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Minneapolis's booming downtown due to different kind of stadium district

The Big Build initiative is bringing billions to the city's underutilized downtown

By **Patrick Sisson** | Nov 28, 2017, 12:03pm EST



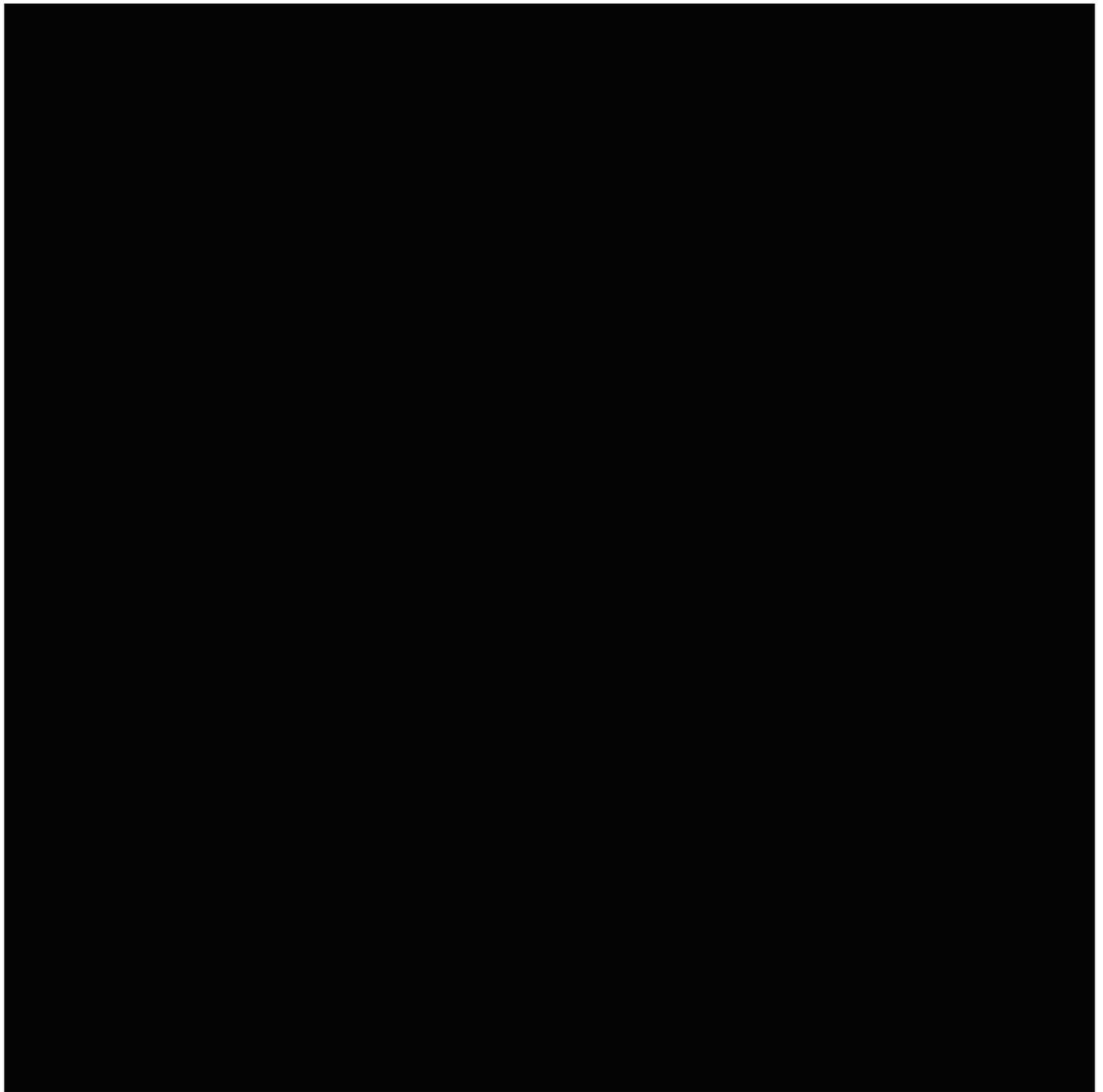
U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis, a core part of the Big Build series of developments taking place in East Town. | Minneapolis Downtown Council

When [Super Bowl LII](#) takes place in Minneapolis in February, a coming-out party of sorts for the city's new [warship-shaped U.S. Bank Stadium](#), Minnesotans hope that their hometown Vikings (currently leading their division with a 9-2 record) play a starring role.

