

Dear St. Paul Councilmembers,

I am honored to represent the Eastside Skatepark Taskforce (EST) in submitting testimony in support of funding for a skatepark and recreation area in the Payne Phalen neighborhood. The EST, made up of more than a dozen Eastside residents, business owners, and experienced park advocates, has been working for over a year with neighborhood organizations, city council representatives, and park planners to develop and plan a successful path forward for this vision, and the experience has been fantastic. The response from all has been overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic for this exciting amenity for a community that is highly deserving. Payne Phalen is the largest and most culturally diverse neighborhood in St. Paul. The majority of Payne Phalen residents are under 30 years old and would be categorized as low income. Families need a free, safe, and welcoming place that reflects the vibrancy and energy of this community. The vision for the park includes an iconic state-of-the-art skatepark, matching the quality of parks being built now in 2020, as well as picnic and barbecue areas, native gardens, solar lighting, and resident art features. The Eastside Skatepark is not just a skatepark, but a unique and memorable outdoor gathering space that residents of all ages can use for a wide range of purposes, from birthday parties and farmers markets to a simple lunch meeting spot. The proposed site for this park is currently a large, under-utilized but highly visible parking lot at the corner of NW Payne Avenue and York Avenue. A dynamic community recreation and greenspace at this site will strengthen the growing vitality of Payne Avenue, bolster public safety by increasing eyes and ears at the site as well as resident stewardship, and provide an outdoor “family room” for residents where visitors are also welcome.

In addition to co-chairing the EST with Eastside resident and business owner, Mat Graske, I am also the chair of the non-profit organization, the Midwest Skateboarding Alliance, a long-time skateboarder, mom to two young skateboarders, and hold a PhD in Public Health with a focus on the built environment. I speak from a place of knowledge and experience when it comes to the value of skateparks for energizing communities and improving lives. I’ve been skating for nearly three decades at skateparks across the nation and for the last decade turned my gratitude for all this sport has done for me, and my kids, into advocacy. In the years I’ve been involved with organizing for skateparks, in various states, I have never experienced the outpouring of excitement and support for a skatepark as I’ve seen for the Eastside plan. The mission of the EST is to mobilize community residents and end-users to support and inform park development, assist with fundraising, and help connect planners and developers with the wealth of experience and information that now exists relating to skatepark design and construction. Due to the pandemic we’ve been able to hold only one in-person community outreach event, in conjunction with the October Payne Phalen Solidarity Art crawl. It was shockingly successful! At all levels, from residents to community leaders and business owners, to city leaders and planners, there is such positive support and energy for this project.

At this event we launched a survey to gather input from the public. I’ve included the results of this survey with my testimony, and it demonstrates overwhelming support for the project. In addition, more than 400 people have liked the EST facebook page and are tracking our progress. There are many academic papers now available delineating the numerous ways that skateparks enhance our shared built environment and the lives of those who take on this sport (for reference see papers included with this testimony). But more accessible are the many new stories chronicling testimony from the individuals and decision makers who have set a path that St. Paul can follow for achieving its own destination skatepark. In a recent New York Times article (“Why Cities Are Finally Showing Skateboarders Some Respect”, 11/17/20), Jersey City’s mayor rightly observes, “If you’re really going to be a world-class city and you’re going to invest in recreation, you need to think beyond traditional sports. Thus, we’ve invested in our first skate park and we’re probably going to be doing more.”

Skateboarding has enjoyed a massive spike in popularity thanks to the rising engineering and design sophistication of skatepark construction. The decades old practice of drilling cheap, weak and dangerous metal or composite features into a slab of flat concrete and calling it a skatepark is misguided at best, boring and hazardous at worst. Design/Build firms like Evergreen Skateparks or Grindline Skateparks have elevated best practices for skatepark development to the point where parks are aesthetic marvels

as much as concrete fields built for fun. Although the 2020 Olympics were postponed, rest assured there will be a further explosion of interest in skateboarding when the best women and men in the sport showcase their talents to fans across the nation, and across St. Paul.

With regard to our immediate times, the pandemic has underscored the rising star of skateboarding everywhere, but particularly so in the Twin Cities. Skateboard shops have struggled to retain inventory, selling out skateboards and equipment faster than they can get stocked since manufacturers across the nation are struggling to keep up with demand. Skateboarding, given its emphasis on the outdoors and necessitating social distance (lest you collide with your fellow skaters), has become an enormously popular Covid-era activity. When all other pay-to-play programming and sports leagues are canceled, skateboarding remained free and available to all. I spend a lot of time at skateparks all around the Metro, and I hear it all the time, how skateboarding was a blessing for young and old during these difficult quarantine times. It's obvious by the numbers of skateboarders (and rollerskaters, BMX riders, scooters, etc) that are packing many of these parks round the clock.

Finally, as a woman and parent to two African American kids, I can't emphasize enough how the community and culture of skateboarding has broken wide open in the last decade to become so much more inclusive and diverse. As I near 50 years on the planet, a fair amount of time to observe the birth and growth of skateboarding, I have never seen the number of girls and women and BIPOC people taking up this activity as I do now. When I arrive with my kids to a skatepark these days, I am thrilled to not be the only woman and my kids to not be the only non-white riders. Skateboarding checks all the boxes for an accessible, inclusive, engaging activity, and skateparks provide a gathering place for this activity to flourish.

Skateparks provide the space for visitors young and old, beginning and skilled, to meet and share experiences, cheer one another on, teach each other, and just be together. For many skateboarding youth, the skatepark becomes a home-away-from-home and for many of us that connection continues well into our "mature" years.

In closing, I just want to thank everyone that has provided encouragement and support to the EST in our journey to achieving something so fresh, exciting, and promising as this skatepark and recreation area for the Eastside. 2020 has been a rough year, but I know I speak on behalf of all our volunteer advocates that our tireless work and resulting camaraderie surrounding this project has been extremely heart-warming and inspiring. Myself, I've fallen deeply and thoroughly in love with St. Paul and the Eastside through this experience. This is an extraordinary community and the funding from the CIB will likewise be an extraordinary lift to achieving this vision for the community.

I would love to speak further to any of the Councilmembers or staff that have questions or concerns about this project or skateparks in general. My number is 971-222-9117, and my email is [brendahoppe@gmail.com](mailto:brendahoppe@gmail.com). On behalf of the entire EST leadership, thank you so much for considering our project.

Brenda Hoppe