



# THE EAST SIDE UNIFIED HOUSING JUSTICE JOURNAL

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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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# Investing in Community Development with District Councils



Image: Downtown St. Paul from Indian Mounds Park in Dayton's Bluff

**by Bailey Ethier**

When the City of St. Paul officially defined its 17 District Councils in 1974, both the Mayor's office and the City's residents expressed enthusiasm about the system's purpose: to empower civic participation in local community development. As participation and funding dwindled over the years, so did the District Council infrastructure. Fortunately, there is a growing group of citizens, District Council members, and government workers who are determined to reinvigorate the system.

The St. Paul Director of Community Initiatives, Noel Nix, is working to help revive the functionality of District Councils and engage more citizens in government decision-making processes. Nix wears many hats in relation to community engagement, collaborating with City departments and community groups to create opportunities for joint work. He also runs the appointment process of the 39 boards at the City, works with the Department of Finance to prioritize community engagement in the budget, helps with the neighborhood and Cultural Star boards to help collectively decide how certain funds are allocated, and acts as the Mayor's main point of contact.

Right now, Nix works with District Councils on a case-by-case basis in a variety of capacities. When certain projects and initiatives require a connection between specific city departments and local citizen efforts he acts as communication liaison. When requested, he also comes to speak at District Council meetings to discuss planning and development projects.

Because Nix has so many roles at the City, as well as with the District Councils, it's difficult for the City to exert the energy and attention needed for flourishing District Council collaboration. Since the inception of the District Council structure, the City has employed collaborators to work with the councils. This role has been removed, reintroduced, and redefined many times.

In recent years, dedicated organizers and community leaders have demonstrated great determination in the revival of the District Council system, and City leaders have responded to their calls for action. Right now, the responsibility of District Council collaboration is divided among the City Council, the Project Manager for the Department of Planning and Economic Development, and the Director of Community Initiatives.

“We have begun the reconfiguration process to concretely allocate district council responsibilities among different positions at the City. The Mayor’s Office and the City heard loud and clear that there is a need for faster reimbursements and executing contracts. We are working internally to be more responsive to District Council requests and needs,” said Nix.

To create a more intentional and focused relationship between the government and the District Councils, the City of St. Paul is currently hiring a District Council Coordinator to help revitalize council functions. Traditionally, the District Council position has provided technical assistance to navigate City processes and acted as a main point of contact between the Mayor, the City staff, and St. Paul citizens. The responsibilities of the new District Council Coordinator position, housed within the City Council office, will be split between District Council work and reparations work.

Nix hopes this role will make it easier for the City to support District Council work. He and his colleagues know that District Councils take on an array of projects to meet community needs and that there must be a stronger focus on these platforms. District Councils function as vital conveners, facilitators, and communication liaisons for St. Paul residents. They can submit community stances on zoning ordinances, development decisions, and rental statutes, all of which can substantially alter the equality of housing opportunities in St. Paul neighborhoods. More broadly, Nix asserted that each District Council

can and should create district plans that inform and influence the City's comprehensive plan.

"We are working to reduce ambiguity surrounding District Council roles and the comprehensive planning process," said Nix.

Nix also addressed the challenges associated with the legal limitations of District Council functions. Because all 17 of the District Councils are [501\(c\)\(3\)](#) nonprofit organizations, there are restrictions on their ability to lobby. While District Councils are designed to issue community stances on policies and ordinances, the work that follows is often complicated. District Councils must find ways to help the community advocate for their stances without crossing lobbying boundaries.

"There is a fine line between the facilitation of community voice in local development and the act of lobbying. Sometimes there is discrepancy about where that line should be drawn, but it's necessary to navigate those challenges because District Councils provide a vital platform for people to gather and develop collective positions on proposals," said Nix.

While lobbying limitations present challenges for District Councils, those same challenges are successfully navigated by numerous [501\(c\)\(3\)](#) nonprofits across the country. To strengthen their facilitative role in the community, many District Council leaders and participants have voiced the need for additional funding, resources, and staff. The councils must obtain additional resources from both the government and non-governmental funders.

In a [2018 report](#) created by District Council staff and board members, the complexity of effective funding was given ample attention. The District Council leaders recognized their need to work both individually and collectively to deepen the tangible support they receive from their communities, foundations, and other institutions outside of the City government. The report also highlights the need for an increase in annual City funding to the 17 councils. If funding was readjusted for inflation, District Councils would be receiving an additional \$300,000 in annual City funds.

