



THE EAST SIDE UNIFIED HOUSING JUSTICE JOURNAL

Published by the East Side Freedom Library

April 27, 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



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A Resurgence of St. Paul's District Councils



Image: Tayler Guccione

by **Bailey Ethier**

The leaders of St. Paul’s district councils are full of vision, hope, and determination, but their barriers to success are daunting. District councils have the potential to help residents shape the development of their neighborhoods, guide policy decisions that affect the entire state, and improve quality of life for all Minnesotans. They are a particularly valuable and a largely untapped tool designed to empower the collective will of the working class community. Unfortunately, St. Paul’s district councils are understaffed, underfunded, and unknown by many city residents.

Because St. Paul’s district councils lack both funding and public awareness, staff turnover is an ongoing challenge. In 2018, 70 percent of the councils were led by executive directors with less than three years in their position. The same year, average overall compensation for district council directors was only \$44,700. Executive directors of district councils need skills in finance, administration, communication, organizing, management, grant-writing, public relations, zoning, policy, and so much more. The community members who dedicate themselves to district council work are relentlessly passionate about their neighbors’ wellbeing and deeply committed to the practice of democracy.

Veronica Burt, the Executive Director of the [Dayton’s Bluff Community Council](#) (District 4), is a shining example of the spirit and determination present in St. Paul’s district council boards.

“Early in my organizing career, I frequently interacted with district council systems. While I noticed the shortcomings of the council's activities, I also recognized their challenges. I realized that part of my role as an organizer was to supplement the work of the councils. Generating authentic civic participation is never a siloed activity. We are all in the same community trying to transform systems and achieve a myriad of outcomes like justice & equity,” said Burt.

Burt sought out her current role at the Dayton’s Bluff Community Council because she wanted to be in a space where people share her values. She felt a shared passion for social transformation and collective power in the district council system, and found herself drawn to the work.

Successful district councils require all the same resources as any other effective community-centered 501(c)(3) nonprofit, which means a full team of people must have the resources and time to perform this work. Appropriately compensating district council employees and offering comprehensive benefits could change the entire landscape of district council operations. Currently, many executive directors of district councils are burdened with responsibilities that would normally be spread across a team of skilled staff members. An increase in City funding has to be a piece of the solution to the staffing problem.

Each of the 17 district councils in St. Paul are separate nonprofits, but in 2014 they came together as a collective to apply for funding from the City’s annual Innovation Fund. In 2017, the councils agreed to divide the funds equally to promote equitable practices. While the equal distribution of funding demonstrates the councils' commitment to collective efforts, splitting the funds evenly means each council receives a modest share of about \$6,000 each year.

The City doles out additional funds to district councils through the City of St. Paul General Fund and Community Development Block Grants (CDBG). Unlike the Innovation Fund, this money is not divided evenly among councils. General Fund and CDBG allocations are calculated by the City using a formula that takes into account each district’s population, poverty level, non-english speaking residents, and employment rates, in amounts that range from approximately \$50,000 to \$100,000.

In 2021, some councils were not allocated any CDBG money and General Fund allocations varied significantly among the councils. On the East Side, the Dayton’s Bluff Community Council received \$77,811, the Greater East Side

Community Council received \$125,519, and the Payne-Phalen Community Council received \$142,383.

While these dollar amounts may seem hefty, they are not large enough to support the full potential of each council. Over the decades, City funding for the councils has eroded and in the initial draft of St. Paul's 2040 Comprehensive Plan, district councils were rarely mentioned. Almost two decades ago, \$1.2 million of City funds were dedicated to district councils. If that funding was adjusted for inflation today, councils would be receiving an additional \$300,000 in annual City funding. District councils are constantly tasked with funding activities; seeking individual grants and support from other institutions to keep their work in the community afloat.

"I think the City can and should invest more deeply in district councils. We are designed to function as a liaison between grassroots efforts and government processes, two spheres that are almost always lacking effective connection. District councils are deeply in-tune with their neighborhoods and offer a clear opportunity to directly engage with residents about local issues. All units of government acknowledge the importance of investing in community engagement. I think it would be wise to more substantially invest tax payer dollars back into the taxpayer communities they wish to engage," said Burt.

