

LOCAL

Lowertown St. Paul residents want an improvement district of their own

They want an improvement district with a mission beyond businesses.

By James Walsh (<https://www.startribune.com/james-walsh/6370562/>) Star Tribune |

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Chris Thomforde is one of more than 10,000 people who call downtown St. Paul home, with a townhouse overlooking the small green gem of Lowertown's Wacouta Commons Park. Like many, he's encouraged by the progress made in safety and cleanliness in the nearby Downtown Improvement District.

So much so that he and other Lowertown residents are exploring forming their own Residential Improvement District to boost after-hours security and community in their neighborhood.

"I think [the Downtown Improvement District] is a great thing," said Thomforde, former president of St. Olaf College. "But a Lowertown residential district would give people who own housing their own voice, for their own priorities."

After years of discussion, a group of downtown St. Paul property owners now pay into a special improvement district that funds a public safety communications center, neighborhood ambassadors and other amenities in an area that encompasses many artistic, cultural and entertainment venues, as well as corporate headquarters for Ecolab, Securian Financial and Travelers. Business owners in the district are expected to pay about \$1.2 million toward improvements next year.

City and business officials credit the district, and the street teams it pays for, with putting a dent in downtown crime as well as spiffing up parks and properties. It's no panacea, however. Money raised by the district goes to services that are additional to what the city provides. And after a recent mass shooting near Xcel Energy Center, some downtown business owners say the city is not doing enough to ensure the safety of workers and visitors.

John Mannillo, a commercial real estate developer and longtime Lowertown champion, said downtown's surge in residents over the past decade — especially in Lowertown — makes it even more important to consider an improvement district focused on the unique needs of residents. Proponents are tapping about \$300,000 left over from the Lowertown Future Fund, which was dedicated to helping foster development there.

There are approximately 4,300 Lowertown property owners, Mannillo said.

Proponents have completed a feasibility study in which Lowertown residents were surveyed and expressed support for an improvement district — provided they have a say in what their assessments pay for. The next step is to hire someone to shepherd the idea



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A crowd filled Mears Park for the Lowertown Blues Fest in 2015. Residents are exploring forming their own Residential Improvement

through the statutory and approval process, Mannillo said.

State law details the formation of business improvement districts, although there appears to be no prohibition of residential districts.

"We will hire someone to push this. We're talking to people now," he said. "We could start some of the benefits right away. Our plan is to use what we have right now to improve Lowertown."

Joe Spencer, president of the St. Paul Downtown Alliance, said there is interest in a residential district for Lowertown. But he said he thinks residents should give the business-driven development district more time to ripen before potentially siphoning away support by launching an effort of their own.

"I think it makes the most sense for us to think about our downtown being one downtown," Spencer said. "These services are really valued by all members of the community. However we grow these kinds of things, we should do it in a way that is unified and coordinated."

City Council Member Rebecca Noecker, who represents downtown, said she has talked to Mannillo and others about the idea. But she said she would rather residents and downtown businesses work together to find common ground than launch separate efforts.

"We don't want to splinter the message," she said. "Coordination is almost always more efficient."

She wondered if there are ways the existing downtown improvement district could be more inclusive of residents' concerns.

"The question would be, what are the specific services that residents need that commercial properties don't?" Noecker said.

But Mannillo said residents don't trust business leaders to adequately address their unique concerns.

"For years, whenever there is an issue downtown, it's been decided by what the commercial owners want. [Residents] don't have a political voice," he said. "We want to complement the [Downtown Improvement District]. We don't want to compete with them or hurt them in any way."

Merritt Clapp-Smith, a consultant and former city planner who produced the residential district feasibility study, said the needs of downtown's residents are increasing as the area's population grows.

Lowertown residents want parks to be more than a place to have lunch during the workday, she said. They want safe spaces where children can play pickup games, where they can walk their dogs or fire up the grill.

They also want to connect with their neighbors, to hold block events or coffee meetups and small evening gatherings. And they want more emphasis on security, but with empathy for the unique challenges of people who are homeless or grappling with mental illness.

"A Residential Improvement District for downtown St. Paul is an exciting and important opportunity that should be given open and thoughtful consideration," Clapp-Smith said.

At the end of the day, said Lowertown resident Thomforde, what residents want and what businesses want differ on one important point: "I'm still here after 5 p.m."

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