

# NICOLLET ISLAND-EAST BANK NEIGHBORHOOD SMALL AREA PLAN



**Nicollet Island East Bank Neighborhood Association**

**Executive Summary**

**October 2014**

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# Acknowledgments

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We acknowledge and thank all the residents, business owners, and other interested parties who participated in the development of this Small Area Plan. Altogether, over 200 people participated in the process in one way or another. Their commitment to making this wonderful neighborhood the best that it can be has been inspiring.

This plan is a culmination of countless hours of work over 18 months by the Nicollet Island-East Bank Small Area Plan Steering Committee, including the following members:

Lou Burdick	Victor Grambsch	Rodd Johnson	Leo Melzer
Chris Christoforides	Katie Greene	John Larkey	Linda Sheran
Barry Clegg	Michael Guncheon	Matt Lehman	Karen Snedeker
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The plan reflects the insights and visions of the neighborhood association's Board of Directors, who made the plan's development possible:

Lou Burdick	Victor Grambsch	Matt Lehman	Judy Richardson
Barry Clegg	Michael Guncheon	Doré Mead	Steve Rosenberg
Ryan Curry	Dale Herron	Jeffrey Meehan	Thomas Sheran
Jan Deming	Lisa Hondros	Leo Melzer	Kevin Upton

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## NICOLLET ISLAND-EAST BANK NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION

Victor Grambsch  
President and Chair of the Small Area Plan Steering Committee

Consultants to the Board and Steering Committee on this project:



# Executive Summary

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This Small Area Plan (Plan) describes the Nicollet Island-East Bank neighborhood, its past, its present, and its future. The intended audiences for this Plan are city officials, city staff, other governmental agencies, neighborhood volunteers, developers, and residents. The Plan mandates key changes that will increase the neighborhood's population and expand its economy by varying and enlivening land uses and the economic base and by intensifying development of currently underutilized properties. The Plan spells out steps to achieve the neighborhood's vision by implementing its goals.

On the banks of the Mississippi River across from downtown Minneapolis, the Nicollet Island-East Bank neighborhood is a crossroads linking Downtown, the University of Minnesota, and the Northeast Arts District. It is poised to capture significant growth during the current wave of development in the City. Originally called St. Anthony, the area was recognized by the Minnesota Territorial Legislature as a Town in 1855. Today, the neighborhood is the smallest and one of the oldest in Minneapolis [along with Marcy-Holmes and St. Anthony East, which were also parts of the original town of St. Anthony]. Nicollet Island-East Bank includes the City's only residential island.

It is a neighborhood of contrasts. Nicollet Island provides the setting for 19th Century homes near the River's edge and for Nicollet Island Park with its commanding views of the river, Downtown and the Stone Arch Bridge. The East Bank – with its eclectic mix of low-rise historic storefronts and modern residential high-rises – reminds visitors of both the East Bank's early days as the City's first commercial district and then its first re-birth with major industrial compounds.

Nicollet Island-East Bank includes one of the most heavily used park districts in the Metropolitan Area: The Mississippi Riverfront. This Plan preserves and protects the parks while building better, more attractive connections among the neighborhood's parks, commercial districts, and residential areas.

Today, the East Bank is once again on the cusp of significant change. Increasingly, unique shops and restaurants are opening in this now-trendy neighborhood, while the last of the remaining industrial sites has closed. Major "opportunity sites" are ripe for redevelopment and could become home to scores of additional businesses and at least hundreds of new residents.

At the same time, the first modern streetcar line in Minneapolis is planned to traverse Nicollet Island-East Bank. That will strengthen the neighborhood's role as a crossroads for public transportation in Minneapolis. It will also spur substantial growth, both in population and economic activity, leveraging the increasing popularity of inner-city convenience and sustainable patterns of development. In this small neighborhood straddling the boundary between northeast and southeast Minneapolis, each major roadway – East Hennepin, Central, University, and 1st Avenues as well as 4<sup>th</sup> Street – is already a major transportation corridor and a vital commercial and residential street.





The neighborhood of the future will have safe and bustling streets and sidewalks where people can be found walking at all hours of the day and night. In a compact neighborhood teeming with people, tall buildings will comfortably face shorter neighbors; and no two buildings will look exactly alike. The community will be transit oriented and people friendly. It will include the full spectrum of housing, business and other options that will attract and support residents and visitors from across the region and beyond.

The Nicollet Island-East Bank Neighborhood Association invites the City of Minneapolis, Hennepin County, and the Metropolitan Council to join it in this journey, pursuing an even brighter future for this already vibrant neighborhood.



## VISION

The Nicollet Island-East Bank neighborhood will achieve significant growth in both residential and business population and tax base during the next 20 years. When fully developed, the neighborhood will be a culturally diverse home to at least hundreds more people and scores of thriving new businesses. A vital urban neighborhood in its own right, Nicollet Island-East Bank also functions as a major crossroads for the City and as a destination for the region.