There are an array of factors that contribute to government funding for District Councils. The federal Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 established the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), designed to fund local platforms like St. Paul's District Councils. Every year since the institution of the CDBG fund, the federal allocations have declined. St. Paul must decide how to use these dwindling funds for economic development, housing development, community engagement, and District Councils.

A few years ago, in response to District Council requests, the City made a modest base increase in annual funding. To continue empowering District Council work, the City will adjust the funding formula based on 2020 Census data. The last time the City adjusted funding for the District Councils it took a full year and there were large scale ramifications. Before the City can begin this process, they must be fully staffed. Until the new District Council Coordinator is hired and the City concretely defines District Council collaboration activities among staff, the funding adjustment process is on hold.

While government change is notorious for its slow pace, Nix made it clear that the City of St. Paul, the City Council, and the Mayor's office have heard the community's call for a revived investment in District Councils.

"The City of St. Paul looks to the District Councils to use City funding to support participatory processes and ensure folks have the opportunity to influence change in their own neighborhoods. District Councils take on a wide range of projects to meet community needs, which I think is incredible. There must be an ongoing focus on these platforms," said Nix.

While the City and District Council leaders are currently working to increase funding and resources, transformative change must be driven by collective community voice. St. Paul residents can help strengthen the District Councils' influence on local development projects by participating in their District Council meetings, projects, and organizing efforts.

The East Side Freedom Library encourages St. Paul residents to get involved with their District Council. Our Housing Justice Directors, Sidney Stuart and Ismail Khadar, are active board members of the Payne Phalen District Council, and they need community support to ensure future East Side development projects are carried out ethically, equitably, and in alignment with the people's interest.

To learn more about the past, present, and future of St. Paul's District Council system, check out the [March](#) and [April](#) editions of East Side Unified.

If you or someone you know would be a good fit for the St. Paul District Council Coordinator position, be sure to explore the [application](#).

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## **Tourism Trade-Offs: Initial Reflections**



Image: Beaches all-inclusive Resort in Jamaica

## by Ismail Khadar

In 2019 British actor Idris Elba received official citizenship to his ancestral homeland of Sierra Leone. A small country on the West African coast, Sierra Leone's modern history has been one of turmoil and violence, not unlike many other African nations in the post-colonial era. Elba has publicly expressed interest in developing a 'world class city' on the nation's Sherbro island, an underdeveloped and underpopulated province in one of the poorest countries on Earth.

When I read this back in 2019 I scoffed at the idea of Sherbro Island containing such a city. My father, being from Sierra Leone, the mainland albeit, I attempted to envision such a development and how it would drastically change the nation. How would these islanders maintain their way of life? A way of life, according to my father and uncle, that had been waning since the 1980's - before the cataclysmic civil war that changed the nation.

Elba's bid was a part of a larger push to increase tourism in Sierra Leone. Why not? Sierra Leone is a small, easily traversable, lush and tropical country with many underemployed citizens who would jump at the opportunity for gainful employment. Tourism is a relatively easy, and straightforward route to boosting the economy.

When weighing the benefits, I found it hard to pinpoint my initial reservations with the concept. I remembered in 2018, my first time going to Sierra Leone,

getting off of the plane into Lungi Airport and overhearing a group of Spaniards belittle and demean first the airport, then the workers, all while discussing their vacation plans. It reminded me of Pedro Blanco, a Spanish slave trader who infamously stationed out of the Gallinas River. From this base, slaves were sent to Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, and countless other locations.

This train of thought led me down a path of questioning as to why colonialist structures of servitude still exist today. However paltry, why is it that former colonies are the most popular destinations for tourism? Especially for western tourists. Jamaica, Bali, The Bahamas, and The Gambia are but a few examples of countries that gain an immense amount of capital from tourism. In many of these countries, a collapse in the tourism industry would spell doom for their local economies.

It is under this truth that I'd like to analyze the idea of "hospitality". At what point does the hospitality industry become coercion? If a nation's product is tied to the service of others, namely the descendants of those who colonized you, how is that nation fulfilling its destiny as a self-determined state? These are the questions I will explore further in a second part to this opinion piece.

Stay tuned for part two on tourism in the August 2023 issue of East Side Unified.