But even if the Vikings don't make it to the big game, the Twin Cities will have many reasons to show hometown pride. In the midst of the media circus and NFL pregame hype, including the [Bold North Festival](#), a football-themed street party kicking off in late January, the Super Bowl will bring national attention to the ongoing redevelopment of the city's downtown.

Known as the [Big Build](#), this ongoing wave of public and private redevelopment will, when it's finished in 2025, bring \$2 billion of investment to Minneapolis over the next few years, the biggest investment the city has seen in decades. With nearly two dozen projects finished or under construction, the Big Build will basically create a new neighborhood, the 120-square-block district of East Town (bordered by the traditional downtown to the west, the Mississippi River to the north, and two expressways).

Anchored by the new stadium, a high-tech arena with a glass prow that opened earlier this year, as well as a \$588 million five-block redevelopment called Downtown East built around twin 17-story towers owned by Wells Fargo, this constellation of construction projects shows the city trying to turn a stadium project into a benefit for the entire city.



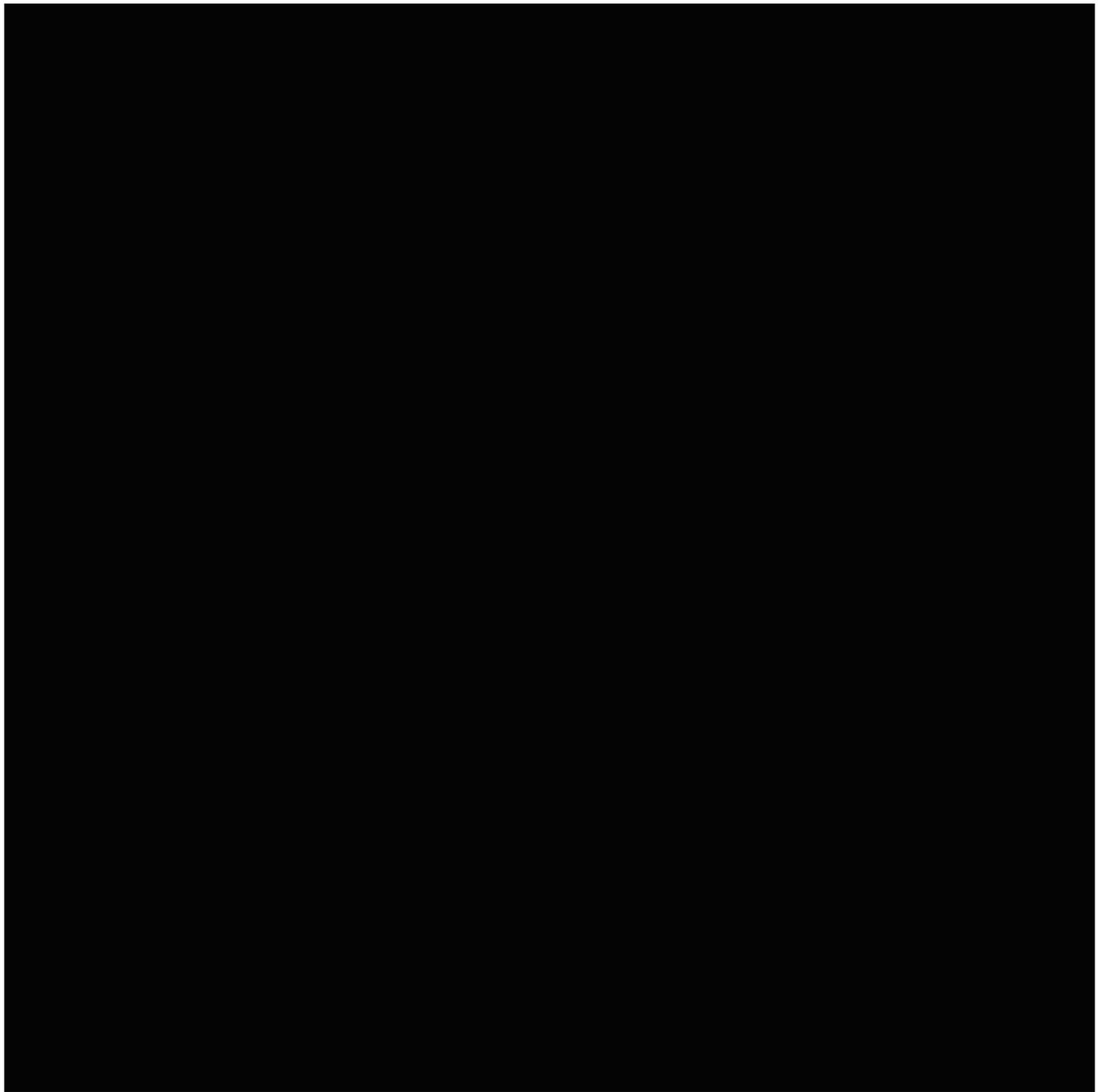
The Big Build covers a large swath of Minneapolis's downtown.

