



*Working to protect the Mississippi River
and its watershed in the Twin Cities area.*

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Dear Councilmembers Cunningham and Ellison:

As you know, Friends of the Mississippi River has been closely engaged in Upper Harbor Terminal planning for many years. In recent months we have had many conversations with you relaying our concerns about the UHT concept plan and the process by which it was developed. Now that the coordinated plan development is underway, we want to share our serious concerns about the current community engagement process.

These concerns have come forth through our attendance at Collaborative Planning Committee (CPC) meetings and the first UHT community learning table, as well as our continued partnership with North Minneapolis residents and organizations.

Given that the city is only a few months away from finalizing its coordinated plan, selling land, and seeking taxpayer funds for private development on this site, we want to make our concerns known early. We want to be your partner in addressing these concerns, rather than waiting until the end of the process to raise objections to the process.

Concept plan commitments

The approved UHT concept plan included several commitments about community process:

“The collaboration between the UHT Community Planning and Engagement Committee (CPEC) and the development team will include the following:

- Review the Concept Plan and make recommendations for improvements within the first sixty (60) days after the first convening of the committee for the coordinated plan.
- Collaborate to develop three (3) scenarios to assess for financial feasibility and environmental impact.
- Collaborate with Neighborhood and Community Relations (NCR) to support the committee to lead more in-depth, long term community engagement.
- Support the committee’s participation in and centering of deliberative democratic strategies and EcoDistrict protocols.

“Strategies emphasizing democratic participation and co-creation will be explored, as well as community engagement strategies recommended by the UHT CPEC. The underlying principles of the strategies employed should include, but are not limited to:

- Transparency in decision-making, including the consideration and clear communication of multiple options based on desirability and feasibility.
- Co-creation between community members and the development team through each step of the process.
- Engagement that draws in new participants and seeks to close potential knowledge gaps between the technical experts and community members and vice versa.
- The engagement process should build knowledge, skills, and leadership in the community.
- Clearly defined goals and metrics to measure progress should be employed to evaluate the engagement process.”

Concept plan commitments not on track

Our observations of the first CPC meetings have shown that the city’s concept plan commitments are not yet being met—and with the entire process slated to wrap up in just a few months, there’s not much time to course-correct.

The CPC’s first meeting was June 26, meaning that by August 25 the CPC is supposed to have reviewed the concept plan and recommended improvements. To date, the CPC has not reviewed several key elements of the concept plan and has not had time for in-depth discussion about the plan elements that have been presented to them. While members have offered many recommendations for improvement, it’s not clear whether or how those recommendations might be incorporated into alternative development scenarios that will include sufficient detail and time to assess for community and environmental impact and financial feasibility.

This lack of clarity is a consistent theme at CPC meetings and consumes the majority of the meeting time. At the fourth CPC meeting on August 14, many members expressed ongoing confusion about what decisions the CPC is making; the timeline for making those decisions; what the coordinated plan must include; and the project’s goals, values, and priorities. These basic questions should have been addressed months ago as part of the concept plan’s commitment to democratic participation and co-creation.

Several other aspects of the concept plan are also not being carried out:

- The CPC has not been asked to recommend community engagement strategies.
- We are not aware of any further engagement being supported by the Neighborhood and Community Relations Department.
- We have heard no discussion at the CPC about EcoDistrict protocols nor about centering deliberative democratic strategies. In fact, a large portion of the CPC meeting time has been taken up by presentations from the city and development team, not by democratic decision-making with committee members.
- No goals or metrics to evaluate the engagement process have been shared.

Community process is being rushed

The insufficient timeline for this phase of project development and community engagement is contributing to a sense of disorder and lack of confidence in the process among participants and

attendees. CPC members continually voice concerns at their meetings about not having sufficient time before the project moves ahead whether or not they've completed their recommendations.

The engagement events open to the community at-large (the learning tables and deliberation days) are 4-8 hours long because there is not sufficient time to cover all of the subject matter in smaller, more accessible segments. Furthermore, early events and CPC meetings don't seem to have been fully thought through or well-planned. Every event that misses the mark is another day lost in this very short engagement period.

Already, the forthcoming learning table that was supposed to be dedicated to discussing the concert stadium has been changed to a housing focus because of feedback that the first learning table about housing was insufficient. It's not clear when community members will have the opportunity for in-depth discussion about the concert stadium—the key underpinning of the entire concept plan.

This rushed process suggests that the city's goal is not to center North Minneapolis residents in this project. It suggests that the city's goal is to help United Properties and First Avenue advance their development plan with as few delays and inconveniences as possible.

Lack of public accessibility and engagement

The opportunities for community members to share their feedback about the project are limited. The city's UHT website does not include sufficient details about upcoming engagement events and the city's social media channels are not sharing information about UHT (despite a blurb in North News encouraging readers to follow the city's social media channels to learn about UHT).

