

Laying the tracks

Hennepin County explores Train Museum concept on the Greenway

The Train Museum would reconnect the Sears site to the Greenway and its railroad history, creating a renewed relationship between neighborhood residents, trains, and regional commerce.

In its former life, the Midtown Greenway was a bustling railroad corridor that connected south Minneapolis to regional commerce. For a hundred years, the trains were the main mode for commercial transportation. Conflict between the trains and neighboring residents led to the excavation of the railroad trench in the early 20th century, but the trains continued to serve commercial and industrial shipping customers for decades thereafter. One of the largest commercial shippers in the corridor was Sears Roebuck.

Sears closed its Chicago and Lake location in December 1994, and as local officials work to redevelop the giant complex, reconnecting the site to the Greenway and its railroad history has surfaced as a means of creating a renewed relationship between neighborhood residents, trains, and regional commerce. Hennepin County is exploring the possibility of building a train museum in the Sears train shed. While the proposal is still in its infancy,



Kodet Architectural Group, Ltd.'s rendering of the proposed Hennepin County Train Museum.

the County recently commissioned a feasibility study from Kodet Architectural Group on the idea. As Hennepin County Commissioner Peter McLaughlin points out, the location stands at the junction of past and future transportation use, which helped to inspire the idea of building a train museum there. "The train shed is immediately adjacent to the Greenway, with its history as a former major railroad corridor, its present-day service as a pedestrian and bicycle route, and its future role as a corridor for mass transit that will serve neigh-

borhoods along the Greenway," says McLaughlin. "And a future Metro Transit hub at Chicago and Lake will be just steps away from the proposed train museum site." McLaughlin also believes that a train museum could serve other important purposes. "The museum would create a destination attraction in the area," he says, "and be a great supporting use for a re-developed Sears complex."

Open spaces of a bygone era

The architect's proposal, which was finalized late this

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Ingebretsen's Scandinavian Food & Gifts

Immigrant business brings vitality to Lake Street— for over eighty years.

Ask anyone what they love about Lake Street, and they will immediately mention the vibrant immigrant businesses that create a rich tapestry of diverse cultures and ethnic foods and wares. Lake Street is a commercial corridor that spans the City east to west, and is loaded with new, energetic, business owners pursuing their dreams. And while these businesses open nearly every month on Lake Street, it is not a new story. You can find establishments on



Ingebretsen's Scandinavian Gifts & Foods, 16th Avenue and Lake Street.

Lake that claim a history of continuous operation stretching back to the street's heyday of bustling streetcar traffic. One such fixture is Ingebretsen's Scandinavian Food & Gifts, which has presided over the corner of 16th & Lake Street for over 80 years.

Ingebretsen's began as The Model Meat Market in 1921, and expanded to include gifts and other imported Scandinavian items in 1974. The store prides itself on offering imported Scandinavian foods, needlework supplies, and beautifully-crafted gifts, as well as items made locally by Scandinavian artisans. According to current owner Julie Ingebretsen—the third generation of Ingebretsens to operate her family's business at the corner—the interior of the building looks much the same as it did in 1930. She attributes the store's success to its many loyal, committed customers from both within and outside the neighborhood.

Organizing for positive change

Its deep roots in the community and its

connection to Old World traditions notwithstanding, the store very much exists in the present, and Julie Ingebretsen has taken an active role in meeting the challenges of operating a business along Lake Street. In addition to serving as president of the Lake Street Council, she is co-chair of the Bloomington-Cedar-Lake Commercial Association. "Bloomington-Lake's worst period probably followed First Bank's departure about 10 years ago," she says. "But as bad as the situation seemed at the time, it had the positive effect of galvanizing the local business community to organize itself.

"Our commercial association was born of those organizing efforts, and we have had good success in implementing positive changes at our commercial node. We convinced another bank to move in to the First Bank site; we supported the establishment of the Mercado; and we have helped several new businesses make a go of things at the northeast corner, a location once occupied by a menacing, fortress-like gun shop."

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Jim Campbell

Counsel

Louis N. Smith

808 Colwell Building
123 North Third Street
Minneapolis, MN 55401

612.344.1400

fax 612.344.1550

www.midtowncommunityworks.org
smith@smithparker.com

Investing in street improvements

Despite the positive changes at the Cedar-Bloomington-Lake commercial node, room for improvement remains. “Although we are seeing more and more traffic along Lake Street in the last few years, access continues to be a problem,” she notes. “We are really overdue for repaving, and that detracts from the efforts to revitalize Lake Street as a vibrant commercial corridor.” Ingebretsen’s desire to help foster Lake Street’s revitalization prompted her participation in the Project Advisory Committee for the Lake Street repaving project. The PAC will serve an important advisory role as plans proceed for the repavement and streetscaping to be undertaken along Lake Street by Hennepin County in 2004.

