



THE EAST SIDE UNIFIED HOUSING JUSTICE JOURNAL

Published by the East Side Freedom Library

August 8, 2022

We welcome you to a monthly update providing the East Side with the latest and juiciest news about the past, present, and future of housing justice in our community.

In this newsletter, you can discover untold stories of the East Side, learn about opportunities for activism, and find community resources.

East Side Housing Justice



In this Issue:

- Reconstruction on Arcade and East 7th Street
 - St. Paul's \$15 Budget Gap
 - Community Feature: ESFL Founders Peter Rachleff and Beth Cleary
 - Housing Justice Community Resources
 - Community Art by Melanie Gomez Mejia
-

In the Works: Reconstruction on East 7th and Arcade Street



Map of the corridor scheduled for reconstruction in 2024 from Roselawn Avenue and Arcade to Highway 52 and East 7th Street. Image: MnDOT

by Bailey Ethier

The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) is set to begin road and sidewalk reconstruction on a high-needs corridor along Arcade Street and East 7th Street in 2024, but residents have yet to see definitive and inclusive plans for some parts of the project. Currently, the corridor lacks the cohesive identity and safety features needed for economic vitality, and its design will help shape a new standard for East Side streets. MnDOT hopes to narrow the roads, improve the sidewalks, and increase pedestrian safety levels in the corridor. With just a year and a half left to implement community feedback

into their design, MnDOT's window to appropriately engage residents in the planning process is closing.

While there are remnants of industrial manufacturers scattered across the East Side, the neighborhood looked much different when large-scale production was in full swing during the mid 20th Century. With three massive manufacturers in the neighborhood, 3M, Hamm's, and Whirlpool, the East Side enjoyed a prosperous period of economic vitality. East St. Paul's roadways also provided important avenues between the city and surrounding suburbs. Before the construction of Highway 35E in 1970, Arcade Street served as a major north-south route for urban motorists. Streets were lively and lined with thriving small businesses, many of which were operated by St. Paul's immigrant populations. The neighborhood has always been a place where working-class families sought community, solidarity, and steady employment.

As 35E pulled traffic out of the neighborhood and big manufacturers closed their doors, the community entered a multi-decade period of disinvestment that shaped the current state of the neighborhood. Almost 30 percent of East Side households survive on an annual income below [\\$35,000 dollars](#), and it is estimated that around 20 percent of East Siders fall below the poverty line. The cost burdens of housing magnify the detrimental impact of these financial conditions. In 2020, [30 percent](#) of homeowners and 69.5 percent of renters were financially burdened by housing costs.

Despite the loss of its industrial powerhouses and its decline in social capital, East St. Paul remains a culturally rich working-class community with a diverse immigrant population. Today, the East Side is home to multiple diasporic communities; immigrants comprise nearly [30 percent](#) of the population, and over the last five years, immigrants accounted for [40 percent](#) of the East Metro's population growth. The East Side is home to the nation's largest Karen population, and [44 percent](#) of the community's immigrant residents are East Asian and Pacific Islander. East St. Paul also has a significant and growing population of Mexican and African immigrants.

Immigrants provide vital business in local economic corridors like Arcade Street and account for [30 percent](#) of the entrepreneurial force in St. Paul. In 2019, immigrants across the East Side made substantial contributions to the local economy with over \$3.4 billion in spending power. This neighborhood is both a historic and contemporary haven for those seeking a new home in the United States, and Minnesota has a responsibility to ensure residents, those of the future generations, and those new and old to the community, have a safe and accessible neighborhood in which they can prosper.

Just a few months before the onset of the pandemic, MnDOT introduced an infrastructure improvement project along East 7th Street and Arcade Street from I-94 in St. Paul to Roselawn Avenue in Maplewood. State safety officials have deemed this section of road unsafe for motorists and pedestrians, and a reconstruction of the road section is currently scheduled for Fall 2024.

