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Dan Collison, executive director of the East Town Business Partnership. Photo by Janelle Nivens

## An East Town evangelist

By SARAH MCKENZIE

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Dan Collison's Twitter profile sums up his unique role in the community: "A pastor and civic leader who spends most days bringing people together across sectors

through inter-disciplinary work for the purpose of human flourishing.”

He serves as executive director of the East Town Business Partnership (formerly the East Downtown Council) and lead pastor of First Covenant Church in Minneapolis. Before he became a pastor, he ran an adult foster care home for men with development disabilities with his wife Holly.

He’s a champion of East Town, the newly branded east side of downtown that has been dramatically reshaped by the new stadium, Commons park, the Wells Fargo towers and other new development.

Here are highlights of a recent interview with Collison.

**Q: What motivated you to get involved in the East Town Business Partnership?**

I joined the partnership in 2010 as a volunteer board member. My family moved downtown from the Twin Cities western suburbs in 2009 to help re-birth First Covenant Church, a congregation located between HCMC and the stadium that had declined for several decades and was ready for a ‘reboot.’ It only made sense to volunteer in the community as a means to learn how to be a good and contributing neighbor.

In 2011 the East Downtown Council completed a comprehensive market analysis we called “The East Downtown Great Streets” study. It was undertaken to identify and understand the economic revitalization potential of our district which includes the Elliot Park and Downtown East neighborhoods. It was this study that got me personally excited and inspired about the potential for our area. I was also shocked to learn that only 16 percent of the land in East Town was used for housing while 25 percent went to surface parking lots and vacant land. Our district was ripe for rediscovery!

The passage of the 2012 stadium legislation was what set the stage for a new wave of development, but it was the diligent work of many, but especially former Mayor R.T. Rybak that truly inaugurated a new era for East Town. I became the board President in 2013 and spent much of that year racing throughout downtown asking our members, our neighbors, elected city and county officials, the development community and regional voices “what do you want East Downtown to become?”

There were consistent responses: “become more integrated, improve connections and pedestrian environment, leverage transit, and whatever you do — while advocating for the new stadium be sure to reach further for a complete vision of holistic 21st century urban development.” At that point I fell in love with not only the vision potential but the challenge of the ask!

My professional work began in June of 2014 and expanded to include a shared staff role as director of East Town Partnership for the Minneapolis Downtown Council-DID and executive director of what we have been renamed as the “East Town Business Partnership.” This innovative partnership leverages the emerging grass roots nature of the East Town business community and the larger reach and influence of the MDC-DID.

**Q: What are the greatest strengths of East Town?**

I like to think of East Town as an emerging “complete” community. And, by “complete” I mean:

- two diverse neighborhoods that meet in the middle with our new metropolitan park “The Commons”;
- rapidly expanding hotels and hospitality;
- strong mix of small, medium, and large business including an array of nonprofit organizations;
- diverse residential population of 10,000 now and the potential of growing to 16,000 by 2030;
- affordable, market rate and transitional housing to support residential growth;
- trauma 1 regional medical center and clinics;
- several public parks and a college sized soccer field;
- connections to University of Minnesota and a private university in Elliot Park;
- several riverfront amenities, including the iconic Stone Arch Bridge;

- rapidly growing commercial space;
- nationally celebrated sports and entertainment complex;
- Complete transit options and a regional LRT hub; and
- Regionally leading fine arts education and performance institutions.

**Q: What are some of the challenges facing the neighborhood?**

For several decades the income disparity between Downtown East/Mill District and Elliot Park was stark and unfortunate. This was true regarding housing and retail opportunities as well.

The leadership of the East Town Business Partnership (which has existed since 1979) continues to diligently look for ways to bridge those gaps and bring people together for the common good, and in common shared spaces. Now that development is reaching into all corners of both neighborhoods, we realize that the rising costs of home ownership and rentals will continue to be a pressure point for low and middle income families. We are working with the development leadership of the Minneapolis Downtown Council-DID 2025 Plan to explore ways and means to pursue a diverse housing narrative in the currently hot housing market.

