



# THE EAST SIDE UNIFIED HOUSING JUSTICE JOURNAL

Published by the East Side Freedom Library

March 22, 2023

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:

- District Councils and Democracy
- Streetcars in St. Paul
- Community Feature: Ianni Houmas
- Art by Siouxper
- Housing Justice Community Resources



# The Legacy of Civic Participation in St. Paul: Democracy and District Councils



Downtown St. Paul from Indian Mounds Park. Image: Friends of the Mississippi River

Collective leadership and democratic practices have deep roots in Minnesota. Long before European colonists arrived in North America, Anishinaabe Nations established systems that we consider central to a healthy democracy today.

Consensus building, separation of powers, and the pursuit of collective wellbeing have always been a part of Anishinaabe sovereignty practices. When Europeans came to Minnesota with ideas about building a democracy, American Indian governing systems were already modeling collective leadership customs.

Ponca Historian Roger Buffalohead proposes three assumptions that explain [Anishinaabe values](#) and practices: the individual is dependent upon the group for survival, the group is dependent upon nature for survival, and nature is dependent upon the supernatural for survival. This philosophy recognizes the necessity of interdependence and shared responsibility.

These Anishinaabe practices are exemplified in Minnesota's culture of civic participation and populist politics. Minnesota has a long standing tradition of communities coming together to ensure the people's will is carried out by the government.

Minnesota often boasts the highest voter turnout in the country. It is the birthplace of the American Indian Movement, a landmark in the Labor Movement, and in the Mid-20th Century, Minnesota's capital city became one of the first in the nation to formalize a method for community participation in local governance.

In the 1950s, Saint Paul neighborhood organizations began forming coalitions that helped communities bring their local problems directly before the City Council. For almost a century, Saint Paul has had some form of organization that actively engages residents in government decision-making.

In 1974, the same year that the U.S. Congress passed the [Housing and Community Development Act](#), the Saint Paul City Council introduced a [resolution](#) to establish district councils. To receive federal grants for local development, the housing act required resident participation and community engagement in city planning. The City Council resolution accommodated this requirement by formally establishing the 17 district councils we have today.

District councils are nonprofit organizations funded by the city to hire staff, perform planning tasks, and engage residents. The councils identify neighborhood needs, develop community outreach programs, and provide recommendations to the city based on local residents' perspectives.

In the 1980s, under the leadership of Mayor George Latimer, Saint Paul launched the Better Neighborhoods Program (BNP) to establish a functional partnership between city leadership and district councils. The program was designed to strengthen the neighborhood planning process by focusing city resources on the top two or three priorities of each district council. While the goals of the BNP had integrity, neighborhood interests were often pitted against city-wide goals and communities were not always pleased with the outcomes.

Despite controversy about the BNP, it fostered a strong link between the Mayor and the district councils, and a number of projects were carried out. Neighborhood cleanup days were established, community policing was introduced to Saint Paul, adult-oriented businesses on University and Dale were closed down, and [West Publishing Company](#), a business with over two thousand employees, was relocated to Eagan.

By the end of the decade, Saint Paul boasted a strong culture of citizen participation. In 1992, a study rated Saint Paul number one among United States cities for open accessible government practices.

The level of public participation and the number of completed projects that emerged with the [district councils](#) provide undeniable evidence of the city's

