

9.0 - VENTURA VILLAGE INITIATIVES

9.3 - THE CRYSTAL PARK INITIATIVE

9.3.1 - What is Crystal Park:

Crystal Park is an urban development initiative first proposed by Ventura Village in late 1998. Ventura Village sought to develop Crystal Park in the fifteen block area bounded by I-94, Cedar Avenue, and Hiawatha Avenue which is now the site of the LRT Operations and Maintenance Facility (more commonly known as the "yards and shops").

Design of the Crystal Park Plan was motivated by the desire to reconnect five neighborhoods that were divided in the recent past by highways and railroads. Ventura Village, Seward, Cedar-Riverside, Elliot Park, and Phillips, were at one point thriving communities that were home to Minneapolis working class families, neighborhood businesses, and community schools and institutions. The vision of Ventura Village was to use the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity afforded by the construction of the



View of Crystal Park

Hiawatha light rail (LRT) line to reconnect these neighborhoods and create a pedestrian friendly, transit-oriented community that would work towards making our city whole again.

The Crystal Park Plan took a fresh approach to development along the LRT route. With an open mind, and input from engineers, planners, residents, architects, business owners, and other cities who already have successful LRT systems (Portland, Oregon and the District of Columbia), we were able to put together a plan that yielded a positive cost/benefit analysis for the entire LRT system, that alleviated almost 20% of the City of Minneapolis housing shortage, and that made future LRT line connections to the east and west more efficient.

9.3.2 - Some of the Benefits of the Crystal Park Plan

We proposed the Crystal Park Plan because we felt that it would bring many positive changes for our neighborhood, our city, and our region. Among these were:

- A reconfiguration of the LRT Operations and Maintenance Facility that minimized adverse impacts on our population and preserved the maximum development area along Franklin and Cedar Avenues,
- Construction of a project that created a lively LRT station area with safe, inviting pedestrian environments, and that concentrated new development along pedestrian and bike routes to create safe 24 hour environments with many "eyes on the street", and that reconnected the neighborhoods of Ventura Village, Phillips and Seward,
- Creation of an integrated transit hub that could conveniently link bus riders, bikers and

pedestrians to the light rail system, allowing easy access to regional transit service,

- Construction of new mixed-income housing and commercial development that created and attracted new living-wage jobs for local residents, that strengthened pedestrian connections to neighborhoods, businesses, transit service, the Midtown Greenway, and nearby parks.



Cross-section of Crystal Park, showing proposed housing, Hiawatha Avenue land-bridge, and relation to Franklin Avenue.

9.3.3 - Some Issues Addressed by the Crystal Park Plan

Additionally, our plan sought to remedy concerns about several specific issues that had been brought forward by citizen groups:

- The impact of the LRT Operations and Maintenance Facility would have been reduced and best mitigated by relocating it to the industrial sector south of Franklin Avenue, near 28th Street. This area is free of residential uses, is currently zoned for industrial operations, and is well within the area covered by the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that governs the construction of the LRT line.
- The challenge of providing safe, convenient access to the station would have been best solved by relocating the station away from the open inaccessible location above Franklin Avenue, to a location within a commercial and residential development. This new location would have been accessible to all including the mobility-impaired. It would have been safer because it would have been indoors in a secure environment. Many parties that were involved in the LRT public participation process for the area agreed with Ventura Village's determination that the plans proposed by the DOT and their partners was inadequate in this respect. The following is a quote from Franklin Avenue LRT Task Force - Final Report - 3/1/2000, p10:

"The concrete wasteland between Seward and Ventura Village is completely inhospitable to pedestrian, wheelchair and bicycle activity. The absence of buildings along Franklin Avenue to provide activity and eyes on the street is part of the problem. The grade separation as Franklin Avenue drops beneath the LRT rail Bridge and the Hiawatha Avenue/Highway 55 overpass further isolates pedestrians and others passing through this automobile-dominated "no-one's land". While safe access to the LRT station is a concern to residents of both neighborhoods, it is of particular concern in Phillips (Ventura Village) because of the two enormous barriers to the station area from the west: Hiawatha Avenue and the grade separation of Franklin Avenue from the LRT line above."

- The potential for significant new development in the station area was optimized in the Crystal Park Plan. The planned development included 3,800 to 5,000 new housing units, and over 200,000 square feet of neighborhood retail and commercial space.
- The Crystal Park Plan addressed the still critical shortage of affordable housing. This is perhaps the most critical issue facing the entire Metropolitan area. While Minneapolis concentrates its resources on an entertainment center in the heart of downtown (the Block E redevelopment), middle-class working adults are unable to find affordable housing. Over half of the 7000 new housing units planned by Ventura Village were to be built in Crystal Park.
- The Crystal Park Plan reconnected downtown Minneapolis to Cedar-Riverside, Seward and Ventura Village - there is no better way to strengthen a city than by fortifying the strength of its connections.
- The Crystal Park Plan would have created up to 6000 jobs in an area that will now only hold 100 to 150 jobs (Mn/DOT LRT Factbook). Many of the jobs created by Crystal Park would have gone to inner-city residents living nearby.
- The LRT's projected negative cost/benefit ratio would have been reversed had Crystal Park's commercial and residential projects been built instead of the Operations and Maintenance Facility.

9.3.4 - Outcome

In the end, our proposal was not accepted by the Metropolitan Council, Mn/DOT, or the Hiawatha Project Office (HPO). Their reasons basically centered on the timing of our proposal vs. the flow of their design and construction schedule. This was so even though community members requested reconsideration of the siting decision for the Operations and Maintenance Facility almost immediately after the decision was made public. Legislators, including Senator Linda Berglin and Representative Karen Clark, repeatedly requested reexamination of this issue and an in-depth evaluation of the potential benefits of Crystal Park's transit-oriented development model. We were unable to make progress even with a developer's signed letter of commitment to Crystal Park. That developer, Dominion Inc., a leading land development company, was excited about the promise of central city housing development and revitalization that the project was based on. Although in the end we were not able to move the Crystal Park Plan forward, we provide information on it here so that the record contains information on what could have been a wonderful project for our city.