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## **Community Feature: Jordan Burt McGregor**



Image: Jordan McGregor

**by Abby Bulger**

For this month's Community Feature, I had the pleasure of meeting Jordan Burt McGregor, the Economic Development Coordinator at the East Side Neighborhood Development Company (ESNDC). McGregor was drawn to ESNDC during the COVID-19 pandemic after working alongside the company through a housing studies internship. While he did not have a relationship with the East Side before he began working with ESNDC, his authenticity and people-centered passion helped him quickly gain the trust of the community.

"I've been here for just over a year, I've met tons of people here on the East Side, and now it kind of feels like home," said McGregor.

As the Economic Development Coordinator McGregor wears numerous hats, but the majority of his time is devoted to the East Side Black Business Network (ESBBN), the Business Investment Fund (BIF) and the East Community Fund (ECF). These programs work to provide BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) business owners with working capital, forgivable loans, and spaces for entrepreneurial collaboration.

McGregor cites ESBBN as his proudest work while at ESNDC, which began as a non-profit initiative and now operates organically, powered by dedicated Black entrepreneurs. ESBBN was created to build community among Black businesses on the East Side, and the network now boasts a membership of over 40 businesses.

McGregor explained, "We've realized that there's a shared struggle in owning a business on the East Side, especially if you're Black. It's created a safe space to talk about these issues, whether it's a landlord who won't make the fixes needed to properly run a business or the barriers to accessing capital. We've had a ton of success with that, and I'm looking forward to seeing that network grow."

McGregor also provides assistance to those that need help organizing their finances to apply for funding programs. Aid programs can help entrepreneurs do everything from business plan development to budget reporting.

"It's really just a lot about meeting folks where they're at, helping them build upon the hard work they have already done. I'm passionate about togetherness, community, and dismantling barriers to Black wealth and Black businesses," said McGregor.

Community is clearly at the center of McGregor's work at ESNDC. His favorite part of working on the East Side is the people, and he deeply values the



relationships he is building.

“I think ESNDC will be a player for a long time, helping folks build community here on the East Side. I aspire to help make ESNDC a place where people can go for help wherever they're at in their business journey. We don't have a ton of money to give out, but we have the expertise to connect folks with the resources they need to take the next step and turn their business into a wealth-creating opportunity.”

McGregor's latest community engagement efforts are focused on an East Side event coming up this fall. On September 9, 2023, the Uniquely East Side Fall Festival will be held on Payne Avenue from noon to 7:00 PM. The festival will feature a walkable art gallery, a large vendor market, live music, family activities, and other classic street fair elements.

Though McGregor is a newcomer to the East Side community, he is already part of projects with big potential. In collaboration with BIPOC-owned businesses, he is creating more equitable financial opportunities on the East Side. As ESNDC continues to build collective power, networks like the ESBBN will continue to expand their influence and potential.

Check out [ESNDC](#) and learn more about their work.

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## Community Art for Justice

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

This month, East Side Freedom Library Collaborator, Sara Ward, shared an infographic they created on Environmental Racism. Environmental racism is deeply enmeshed in housing discrimination, and ESFL will continue to explore this intersection through programming, report.

**Environmental Racism is racial discrimination in..**

**Environmental Policy-making and Enforcement of Regulations and Laws**

**95%** of civil rights claims have been denied by the Environmental Protection Agency since the mid-1990s.  
Center for Public Integrity- 2015

Children of Color in Minnesota are **3.5 times** more likely to have lead poisoning than white children in Minnesota.  
MN.Environmental Justice- 2020

**The Official Sanctioning and Life-Threatening Presence of Poisons and Pollutants in Low-Income, Communities of Color**

**Race** is still the most significant factor in determining the locations of landfills and other hazardous waste in the U.S.  
UCC, 2021.

African Americans are **75%** more likely to live close to chemical facilities, exposing them to risks of cancer, birth defects, chronic illness and more.  
Sustained Kitchen, 2014

**The Deliberate Targeting of Communities of Color for Toxic Waste Facilities**

**91%** of Minnesota Communities of Color have air pollution-related risks above health guidelines.  
Climate Justice and Public Health in Minnesota (2016)

Asthma death rates are **4 Times** higher for Black Minnesotans than for white Minnesotans.  
Climate Justice and Public Health in Minnesota (2016)

**Racial Covenants and Redlining Laid the Groundwork for Environmental Racism**

Research on 108 Minnesota cities found former redlined areas were **5° hotter** than those that weren't.