Over half a century ago, St. Paul residents came together and insisted upon the formalization of the district councils. They demanded an effective platform for the people to bring their collective will to the government and ensure their own needs were met. The district councils are still primed to serve as agents of true democracy, but community action is what makes them powerful. Without sufficient resources it is extremely difficult to garner energy from the community. The cultural expectation of civic participation has declined and its resurgence will be key in the revitalization of St. Paul's district councils, but additional funding is an undeniably necessary component.

"If the district councils were to disappear, it would be a signal to me that our community is experiencing an alarming degradation of democratic values," said Burt.

District councils have proposed a variety of remedies to the City in attempts to strengthen community participation in neighborhood development and policy change. The City could more frequently match funds for projects led by the district councils, steer more funding toward community-led development ventures, and eliminate contractual restrictions that hinder District council

work. The wellbeing of all St. Paul residents has the potential to improve if the City can find ways to invest more in district councils.

When Burt reflected on her last two years at the district council, she was discouraged by the red tape they must navigate in order to get things done.

“We have to put so much time and energy into obtaining the resources while simultaneously trying to do the work we want. It would make a huge difference if we could streamline those processes and support the people power we need,” said Burt.

Living wages are hard to come by in the present economy, and time is money. For many working people, keeping up with the cost of living makes civic participation nearly impossible. In a capitalist society, financially compensating working people for the time they spend on civic participation is sometimes the only way to achieve it.

“When the people don’t or can’t participate in the governing process, extreme capitalist agendas dictate the terms, creating inequities we all have to grapple with at a neighborhood level,” said Burt.

Despite financial challenges for the district councils, Burt demonstrates energizing optimism. She is inspired by the collaboration between district councils on the East Side, as well as other local community organizations.

“We readily come together to cooperate and collaborate, which gives me hope. In the short time I have been in this position, I am happy to see some developers and private organizations seeking district council collaboration on their own volition. There are so many people involved in this work who have unshakable grit and an intrinsic understanding of our community’s needs,” said Burt.

Burt sees a vibrant future for district councils on the East Side and hopes to reinsert both energy and clarity into their work. In partnership with East Side residents, she is working to build out a council that accurately reflects the community it represents. With galvanized community leaders like Veronica Burt behind district council work, their revival has massive potential.

“District councils can and will be a force of community-powered social transformation,” said Veronica Burt.

To learn more about your district council, head to the [district council directory](#) on the City of St. Paul’s website.

An Update on the St. Paul 1-4 Unit Housing Study



Image: Tayler Guccione

by **Hilary Kaufman**

Although demand is high, there is a lack of affordable housing available for many St. Paul residents. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, households experiencing extremely low incomes, defined as incomes at or below 30% of their area median income, are often unable to find rental homes that are affordable and available to them. When the question of how to fix affordable housing shortages is posed, many think the answer is simple: build more houses. However, the red-tape of bureaucracy and legal limitations makes this simple answer difficult. In St. Paul, the zoning code dictates how much housing can be built in certain areas of the city. This restricts the amount of housing allowed to be constructed and where it can be built, limiting the opportunity for people experiencing low incomes to find affordable housing within their communities. In response to this issue and the housing shortage in general, the City of St. Paul has initiated a 1-4 Unit Housing Study. The study investigates ways to expand neighborhood-scale housing in all areas of St. Paul.

As a two-phase plan, phase one has already been enacted. During the first phase, the city conducted a study focused on small housing, accessory

dwelling units, and small parcels to look into zoning practices and its effects. On March 5, 2022, the city revised some of its zoning policy, informed by the findings of phase 1. Many of the policy changes altered the size requirements of new housing properties to allow for more housing to be built.