“This is more diverse than just skyscrapers,” says Dan Collison, director of Downtown Partnerships for the Minneapolis Development Council, as well as executive director for the East Town Business Partnership. “This is infill, affordable housing, riverfront development, and, yes, stadiums. It’s quite unusual.”

The newly minted East Town (subject of a public naming contest) has helped accelerate already impressive growth in the city's downtown core, which has added more residents than any other Midwestern metro in the last decade. The city's central shopping and pedestrian street, the Nicollet Mall, just reopened last month after a \$50 million makeover designed by James Corner Field Operations, the landscape architecture firm perhaps best known for its work on New York City's High Line.

East Town, which has already seen its population grow 30 percent since 2000, will welcome 3,200 new units between now and 2030, and has accounted for 8 percent of the entire region's housing growth since 2010. Perhaps even more encouraging, downtown Minneapolis now boasts more than 40,000 residents, making it one of country's 10 most populous central business districts.

Stories of stadium-led civic re-investment that fall short aren't new. Local politicians and civic boosters say East Town is different. Yes, it's anchored by a billion-dollar stadium, but it's also a move to create a new civic landscape that could catalyze a walkable, transit-friendly neighborhood; the new Green Line light rail station, which connects with downtown St. Paul, drops riders just a few blocks away, and an accompanying 4.2-acre urban park has a title—the Commons—that's a little on the nose.



A view of the Hubert H. Humphrey Metrodome in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The famous dome was torn down in 2014 to make way for U.S. Bank Stadium. | Bettmann/Getty

Doubling down on stadium projects

Before plans to construct a new Vikings stadium took shape in 2011, the eastern part of downtown Minneapolis was famously called “a concrete oasis” by Minnesota Gov. Mark Dayton. The Hubert Humphrey Metrodome, previous home of the Vikings and Twins, became a nexus for a series of surface parking lots. Whatever housing, small commercial buildings, and auto shops were left after ribbons of highways were laid down during the

postwar urban renewal push made way for a real estate model centered on athletics and asphalt. One owner actually controlled a five-block section of parking, and a 2010 Great Streets study found that 25 percent of the neighborhood's land was set aside for parking or vacant lots.

“It was the classic suburban push,” says Collison. “Policy and practice led half the city to move to the suburbs.”

By the mid-'90s, there were signs of rebirth in what would later be known as East Town, with condo development creeping along the riverfront, especially in the Mill District (now the northern part of Downtown East). Sam Newberg, a Minneapolis urbanist and developer, says that with the right zoning and development plans, the area could have turned around sooner. But it took the push for the stadium to generate enough critical mass, and public support, to attract a core of developers.