MnDOT began their community outreach last February, and other organizations initiated efforts to ensure residents and businesses were aware of this project and had a voice in the outcomes. Local community organizations, the City of St. Paul, the Payne-Phalen Community Council, the Dayton's Bluff Community Council, and ESABA, involved residents in the planning process for reconstruction. While the pandemic presented obvious challenges to a robust community engagement process, quality outreach is imperative to an ethically designed reconstruction plan. Community advocates are tirelessly working to gather input and guidance from those who will be directly affected by the infrastructure changes, but many East Siders are dissatisfied with MnDOT's response to community input. The state has yet to release definitive plans for important intersections, such as Arcade and Maryland and East 7th and Mounds Boulevard. Originally, the community engagement period for the project was set to close in June, but MnDOT recently extended that period indefinitely.

Every day, around 20,000 vehicles drive on East 7th Street and 14,000 on Arcade Street. Compared to other roads in the community, MnDOT classifies this traffic as light (really? By whom?). The goal of MnDOT's reconstruction project is to slow down traffic and improve pedestrian safety. Because daily traffic is relatively low, reducing speed limits and eliminating multi-lane intersections will not disrupt the general flow of urban traffic in the area.

The need for safety improvements became horrifically evident in 2021 when a woman was killed in a hit and run outside the G.W. Carver Cultural Center for Innovation on the corner of East 7th and Hope Street. The reconstruction project will include road resurfacing, sidewalk repair, curb ramp improvements, updated traffic and pedestrian lighting, revitalized bus stops, and general safety enhancements along the designated corridor. Under federal law, the construction project must adhere to the Americans with Disabilities Act stipulations, and final plans for the project should clearly demonstrate compliance with accessible design. Using the community feedback MnDOT collected in 2021, they put together several [potential designs](#) for different sections of the reconstruction corridor. However, no final design drafts have been released to the public.

When The Payne-Phalen Community Council heard about the project, the Council's Board, put together the Arcade Street Task Force to work alongside MnDOT and ensure authentic community outreach took place. Byers feels good about the community outreach that has taken place under the Council's leadership, but he is concerned about the extent and depth of MnDOT's outreach efforts. In May and June 2022, MnDOT told the Council they were wrapping up designs, but did not present any drafts or possibilities that incorporated community feedback.

"During community meetings with MetroTransit back in 2019,, we identified an issue on Arcade, north of Wheelock. There are no sidewalks out there. For people who take the bus, they are without a covered bus stop or a sidewalk. In the winter, they have to wait in snow drifts and find a way across the street with no lights or designated pedestrian paths. MnDOT was responsive to this and they have presented a sidewalk in their plan for the intersection, but we want to see more. Will there be crosswalk buttons? A covered bus stop? We want to see comprehensive safety measures, " said Byers.

The need for better infrastructure along the corridor is undeniable and implementing improvements may drastically alter the well-being of the East Side community. As with many community development projects in disinvested urban neighborhoods, the need for more intelligently-designed infrastructure is complicated by the potential for gentrification. Residents in disinvested neighborhoods frequently experience [displacement and gentrification](#) when an influx of investments leads to rising home values, an increase in household incomes, higher levels of education amongst residents, and the arrival of wealthy white residents in neighborhoods of color.

Gentrification can be difficult to predict, and community development does not inherently result in the displacement of low-income residents, but East Siders are right to be concerned about the effects of this infrastructure project. The recent revitalization of Payne Avenue, and its colloquial classification as a burgeoning arts district, have prompted concerns about the potential gentrification of East St. Paul.

Once the road reconstruction project is complete, Arcade Street, East 7th Street, Payne Avenue, and Phalen Boulevard will form a loop around Swede Hollow Park. This pedestrian-friendly loop will encompass a slew of popular spots like Caydence Records, St. Paul Brewing, Tongue in Cheek, Brunson's Pub, and the Mississippi Market. The reconstruction at the East 7th and Mounds Boulevard intersection will also improve walkability from the Payne-Phalen neighborhood to Metro State and Indian Mounds Park. Conveniently

connecting all of these amenities has the potential to draw new residents to the area and catalyze an increase in housing costs.

The city and state have the opportunity to respond appropriately to constituent concerns, and historical cases of gentrification in the Metro should serve as valuable lessons for those with the power to define the reconstruction plan. Government officials have a responsibility to deter residential displacement by prioritizing affordable housing development alongside infrastructure improvements.

