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Columbia Arena site: Creating something Grand

Surrounded by a rich array of natural amenities (Locke Park, Rice Creek, trails and sports fields), and transit amenities such as the nearby Northstar commuter train station major bus lines and easy access to a major free-way, the location offers great potential for something grand. The redevelopment opportunity of the Columbia Arena site (11 acres) is even further enhanced by the surrounding sites, which are also publicly owned. The current public facilities site (11 acres) and an adjoining park with soccer fields (11 acres) provide a “once in a lifetime” opportunity for an aggregated parcel of 33 acres.

Home of the Mighty Ducks, the Columbia Arena has long been an iconic and loved symbol for the Fridley community. With memories of hockey games and other noteworthy events, the arena will always be cherished. But with years of deterioration and neglect, unable to resuscitate the facility, the City of Fridley purchased the site in 2014 because of the unique development opportunity it offered. With the purchase of the Columbia Arena, along with the public works and park site, redevelopment of up to 33 acres is unique opportunity for Fridley to upgrade its image and attract development that would enhance the City.



Above: Some of the amenities located in Fridley. Clockwise from l to r: Medtronic, Rice Creek, Moore Lake, and the the Northstar Commuter Rail Station.

ASSETS

The broader city of Fridley offers:

- A strong network of 38 recreational city parks, the Springbrook Nature Center, an array of natural amenities such as Moore Lake, Locke Lake, Rice Creek and the Mississippi River, and regional trails for biking and walking are available to appeal to families of all ages.
- Major employers such as Medtronic (operational headquarters), Cummins, Unity Hospital, BAE Systems and Target.
- Strong commercial and industrial areas that provide over 25,000 jobs and tax base.
- University Avenue with accessibility to bus stops.
- Convenient to both St. Paul and Minneapolis, as well as the airport.
- A wealth of community resources, including four public school districts and three private schools, a community center, many churches, transportation options, and other community services.

MAXIMIZING THE POTENTIAL OF THE SITE

A strong community vision is needed to guide the future of the site. This document serves to recommend community goals and objectives for what could be achieved, and informed by market realities of redevelopment. Key questions to be asked include:

1.) Which scenario is the most preferred?

Support was expressed for all three scenarios: strong support for C, with the majority supporting B.



Scenario A: Small Site

- Columbia Arena site only (11 acres)
- Could locate a City Hall
- Maintains existing public works facility to the north



Scenario B: Medium Site

- Columbia Arena site + the public works facility site (22 acres) *excludes the park*
- May include a new civic center (city hall, fire, police, public works or other configurations)
- A large public use could reduce options for private development (and perhaps development interest)



Scenario C: Large Site

- Columbia Arena site + the public works facility site (22 acres) *excludes the park*
- May include a civic center (city hall, fire, police, public works or other configurations)
- Greatest potential to reconfigure or integrate public space throughout the site (e.g. trails, water feature, soccer fields, etc.)
- Preserving family park and public activity space (approximately 11 acres)
- Water filter plant would need to remain where it is on the frontage of the park site



Above: The three portions of the focus area. Top: Columbia Arena, Bottom left: Park and soccer fields, Bottom right: Public Works facility.

2.) How to weigh the need to generate additional tax base (private development), with the willingness of taxpayers to pay more taxes (to enhance additional amenities and community uses)?

Recommendation: Work to recover as much of the public investment as possible, but be prepared to provide some public support (e.g. TIF, finance support, etc.) to ensure the City and community can achieve their goals. The public investment made to acquire and clear the Columbia Arena site for redevelopment is approximately \$3.4M. The decision to incur additional public costs (e.g. upgrade or replace the existing City Hall, upgrade or relocate the existing public works facility, pedestrian bridge over University Avenue, infrastructure improvements to the site, street reconfiguration, etc.) will be calculated and considered.

3.) How to attract a quality developer(s) to partner with the City?

Recommendation: Define a strong vision for the site that responds to community needs and priorities listed below, and submit an RFQ (Request for Qualifications) to identify a private partner. Once a private partner(s) is established, they will work closely with the City and community to co-create the site plan and land use components.



Above left: Housing development under construction on University Avenue. Above right: Fridley City Hall.

DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINES

The focus area includes (scenario A, B, or C):

- The Columbia Arena site (11 acres)
- The Fridley public works facility site (11 acres)
- The park / soccer fields (11 acres)

