## 9.0 - VENTURA VILLAGE INITIATIVES

### 9.1 - PROPOSAL FOR AIR-RIGHTS DEVELOPMENT

#### 9.1.1 - What we want to do:

The neighborhood of Ventura Village seeks to obtain support for the construction of commercial and residential properties over existing freeway right-of-way. This proposal is motivated by the desire to improve neighborhood continuity, connection, and circulation, which were disrupted as a result of freeway construction in the 1960s. Reestablishment of the neighborhood's urban fabric will increase the neighborhood's residential and commercial vitality and desirability, greatly aiding its ongoing economic and social recovery.

#### 9.1.2 - Why we want to do it:

Interstates 35W and 94 were built through the Minneapolis Southside in the mid 1960s. Construction required the demolition of several hundred homes and businesses in this area (including in what is now Ventura Village), and brought significant disruption to the established fabric of the neighborhood.

The loss of homes and businesses, the disruption of pedestrian connections, the establishment of significant barriers to neighborhood cohesion (17 lanes of traffic now separate Ventura Village from Elliot Park), and the provision of incomplete access from the new freeway to the neighborhood's commercial corridors combined to decrease the commercial viability and residential desirability of the Phillips neighborhood. As a result, its decline paralleled that of other central city locations nationwide.

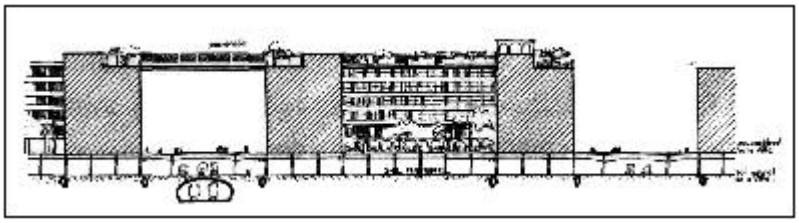
#### 9.1.3 - A short history of air-rights development

The idea of developing residential or commercial properties on bridges over transportation routes is not new. Antecedents go back as early as 14th Century Florence, where the Ponte Vecchio (a bridge over the Arno River) became the center of the goldsmith trade and a lively spot for the tourists who visit it to this day.

*Two views of the Ponte Vecchio, Florence, Italy.*

The arrival of the automobile brought a whole new set of demands for our cities. The provision of transportation routes that could satisfy the needs of trucks and automobiles became political and economic priorities in many urban centers, and often led to solutions that had negative

implications for the welfare of the city's urban fabric. Efforts to find a way to reconcile the competing demands of transportation and urban form began in the early 20th Century, when it became clear that the automobile would continue to gain importance as the means of transport for a large segment of a city's populations. Architects and engineers of the time proposed many innovative solutions to mitigate the undesirable impacts they saw as consequences from the construction of urban highways. As early as 1915, French architect Le Corbusier sought to decrease congestion and preserve buildable city space by building commerce and residences above the roads which would carry high speed automobile traffic.



*Ville Pilotis (1915), from Le Corbusier's Towards a New Architecture, 1931.*

Many of the solutions proposed by these visionary designers were not carried out in their lifetimes. In the United States, the conventional wisdom held that there was always more land in which to build, and that cities were not that valuable anyway, being noisy, busy places full of old buildings that should instead be torn down to make room for sleek, modern glass boxes. It is only after urban freeways and urban renewal schemes become reality that citizens and public officials begin to realize the cost at which these schemes were carried out. Construction of I-94 and 35W, for example, had a number of negative impacts for the area that is now Ventura Village. The 17 lanes of traffic that now separate Ventura Village from Elliot Park severed the connection of what was a whole, continuous neighborhood. The same is true of the connection with the Whittier neighborhood, which was disrupted with the construction of 35W. In addition, the loss of the hundreds of homes and business which were demolished to make room for the freeway took jobs and opportunities for gainful employment from neighborhood residents and significantly decreased the city's tax base.

It is only recently that communities are recognizing the importance of their urban centers and working to rescue the energy and vitality that they historically shared with their metropolitan regions. The practices of "New Urbanist" planners in fact seek to address these losses and integrate the needs of modern transportation infrastructure with the needs of pedestrians and city dwellers in order to provide all citizens with the opportunity to live in a desirable, positive, and vital environment.

