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To: Saint Paul City Council
From: Riverfront, Development and Land Use Committee on behalf of the West Side Community Organization Board of Directors
Re: Response to Council Member Thune's amendments to the WSF Update
CC: Mayor Christopher Coleman

The West Side Community Organization (WSCO) has serious reservations about the amendments that Council Member Thune distributed at the May 6, 2015 City Council Public Hearing on the West Side Flats Master Plan Update (WSFMP Update). In that public hearing, WSCO expressed its reluctant support for the WSFMP and proposed Planning Commission amendments, because the amended plan remained consistent with the values and principles of WSCO's Community Plan, which supports a robust job center on the flats. We cautioned, however, that additional substantive amendments that further erode the core of the WSFMP would be problematic.

After reviewing Council Member Thune's proposed amendments, WSCO believes that the cumulative impact of Thune's amendments and those proposed by the Planning Commission crosses a threshold and takes us into the problematic territory that we cannot support. The WSFMP Update that was forwarded to the Planning Commission is important to WSCO because it is intended to be a vision for the future. The product of a two-year community planning process that was open to everyone, including West Side businesses and special interest groups, it complemented WSCO's recently approved 10-year comprehensive plan for the West Side. Crucial WSFMP Update guiding principles for future development included integration of a broad mix of complementary land uses, re-establishment of an urban neighborhood block and street pattern to increase connectivity for all transportation modes, and improvement of the business functionality, land use diversity and visual character of the commercial/industrial employment district east of Robert Street.

In response to concerns raised through its public process, the Planning Commission forwarded to the City Council an amended plan that removed all visual references to future development of a smaller-scale street grid east of Robert and south of Fillmore and added stronger language in support of business. Council Member Thune's additional amendments take the Planning Commission's proposed changes one step further; they add protections for existing businesses and a dated suburban industrial park model, and remove zoning changes proposed in the WSFMP Update.

Council Member Thune's amendments ignore the fact that the flats are already evolving. Within the study area a new Hmong Funeral Parlor is being established on Eva Street & Plato, which could benefit from added sidewalks and on street parking for families attending funerals. Just south of the study area we have a new hardware store/small engine repair shop, and a paintball (Air Assault Paintball) business. At the other end of the spectrum, we also have an empty printing plant (Pioneer Press), and perhaps soon a closed down post office. What the amended WSFMP Update lacks is a vision for how these areas should evolve when opportunities arise.

Council Member Thune's amendments do say: "New living wage business opportunities will be identified over time, and may include sustainable creative enterprises/maker economy businesses on underutilized sites that complement the larger "powerhouse" industries. This area has significant growth potential. Reinvigorating the West Side's economy could also include attracting innovative, high technology companies that will value the proximity to an emerging urban village and the river corridor's natural amenities." But how are we going to address their site needs if we cannot even envision the possibility of reconfiguring sites and increasing multi-modal access? This concentration on the present at the expense of planning for the future is clearly stated in RECOMMENDED AMENDMENT TO CITY POLICIES AND REGULATIONS that "The intent is to retain existing industrial businesses in a livable-wage, jobs-rich center for economic activity." While this is laudable, the intent should be expanded to retaining existing business and increasing the number and types of businesses to insure that the flats continue to grow and evolve.

WSCO wants Rexam, the Red Cross and other businesses to stay on the flats while, as a community, we must be prepared for the possibility that they will move or worse, shut down. Business and industrial centers go through cycles of change that are often driven by macro economic forces. St Paul's experiences with the Ford Plant, 3-M, Whirlpool, Hamm's and Schmidt's Breweries, and others, plus our own experience of neighborhoods and businesses being removed from the flats in the 1960s tells us on the West Side that we must be ready for businesses and industrial areas to change. It also tells us that industrial sites and districts should not be tailored to the specific needs of one industry; rather they should be flexible and able to accommodate a range of future uses. Forethought can shave off years of planning that must take place at sometime; better now than when the crisis hits and immediate action is needed.

And while we applaud references in the amendments to adding trees and addressing stormwater management, isn't this a little like greenwashing a 1960s suburban industrial park? The amendments do not mention which City department will work with the businesses to incorporate trees and stormwater management at the existing industrial businesses. All discussions about instituting green requirements are left up to the businesses.

WSCO is frustrated and disappointed to be in the position of opposing amendments to a plan that we initially supported. We came to the table in good faith, engaged the community, and throughout an open planning process we worked hard to resolve differences and reach consensus on difficult issues, such as heights and density. While our comments at this point must be limited to the amendments introduced by Council Member Thune, we cannot help but say that in our opinion what was once an innovative and forward-looking plan is now fraught with half-finished thoughts and conflicting messages, and fails to offer a complete vision for the future of the West Side Flats.