Furthermore, the existing engagement events also fall short in their implementation. The community learning tables and deliberation days, marketed as the key opportunities for public voice in the project, are 4-8 hour long workshops. Asking community members to participate in all-day meetings, and sometimes even 12 hours of learning table/deliberation day events in a single week, excludes community members who can't devote such large block of time and actually discourages participation from a diverse and representative sample of community members.

The first four-hour learning table was only announced a week in advance. Childcare, transportation, interpretation, and stipends/compensation were not provided. *These are not accessible events.*

The first eight-hour deliberation day is scheduled for the same day as West Broadway Open Streets, demonstrating that the project team is not interested in being out with the community, but instead in waiting for the community to come to them. No outreach events beyond the 4-8 hour learning tables and deliberation days have been announced.

We are not aware of any culturally-specific outreach being carried out with North Minneapolis' immigrant communities, nor with the American Indian community that has 1,500 years of history on this site.

Some UHT community engagement activities are being carried out by community organizations with which the city has partnered—but this is not an excuse for the city to abdicate responsibility for delivering an effective and inclusive community process. Upper Harbor Terminal is the city’s project, on the city’s land, led by city leadership. City staff frequently remind us that they are working at the direction of the mayor and city council. Therefore the ultimate responsibility lies with you to ensure that the engagement process is successful.

Lack of participation by elected leaders

Despite the lack of sufficient advertising and accessibility, community members attended the first learning table—and they voiced several major concerns with the project. We didn’t hear any comments at the event in support of the concept plan. But *not a single elected official* was at the first learning table to listen (Councilmembers Fletcher and Reich later told us they didn’t even know it was happening). CPC members are also expressing many serious concerns about the concept plan and process, yet Councilmember Cunningham has been the only member of the city council attending CPC meetings.

When we first approached city and state leaders about our concerns with Upper Harbor Terminal, we were told, “The community has told us they support the concept plan.” That’s not what we heard from community members then, and it’s not what we’re hearing from community members at recent engagement events. The community learning tables are not authentic opportunities for dialogue between residents and project decision-makers because you haven’t been there. Residents deserve to speak directly with you at these events and to receive responses to their questions and concerns.

Lack of consultative expertise available to residents

Residents have voiced several requests at the CPC meetings and learning table for a broader range of experts and ideas to be presented, particularly around affordable housing. This hasn’t happened. United Properties and First Avenue have been the primary presenters at CPC meetings and the learning table. Their proposed models are limited and are centered around their own profit. The development team is being allowed to control the narrative and content of meetings that are supposed to be centered around resident voice and resident ideas.

This phase of development planning is short—only a matter of months. Given that the city took months to plan its engagement strategies between when the concept plan was approved and when community outreach began, we’re disappointed by how disjointed, unclear, and rushed this phase has been. More of this time between concept plan approval and community engagement should have been given to designing a better engagement process and/or actually carrying out outreach. It’s not clear what these intervening months were spent doing if the process is still this lacking.

We do not believe that this process will result in genuine democratic community influence over the UHT coordinated plan. We urge you to make immediate changes by extending the planning process, delaying the coordinated plan approval and land sale, expanding the breadth of your outreach, and planning future engagement events more thoughtfully. We ask that you:

- Quickly present and carry out a plan for additional community engagement as committed to in the concept plan, targeted at residents and stakeholders most likely to be disenfranchised by the inaccessibility of the existing CPC meetings and community learning tables.
- Present and achieve metrics for measuring the community engagement process as committed to in the concept plan.
- With the CPC, develop three detailed alternative development scenarios as committed to in the concept plan. These should include alternatives to the First Avenue concert stadium, such as a smaller publicly-owned venue or no concert venue at all.
- Release the completed market studies to allow CPC and community members to better evaluate alternative development scenarios with the level of transparency committed to in the concept plan.
- Provide a detailed explanation of what planning needs to be completed by March 2020 and why. If a deadline for spending state bonds for site infrastructure are a concern, request an extension from the state and/or present an explanation of what further planning needs to be completed in order to spend \$30 million on site demolition and preparation.
- Share an alternative project timeline that would allow sufficient time for genuine community participation and host a transparent conversation about the potential benefits and drawbacks of a longer community process.
- Implement the deliberative democracy committed to in the concept plan by restructuring CPC meetings so that its members are fully leading the meetings while city staff and the development team listen more and speak less.

We will be following up to request a meeting with you to discuss this further. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Whitney L. Clark
Executive Director



Colleen O'Connor Toberman
River Corridor Program Director

CC:

Council President Lisa Bender
Council Vice-President Andrea Jenkins
Councilmember Alondra Cano
Councilmember Steve Fletcher
Councilmember Lisa Goodman
Councilmember Cam Gordon
Councilmember Andrew Johnson

Councilmember Linea Palmisano
Councilmember Kevin Reich
Councilmember Jeremy Schroeder
Councilmember Abdi Warsame
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