Sometimes these initiatives are motivated by the desire to aid the economic revitalization of city cores, as a way to reverse the trends of capital flight to the suburbs, and to regain the economic vitality that was characteristic of a city's central neighborhoods. Additionally, these initiatives can seek to address the social problems that have come to be seen as endemic in central cities and

that have much to do with the lack of social connection that exists in these places (itself a consequence of the physical separation between residents and community institutions resulting from freeways that function as barriers for citizens of the neighborhoods through which they are built). Additionally, reconnection can be motivated by the desire to create stronger links from residential and commercial areas to natural or economic resources within a community. Duluth, for example, sought to reconnect its city to the Lake Superior shore by constructing a park and interpretative center that allowed a pedestrian connection to this natural asset. The integration of the Lake Superior shore into the life of the city has helped to revitalize Duluth and transform it into a major tourist destination the Midwest.

City planners nationwide almost universally recognize that the urban freeways built in the 1960s did significant damage to the neighborhoods through which they were built. These professionals have been joined by citizens, designers and other government officials in seeking ways in which to restore their cities' urban fabric, incorporating New Urbanist principles in project that they hope will revitalize their neighborhoods and make improve the quality of their cities. Boston, for example, will soon complete construction of its Central Artery Tunnel, which will place underground most of the roadway which was built through the city's central neighborhoods in the mid 1960's. Hailed as a project with great potential for the City of Boston, the Central Artery project includes the construction of commercial and residential space above the tunnels that carry automobile traffic through the city. The city of Portland, Oregon is also at this time considering the construction of "caps" over I-405 rights-of-way in order to facilitate the development of additional residential, commercial and park properties in the city. Portland expects to add over 1000 housing units, 650 000 square feet of commercial space and more than six acres of parks to its city through construction on these air-rights parcels.

**9.1.4 - Air-rights development in Minneapolis**

Ventura Village's proposal is not the first time that development on freeway air-rights has been proposed for Minneapolis. In fact, similar proposals were mentioned beginning in the early 1960's as politicians and local officials grappled with issues of neighborhood disconnection and tax roll reduction resulting from the construction of I-94 and 35W. A quick search of the newspaper archives from that time gives an interesting picture of the ideas being floated about, and the extent to which city and state transportation officials explored some of these options.


Grant May Aid Platform Over 35W

*From the Minneapolis Star, November 4, 1965.*

By 1965 lawmakers, DOT and other government officials were advocating air-rights development as a way of making use of property rights above the highway trench and mitigating some of the impacts that its construction brought. The Minneapolis Star, in an article dated November 4, 1965 ("Grant May Aid Platform Over 35W"), quotes then 5th District Congressman Donald Fraser proposing the construction of a school-park complex over 35W near the site of the Marcy-Holmes School that was torn down to make room for the freeway, and paying for it with Federal funds. Minnesota Highway Department Commissioner John Jamieson was apparently also supportive of the idea and entered into conversations with the city about leasing the "air rights" of the highway for such and end.

A Minneapolis Star article from three years later, November 13 1968 shows the continuing appeal that air rights construction held for city and state officials. Weiming Lu, then head of the City of Minneapolis Planning Department proposed using air rights over the freeway for new construction. He is quoted as saying that air rights development was a viable way to "take advantage of land that has been taken off the tax rolls", and saw the additional benefit that "new building over the freeway ... could also stretch downtown".

An article the next day (November 14, 1968 "Success of Freeway 'Surgery' in Doubt") quotes Marvin Tenhoff, then the planning director of the Minneapolis schools speaking of the possibility of using air rights development over the new freeway trenches to build new schools. He argues that air-rights development "would serve the double purpose of linking neighborhoods" that now found themselves separated by the freeways and "avoid taking more land off the tax rolls". His comments are followed by remarks from then Deputy City Assessor John Taylor who also cites concern at the amount of land taken off the tax rolls and which would remain unproductive unless developed.

