in decision-making processes. As with the lack of trust, this reflects the impact of historic and structural issues that extend well beyond the scope of this specific project. While not all of this can be solved in the short term, this should be kept in mind and worked towards.
- **Keeping the project moving forward.** Without some forward momentum in terms of developing the site (including approval of future private development projects), no benefits will be achieved for the community if the site remains empty. Indeed, the result will be worse than zero, as the site's vacancy, blight, and absence from the tax rolls means it is a drain on the city's financial resources and community fabric. While this does not mean the process should be rushed, it also means that delaying the project indefinitely is an undesirable option.