Phase 2, which is currently in action, focuses on additional zoning flexibility that would help diversify housing opportunities, in part by allowing more duplexes, triplexes, and fourplexes to be built across the city. Currently, single family homes make up 54% of the city's housing supply while duplexes, triplexes, and fourplexes make up 11%. However, the demographics of St. Paul have changed greatly over the past couple of decades. The population continues to grow meaning more housing like duplexes and triplexes are needed to accommodate the population. The planning commission behind the study opened up a forum for public comment from April 1 to April 13, 2023. Residents were encouraged to review the zoning proposal, submit their feedback, and participate in a public hearing on April 14. Following the public comment period, in late spring, the Comprehension and Neighborhood Planning Committee will consider city staff's response to the public testimony and make recommendations as they see fit. In early summer, the Planning commission will voice final recommendations for zoning changes, followed by a City Council public hearing. If adopted, the changed zoning ordinances will take effect 30 days later. Learn more about the study [here](#).

Community Feature: Skylar Hawkins



Image: Urban Roots

by Ismail Khadar

Tucked away in the back of Caydence Records & Coffee, Skyler Hawkins and I found ourselves congregating on the vacant stage chatting away. It seemed fitting, as we are technically in a band with one another. We shared a hug, ruminated on our future tour dates, and then got into the interview.

Skyler is the farm manager at [Urban Roots](#), a nonprofit focused on urban farming headquartered on Payne Avenue. As a farm manager, he works in the market garden program ensuring their gardens are set up for a successful harvest. Skyler collaborates with young people in the community to plant, care for, and harvest the 1.5 acres of land.



Image: Urban Roots

Young people are central to the existence of Urban Roots, helping the organization operate year-round. Right now, the urban farm has a total of 85 youth who help make the gardens possible. The impressive team of young

gardeners is part of the entire farming process, from choosing the plants and starting the seeds, all the way to sale.

Skylar's devotion to both tending the Earth and working alongside younger generations highlights his caring nature. When you see Skylar in action, his kind energy permeates whatever space he occupies.

When starting the job he mentioned that he was worried about rallying the youth.

"I thought that I was going to spend a lot of time and energy convincing young people to participate and feel ownership over the garden. But I have found that most young people come in totally committed and psyched to grow something great," said Skylar.

Before we were needed back at our respective jobs, I inquired about the challenges of urban farming. Skylar mentioned the expected issues like pests and severe weather, but he also revealed challenges set forth by geography. In many cases, Urban Roots rents out lots or uses donated space to grow their gardens. The locations can change each year, and when plots are particularly distant from one another, logistical obstacles ensue. It can be difficult to get people to the gardens they need to tend.

Despite these challenges, Urban Roots supplies produce to several institutions in Minnesota and has regular farmers market appearances at popular spots like the Mill City Market. Be sure to check them out this summer!

More funding, resources, and people power will help this youth-led urban farm conquer its challenges and expand its potential. If you're looking to volunteer, get involved, or wish to invite them to farm on your lot please send an email info@urbanrootsmn.org, call at 651-228-7073, or visit the [Urban Roots website](#).



Image: Urban Roots

Community Art for Justice

The East Side Freedom Library understands the power of art in community.

This month, we were struck by a living work of art designed by Mother Nature herself. This turkey, a resident of Dayton's Bluff, recently came to visit his human neighbors to remind us that he is a big beautiful bird. Enjoy these dazzling poses he served near Margaret Park last week.



Images: Tayler Guccione

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

Renter Wellness Survey

The CALM project was created in order to prevent feelings of isolation and burnout experienced all too often in renter organizing. We need to come together to strengthen bonds and build out new routines and tools for maintaining a healthy balance to be our best selves in the community.

This survey is to help determine the kinds of things we'd like to do together. We'll have a free open space held once monthly at The East Side Freedom Library for us to eat, establish relationships, and experience joy. The hope is to create a space of refuge. Let us hear about a space you'd like to be a part of!