## 9.2 - MARKET FEASIBILITY AND POTENTIAL FOR AIR-RIGHTS DEVELOPMENT

### 9.2.1 - Literature Search

The Ventura Village Master Plan envisions an air rights development above I-35W at Franklin Avenue and I-94 between Portland and Chicago Avenues. A literature search was conducted to identify examples of other air rights development.

Air rights can be purchased or leased and then used to further development and increase density. Air rights are commonly held either by the owner of a building or parking lot, or by the state, especially when roadways are involved. Many communities have researched the potential of building on air rights, but few projects actually proceed. The main reason for the cancellation and delay of these projects is the bureaucratic maze that has developed surrounding the use of air rights by various local, county, and state agencies. While many of these safeguards are necessary, for instance the protection of surrounding businesses and homes from a loss in

available parking, others are more indicative of conservative, “safe,” thinking.

Several projects have gone through the exhaustive process of approval by both governments and communities in several different parts of the United States. The following projects will be discussed in this section: CA/T Project in Boston, Lake Place Project in Duluth, Freeway Park in Seattle, Northrup Commons in Portland, and Deck Park in Phoenix.

### 9.2.1a CA/T Project – Boston, MA

The Boston Central Artery/Tunnel Project (CA/T) was first envisioned in the late 1960’s by a committee convened to address the expansion of the expressway system in Boston. The project is estimated to cost at least ten billion dollars and is scheduled to be complete by 2004. It is the largest public works project under way in the United States. The CA/T encompasses 7.5 miles of highway, or 160 lane miles, a new harbor tunnel, increased access to Logan airport, increased traffic through downtown, the reconnection of community neighborhoods that were split apart by previous freeway expansion, the reclamation of Boston’s waterfront as a part of the city, and the reclamation 36 city blocks that were demolished to make way for the old expressway system.

Advocates of the project believe it will enhance existing traffic capacity, provide 27 acres of open space in downtown Boston, and separate regional highway traffic from local traffic.

The project would open much needed space for development in downtown Boston. Potential projects include a 59-story housing, hotel, cinema, and health care complex that has been proposed by Millennium Partners, a hotel complex proposed by Arthur Winn, an expansion of the Boston Red Sox stadium, and Boston University’s bid to increase its campus.

### 9.2.1b Lake Place Project – Duluth, MN

The Lake Place Project capped Interstate 35 in 1992 in an attempt to reclaim Lake Superior as a vibrant and important section of the city. The project cost 300 million dollars and was an alternative to a proposed freeway expansion.

The highway air rights support a two-and-half acre park, historic buildings, and a rose garden that attracts hundreds of thousands of people. A $35 million high-tech campus is also part of the project. It is estimated to support 600 to 1,000 people with salaries ranging from $75,000 to $200,000 a year. This would also encourage further growth, especially in the housing sector.

### 9.2.1c Freeway Park – Seattle, WA

Freeway Park was completed in 1976 and cost $13,794,000 in public investment. The five-acre

city park was built over an existing parking lot, on freeway air rights, that contains 612 spaces. The park contains 20,000 cubic yards of sand and topsoil, almost 500 trees, 4 different water elements, and the 21-story, 299,564 square foot, Park Place Building.

Seattle has also capped three other segments of the freeway system. One houses a semi-public convention center building and the other two contain parks.

#### 9.2.1d Northrup Commons – Portland, OR

Northrup Commons, designed and built by Sienna Architecture Company, is a 59,000 square foot residential project built over a clinic parking lot. Construction costs were $110 per square foot, while the sales price for the apartments has been around $200 per square foot. The structure was designed to meld into the surrounding community, and kept both the original parking lot and its new lot concealed from public view.

#### 9.2.1e Deck Park – Phoenix, AZ

The Arizona Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration designed and funded the construction of the Deck Park in central Phoenix. The project, at a cost of over $60,000,000 is intended to “re-establish community cohesion” and to promote redevelopment of the surrounding area. Deck Park was constructed on a structural deck that was built over freeway I-10 between Third Street and Third Avenue.

The development strategy includes the creation of a 17-acre park, 950 units of housing, a 250-room hotel and over 1,800,000 square feet of commercial and office space.