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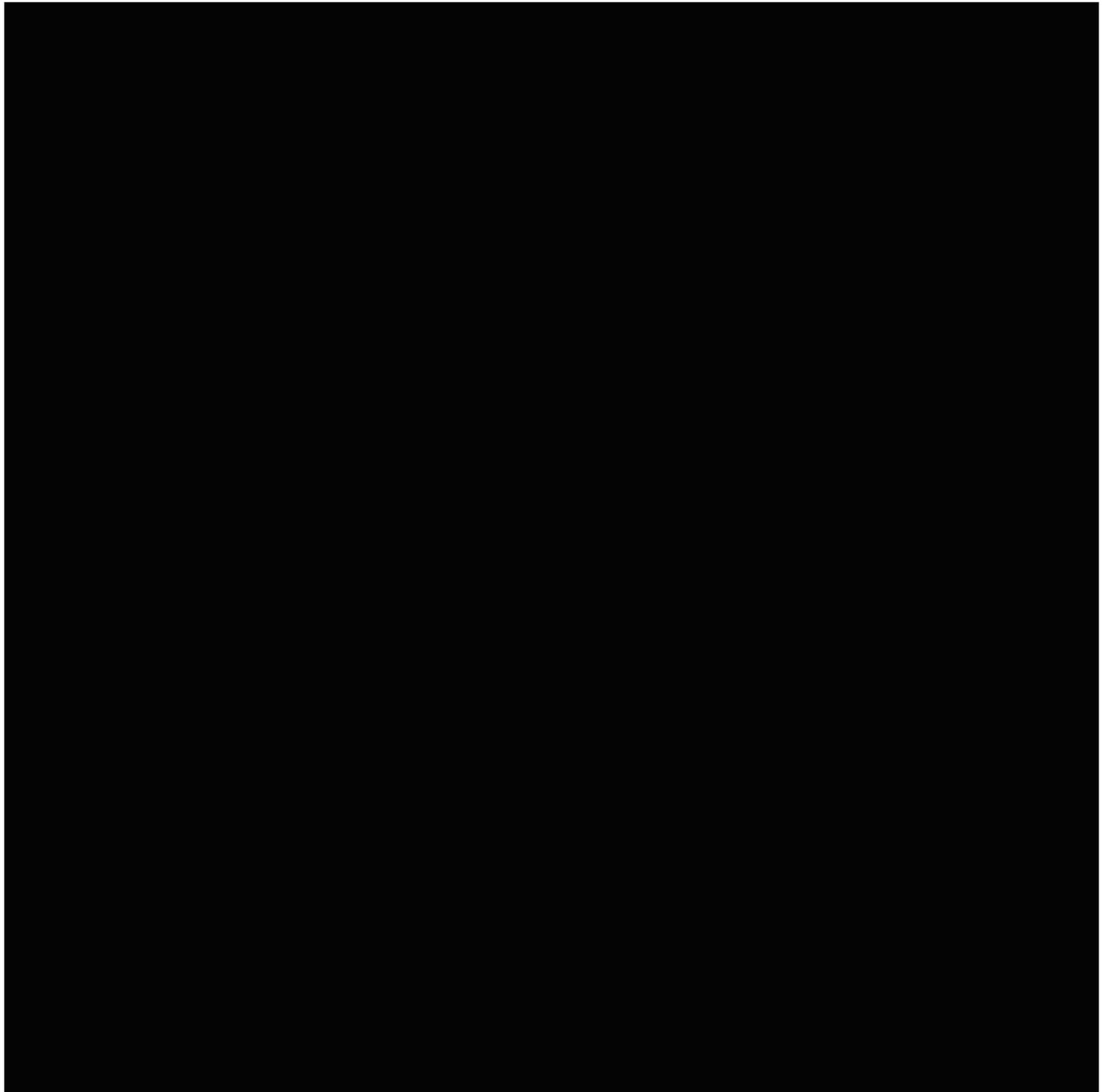
The stadium push took shape just as the Minneapolis region's economy began bouncing back from the Great Recession. The Twin Cities region is more of an economic powerhouse than many outside of the state may appreciate: With a population of 3.6 million, it generates \$250 billion in GDP and is the home of 17 Fortune 500 companies. If it were its own country, its output would rival that of Chile. Offering up new land adjacent to downtown gave developers an ideal space to take advantage of the trends toward downtown living and corporate relocation (the Wells Fargo towers will consolidate workers from 13 far-flung suburban locations).