Ethnic, minority neighborhoods in Minnesota have **33% less** tree cover.  
Green 2.0, 2019

**The History of Excluding People of Color from Leadership in the Ecology Movement**

**70%** of the Environmental Defense Fund Staff in 2019 was white.  
Green 2.0, 2019

Watch this [video](#) to learn more about the connection between housing justice and environmental racism.

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](#).

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## **Upcoming Events**

EAST SIDE HOUSING JUSTICE, PHALEN RECREATION CENTER, AND  
FAMILY VALUES FOR LIFE PRESENTS:

# COMMUNITY ROLLER PARTY

JOIN US FOR FREE SKATING, FOOD, GAMES,  
RESOURCES, ART, AND MORE!



SCAN HERE FOR  
ATTENDEE SIGN UP



SCAN HERE FOR  
VENDOR SIGN UP

OUR RAIN  
LOCATION WILL  
BE @ HARDING  
ARENA!

**FRIDAY AUGUST 4TH, 5:00-8:00**

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



<https://eastsidefreedomlibrary.org>



# URBAN ROOTS MOBILE MARKET



## Mobile Market Pop-up

Sundays • 12pm to 3pm

1200 Payne Ave,  
St Paul, MN 55130

Starting June 4th  
through October



We Accept  
SNAP/EBT  
& Market Bucks  
Matches

Contact: [Aalvarado@urbanrootsmn.org](mailto:Aalvarado@urbanrootsmn.org)

[UrbanRootsMN.org](http://UrbanRootsMN.org)

# Get more fresh food for less!

**Triple** your SNAP/EBT at your participating farmers market with Market Bucks



## How it works:

- 1 Visit:** Go to the Information Booth at the farmers market to get started.
- 2 Swipe:** Swipe your EBT card for the amount you want to spend. We'll match your purchase dollar-for-dollar (up to \$10). You can get up to \$10 in Market Bucks and \$10 in Produce Market Bucks each visit.
- 3 Shop:** Spend your Market Bucks with eligible vendors at the farmers market.

Learn more and find a participating market near you at  
[hungersolutions.org/farmersmarkets](https://hungersolutions.org/farmersmarkets)  
or call or text the Minnesota Food HelpLine  
888-711-1151.

## What you can buy with SNAP at the farmers market:



Fruits and Vegetables



Meat, Fish, Eggs,  
and Dairy\*



Honey and  
Maple Products\*



Jams, Jellies, Pickles,  
and Sauces\*



Baked Goods\*



Seeds and Plants  
that Produce Food\*

\* Not eligible for Produce Market Bucks.

## What is SNAP?

SNAP stands for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps. SNAP helps eligible households purchase food at grocery stores, convenience stores, and farmers markets.

## Can I get SNAP?

SNAP eligibility is based on household size and income. You can check to see if you are likely eligible for SNAP online at: [hungersolutions.org/snap-screener](https://hungersolutions.org/snap-screener) or by calling the Minnesota Food HelpLine at 888-711-1151.

## How to I apply for SNAP?

You can apply for SNAP online at [MNBenefits.org](https://MNBenefits.org) or you can get a paper application mailed to you by calling the Minnesota Food HelpLine 888-711-1151.

Market Bucks is a program of

**HUNGER  
SOLUTIONS**   
Winning Minnesota's Food Fight

# 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:

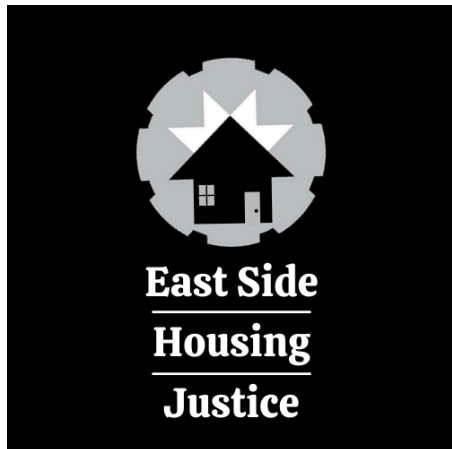
Email: [Katherineb@homelinemn.org](mailto:Katherineb@homelinemn.org) & [sidney@eastsidefreedomlibrary.org](mailto:sidney@eastsidefreedomlibrary.org)

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

Take the Renter Wellness Survey

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