The implementation and ongoing enforcement of St. Paul's Residential Rent Stabilization Ordinance is another key component of equitable community development on the East Side. Much like the rest of the Twin Cities, East St. Paul is grappling with a lack of affordable housing. The community's recognition and concern about housing affordability was exemplified by the passage of the rent stabilization initiative in the November 2021 election cycle. The community is in dire need of housing justice, and [new infrastructure](#) will directly influence the affordability of life on the East Side.

Responsible and [ethical public infrastructure projects](#) catalyze healthy communities' development. They foster flourishing communities by promoting healthy behaviors, minimizing hazards for residents, improving accessibility, and preserving the natural world. Urban design influences community dependence on automobiles, pedestrian and driver safety, accessibility for the disabled by enabling physical activity and community participation, residential mental health levels, community social capital, and environmental health. [Numerous studies](#) have shown that combining the traditions of a "main street" and the convenience of a commercial strip in urban design is feasible and desirable. Infrastructure improvements prioritizing accessible public transportation and "walkable" life-styles are proven to increase the well-being of surrounding communities.

For Jack Byers, urban design and economic development are key elements of the Arcade and East 7th redesign. Byers believes the reconstruction project will help open opportunities for more dense affordable housing within walking distance of essential businesses. "We want everyone on the East Side to have the ability to walk or roll ten minutes in any direction and reach the grocery and convenience stores they need," said Byers, "and sidewalk extensions with curb cuts and true continuity are key parts of achieving that goal."

Responsibly redeveloping the Arcade and East 7th Street corridor is certainly possible, and the ethical design standards established under this project

should carry through to all reconstruction projects on the East Side. Improvements along Arcade alone are not going to have a big immediate effect on housing availability, but the slow revitalization of East St. Paul's streets will require thoughtful planning. "There are a lot of small spaces that need redevelopment," said Byers, "I think the city needs to recommit itself to helping grow a cohort of small scale community developers who are willing to take on these small scale sites, not everybody wants to take on Hillcrest or the Ford Site or has the wherewithal or the money, those are huge projects, and the cities kind of putting all their eggs in that basket."

While Byers, the Community Council, and other local organizations are working hard to make sure the reconstruction project is truly informed by the businesses and residents, the city and state have the power to take more actions that protect neighborhoods like the East Side from gentrification. Investing in community revitalization can uplift current residents instead of placing a strain on their living conditions. Most importantly, governing bodies must prioritize meaningful community engagement in all development projects to ethically serve their constituents.

[Zoning policies](#) are also influential to the economic health and affordability of a community. A lot of folks on the East Side were happy when St. Paul rezoned the Arcade Street corridor for "mixed-use development" instead of a business district. The opportunity to build more affordable housing is key, but there must also be support available for individuals and families. Policies like split tax rates for incumbent residents and tenant refusal rights for apartment conversions coupled with low-income homebuyer financing can offset the gentrifying effects of redevelopment projects in working-class neighborhoods. There are a variety of measures the city can take to protect current residents from being priced out of their homes, and the government can implement comprehensive policies to ameliorate housing cost burdens as redevelopment ensues. Transparency is key in government activities, and the Arcade and East 7th Street reconstruction is not exempt from that expectation.

East Siders still have the opportunity to make their voices heard and influence the design process for the reconstruction project. While no definitive or final designs have been released, the public can view the [potential plans](#) MnDOT created in response to their 2021 community outreach. [MnDOT](#) will be collecting more community feedback on August 2nd during National Night Out, on August 6th at the HealthEast Sports Center for Karen Martyrs Day, and on August 17th at the East Side YMCA and the Gustavus Lutheran Church. Residents can [sign up](#) for updates and notifications about feedback opportunities as well. The project team can be reached

at info@E7thArcade.com and 651-728-4542. East Siders know their neighborhood best, and MnDOT must listen and respond accordingly to constituent concerns.

St. Paul's \$15 Million Budget Gap



Under then-St. Paul Mayor Randy Kelly, shown in 2005, St. Paul began assessing nearly all properties with right-of-way footage in 2002. Image: Tom Sweeney/Star Tribune

by Lena Abara

On May 2, 2022, the Ramsey County District Court ruled that property owners will no longer be charged a separate fee for regular street maintenance in St. Paul. These street maintenance items include lighting, sweeping, seal coating and other overlay work for the owners on their respective streets. This ruling was initiated by two cases within the city; the first was from the First Baptist Church and the second from the Summit Hill residents.