“Our commercial association has learned to actively engage in the issues that affect Bloomington and Lake,” explains Ingebretsen. “With the streetscaping project, we are eager to take part in the planning so that we can help ensure that the improvements along Lake Street retain the distinctive flavor of the individual commercial nodes. For instance, we have many artists living in the Bloomington-Lake area, so we would love to see a strong public art focus at the intersection.”

“Of course, no business owner enjoys the disruption of street repaving,” says Ingebretsen. “It is a challenge. But if we focus on the long term, creating a new streetscape for Lake Street can be a huge asset for the businesses, their customers, and neighboring residents.”

summer, highlights the train shed’s many attributes that would support this creative reuse and redevelopment. The shed’s large open spaces suggest the cavernous train stations of a bygone era, while the existing loading dock along the tracks would render display cars more accessible to the public. The shed also has sufficient space for classrooms, archives, and workrooms. The building already has skylights, as well as other features that would allow for the ready addition of more natural lighting. A series of bricked-in arches could convert to windows, and the existing openings at the either end of the tracks could also become windows to give the appearance that the tracks continue to the outside. The proposal also calls for street level access via an elevator, and includes a coffee shop or snack bar with restrooms on the Greenway level, so that the Museum could also operate as a “comfort station” for the Greenway’s bicyclists and pedestrians.

The lobby would resemble the main waiting room of an old train depot, while the display area would replicate a depot’s loading platform. The existing 300 feet of track inside the shed would provide an ample expanse for the placement of the historic train cars, which might include a sleeper car, a first class coach, and a small steam locomotive.

Potential partnership

The County has explored the possibility of partnering with the Minnesota Transportation Museum,

which operates the Lake Harriet Trolley and the Jackson Street Roundhouse in St. Paul. MTM has been involved in the preparation the preliminary feasibility studies, and has expressed interest in overseeing the museum’s operations. According to MTM executive director Don Meyer, “We have identified three wooden passenger cars that would be ideal candidates for exhibition in the museum, should the project go forward. Each is different in its heritage and design, and represents a different railway that once had operations in the Twin Cities. We would welcome an opportunity to display these cars, which are too fragile to operate, but which are truly some of the gems of our collection.”

Peter McLaughlin describes the proposal as promising, but emphasizes that the train museum plans are very much in the preliminary phase. “We have not come to an agreement that a train museum would be the highest and best use for the train shed, much less allocated funding for the project,” he notes. “But the proposal does illustrate the type of historically meaningful, high-quality amenity that could be included in the re-development of the Sears complex. Even as we move forward with plans to reinvent the role of transportation along the Greenway, we are committed to ensuring that the Corridor preserves a meaningful connection to its complex, century-old transportation history.”

Saddle up and head west

Construction begins on trail between Greenway and the Southwest Corridor

Metro-area bicycling and walking enthusiasts will soon enjoy an unbroken connection between the Midtown Greenway and the extensive trail system in the Southwest Corridor. Just two weeks ago, construction began on a trail segment that will connect the westernmost end of the Greenway (at Chowen Avenue) to the current east end of the Southwest LRT Trail (at Beltline Boulevard).

The Hennepin County Regional Railway Authority has owned both the 29th Street Corridor and the Southwest Corridor for some time, but a connecting trail was not built previously because of difficulty in reaching an agreement with the railroad on the trail's location. HCCRA recently purchased the necessary section of the Canadian-Pacific cor-



Construction is currently underway on the trail connection.

ridor between Chowen Avenue and Beltline Boulevard and negotiated an agreement with the Twin Cities & Western Railway to cross over its line, clearing the way for construction.

Although HCCRA owns the corridor, the project falls within the jurisdiction of the Three Rivers Park District. Three Rivers' trail coordinator Boe Carlson says that the trail will serve a much

greater purpose than its 3/4-mile length might suggest: "This connection will provide a real benefit from the standpoint of both recreational users and commuters, providing a link around the Chain of Lakes and to the Kennilworth area." The contractor for the project, Barber Construction Co., Inc., has just completed the paving, and anticipates final completion of the trail this fall if the weather holds; otherwise, the trail will be finished in the spring. All parties predict that the public will be amazed at the result of the trail construction. As Hennepin County Commissioner Gail Dorfman points out, "This trail connection project provides yet another example of the Greenway's potential as a regional asset to forge great connections between neighboring communities."



808 Colwell Building 123 North Third Street Minneapolis, MN 55401

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