

MINNEAPOLIS

Neighborhood groups, businesses, marketers get creative with east end of downtown Minneapolis

A stadium, an office complex, a park and housing are going up on downtown's east end. Can one name capture it all?

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The east end of downtown Minneapolis has a lot going on, but no one seems to know what to call it.

This 100-block area is undergoing a flurry of development that's quickly filling the space between the upscale Mill District and the lower-to-middle income Elliot Park.

There's a mammoth new pro football stadium, a new corporate campus, and a handful of new hotels, restaurants and luxury residential buildings in the works.

There's talk of more mixed-income housing, an incubator for socially minded businesses and a major expansion underway of the already-sprawling Hennepin County Medical Center.

With so many different uses popping up at once, developers and community leaders are left wondering whether this is becoming a tourism district or an up-and-coming residential neighborhood, a place to relax and recreate or a place for diverse-income housing and human services.

The East Downtown Council says that it can be all, but that a larger umbrella name is needed to describe the district so that one portion of it doesn't hijack the identity or fall short of capturing all that it offers.

To do so, the council — made up of developers, real estate agents, bars, restaurants, hotels, churches, nonprofit organizations and, of course, the Minnesota Vikings — is leading an effort to potentially rename the district.

The idea of district branding is polarizing, drawing strong support from many businesses and individuals invested in the area and censure from some who say it is contrived and disingenuous.

Dan Collison, executive director of the council, knows that, and it's why he says the process is taking so long. "When people say it's fluff, that's because they are talking about 10 people sitting in a room and making a decision that impacts 30,000 people," he said.

Development and the ensuing naming issue has brought attention to an area of downtown that previously had been largely ignored.

"This effort has brought people together," he said. "People who have always cared about the community but now actually feel connected."

The council is taking its time and has hired public relations firm PadillaCRT to lead the renaming effort. To pay for it, the council received two grants — one competitive business grant from the city of Minneapolis planning department for \$25,000 and one from the McKnight Foundation for \$50,000 a year for three years — to apply structure to helping the neighborhood "grow up" into the next phase with a new name.

"The city was skeptical until the private development wave started; then they saw that it was an important task to deal with," Collison said.

Depending on who's doing the talking, the area is called different names — Downtown East, Stadium District, East Downtown, Elliot Park and Mill District. All connote something different.

"Each time someone uses a term now, they are describing just a slice," Collison said. "Each neighborhood alone doesn't have a big idea."



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Dan Collison, executive director of the East Downtown Council, said branding this district of Minneapolis has "a little bit of 'naming the..."

To gain support from the district's heavy hitters, Collison had to reassure them that this effort would not interfere with existing names or projects underway.

"The Vikings were worried we'd mess with the purple. Ryan [Cos.] was worried we'd mess with the name of their development project. The city was worried we were going to mess with names on the maps," Collison joked.

With their support, the business organization is looking to the example of other U.S. cities that have taken a similarly structured approach. For instance, in Denver, a business group rebranded downtown's most popular bar and restaurant district as LoDo (Lower Downtown), and the term is now widely used by Coloradoans.

Collison said city residents need only to look southwest to Uptown to understand what he hopes to accomplish with the name.

Uptown is not officially a city-designated neighborhood, but it appears on Google maps and in residents' everyday vocabulary to describe a general area overlaying seven distinct neighborhoods.

But just giving it a new name doesn't mean it will stick. Minneapolis has several examples of failed efforts by smaller groups to rebrand or rename a corner of the city.

"This is just the name. What matters is what you bring to it after you name it," Collison said, "because 90 percent of people will not like it after they hear it, whatever it ends up being."

Names already put forward, like East Loop, E Do, East Central Square, Mississippi River Heights, Newsmaker Square and SoFa (south of Fifth Avenue), have stirred strong reactions.

Padilla will continue work on the name — including images, colors and signage — through 2016. The goal is to have the district branding in place before Minneapolis plays host to the Super Bowl in February 2018.

"People need to have a positive experience that brings that name meaning," Collison said. "There's a little bit of 'naming the baby' anxiety."