



# **What's Good in the Neighborhood?**

## **Community Assets in the North End of Union Park**

A Collaborative Project by  
Qualitative Research Methods  
Supervised by Professor Dan Trudeau  
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**MACALESTER COLLEGE**

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## Executive Summary

The Union Park District Council is a nonprofit neighborhood association that serves the Desnoyer Park, Iris Park, Lexington-Hamline, Midway, Merriam Park, Shadow Falls, and Snelling-Hamline neighborhoods. As part of their mission, the organization “promotes resident involvement in community issues, and ensures neighborhood voices are heard in government decision-making.” The council encourages active citizen participation and tries to represent the interests of the community in regards to many current issues.

The goal of our Fall 2016 Qualitative Research Methods class was to produce a report in coordination with the Union Park District Council on the area between University, Fairview, Saint Anthony, and Prior Avenues using an assets-based approach. Through a variety of qualitative methods, including surveys and in-depth interviews, we explored how individuals interact with and perceive the neighborhood around them. Overall, our research shows that this area is experienced differently by different people. These differences sort by demographics, housing tenure, and location. This is to say that there is not a single way residents experience this neighborhood, and community development efforts will need to be sensitive and responsive to these differences. We entered this project as students and researchers, committed to working on this report in an impartial way, yet also acknowledge our own positionality and biases. We believe in the mission of the Union Park District Council and committed ourselves to producing the data and interpretations for this report.

First, we surveyed neighborhood residents. We then conducted more in-depth interviews with residents and business owners to gain further insights. By coding and analyzing survey and interview results, we attempted to gain a comprehensive understanding of the many viewpoints of the neighborhood residents and businesses. We ultimately organized our research around five main themes that all connect to a tangible and intangible asset framework: 1.) we delved into how people view the “tucked away” and secluded qualities of the neighborhood, 2.) we sought to understand the importance of location-based assets, 3.) we explored how residents perceive the diversity, change, and walkability of the neighborhood, 4.) we discussed the gathering spaces in the neighborhood in which community is formed, and 5.) we examined the importance of emotional connection to place and a sense of agency in the neighborhood. Moving forward, it will be important to recognize how views are not uniform throughout the neighborhood and that future projects will have varying impacts on different residents.

Taking multiple viewpoints into consideration is valuable for future progress. We hope that the research we present here can support the work of the Union Park District Council and serve as a baseline of community viewpoints in the study area. Finally, while we have provided a wealth of information in this report, we recognize there is still more research to be done. We therefore hope that this project can lay a foundation for future investigation by the Union Park District Council and others.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone who participated in our research project. We would also to thank Michael Johnson and the Union Park District Council for partnering with Macalester and for their tremendous guidance and support throughout this process.

## List of Authors

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# Introduction

## *Our Research*

Our class partnered with Union Park District Council to fulfill the following goals:

1. To better understand how people identify with the neighborhood and locate its boundaries
2. To support efforts to communicate broadly and effectively with a diverse set of neighborhood residents
3. To inform conversations about potential future development/improvement in the neighborhood, especially in its commercial areas

While our primary focus was conducting research on how residents perceive of the neighborhood, we were also actively learning about qualitative research methods by engaging with relevant academic scholarship and applying what we learned. This involved writing interview and survey questions, conducting semi-structured interviews, and analyzing our results. Throughout the semester, we used class time to reflect on the research process, producing a truly collaborative report.

This report provides analysis of our survey and in-depth interviews, as well as recommendations for the future. We generated a number of overarching themes that connect our results, including discussions of the “tucked away” and secluded nature of the neighborhood, location-based assets, perceptions of diversity, walkability and change, views on neighborhood gathering spaces, and finally, the roles of agency and affection in the neighborhood.

First, we will introduce the history of our study area, and then explain our research framework and methods. Specifically, we discuss our application of qualitative methods and an asset-based approach. Next, we will share some relevant results from our survey data, and address the themes that arose in our resident interviews. Finally, we will close with some concluding remarks and suggestions for next steps.

## *History of the Study Area*

Union Park was originally established in 1880 as an amusement park. The amusement park was platted with curving streets designed to complement the contours of the area’s natural topography, similar to Saint Paul’s Saint Anthony Park and Macalester Park neighborhoods. When the amusement park closed in 1884, the lands of Union Park were subdivided and sold off as residential lots, centering on an artificial pond beside University Avenue called Lake Iris (Empson, 2006).

With convenient access to the Merriam Park commuter rail station at the corner of Saint Anthony and Prior Avenues, the residential iteration of Union Park experienced rapid growth as a northern extension of the established Merriam Park suburb. As the area matured, an important neighborhood commercial center grew around the Merriam Park train station, with Prior Avenue becoming lined with small businesses. In 1890, the Saint Paul-Minneapolis interurban streetcar opened on University Avenue, giving rise to commercial and industrial development on the northern perimeters of the neighborhood.