If you have any questions feel free to contact Katherine Banbury or Sidney Stuart at:

Email: Katherineb@homelinemn.org & sidney@eastsidefreedomlibrary.org

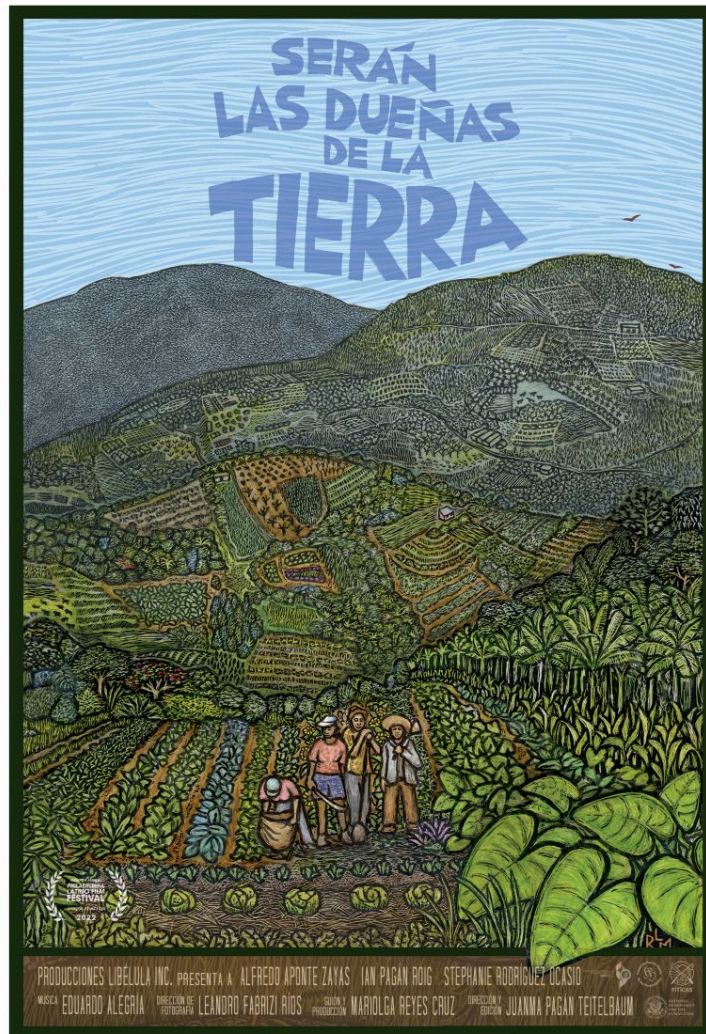
Phone: Katherine: 612-200-2645, Sidney: 612-986-0617

Take the Renter Wellness Survey

Upcoming Event:

Serán Las Dueñas De La Tierra

A Film Screening and Panel Discussion



June 6, 2023

6:00 PM - 8:00 PM

at the East Side Freedom Library

Join East Side Housing Justice and [Trilingua Cinema](#) for a Free Documentary Screening and Panel discussion of *Serán Las Dueñas De La Tierra* (English title: *Stewards of the Land*). The film follows the struggles of three young farmers in Puerto Rico, their fight for land sovereignty, the realities of climate change, and the strain from dependency on food imports threatening food security and sovereignty. We will be joined after the film in a panel discussion with the film's Director and Writer Mariolga Reyes Cruz and local community organizations doing work around food justice and land sovereignty.

Register to Attend

More Housing Justice Content

Listen: [The Plot of Land Podcast](#)

We're back on Roosevelt Island, looking at what happened after subsidized affordable housing programs expired in the 2000s. Some residents managed to buy in, building equity and stability, others experienced precarious tenancy or displacement, and an influx of wealthier residents is changing the face of the island. We ask the question, can Roosevelt Island's past guide state and federal investments in multi-racial, multi-income neighborhoods for the future?

Watch: [Last Week Tonight](#)

John Oliver discusses why rent has become increasingly unaffordable, what we can do to combat a system that is stacked against tenants, and, of course, Dakota Johnson's complex relationship to limes.

Read: [The False Promise of Opportunity Zones](#)

Tax breaks for investors don't help poor communities. Rather than court venture capital, cities must build new institutions to grow neighborhood wealth.

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](#).

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