### 9.2.2 - Summary

The potential exists for the creation of valuable downtown real estate through the creative usage of air rights. Not only do these projects create prime development land, but the bridging of expressways can also reclaim various sections of downtown areas that were cut off from the city as a whole. The new corridors can provide much needed residential space and green space in the heart of redeveloping communities. Another benefit of air rights construction involves limiting urban sprawl. Growth can be accommodated in the city core instead of the suburbs.

There are several barriers to air rights development however. First there is the nature of the ownership of the air rights. Several different levels of government need to be negotiated with before the acquisition of air rights is possible. Second, community opinion must be gauged to see what the prevailing feeling of the area is as it concerns high-density development. The CA/T project in Boston underwent numerous changes and delays due to community expectations and

requirements. Finally, the actual projects themselves are not easy to fund. Discovering which enterprises will be profitable both on and near the air rights construction is not easy, especially with zoning ordinances, which may limit what can be constructed on air rights.

The development of projects that involve the use of air rights is an established trend throughout many major U.S. cities. The potential benefits are usually worth the complexity of planning and construction that air rights developments require.

### 9.2.3 - Freeway Air Rights Development in Ventura Village

The Ventura Village Comprehensive Land Use Master Plan envisions residential and/or commercial development on air rights above the I-35W/I-94 corridor on the north end and I-35W corridor on the west. Air rights development over transportation corridors is not new. Air rights construction over transportation corridors has occurred in several cities including: Boston; Washington, DC; Phoenix, Arizona; Seattle, Washington; and Portland, Oregon. In New York City, air rights development above transportation corridors has occurred in Midtown, north of Grand Central Station and west of Penn Station, and above city streets.

Air rights construction in Minneapolis in Ventura Village could be accomplished in two ways: constructing a podium above the freeway on which structures could be built; or for mid-rise and high-rise buildings, constructing the building foundation columns located in the medians between freeways and then constructing the building on top of these foundation piers. Both approaches utilize construction techniques that are commonly used to build bridges or buildings with concrete or steel frames. Technical feasibility is not a problem. Where problems are likely to occur is perceptual issues related to building above a freeway. The fact that air rights development has occurred in numerous cities for various purposes demonstrates that it is possible and solutions have been found to all of the concerns that are most likely to be raised in connection with the Ventura Village proposals.

Bridges over freeways are designed to handle significant dead and live loads resulting from automobile and truck traffic. The load-bearing capacity of these bridges is more than adequate to carry the weight of buildings up to four stories in height. Thus, the podium structure for air rights development is best visualized as a very large bridge spanning the freeway. Buildings can be placed on top of this podium in almost any manner that designers desire as long as the loads do not exceed the carrying capacity of the podium's structural system. It is likely that Mn/DOT and the Federal Highway Administration would require that the podium be constructed to bridge standards due to its location above a freeway for safety purposes. The cost of bridge structures is currently about $70 to $75 per square foot. Physical constraints relative to bridge construction

would be the depth (or height) of the structural beams required to carry the podium and housing loads. This would generally be governed by the thickness of the freeway bridge and elevation of the road adjacent to the podium. These are design issues that can easily be resolved. Federal programs exist to cover the cost of podium construction where interstate freeways have cut through communities and divided residential areas. The I-35W and I-94 freeway corridor has clearly cut through a neighborhood and divided the community.

### 9.2.4 - Franklin Avenue/I-35W Development Potential

The Ventura Village Master Plan envisions an air rights development above I-35W at Franklin Avenue. The prototypical development concept for this location includes building air rights podiums 125 feet wide on the north and south side of Franklin Avenue as shown in Figure 6-1. The prototypical concept and dimensions are contained in Table 6-1. The distance between the frontage roads appears to be 275 feet on the north side of Franklin, and 268 feet on the south side. The north air rights podium would be approximately 34,375 square feet, while the south side podium would be about 33,500 square feet. Assuming a construction cost of $75.00 per square foot with ten percent for engineering and design, and contingency, the two air rights podiums would cost about $5.6 million.

