Creating Public Open Spaces:
The Midtown Greenway

by Jeff Liljegren and Jeff Corn

The Midtown Greenway is a six-mile-long multimodal transit route in south Minneapolis connecting Lake Calhoun to the Mississippi River. An old entrenched rail corridor, the Midtown Greenway currently provides bicycle and pedestrian access, with future plans for a streetcar transit line. The third and final portion of the corridor is scheduled for completion during the summer of 2006. This segment of the greenway will provide a cross-route for the Grand Rounds, a 50-mile-long National Scenic Byway in Minneapolis, as well as access to the corridor for some of the city’s most culturally diverse neighborhoods.

The Midtown Greenway Coalition, a community-based nonprofit organization, represents 16 neighborhoods adjacent to the Midtown Greenway corridor. In the summer and fall of 2005, University of Minnesota student Jeff Liljegren worked with the coalition through a grant from CURA’s Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization (NPCR) program. As the first step in a long-term discussion concerning development of land adjacent to the corridor, Liljegren, a graduate student in urban and regional planning and landscape architecture, facilitated a community planning process and created a Public Open Space Vision Plan for 12 potential open space sites along the Midtown Greenway corridor. The 12 sites were chosen based on current development, adjacent vacant lots, publicly owned adjacent lots, and existing and future planned access points for the greenway corridor.

Approximately 200 people participated in the Midtown Greenway community planning process, which extended over 46 public meetings. Participants included local neighborhood residents, community councils, local nonprofit development corporations, and business associations. The purpose of the community process was to educate participants about the anticipated growth of housing stock and human population along the corridor, highlight the need for further public investment along the corridor during the next 30 to 50 years, and provide participants with opportunities for input and dialogue. The process included PowerPoint presentations, site visits, questionnaires, individual interviews, and focus groups.

Community input coalesced into three general viewpoints about future public open space along the corridor. Some participants were eager to imagine what “could be,” and provided design ideas for the 12 specified sites. Others had reservations about envisioning future use of adjacent parcels.
of land, either because of concerns about land ownership or because of the existing physical condition of the parcels. Finally, the political climate surrounding a few specific sites impeded the process and prevented thorough exploration of alternatives.

The community outreach and participation process laid the foundation for development of the Midtown Greenway Public Open Space Vision Plan, which provides a framework for further public discussion about the proposed plans for the 12 open space sites. The plan includes a PowerPoint presentation and a set of seven 42-inch by 30-inch presentation boards which, taken together, provide a complete and comprehensive look at the proposals for all 12 sites. Tim Springer, executive director of the Midtown Greenway Coalition, calls the plan “an important tool to educate the public and gain support for a vision that includes parks and plazas along the Greenway.”

The City of Minneapolis Community Planning and Economic Development office has reviewed the vision plan and is considering including the 12 identified sites as public open space in its Midtown Greenway Land Use and Development Plan, which is currently under development.

Setting aside adjacent lands as public open space can enhance multimodal transit corridors by providing better access, offering a range of activity destinations, and improving safety and aesthetics. Because of the increasing availability of federal funding for development along transit corridors, private land developers are finding new markets for property adjacent to such corridors. Ensuring that open space along these corridors remains a valued public good requires careful planning and supportive land-use policies. The Midtown Greenway Public Open Space Vision Plan acknowledges adjacent properties as public amenities, provides a framework for successfully incorporating them into the public space, and demonstrates the potential for a community-driven model to attain these objectives.

For more information about this project, see “Midtown Greenway Coalition: Public Open Space Vision Plan” (NPCR Report #1230), available online at www.cura.umn.edu/publications/NPCR-reports/npcr1230.pdf.

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Fifth Community GIS Expo June 5th

Are you a local government planner, county GIS specialist, land-use planning consultant, neighborhood organizer, faculty member, or student with an interest in geographic information systems (GIS) technology? Then the fifth Community GIS Exposition is for you!

Intended for everyone interested in community applications of GIS, this year’s day-long expo will explore the theme “The Future of Community GIS: Moving to the Internet,” with the goal of building collaboration among GIS users in the Twin Cities metropolitan area and advancing a comprehensive GIS agenda for the region.

The expo will be held June 5, 2006, at the Continuing Education and Conference Center on the University of Minnesota’s St. Paul campus. Highlight’s of this year’s expo include:

- keynote address by Josh Kirschenbaum, associate director of planning and development for PolicyLink
- panel discussion on public use GIS titled “Challenges and Opportunities of Moving to the Web”
- showcase session for Minnesota 3D (M3D), a Web-based GIS program
- poster sessions highlighting local and regional GIS projects
- hands-on workshops

This year’s expo is sponsored by the Minneapolis Neighborhood Information System (MNIS), St. Paul Community GIS Consortium, Neighborhood Planning for Community Revitalization (NPCR), and CURA.

More information about the expo, including information on how to register, will be available soon at www.cura.umn.edu/GISExpo2006.php.