With new housing built to universal design standards along easy-to-navigate sidewalks and streets, the neighborhood will serve as an urban laboratory where innovations take place within the public realm. The eclectic neighborhood will be known for its public art, walkability and bikability, access to great public transportation, welcoming plazas and innovative parklets, environmental sensitivity, and careful blending of the new with the old.

Visitors from across the region will have numerous reasons to seek out Nicollet Island-East Bank as a place to shop, dine, or simply enjoy access to the riverfront. Buildings both small and tall will anchor and enliven busy, bustling streets. The sustainable and environmentally-sound neighborhood will offer such a wide variety of housing, commercial, and cultural choices that residents will never *have* to leave the neighborhood.

## MAJOR STRATEGIC GOALS

1. Strengthen the neighborhood's role in the regional economy, with emphasis on businesses that are unique, in part by restoring East Hennepin to its historic commercial roots.
2. Guide infill development while increasing density, cultivating mixed-use corridors, and increasing communal green space.
3. Attract a rich mix of residents, cultural experiences, businesses and other institutions, building types and styles, and employment opportunities.
4. Adapt to contemporary use the historical character, unique architecture, and regional and neighborhood parks – in cooperation with the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board and in compliance with the historic district guidelines of the St. Anthony Falls Heritage Zone and the Central Mississippi Riverfront Regional Park Master Plan.
5. Expand and improve pedestrian, bicycling, and transit infrastructure throughout the neighborhood.
6. Provide an exceptional urban pedestrian experience for people of all ages.
7. Act as stewards of the environment, valuing sustainability, energy conservation, minimal surface water run-off, and re-use/reduce/recycle economies.
8. Enhance public safety through maximum use of “eyes-on-the-street” building designs.



## TOP PRIORITIES

1. Restore one-way streets to two-way operations.
2. Expand the Pedestrian Oriented Overlay District to include the entire neighborhood.
3. Attract high quality development to underutilized areas.
4. Increase emphasis on the pedestrian with amenities such as artwork, wider sidewalks, trees, parklets, enhanced lighting, street “furniture” (benches, tables, etc.), and transparent building facades.
5. Eliminate overhead utilities.
6. Support improved transit services and infrastructure including the Nicollet-Central Streetcar implementation, real time transit information signage and otherwise.
7. Improve connections to the riverfront parkland and to bicycle and pedestrian trails.

## ACTION HIGHLIGHTS

### **Chapter One: Introduction**

Nicollet Island-East Bank is the smallest and one of the oldest neighborhoods in Minneapolis. On the Mississippi River just east of Downtown, the neighborhood includes Nicollet Island (the only residential island in Minneapolis) and the East Bank, a triangle formed by the River, Central Avenue, and the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad line.

An estimated one-third to one-half of the property in the East Bank portion of the neighborhood is ready for redevelopment. It is ready for significant population growth that re-use would enable. Now is the time to focus on redevelopment efforts here, while new households are forming at a rapid pace and the viability of the urban core is rising.

Once fully developed, the East Bank will be even more vibrant than it is today. It will be home to scores of businesses, both old and new. It will be a sustainable and culturally-diverse community where people live, work, shop, dine, and play. Together, both Nicollet Island and the East Bank will treasure their natural and built environments and ensure the strength of their property tax base for the long term.

Chapter One designates the Small Area Plan as the official document that guides the neighborhood’s land use.

### **Chapter Two: Land Use & Housing**

***Re-zone the entire East Bank as C3A Community Activity Center District and expand the Pedestrian Oriented Overlay District to encompass the entire neighborhood.***



Although residential towers constructed in the last 30 years command a presence in the skyline, small scale commercial buildings tend to dominate the East Bank. Industrial businesses have ceased operation and the neighborhood no longer functions as an industrial area.

High density mixed uses including housing, retail, and offices – with extensive ground floor commercial spaces – can be expected as the norm for future development. Consistent with City goals of making this a high pedestrian and transit oriented area, these uses will also support existing small businesses and enhance transit ridership.

NIEBNA seeks to maximize development of taller, architecturally distinguished, mixed use structures that will accommodate significant increases in population and employment on the East Bank, while recognizing that smaller structures may be needed in certain locations.

### **Chapter Three: Transportation**

#### ***Restore one-way streets to two-way operations.***

This Plan's top priority is to restore Hennepin and 1st Avenues and 4<sup>th</sup> Street within the neighborhood to two-way operations. That work is essential for maximizing the redevelopment potential of major opportunity sites, especially for retail uses. Transportation agencies should employ "smart street" technologies as part of the two-way street restoration work. Emphasizing pedestrian safety and ease of movement, those technologies result in considerably shorter travel times, as recently demonstrated in downtown Minneapolis.

#### ***Enhance the pedestrian and bicyclist experience.***

NIEBNA encourages the City to consider the neighborhood an "urban laboratory" for testing new approaches to incent walking, bicycling and transit as preferred modes of travel. The City could try out new types of lighting, signage, streetscape and sidewalk improvements, traffic management, street furniture, and other features for use in street rights-of-way. "All Walk" intersections, which reduce conflicts between cars and pedestrians, are an example of a strategy that could be tested.