The cases were brought against the City of St. Paul, assessing all the properties, which began in 2002 under Minnesota Mayor Randy Kelly. A law was created enabling tax-exempt businesses to contribute to street maintenance needs. Most cities, like Minneapolis, assess residents only

during projects that benefit their individual properties. St. Paul assesses property owners based on their individual street or alley frontage.

The 2016 lawsuit was spurred by the strict processes associated with funding street maintenance. The final ruling decided that St. Paul's assessments were ultimately taxes and not just fees. As a result, the policy contributed to a 20% property tax increase down the road and narrowed street maintenance activities to those mentioned in the first paragraph. However, these taxes have been removed after a new ruling made in 2022.

Because of the tax removal, a \$15 million budget gap now weighs on the shoulders of the municipality, and that deficit could be addressed by increases on property tax bills in the future. Despite the challenges ahead, they St. Paul officials insist this decision was made in the best interest of the city. The city is currently strategizing to fill the budget gap and keep up with the road work. Recently, a proposal was submitted to assess the street maintenance cost through a law passed in 1967 by the state legislature, but no action has been taken.

A report from the [TRIP organization](#), a transportation research nonprofit, found that in general, the average Minnesota resident pays over \$543 per year in the form of increased repairs, vehicle depreciation, and fuel consumption because of poor road conditions in the state. In fact, poor road conditions collectively cost Minnesotans \$1.8 billion every year. Through their investigation, the identified over 35 percent of Minnesota's roads in poor or mediocre condition. A study done by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety discovered that extra funding, specifically \$100 million, could potentially cut traffic fatalities by 44 and other injuries by 760 over the course of 20 years. Hence, the budget gap could lead to serious issues for the city this year and in the future. As overall, having better roads leads to safer driving conditions and less fatalities.

Community Feature:

Peter Rachleff and Beth Cleary



Peter and Beth in front of a piece by Mike Alewitz. Image: Mike Alewitz

An ESHJ Interview with the ESFL Founders

by Bailey Ethier

To stand in the face of institutional powers and demand justice takes extraordinary grit. Across the world, activists are proclaiming a critical truth: poverty and inequality are a policy choice. There is enough for everyone on our planet to thrive, and we must unite to achieve the future we all deserve.

Collective liberation requires incredible endurance, creativity, determination, and solidarity. When we push forward with fortitude in our struggle for justice, it is both comforting and encouraging to channel the strength of our teachers, comrades, and leaders. Tenant unions, housing co-ops, community land trusts, rent caps, and affordable housing would be mere ideas without the activism of past generations.

This month, I had the pleasure of interviewing two community leaders whom I deeply admire, the East Side Freedom Library (ESFL) founders, Peter Rachleff and Beth Cleary. Their dedication to the liberation of all people and their healthy sense of grassroots democracy is incredibly powerful to witness. The two move through the world with boundless joy and love for their community, emanating radical optimism in every space they occupy. It is with a deep intersectional understanding of justice that they approach not only their work, but also their lives.

At the end of the summer, Peter and Beth will be transitioning out of their current roles, and a new Executive Director will take the lead at the library. While Peter and Beth will remain involved at the library, I find this a timely moment to acknowledge the invaluable foundation they created. ESFL's Housing Justice Program is a powerful representation of the robust collective achievements forged by the library founders.

“Our housing justice work is an application of that knowledge, an attempt, in an organized fashion, to materialize that knowledge to change life for the better, for all East Siders. ESFL seeks to inspire our neighbors to see themselves as capable, as potentially powerful, as the subjects of their lives, not just the objects of others' machinations and manipulations. Our neighbors have identified housing justice as one of their prime needs and goals, and we are trying to provide them with the resources and self-confidence to bring it about,” said Peter.

When Peter and Beth founded ESFL in 2013, they established a unique space to celebrate, exercise, and archive free thought. After a lifetime of organizing workers against corporate power, mentoring the next generations of activists, navigating the barriers of academia, and producing radical art, the two professors were determined to build a community space that empowered all liberatory activities.