East of Fairview Avenue, residential infill blocks were platted between University, Snelling, and Saint Anthony Avenues by the 1890s. This development was encouraged by the area’s proximity to the University and Snelling Avenue streetcar lines (the University-Snelling intersection was established early on as a major transfer point), as well as the Macalester commuter rail station just to the southeast, near the Snelling-Dayton intersection.

University Avenue had become a major automobile corridor by the 1950s, and Snelling-University became an important retail destination with the opening of the Midway Shopping Center. In the 1960s, however, the construction of Interstate 94 along Saint Anthony Avenue destroyed most of what remained of the Merriam Park commercial district and severed the area north of Saint Anthony Avenue from the rest of the Merriam Park neighborhood. In 2014, the Metro Green Line opened on University Avenue, reviving the interurban rail corridor

between Minneapolis and Saint Paul. The light rail line has two stations that serve our study area, which encompasses the area between Prior & Snelling Avenues, and University Avenue and I-94.

### ***Understanding Qualitative Research Methods***

Before delving into our results and analysis, it is important to understand the need for qualitative research methods and our asset-based approach to this research. While quantitative research asks questions related to the relationship and differences among variables, qualitative research in geography is focused on answering questions related to social structures and individual experiences. As Iain Hay (2005, 8), author of *Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography*, states: “The experiences of a single individual have been used in a generalizable sense to illuminate structures and structural change.” Through a variety of methods, including surveys and in-depth interviews, we used qualitative methods to study how individuals and communities construct meaning in the specific contexts in which they live (DeLyser 2008). It is important to note that while qualitative research cannot be replicated (nor is it meant to be), it is still held to standards of rigor like any other type of research. To ensure rigor, we used methods typical of social geographers (Baxter & Eyles 1997), including our use of multiple methods of inquiry (survey and semi-structured interviews), the discussion of our positionality as researchers in relation to residents of the neighborhood, explicit and easily traceable connections between verbatim quotes and our analysis, and finally, a system in which all analysis produced was examined and corroborated multiple times by fellow researchers.

### ***Asset-Based Approach***

In our research, we took an asset-based approach to exploring our study area. All too often, efforts to improve a community begin by focusing on the things that are going wrong. An asset-based approach is one that focuses on everything that is, or has the potential to be, a positive influence on the community. Assets can be people. Community leaders in paid positions or as volunteers have the power to organize residents of the neighborhood or serve as their representative at a larger scale. All members of a community have *individual talents* that can make positive impacts (Sattin and Gilson, 2009). Assets can be places. Parks used for recreation or social events provide spaces for neighbors to build relationships with one another. Businesses or public institutions, such as libraries, have the potential to be community partners and sponsor or host events that benefit the neighborhood. Assets can be local associations. Cultural groups, houses of worship, gardening clubs, and other social organizations can likewise sponsor and host community wide events. Participating in community development work sometimes leads to development *in* the community rather than development *of* the community (Beaulieu, 2002). Asset-based research is “internally focused and relationship driven” and it gears our interactions with residents toward listening to their ideas rather than imposing our own preconceived notions about the neighborhood (Beaulieu 2002, p. 9). We believe that focusing our research on the strongest aspects of the neighborhood is significant in helping to engage residents and center our process on what is most important to community members.

## **Methods**

### ***Distribution of Survey***

We obtained baseline data by administering surveys to study area residents. Each team member was assigned a section of the study area, usually consisting of 1-2 blocks, and delivered surveys in person. Residents who did not respond after several attempts to make contact were also left with envelopes, as were residents of apartment complexes. The survey respondents varied in terms of their homeownership, race, age, education, and the length of their residency.

Our survey had 5 sections. The first section, designed to gain a basic understanding of our survey respondents' experience in the neighborhood, asked residents for a few basic points of information about themselves, including their address (or nearest intersection), the year they moved to the study area, whether they own or rent their home, and their most common methods of transportation. The second section called for more in-depth responses, asking questions designed to get at residents' personal perceptions of their neighborhood. Here, we had residents tell us the name they use for their neighborhood, sketch a map of their perceived boundaries of the neighborhood, and identify unique feature and points of interest. In the third section, we attempted to gauge how residents obtain information and keep up-to-date on neighborhood events by asking them to identify key information sources and tell us if there are any types of information sources they wish were available but are not. The fourth section was designed to gather basic demographic data, asking residents about their age, education, race, and family status. The fifth section provided a space for residents to add any additional information they wanted us to know. A copy of the survey and map are included in the appendix.

Once survey responses were received, we quantified responses to the more basic questions and analyzed responses to the more perception-based questions. Our class split into groups of 2-3 people and each discussed one survey question. Our findings from this stage helped inform our interview questions as well as our overarching themes discussed below.