#### ***Provide modern streetcars that reflect a common sense plan.***

NIEBNA supports installation of modern streetcars on East Hennepin Avenue and 1st Avenue Northeast in a way that leverages the redevelopment potential of the neighborhood. Most major development opportunity sites in the neighborhood would have frontage on the streetcar line.

The neighborhood asks, however, that the City *not* split its smallest neighborhood into two parts by curtailing the streetcar "starter line" at 5th Street Northeast, as proposed in the "starter streetcar line" plan adopted by the City Council in 2013. Fifth Street is not a "common sense" terminus for the line; the streetcar line should extend at least to 8th Street Northeast and should not interfere with the restorations of East Hennepin and 1st Avenues to two-way operations.

The neighborhood supports the streetcar in the context of its full implementation up to 41st Avenue Northeast.



## **Chapter Four: Urban Design**

### ***Enhance the standards of the Pedestrian Oriented Overlay District.***

Future development of the East Bank presents a rare opportunity to make dramatic changes to the character of the neighborhood. With several major improvement sites located in close proximity of each other, this overlay district ensures that each new building is designed with pedestrians in mind. Street level façades should be transparent and visually interesting. Streetscapes in front of new buildings should incorporate vegetation, street furniture, signage and other amenities that make each storefront distinct. By varying upper level building stepbacks from streets, taller buildings can maximize sunlight below and create a more interesting skyline while enhancing the pedestrian experience. NIEBNA encourages a variety of architectural styles and is opposed to “cookie cutter” designs. The expanded Pedestrian Oriented Overlay District will include requirements for developments to achieve these characteristics. With this approach, the neighborhood itself will serve as a regional attraction and as a laboratory for urban design.

### ***Strengthen the neighborhood’s identity.***

A stronger neighborhood identity would entice visitors to return to the neighborhood more often. Unifying strategies like pedestrian-scale lighting and “street jewelry” such as banners and planters would aid this effort. At the same time, the neighborhood and its businesses should savor their eccentricities with individualized storefronts and street features like benches, umbrellas, and landscaping that give the neighborhood character and reflect its personality.

## **Chapter Five: Economic Development**

### ***Increase the population of the East Bank.***

This Plan calls for increasing the population of the East Bank through the development of higher density rental and owner occupied housing that serves all income levels and ethnicities.

### ***Expand employment and economic activity***

NIEBNA intends to strengthen the neighborhood’s role in the regional economy through increased retail (business to consumer) and non-retail (business-to-business) activity, including professional services and technology firms. A key strategy is that all major developments be mixed-use, to increase the amount of commercial and office space available in the neighborhood.

### ***Attract bold, creative, and highly integrated residential and commercial development.***

NIEBNA expects the neighborhood to attract highly-qualified private developers to construct mixed-use buildings that generate both daytime and nighttime uses. This will be particularly important for major opportunity sites, especially sites that front the proposed streetcar line. Mixed-use buildings should offer retail-oriented commercial space on ground floors, with residential or office uses on upper floors.





## **Chapter Six: Arts, Culture & Heritage Preservation**

### ***Enliven the neighborhood with art and entertainment at key locations.***

Iconic artwork should strengthen the unity of purpose and the connections between the River and the arts district of Northeast Minneapolis. For example, works of art might be installed in the following general locations: on the west side of Main Street, between Hennepin and 1st Avenues; near the northeast corner of Hennepin and University Avenues; in the vicinity of the junction of Hennepin and Central Avenues; and in the proposed micro park near 1st Avenue and 5th Street.

As properties on Hennepin and 1st Avenues are improved, developers should be encouraged to add works of art to their buildings, creating still more reasons for people to experience the neighborhood's sidewalks.

## **Chapter Seven: Parks and Open Space**

### ***Build a micro, urban park/open space in the northeast section of the neighborhood.***

Although it is the smallest neighborhood in Minneapolis, Nicollet Island-East Bank contains extensive public parkland managed by the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB). Those public spaces include much of Nicollet Island with its charming pavilion, amphitheater, and trails; the entire length of Mississippi riverfront in the neighborhood, which is mostly parks and trails; and the recently-refurbished Chute Square Park that is home to the historic Ard Godfrey House, the oldest existing wood-frame house in Minneapolis.

Great cities have great public spaces. Nicollet Island-East Bank Neighborhood Association calls for the City and/or MPRB to create a great urban space in the northeast section of the neighborhood. That space will launch a new era for Minneapolis that will attract at least hundreds of new residents and scores of new businesses to this end of town, resulting in a dramatic expansion of the City's property tax base. This relatively modest investment in the East Bank would maximize the neighborhood's development potential.

This Plan envisions a small but highly-visible and active public plaza that would serve as a community gathering and performance space. Intended to be *the* place in the neighborhood to see and be seen, the plaza would provide an intense, artistic, and eclectic venue that would set the tone for future development in the neighborhood.

### ***Provide youth friendly and pet friendly amenities in the neighborhood.***

NIEBNA asks the MPRB to include youth-friendly and pet-friendly amenities on Nicollet Island and along the east bank of the River.