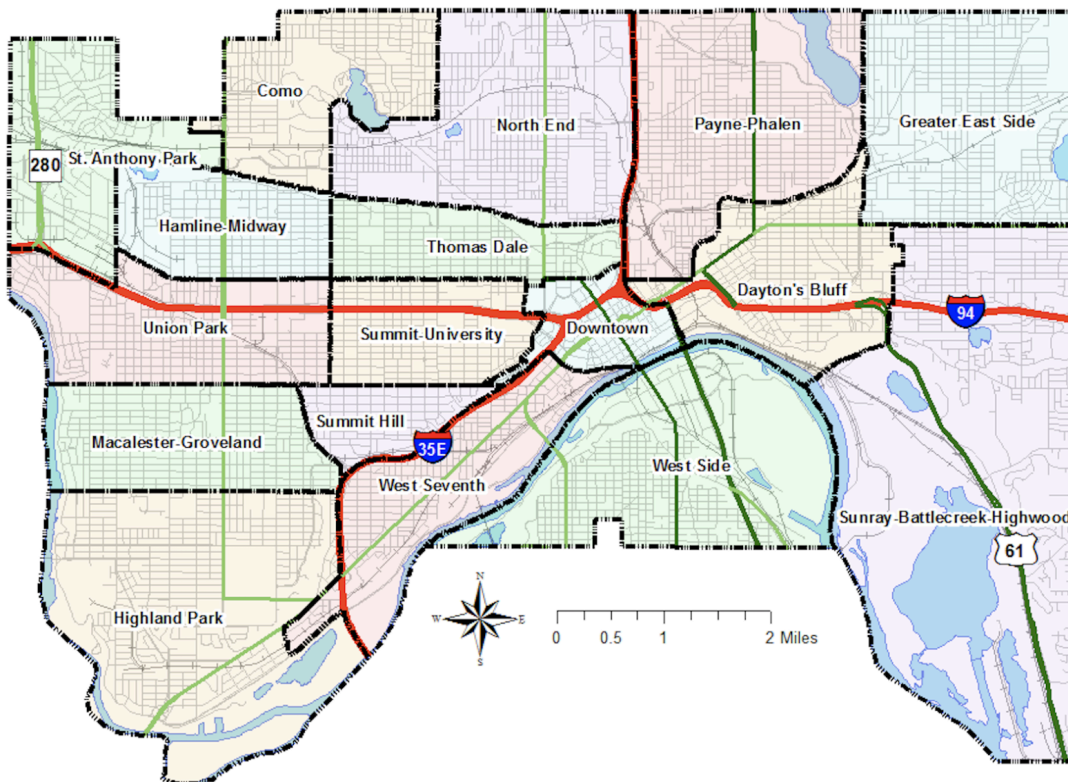
success in the practice of participatory democracy. Unfortunately, even in its golden age, the efficacy of these groups has left much to be desired.

Last year the East Side Freedom Library's former Housing Justice Director, Ben Werner, published a [blog](#) about the failures of Saint Paul's district councils. The problems he brought forth in the piece remain just as relevant today. Renters make up over half of Saint Paul's population and the majority of households of color are renters. In East Saint Paul, around [70 percent](#) of renters are cost burdened with living expenses.

Renters are the folks who have the most at stake when it comes to local development decisions, and their opportunity to influence those decisions via district councils is largely inaccessible. Many East Side residents are unaware that this engagement medium exists, and councils struggle to generate participation within the community.

Minnesota also has some of the worst racial disparities in the nation, and this inequality is reflected in Saint Paul's District Council system. Since their inception, the council boards have been dominated by white homeowners, and that legacy haunts councils today as they work to gain the local leadership of renters and communities of color.

To further dissuade working class folks from using this platform, the councils do not compensate community members for their participation.