“Governor Dayton said this was an economic redevelopment proposal,” says Collison, distinguishing it from merely an incentive to keep a sports owner from seeking a new home.

The incentives given to the Vikings haven't been free from controversy: The team received a \$500 million package from the city and state, and has control over the Commons park for 100 days of the year, a perk the last two city mayors protested. But

based on the dozens of projects in various stages of completion, construction, or consideration, the idea of anchoring construction around the stadium can definitely claim a degree of success.

“I would argue the game changer wasn’t the stadium, but rather the five-block downtown campus put together by Ryan Companies,” says Collison, a reference to the mixed-use development that includes the Wells Fargo buildings. “It gave this area the chance to have a holistic narrative, rather than just be a stadium project.”



Big Build is just getting started

And the story still has plenty of chapters to add. [IronClad](#), a \$355 mixed-use project, with retail, residential, and the boutique Moxy Hotel, will go up blocks from the stadium. Opus Group has begun work on [365 Nicollet](#), a 30-story, high-rise multifamily and retail development, while the [Kraus-Anderson Block](#), a massive mixed-use project, will transform an old two-story office park into a hotel, microbrewery, and social-impact hub.

Add that to streetscaping and transportation projects, including the reconstruction project on [Hennepin/Lyndale Avenue](#), [RiverFirst](#) park projects, and the Washington Avenue redesign, which includes a [dedicated cycling track](#), and the city's stated goal of doubling the downtown population doesn't seem so far-fetched.

Additional creative reuse projects of nearby abandoned historic buildings, such as the Grain Belt site and Foundry Home Goods, offer even more room for expansion.

