

Minneapolis development and economic equity: Upper Harbor Terminal can be a national model

A City Council committee should advance a concept plan, write Mayor Jacob Frey and Council Member Phillipe Cunningham. It's a starting point for the North Side, they add, and deeper community collaboration is baked into the next phase.

By Jacob Frey and Phillipe Cunningham | FEBRUARY 18, 2019 — 6:08PM

While Minneapolis is known as the “City of Lakes,” it’s also defined by our nation’s river. The Mississippi River helped make Minneapolis an economic force, powering the flour mills of the 19th century. Throughout our city’s history, the Mississippi has helped inform everything from our cultural identities to the way we exercise and celebrate. Every resident should have a chance to share in the benefits of one of our greatest natural resources.

But one area of our city, north Minneapolis, has been largely cut off from the riverfront — and not by accident. Heavy industrial use followed by a massive highway has cut off an entire community from a vital asset.

We know that north Minneapolis is home to exceptionally talented people and a wealth of natural features. We also know that the North Side has survived despite generations of pollution, intentional segregation and disenfranchisement that — if left unaddressed — will persist for generations to come. The sustained exclusion from opportunities afforded by the riverfront is a sad legacy that we simply must change. Done right, redevelopment of the Upper Harbor Terminal holds the opportunity to ensure that current residents benefit, that the area’s economy thrives and that the north Minneapolis riverfront is highlighted in deserving fashion. This is particularly true since the Upper Harbor Terminal falls within both the Promise Zone and the Northern Green Zone — place-based strategies to address historic injustices. A broad coalition of community members, city leaders and private partners has a vision to harness the vitality and creative potential of north Minneapolis with the 48 acres of public land. It’s been a long time in the making, too.

For decades, the Upper Harbor Terminal has served as a port for Minneapolis shipping. Since the upper river closed to commercial navigation in 2015, the site has been in public trust. Over those past four years, city staff, the Park and Recreation Board and the development team have conducted 80 public engagement meetings to bring together North Siders to envision a new Upper Harbor Terminal. As a result of those meetings, we now have a concept plan for the site — and that’s just the beginning of the shared work ahead.

Here’s what we mean when we say concept plan: a working document that begins to imagine what could be on the land, not what will be there. The plan is designed to ensure that the North Side economy benefits first from the project, and it is indeed centered on sustainable development.

What is in the concept plan for this first phase? A world-class Community Performing Arts Center — a gateway to North Side businesses — affordable housing, green space and parkland; a business center; and a yet-to-be-fully-envisioned community/integrated utility hub. At Tuesday’s meeting of the City Council’s Economic Development and Regulatory Services Committee, council members will have an opportunity to move the draft concept plan forward. That’s the right step.

With 41 percent of the land designated for park use, plans for new employment opportunities, more affordable housing and a signature concert venue, Minneapolis has a chance to create a national model for equitable economic development that stabilizes



RENDERING PROVIDED BY CITY OF MINNEAPOLIS

A rendering shows the proposed Upper Harbor Terminal riverfront redevelopment in north Minneapolis.

community while expanding riverfront access.

But time is limited. With the Park Board, the Minnesota Legislature and other government partners willing to invest with us, we must act now to send a strong signal that the city and community are united and committed to realizing the full potential of this critical site.

Once the concept plan is approved, the Park Board, the city and the development team will turn to the community for partnership in making big decisions and bring the project to fruition. This is an undertaking of historic proportions, and part of changing history means we put north Minneapolis first and make sure North Side residents are involved in the planning process. Deeper community collaboration is baked into the next phase for the Upper Harbor Terminal.

We are committed to redeveloping the Upper Harbor Terminal with the neighbors we represent. Let's build a more inclusive economy, catalyze the types of investment north Minneapolis has long deserved and reconnect an entire community with the Mississippi River, a national treasure. Let's approve this concept plan and get to work to move this project forward together.

Jacob Frey is mayor of Minneapolis. Phillipe Cunningham represents the Fourth Ward on the Minneapolis City Council.