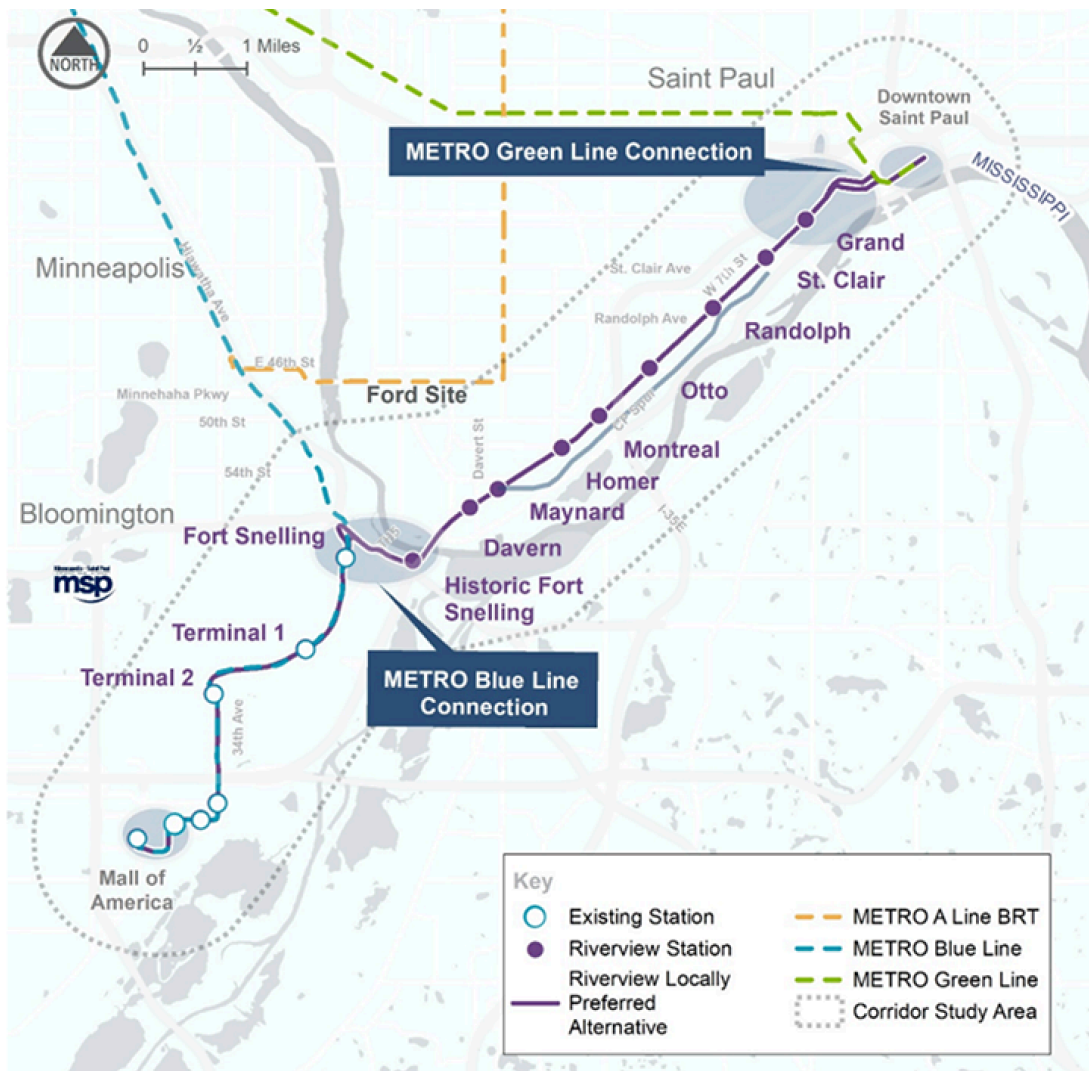
Three district councils are designated to the East Side. [District 5](#) serves the Payne-Phalen neighborhood, [District 4](#) serves Dayton's Bluff, and [District 2](#) serves the Greater East Side. The people who keep the district councils running today are on a mission to revitalize community participation and create equitable spaces that are accessible to everyone.

District Council leaders like Veronica Burt and Jack Byers are dedicated board members who focus on engaging all the communities on the East Side and work to make the councils more representative of current demographics. These leaders are part of an important effort to bring our communities together in solidarity and shared understanding.

**In the next issue of East Side Unified we will feature some of these leaders and share their perspectives on the current state of district council work in East Saint Paul. Stay tuned!**

---

## **Ramsey County Should Add Four East St. Paul Streetcar Stops to Proposed Plan**



by **Ben Werner**

The Riverview Corridor Modern Streetcar project is a planned modern streetcar project through the West 7th neighborhood of St. Paul to Bloomington. Ramsey County, where St. Paul is located, is leading the efforts to build the streetcar route. The proposed route will connect downtown St. Paul with the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport and the Mall of America in Bloomington. The project will be completed by 2032. The current plan for the Riverview Corridor is a significant step towards addressing the transit needs of current and future Bloomington, downtown and West 7th Street residents. It is a logical step in completing the rail infrastructure triangle, allowing rapid transportation between both downtowns, as well as the airport.

However, the Riverview Corridor Modern Streetcar falls short of potential racial and economic equity goals it could achieve. As I've read and studied the streetcar route and proposal, I'm left wondering why similar transit investments aren't happening in other parts of St. Paul with higher concentrations of people of color, and lower-income residents. To remedy

these concerns, I propose adding four East Side stops to the corridor route to address the limited equity impacts of the current project.

The new transit infrastructure will have many benefits and is an exciting step towards creating a better transit future for Minnesota. The population along the corridor route is expected to grow in the next 15 years. As the population increases, the streetcar will increase property values and spur transit oriented development. Vehicle emissions from commuting would be significantly reduced, lowering overall health care costs.