### ***In-Depth Interviews***

In order to gain further insight into the attitudes and perceptions of neighborhood stakeholders, we conducted in-depth interviews with block ambassadors, survey respondents and business representatives. Most of these interviews lasted around an hour. The seven block-ambassador interviews provided us with a general understanding some of the neighborhood's key features; many of these interviews included walking tours, which allowed us, as researchers, to further orient ourselves within the study area. We also conducted follow-up interviews with survey respondents who indicated interest. The interview questions covered the following themes: sense of community, community events, people of interest, reception to the neighborhood, businesses, outdoor space, change over time, transportation, perception of diversity, and perception of place within the larger city. In the end, a total of 17 interviews with residents were transcribed and analyzed. Lastly, we conducted 21 interviews with representatives from businesses around the study area. Some of these interviews were more comprehensive, while others were kept short due to time constraints. These interviews covered themes such as location, interaction with customers, advertising, and participation in neighborhood events. Copies of the interview questions are also provided in the appendix.

During our analysis phase, we transcribed each resident and business interview. These transcriptions were then analyzed using a three stage coding process. The first stage included adding descriptive codes, which meant highlighting relevant material and attaching comments. During the second stage, we applied interpretive codes, which allowed us to cluster, organize, and relate descriptive codes. Lastly, we identified overarching themes that emerged frequently in both the interviews and the surveys. These themes include the "tucked away" and secluded aspects of the neighborhood, its location-based assets, perceptions of change, diversity and walkability, gathering spaces, and emotional connection and personal agency.

### ***Limitations and Selection Bias***

This qualitative research project does not represent an exhaustive account of every person's experience in this neighborhood. One significant limitation to our research process was that we did not receive access to restricted living spaces such as halfway houses or secured apartment complexes until the late stage in our study. Therefore, our results came disproportionately from people living in single-family homes duplexes, or condos, and a majority of our survey respondents are white, middle-class, highly-educated individuals. This is not representative of the true demographics of our study area. In addition to lacking the perspectives of lower-income ethnic minorities, our inability to collect data from restricted living spaces has prevented us from obtaining potentially important information on how ownership versus renter status might influence perceptions of neighborhood space.



We must also consider the influence of selection bias. First, residents who feel more involved in the neighborhood or have had more extreme experiences, both good and bad, may be more inclined to participate in the survey, and later the interviews. Moreover, high socioeconomic status is often correlated with participation in higher education and further, with Whiteness. It may not be a coincidence that many of our respondents have had 17+ years of education and are even more predominantly white than our survey respondent pool. Because of this, the more in-depth parts of our study are comprised of data collected primarily from white residents, who may have had different experiences than people of color and immigrants living in the area.

### ***Incorporating the Asset-Based Approach***

Our survey and interview methods were heavily influenced by our asset-based approach. Many of our interview questions were framed in a way that prompted respondents to think about positive aspects of their communities. For example, one of our survey questions asked respondents to identify places that they would show a friend visiting the neighborhood for the first time. Another asked residents to list aspects of their neighborhood they felt were unique. Examples of interview questions that served a similar purpose would include where we asked respondents to identify key gathering spaces, neighborhood leaders, shopping locations, and other potentially valuable aspects of their neighborhood. This, we felt, would help us tease out the various characteristics of the study area that could be further developed as contributors to the wellbeing of residents.

Though we attempted to work closely to the asset-based approach, we were also compelled to respect instances in which residents did not identify assets. Upon hearing about our project, a number of residents saw an opportunity to highlight grievances with certain aspects of the study area, hoping that our project might contribute to addressing issues they felt needed attention. Where similar grievances appeared repeatedly, we made a concentrated effort to include them in our analysis even though doing this does not necessarily fit perfectly within the asset-based approach.

## **Survey Results**

### ***Survey Demographics***

Over the course of our research, we collected 116 surveys from residents around our study area. The response rate for our survey collection was about 50%, meaning that about half of households we reached out to completed a survey. According to 2010 data, there are 965 housing units in our study area (including vacant or abandoned units), meaning that our survey sample size represents about 12% of the housing units in the neighborhood.

In terms of homeownership, 49% of the respondents were owners and the other 51% were renters. A number of the renters we surveyed live in Episcopal Homes, a nursing facility on University Avenue. This population accounted for about 20% of our total survey respondent pool. The racial composition of our respondents is about 80% Caucasian. People of color, including African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Middle Easterners, and Hispanics/Latinos, comprised the remaining 20%. The respondents come from varied age groups, ranging from 18 to 90. People aged 20-35, 35-40, 55-60, and 75-80 responded most frequently. Lastly, most of our respondents had at least 12 years of education, with 17+ years of education being the largest group. The average length of residency in the neighborhood is seven years. However, the years 2013 and 2015 saw a substantial portion of our respondents moving into the neighborhood (Figure 1).