“When the Library became available and we were encouraged in all seriousness to apply for it, we had to expand our sense of responsibility beyond our own duo-dream. The Library was an important neighborhood

institution, important to generations...and we had to step up our sense of what we were doing in order to fill the Library's shoes," said Beth.

With the help of their comrades and community, Peter and Beth filled the library with unique collections of literature and began their mission: to inspire solidarity, advocate for justice, and work toward equity for all. At ESFL, anyone in the community can access knowledge, contribute knowledge, and participate in its production.

"Our aim was to create a space where our diverse neighbors could share their stories with each other. We hoped that, if they did so, they would discover how much they had in common rather than how different they were from each other," said Peter.

ESFL's Housing Justice Program was founded in 2019 when Seanne Thomas, a local African American realtor and an East Side neighbor, approached the library about hosting an event. The event entailed a showing of the film, "Jim Crow of the North " and highlighted racial inequities in homeownership between white and Black residents. More than 100 community members attended and enjoyed honest and thoughtful conversations about housing justice. The library decided to expand the housing justice project into a series of films and forums, and people continued to attend in large numbers.

"People kept coming, talking, listening, thinking, and they wanted more; they wanted change. We reached out to East Side organizations -- nonprofits, district councils, immigrant organizations -- and began to host meetings at which their leaders and activists discussed their experiences and their ideas. We began to explore how to organize all this. And then we met Ben Werner, who had been working for Seanne's real estate business, ABC Realty. We asked Ben if he would be willing to become the coordinator of this work, and he did an outstanding job of getting a multi-faceted, multi-layered organization off the ground," said Peter.

This summer, we reluctantly bid Ben farewell before he moved cross country to begin graduate school. Sidney Stuart and Ismail Khadar are now leading ESFL's Housing Justice Program into its next stages. Ben, Sid, and Ismail are all brilliant organizers who embody the same tenacity and love as Peter and Beth. Our powerful team of Housing Justice collaborators demonstrates the realization of ESFL's mission.

"The main features of ESFL's mission are: solidarity; equity; and justice," said Beth, "The housing work directly facilitates knowledge-sharing and transparency about housing disparities and access on the East Side, and these collectively-held truths build solidarity. The new awareness becomes a

coalition, a plan, and a strategy for changing the status quo, so the shared value is equity for all. And movement on these entrenched disparities, which will come, brings some justice as people gain stability and dignity where and how they live.”

As ESFL’s housing justice work continues underway, Peter and Beth are confident the library can help our neighbors realize their visions of housing justice, discover their capacity to exercise autonomy and self-direction and unite in solidarity to build a just community.

Housing justice work requires wisdom and fortitude; something I know both Peter and Beth possess in surplus. As long-time East Side residents and lifelong activists, both have abundant experience and knowledge. When I asked them about their secret to success, they provided incredibly humble and sagacious responses.

“Teaching, for me, has always meant "learning with" -- my students always taught me so much about the material we were working on together. And that is not false modesty, it's true, it's one of the sustaining joys of education work, that it's about continuous learning. Which means you can't be fixed in what you think you know, you have to understand knowledge as fluid and expansive. Peter and I are not nonprofit professionals, we had to learn a lot about that, and fast; but the part about honestly opening to what other people bring, that was there because of teaching,” said Beth.

“Yes, agreed,” said Peter, “I learned that the greatest benefit of being a teacher is getting to remain a student, to continue to learn. I have learned so much in the past eight years about how political systems work (yech!), how the economy is structured to reproduce inequality (yech!), how much our neighbors know, how much we all have to learn from the cultures of East Siders, beginning with our Dakota forebears and current neighbors, our immigrant ancestors; and our immigrant neighbors. I have learned that "Americanization" is a hundreds-year-old campaign to push our neighbors -- and ourselves -- to stop caring for each other and to stop finding meaning with each other and to replace those traditions and values with selfishness and competition. We have the answers to what we need -- but education, popular culture, media, politics and the like have functioned to hide those answers.”

Anyone who has the pleasure of knowing Peter and Beth is keenly aware of their passion and chutzpah. It is an honor to work alongside these two iconic thinkers, to work together building international solidarity, and to stand shoulder to shoulder as we stick it to the man.

Peter and Beth - on behalf of the vast community of free thinkers who have found sanctuary and collective power at the library, I thank you. Thank you for sharing your energy, your brilliance, and your radical love with everyone you encounter.