The project will increase access to jobs by making transportation throughout the corridor more efficient, and it would also improve access to community amenities by reducing transportation barriers. Adequate transportation would help people get to work faster and reduce their commute times. The project will require a significant number of workers to complete the construction. Additionally, significant capital would be injected into the local economy through funding and constructing the project.

However, the project fails to advance racial and economic equity, particularly for St. Paul residents. There are no plans to extend the route into the Eastside, which is far more diverse than the West 7th neighborhood. There are planned Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) routes for the East Side but buses don't have the same benefits that rail infrastructure has. Ramsey County and its partners still have an opportunity to make the proposed corridor much better, especially considering how far the project is from completion.

To improve the project, I would add four streetcar stops on the East Side. Adding additional stops is more expensive initially, but over time the additional stops will serve to amplify the positive benefits of the project. East 7th is significantly more diverse than West 7th, so potential equity and wealth building benefits would expand greatly.

Adding additional stops is more expensive initially, but over time the additional stops will serve to amplify the positive benefits of the project. Adding additional stops is more expensive initially, but over time the additional stops will serve to amplify the positive benefits of the project. The first new stop could be at the intersection of Lafayette and Fort roads. Having a stop there would allow the state employees of the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Human Services, the Department of Labor and Industry, and others the ability to get to work without using a car or bus. It would also set a precedent for how the state is transporting its own employees to work.

The second new stop could be at Metropolitan State University. Connecting

the university to the streetcar will make it easier for students to get to the university. Metro State's second campus located near Pierce Butler will be accessible by students connecting from the streetcar to the Green Line, instead of taking a bus. The streetcar would allow Dayton's bluff residents, particularly the older adults in housing complexes such as the Cambric, greater range of mobility.

The third stop, at 7th and Margaret Street, could connect the commercial corridor of East 7th to the downtown. A fourth stop could be at Minnehaha and Payne avenues. There are several proposed affordable housing developments near these two stops, particularly the Hamm's Brewery redevelopment. Connecting residents to a dedicated rail line would expand the positive impacts of the streetcar, as well as improve the access of residents of affordable housing to fast and reliable transportation.

Although the current proposed route will have significant economic and societal benefits, it could go further. If Ramsey County and its partners are serious about racial equity and the future of the transit system, they should add four East Side stops to the planned Riverview Corridor Modern Streetcar. It will have significant benefits for the region, reducing emissions, encouraging development, and building wealth. Considering the growing population, and the need to shift towards public transportation, I am excited to see the streetcar get built. Adding additional stops will only serve to amplify the already positive benefits of the streetcar.

Originally published in [MinnPost Community Voices on March 10, 2023](#)

---

**Community Feature: Ianni Houmas**





**by Ismail Khadar**

For this month's community feature, I had the honor of meeting with Ianni Houmas at a little cafe on Payne Avenue called Caydence Records and Coffee.

As I stared down my empty to-go cup waiting for him to arrive, I pondered the question, "Who is Ianni Houmas?"

Ianni waltzed into the cafe twenty minutes later, requisite thermos in hand, and greeted me. I accompanied him to the register, as I had yet to reach my five cup quota of the day. Within moments of his arrival, it was clear to me that he was acquainted with everyone in the building.

In the cacophony of espresso machine rumbles and brief greetings, I was eager to learn more about this popular East Sider.

Ianni Houmas is a board member of St. Paul's Greater East Side District Council, a longtime advocate for transportation - particularly the purple line, a small business owner, and an East Sider by way of Germantown, Philadelphia.

The similarities between East St. Paul and Germantown anchor Ianni to his current work. Growing up, life in Germantown taught him a lot about community. The diversity and resilience of his childhood community remind him of the East Side.

"It's probably why I like it here," said Ianni.

Ianni also mentioned one notable difference between the two communities. While the East Side has a thriving diverse neighborhood, he notices

significantly more segregation in East St. Paul than in his hometown.

“Back in Germantown you never felt out of place...all of us kids would play together no matter our backgrounds,” said Ianni.

The lack of intermingling and civic participation on the East Side inspires Ianni to be an active part of his community. His seat on the district council board and his involvement in the long-running purple line project demonstrate his vested interest in the wellbeing of East Side residents.