**Table 9.2.4**

FRANKLIN AVENUE AIR RIGHTS DEVELOPMENT
PROTOTYPE CONCEPT

| Component | North | South |
|---|---|---|
| **Podium** | | |
| Length | 275 | 268 |
| Width | 125 | 125 |
| Square Feet | 34,375 | 33,500 |
| **Podium Utilization** | | |
| Sidewalk (feet) | 10 | 10 |
| Building Length (feet) | 255 | 248 |
| Building Width (feet) | 50 | 50 |
| Pedestrian Corridor | 15 | 15 |
| Service Walkway (feet) | 4 | 4 |
| Parking Area Width | 60 | 60 |
| Parking Area Length | 240 | 230 |
| Landscaped Entry/Planters (4) | 7.5 | 9 |
| Barrier and Fence | 1 | 1 |
| **Gross Building Area** | | |
| First Floor – Commercial | 12,000 | 11,650 |
| Second Floor | 12,750 | 12,400 |
| Commercial GLA | 11,150 | 10,800 |
| Townhomes | 12 | 12 |
| Parking Spaces – Podium | 44 | 42 |
| - Bridge | 24 | 23 |
| Total Parking Spaces | 68 | 65 |

Source: McComb Group, Ltd.

The prototypical development concept could be one level of commercial space (either retail, service or office) with townhouse rental units above the commercial area. Podium utilization, taking into consideration commercial space, would be as follows. The existing Franklin Avenue Bridge appears to be about 65 feet wide including two seven to eight-foot sidewalks. The north-south cross section of each podium would consist of a ten-foot expansion of the sidewalk, a 50-foot building footprint, a four-foot service sidewalk to the rear of the building, 60 feet of parking and a two-foot barrier topped by an ornamental iron fence. At the east and west ends of the bridge, the sidewalks would be widened by ten feet to provide a more pedestrian-friendly area. Entrances to the parking area behind the building would be flanked by landscape planters of eight to ten feet in width to provide a more attractive setting for the parking area.

The prototypical building on the north side would be 255 feet in length with a 15-foot pedestrian corridor at the center connecting the parking area with the sidewalk. The parking area would be 240 feet long and 60 feet wide with 90-degree parking. This area would accommodate about 44 parking spaces, including handicapped spaces on the north side. First floor commercial gross building area would be about 12,000 square feet and would result in about 11,150 square feet of gross leasable area. The area above the commercial area could contain ten townhomes with an average size of 1,250 square feet. Providing a ten-foot sidewalk on the air rights podium would enable on-street parking to be located on the existing Franklin Avenue Bridge, increasing available parking for the commercial and residential uses. The north podium and street parking would total approximately 68 spaces. If one outdoor space was reserved for each townhouse, there would be 5.2 spaces per thousand for the commercial spaces. If two parking spaces were reserved for each townhouse, parking for the commercial spaces would be about 4.3 spaces per thousand. This would be more than adequate to accommodate the types of tenants that would be likely to locate in the commercial space, be they office or retail uses. Physical characteristics of the south side podium are similar to the north side except the building is slightly smaller due to the reduced size of the podium.

### 9.2.5 - I-94 Air Rights Development Areas Studied

Air rights development above I-94 was evaluated for two different locations: the area between Portland and Chicago Avenues; and between Chicago and 11th Avenue South as shown in Figures 6-2 and 6-3, respectively. An air rights podium above either of these locations would provide significant area in which to construct a wide variety of housing. The area between Portland and Chicago totals 399,000 square feet or 9.1 acres. The area between Chicago and 11th is about 722,000 square feet or 16.5 acres. Cost of these podiums is estimated at about $32.9 million for the Portland/Chicago podium and about $59.6 million for the Chicago/Eleventh Avenue podium.

### 9.2.6 - Summary

Creating a development area of either nine or sixteen acres in the heart of the city provides the opportunity to develop a residential community that could include the amenities typically found in suburban rental and for-sale developments. Since air rights development is new to this area, it is likely that rental housing will be more successful than for-sale housing located on a podium above a freeway. Institutional investors are far more familiar with air rights development and more likely to be receptive to the concept than potential Midwestern homeowners. Any of the housing prototypes discussed in this report, as well as others, would be suitable for development on a podium. Also, should market demand exist, office or hotel structures could be constructed on a podium. The fact that the podiums have such significant size creates great flexibility in how they could be developed.