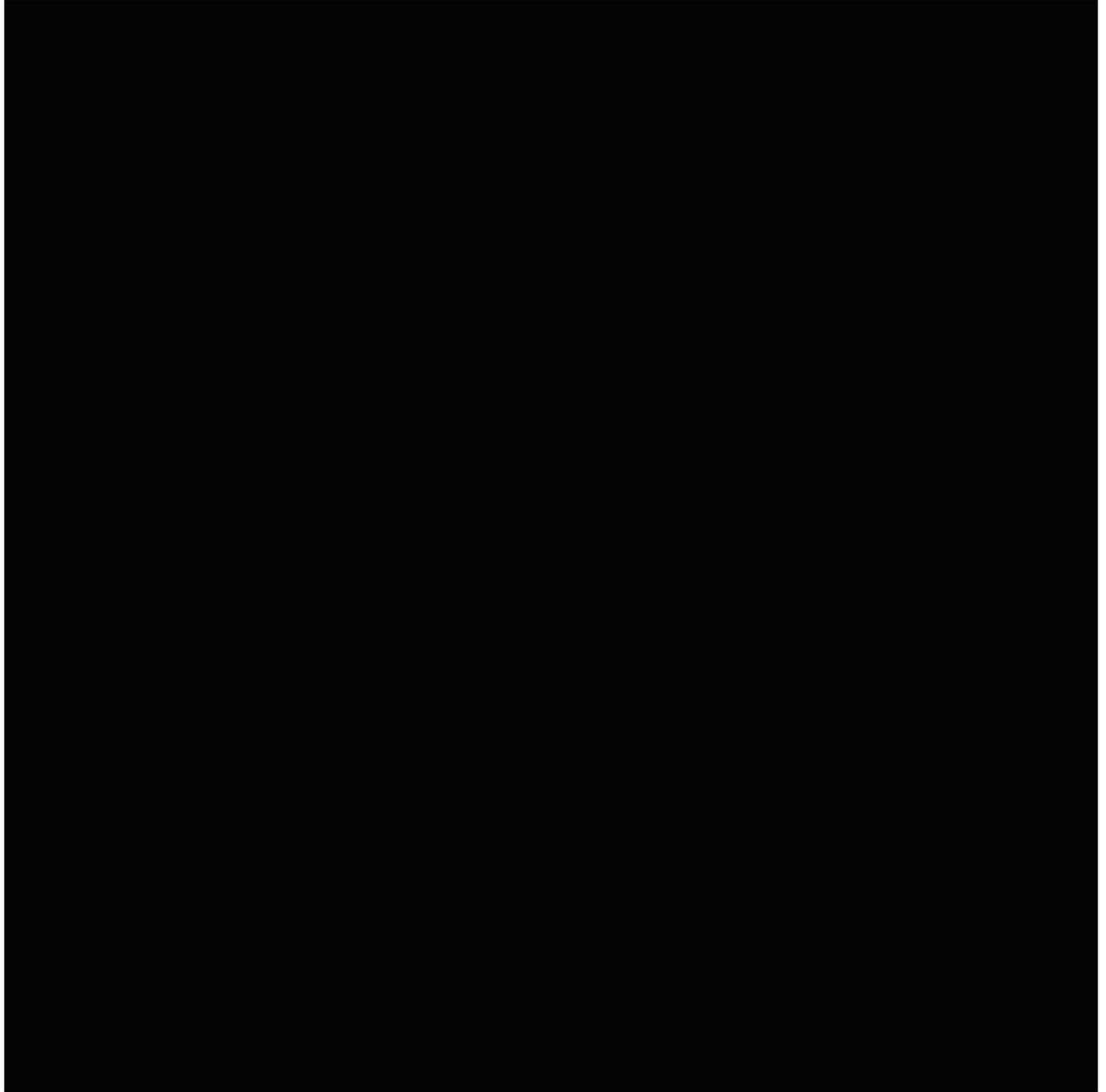
While the landscape has changed significantly in just a few years, what happens next will be the true test of the Big Build's lasting impact, and how it impacts important issues of affordability and equity. The rental market in Minneapolis has been a victim of the city's success, having fallen behind the demand for new units. Currently, rental vacancies citywide stood at just [2.8 percent this spring](#), even though 17,000 units have been added to the Twin Cities since 2010, and the new Mayor-elect Jacob Frey has made affordable housing one of his [top priorities](#).

"Rents aren't yet out of control, but there's a very big housing crisis," says Newberg. "The Twin Cities haven't had enough regular apartment development in the last decade, much less affordable housing."

Against this backdrop, the expansion of East Town worries those in neighboring areas concerned about affordability and neighborhood continuity. South of the new stadium

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district sits Elliot Park, a traditionally low-income area with public housing that may see rents continue to skyrocket as new condos and office building go online just blocks away (Collison and other developers already have a bunch of affordable housing projects set to break ground nearby).



U.S. Bank Stadium during the end of construction. | Universal Images Group Editorial

On the other side of East Town, the northeast part of Minneapolis is also seeing new development, rising prices, and changing streets. Tony Lipa, a long-time resident and realtor who [often blogs](#) about area developments, says the working-class neighborhood, filled with family-owned businesses and multigenerational homes, is making way for bigger redevelopment. What was formerly a market that saw the occasional rehabbed home is now attracting larger plans to purchase adjoining lots, tear down turn-of-the-century homes, and put up townhomes. The forthcoming [Nordhaus](#), a 20-story tower on First Avenue, is being billed as a new, “Scandinavian-style” development.

“Between 2008 and 2014, the trendy hip kids moved in,” Lipa says. “But now, with the Big Build, you’re seeing more corporate interests push into northeast Minneapolis.”

Has the city managed to kickstart downtown development without giving too much away to corporate interests? Collison, understandably, believes the plan for East Town, both what’s been realized and what’s in the works, showcases “a symphony orchestrated to best practices,” a zoning update, transit plan, and concentrated development sending a signal the market picked up and pushed forward. Whether the new neighborhood is as good as these plans make it sound remains to be seen.

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