Not only do Peter and Beth have a wealth of knowledge and lived experience to share with the world, they also have the scoop on the best spots to eat on the East Side. Check out their recommendations below.

- East Side Bar
- Cook St. Paul
- The Original Karen Market - for samosas and vegetables fritters
- Insane Vegan - for sandwiches
- Mañana - for pupusas
- H.F. Cafe - for salt and pepper tofu
- East Side Thai
- Karibu - for the sambusas
- 52 Markete - for papaya salad
- I Heart Pho
- BiBimBap

Community Resources

HOME Line

HOME Line provides free and low-cost legal, organizing, education, and advocacy services so that tenants throughout Minnesota can solve their own rental housing problems.

For assistance, you can [send an email](#) to a HOME Line attorney or call 612-728-5767.

Southern Minnesota Regional Legal Services (SMRLS)

SMRLS provides free, high-quality legal help to low-income people in critical civil matters, like securing food, shelter, and safety.

For assistance, call 1-888-575-2954 or [apply online](#).

Affordable Homeownership Pilot: Local Housing Incentives Account (LHIA)

The LHIA Affordable Homeownership Pilot will provide grants to support affordable homeownership development, including acquisition and rehabilitation, for projects that best meet the following two priorities:

- **Racial Equity Priority:** create homeownership opportunities for Black, Indigenous, and other ethnic or racial groups that own homes at disproportionately lower rates than white households in the region; and
- **Geographic Choice Priority:** create affordable homeownership opportunities in parts of the region where it is most challenging to do so.

To schedule a meeting for more information, [click here](#).

St. Paul Foreclosure Prevention Program

The City of St Paul has partnered with the Minnesota Homeownership Center to offer the St Paul Homeownership Preservation Program (SPHPP). The program provides support to homeowners within the city limits of St Paul who are experiencing difficulty paying their mortgage or other housing expenses. SPHPP offers foreclosure prevention advising and limited financial assistance.

To learn about the program, call 651-236-8952 or check out their [eligibility tool](#).

Home Help MN

HomeHelpMN is offered through Minnesota Housing to help if you have fallen behind on your mortgage or other housing-related expenses due to the pandemic. Whether it's providing financial assistance or guiding you to trusted resources, they can get you the help you need, at the time you need it most.

To apply or learn more about the program, call 1-800-388-3226 and check out their [application preparation resource](#).

Educational Resources

Audio

[ESFL Podcasts: Racial Housing Covenants with Just Deeds Founder Maria Cisneros](#)

Reading

[Homes For All: Accessible and Affordable Housing in Minnesota](#)

Video

[ASL Fair Housing Videos by the Disability Independence Group](#)

Community Art for Justice

Call for artists!

The East Side Freedom Library believes in the power of community art to fuel our fight for justice, and we want to promote your work. If your art speaks to the soul of our community and you want to share it with the people, please send it our way.

Email us at media@eastsidefreedomlibrary.org


In each publication, we will feature a new artist in our newsletter.

This month, our featured artist is Melanie Gomez Mejia. Melanie is a collaborator at ESFL who has contributed to our Housing Justice Zines and other artistic endeavors. Below is a surrealist charcoal and graphite drawing Melanie created. The piece speaks to the new worlds that media can open up for us.



Created by Melanie Gomez Mejia


**EAST SIDE
HOUSING JUSTICE
PRESENTS:
COMMUNITY
ROLLER PARTY**



Friday, August 19th, 5-8 PM

Join ESFL, Phalen Rec. Center, Family Values For Life, and more for the second annual East Side Roller Party! Games, Music, Food, Free Skating, and commUNITY!

Located at Phalen Rec Center: 1000 E Wheelock Pkwy, St Paul, MN, 55106



Register for the **East Side Housing Justice Community Roller Party** using the teal button to make sure we have enough skates available for everyone!

[Roller Party RSVP](#)

Subscribe to the East Side Unified Housing Justice Journal

Subscribe to the East Side Freedom Library Newsletter

East Side Housing Justice Program Webpage



Donate to the East Side Freedom Library

Contact ESHJ at media@eastsidefreedomlibrary.org with any inquiries about the newsletter or housing justice.