Ianni Houmas is undeniably passionate about his community and committed to the improvement of our collective wellbeing. In the coming months, Ianni will be working on behalf of East Siders in a new capacity when he is sworn into the City of St. Paul’s Planning Commission.

---

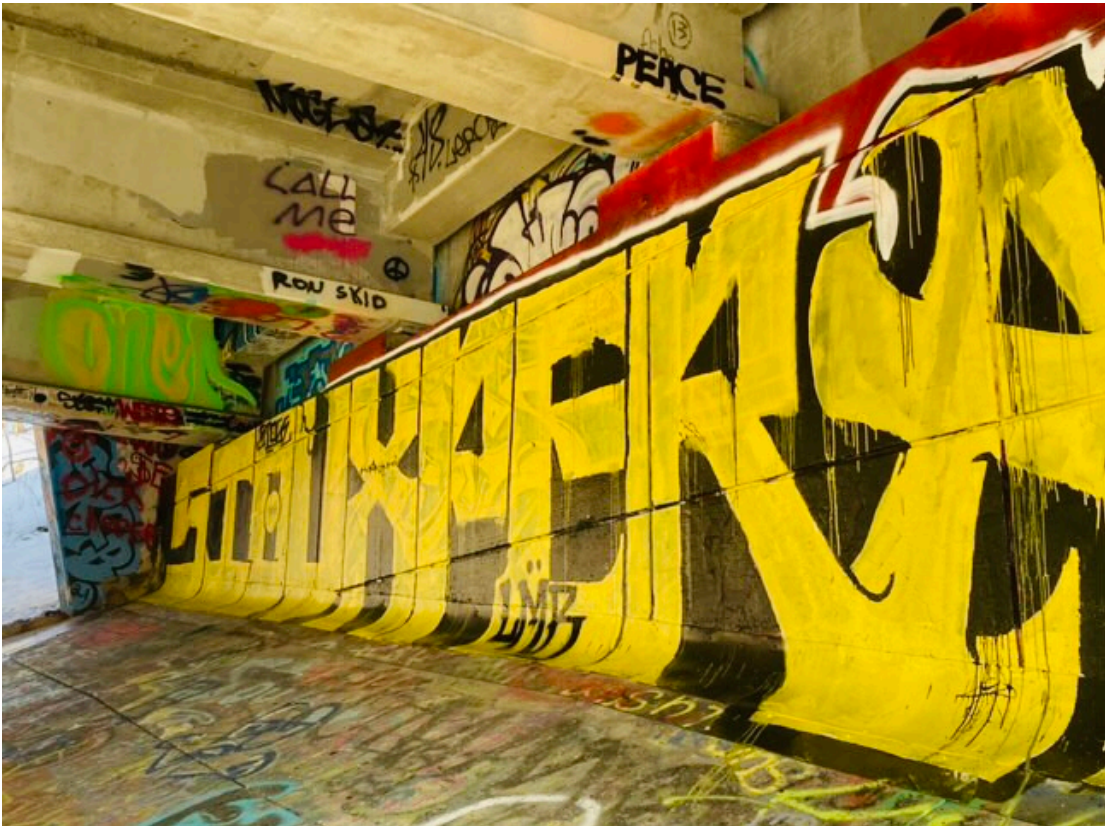
## **Community Art for Justice**

The East Side Freedom Library understands the power of art in community. We believe art is a central component of liberation and we must celebrate our local artists.

This month's featured artist is Siouxper, a Dakota creative from Saint Paul. His is a graffiti and textile artist with a lot of love for his community. When he passes by someone wearing the clothes he designed or catches a glimpse of his art around the city, it brings him joy.

Making art is central to Siouxper's sense of peace. In his experience, creating art is just as essential to life as walking the river and going to ceremony.

Enjoy these photos of a recent Siouxper original and check him out on instagram [@franq.lotion](#).



Attention artists! 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](mailto:media@eastsidefreedomlibrary.org)

---

# 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](#).

## 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](#).

---

[Subscribe Here](#)



**East Side**  

---

**Housing**  

---

**Justice**



**East Side**  

---

**Freedom**  

---

**Library**

Donate to the East Side Freedom Library

Subscribe to the East Side Freedom Library Newsletter