The other challenges include acclimating thousands of new residents and businesses to our area and help everyone to form a growing and new common vision for what East Town's contribution will be to the larger downtown.

**Q: What is the goal of the East Town branding effort?**

Ultimately this process was about creating a cohesive sense of place that celebrates the individual parts of the district but casts a larger vision celebrated on a regional and even national scale.

The East Town area is centered by the new Commons park, Wells Fargo mixed-use development and the U.S. Bank Stadium. In the past, depending upon who you talk to, the area has been called East Downtown, Downtown East, Mill District, and Elliot

Park. A few people even called it The Stadium District.

The branding effort, led by the business community with input from neighborhood organizations, has worked to bring the area together much as a South Minneapolis business community did in the 1930's when "Uptown" united several neighborhoods together around the newly built Uptown Theater.

On May 5, 2016, after almost two years and countless community engagement meetings with stakeholders the East Town Business Partnership Board of Directors officially adopted "East Town" as the new name for their business district. The graphic presentation developed by PadillaCRT, mostly through pro bono efforts, provides a key visual brand commitment along with some possible creative expressions that will be developed further with community partners in the months ahead.

The brand vision driving the visual identity paints a compelling vision of where we are going with this new name: East Town: A Vibrant, Multifaceted and Connected Community.

### **What are your hopes/dreams for East Town?**

(This response was written by Paul Mellblom, president of the East Town Business Partnership. I think that he and I, and the entire board share these hopes and dreams!)

East Town is poised to reap the many benefits brought by the projected growth in visitors and employment connected with the opening of the new stadium and Wells Fargo towers. The construction boom in our district has provided thousands of well-paying construction jobs, with a significant focus on sharing the equity of those jobs among minority workers and businesses. Our organization is committed to partnering with, advocating for and assisting in efforts to grow opportunities for marginalized persons and businesses so all benefit from the prosperity in our district — especially people living here now. We join with the city, businesses, civic institutions and the neighborhood organizations to build a better district that benefits all.

Our landscape is greatly improved by the presence of U.S. Bank Stadium, Commons park, the Wells Fargo towers, four proposed hotels, hundreds of planned or under

construction residential apartments and condominiums, the Kraus-Anderson campus, Ryan Companies' headquarters, HCMC's outpatient specialty center, and a Trader Joes on Washington and Chicago Avenues. From the soccer field in Elliot Park to the new connection of Samatar Crossing to the exciting vision for the riverfront, we are undergoing profound, positive change.

It feels like some may win and some may lose out, but it is the work of the East Town business community to help shape growth such that more feel included. Our business organization is diligently working with municipal leaders and staff, civic and nonprofit leaders, and especially with the neighborhood organizations to minimize the negative impacts within our district.

Together we can make a difference by advocating for opportunity and consideration of all points of view and interests — even and especially those that challenge our own biases. Undoing the damage of decades of neglect has not been easy but it is necessary.

So what's next? We are developing a continuous brand identity for our district linking the distinctly different and established neighborhoods. We all benefit by this connectivity: it brings people together, brings clarity to a larger landscape and builds upon existing strengths. Our brand is a vibrant, multi-faceted and connected community.

We aspire to be a regional focal point offering a diverse range of activities near the center of downtown with streets that are rippling with life and too many activities to choose from, all surrounding a new metropolitan park. Our strength is what is here and the people and buildings that will be here soon. Our district is the last to reach maturity among the many great places that ring Minneapolis's Central Business District: Loring Park, North Loop and Warehouse District, Nicollet Island/East Bank and Marcy Holmes. We are extremely excited to connect two vital neighborhoods (Elliot Park and the Mill District) across the void (Downtown East) to become a booming district that encompasses the best of each neighborhood in such a few short years.

Join us as we grow and prosper. If you live or work in our district, consider getting involved with our organization or one of the many civic and nonprofit institutions that make our community vital and rich in its offerings. And as we continue to fill in and reach towards our full potential of being a complete district, consider shopping here

and visiting us to find myriad recreational activities and places to meet friends. East Town is on the move and our goal is that the benefits are felt widely and shared broadly.

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To learn more about the East Town Business Partnership, go to [edcmpls.com](http://edcmpls.com).

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