

Panel: Land bridges would offer rare chance to reinvest in places torn apart by development in Twin Cities

By [Peter Callaghan](#) | 11/09/16



MinnPost photo by Peter Callaghan

The Urban Land Institute Minnesota panel shown at a formal rollout of the Healthy Communities Initiative report Tuesday in St. Paul.

It's feasible to cap freeways in the Twin Cities in order to reclaim land given over to cars six decades ago, though it matters where the cap is placed. Economics, however, should not be the only factor in deciding whether the projects are worth doing.

Those are among [the conclusions](#) [PDF] of a panel put together by the [Urban Land Institute Minnesota](#) at the request of the state Department of Transportation (MnDOT) to look at the potential for freeway lids. Sometimes called land bridges, the concept is to help reconnect communities disrupted by freeway construction.

The study is part of MnDOT's preparation for rebuilding I-94 through the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. And it comes at a time when federal transportation officials are looking at using future freeway investments to repair the damage done by construction in the 1960s and '70s, damage disproportionately done to poor and minority communities.



“It isn’t often that we get alignment of this nature,” said Caren Dewar, executive director of the state chapter of the Urban Land Institute, at a formal rollout of the report Tuesday in St. Paul. “We have alignment for these ideas at the national level and the local level.”

The panelists, many of whom were drawn from development and real estate businesses, spent three days in June looking at lids in general and at three sites in the metro area specifically. Called a Technical Assistance Panel, the group concluded that the lids were something the state and communities should strongly consider, and their report says a task force should be set up to figure out how to create the governmental and nonprofit entities that might move

such projects along.

Rather than choose one of the three proposed sites — Rondo in St. Paul, Farview Park in North Minneapolis or I-35W at Washington Avenue east of downtown Minneapolis — the panel suggested they all be considered as one.

“Looking at each location as an isolated, one-off project disconnected from the others, will make it much harder to build the political will to get any of them done and misses the opportunity to connect them as part of an economic and social imperative for the state’s long-term prosperity,” the report concluded.

And rather than view them solely as real estate projects, the panel suggested seeing them all as an attempt to redress the health, environmental, economic and social disruptions that resulted from freeway construction. As such, they named the project the Healthy Communities Initiative. “The Healthy Communities Initiative is an opportunity to set big, ambitious goals for what is possible throughout Minnesota’s interstate corridors and on MnDOT’s right of way through the state,” the report noted.

Building a lid over I-35W at Washington Avenue has the highest redevelopment potential because of its proximity the University of Minnesota and the area around the new Vikings Stadium. And putting untaxed land on the tax rolls via residential and commercial development could help cover the large cost, the panel suggested. “We can create much more usable land area,” said Rich Varda, an architect and former senior vice president of store design Target. “The asset isn’t only the air rights but excess land that can be sold off too.”

Varda said the opportunity could easily be lost. “There are parcels around this area that are ripe for development and development is going to make it harder to make this a unique place.”

In St. Paul, a lid that would reconnect the Rondo neighborhood, while serving a strong social justice mission, might not attract the same density of development.

“There are areas where we simply reinvest for social justice,” said panelist and residential housing developer George Sherman. “You may not see that Rondo can pay for its lid — I can guarantee you that it

can't. But the fact that we destroyed their community is a reason enough for us to look at how we come up with the tools to reinvest."

The third site — I-94 near Farview Park in North Minneapolis — suffers from disagreements over whether the land between the freeway and the Mississippi River should remain heavy industrial.

Not a cheap alternative

As part of the process, the panel looked at three existing projects around the country that had lidded either freeways or rail corridors: Millennium Park in Chicago — home to The Bean art work and a large park and amphitheater — was a \$475 million project covering 24.5 acres; Klyde Warren Park in Dallas cost \$106.7 million to cover 5.2 acres; and the I-670 at Union Station project in Columbus, Ohio, which cost \$7.8 million for 1.12 acres.

All were done with a combination of public, private and philanthropic dollars, and each has spurred private development on nearby land. Hugh Murphy, a former mayoral aide in Chicago, said the Millennium Park concept dates back to 1977 and went from a \$100 million "patch of grass" to the park it is now. "I think it's the right time here," he said of Minnesota. "And you need to take advantage of it when you can because the time will pass by."

MnDOT Commissioner Charlie Zelle said there is interest in projects like lids at both the federal and state levels. When asked about next steps, he said: "I know everyone is concerned about how do we keep this going. So the next step is really how do we not just put this on the shelf?"

'This thing could happen'

In Rondo, the land bridge concept has been embraced by a group of leaders in the neighborhood that once was the center of St. Paul's African-American community. Seitu Jones, a St. Paul artist who served on the panel, said it was the only site visit where the panelists were served refreshments. And Monday, two groups active in the land bridge campaign — Rondo Avenue Inc. and the Friendly Streets Initiative — won a \$99,000 Knight Foundation grant to pursue a connection centered on Victoria Street.



Courtesy of Marvin Anderson, Lars Christiansen, and Melvin Giles

A detail of concept art by Rachel Burand for the Rondo land bridge.

“This is an idea that folks have talked about for awhile,” Jones said. “It was one of these crazy ideas — covering the freeway. But with Commissioner (Charlie) Zelle’s support and the support of the Department of Transportation, this thing can happen. It really will happen.”

Marvin Anderson, a cofounder of the Rondo Days festival and Rondo Avenue Inc. with Floyd Smaller, pledged his support for the concept. “We’ll work as hard as we can to make sure this becomes a reality for our community because it’s long overdue. You lit a match to something and I hope it isn’t extinguished by bureaucracy, by this and by that. Don’t let us down this time.”

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