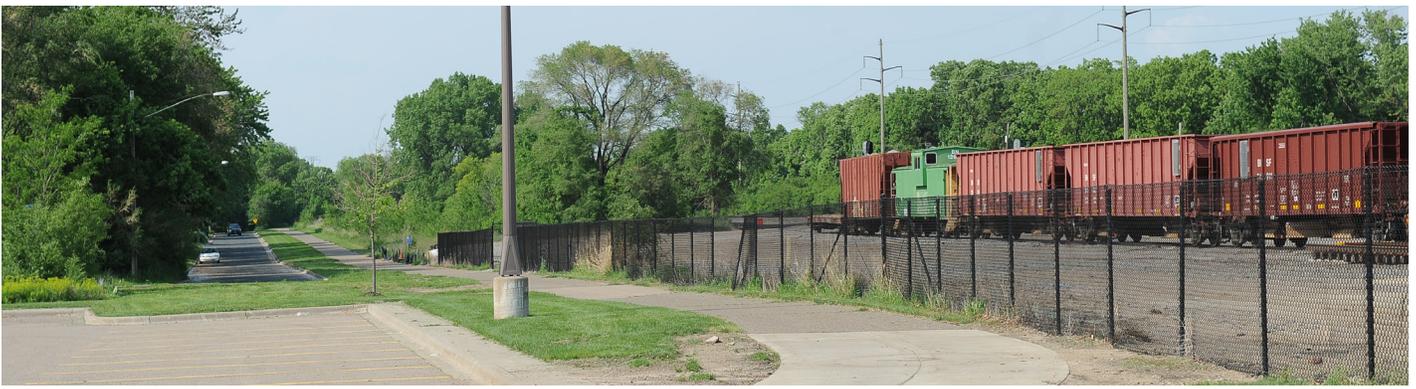
All sites are publicly owned by the City of Fridley. Surrounded by natural and recreational amenities, as well as residential and industrial uses, the site offers the opportunity to better coordinate and enhance the broader area. (For scenarios B or C) By reconfiguring the public and private portions, it would be possible to reclaim the wetland to create a water feature, and reposition buildings on more solid ground.

The (scenario B, or C) acre site may provide an opportunity to create a new Fridley civic center by co-locating and coordinating city services (City Hall, fire, police, public works), and creating an exciting town center of residential, retail and offices that promotes walkability and offers space for community gathering and events. The existing public works facility would not be a good neighbor to new residential housing in its current layout and type. Positioning the city buildings on the north edge of the site would provide a buffer from the industrial uses.

A key concern is access to the area, which is currently severely constricted to one access point onto University Avenue. Better and more access points would be needed to allow accessibility in the area to flow easily. Another enhancement would be to better connect both sides of University Avenue through a pedestrian bridge or underpass to link up the amenities on either side.

A key goal is to utilize the site to create new assets for the community that will enable the City of Fridley to continue to thrive and prosper. As demographic trends show a continued aging of the population, it will be critical to find housing options that respond to their changing needs. And to attract young families (Millennials) who are often saddled with a lot of student debt, and typically have less financial capacity than previous generations. Research shows that Millennials are often looking for smaller lots, with shared open space and access to jobs without owning cars.

To achieve the full potential of the site, the City will need to work proactively with developers (e.g. identify strategies for shared parking, coordinated and complementary uses, attract and retain needed retail and services, safe and effective traffic flow, etc.). The components of the Columbia Arena expanded site should be complementary with the greater neighborhood.



Above: Trail along the Northstar Commuter Rail line.

Recommendations for redevelopment of the Columbia Arena expanded site include:

Goal 1: Preserve and enhance the amenities of the area through greater connectivity

- A. Utilize the opportunity to reconfigure the larger site to daylight the natural wetland and water features.
- B. Strengthen the existing trail system through new connections and access.
- C. Consider rain gardens and other natural features – restore wetlands when possible.
- D. Enhance the walk-ability and bike-ability of the area by incorporating destinations (e.g farmers market, cafe or ice cream shop, amphitheater or gazebo, pond to walk around, art attraction, music, etc.).
- E. Maximize open space to the greatest extent possible.
- F. Include elements that enhance the area as a unique and special place.
- G. Improve water quality.
- H. Consider utilizing solar technology for use by the buildings on the site and possibly for the community.
- I. Incorporate design that increases safety (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design-CPTED).

Goal 2: Create an area that is unique and special that serves to provide new elements that aren't currently available in the community

- O. Incorporate public art and high quality design for visual appeal.
- P. Utilize design to designate public and private spaces, and ensure public access to trails and parks.
- Q. No huge parking lots or paid parking, and limit on-street parking.
- R. Consider design elements and aesthetics that enhance transit and bike uses.
- S. Consider impact on existing neighborhood character, single- family homes, and industrial uses in the immediate vicinity.

Goal 3: To make public use work, advance a public / private partnership that benefits the community, which might include:

- Residential development, with the option of small scale commercial and /or office (mixed use).
- Small lot or townhome options to provide housing options for seniors and younger families.
- Consider non-traditional housing types, such as senior co-ops.
- A mix of mid-density housing options that can accommodate a range of income and age levels.
- Space dedicated for special uses such as farmers markets or outdoor theater and music (public gathering places).
- To serve as a buffer between the industrial area to the north and the rest of the site, reconfigure the public works facilities and potentially relocate the City Hall and other city services (fire and police).
- A multi-generational community center which could include rental spaces (this is an option only if Scenario C expands the use of land for redevelopment, although there's disagreement).

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