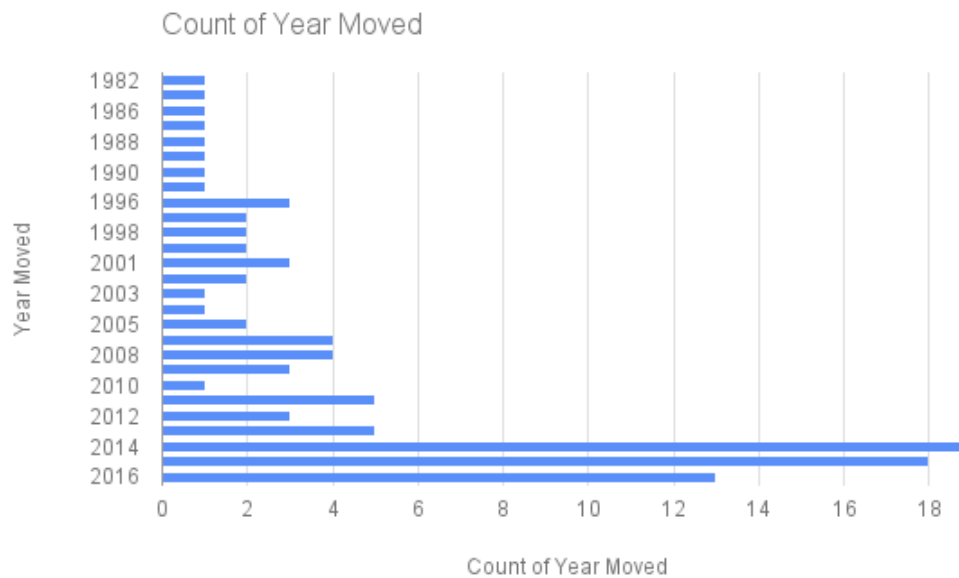


Figure 1. Count of Year Moved

When comparing the demographic data of our survey and interview respondents to the demographic data of the study area overall, several important differences must be noted. One of the most notable variations between our sample and the population of the area as a whole is the age of individuals we sampled. While the average age of our respondents is 48 years, the median age in the survey area as a whole is 28.5. The misrepresentation of age in our respondents is likely due to the high number of Episcopal Homes residents with whom we talked.

Additionally, while the 2010 census indicates that 70% of homes in the survey area were rented and 30% were owned, only 51% of our respondents rented, while 49% owned their homes. This difference is largely due to our inability to contact residents in controlled access buildings, and may lead to results skewed towards the views of homeowners.

The last large disparity that we noticed between our respondents and the area demographic as a whole is the overrepresentation of white-identifying individuals in our study. While 63.1% of the study area identifies as white, 76% of our respondents do, which leads to an overrepresentation of the white population and underrepresentation of people of color, most notably the Black/African American population which makes up 21.5% of the study area and only 7.2% of our respondents, and the Hispanic or Latino population which makes up 8.3% of the study area's population and only 3.5% of our respondents.

### ***Notable Survey Responses***

Our survey results addressed a number of pertinent questions, most of which are explored in the later analysis of overarching themes in the context of follow-up interviews. However, there were a number of questions regarding how residents get information about the neighborhood, the businesses that residents frequent, and the top places in the neighborhood that residents view as attractions. Because these questions were not addressed in our in-depth interviews, we present the results here.

#### ***Getting News About the Neighborhood***

Figures 2, 3, and 4 represent the responses to the interview question: "How do you usually get news and information about this neighborhood?" Respondents were offered a variety of answers to choose from three

different categories: Face to Face, Print, and Online. Respondents could choose as many answers as they wanted, and they could fill in their own answers in each category. See the survey in the Appendix for more details.

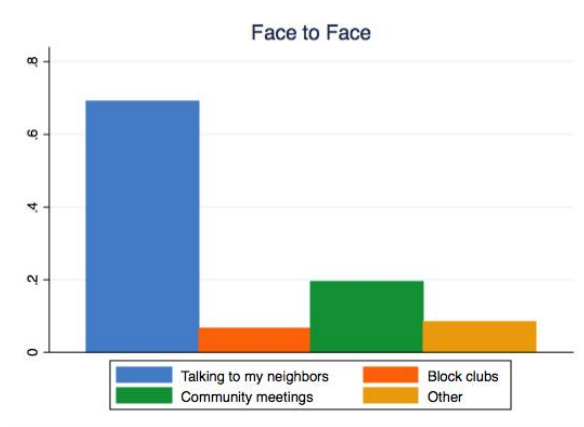


Figure 2: Face to Face

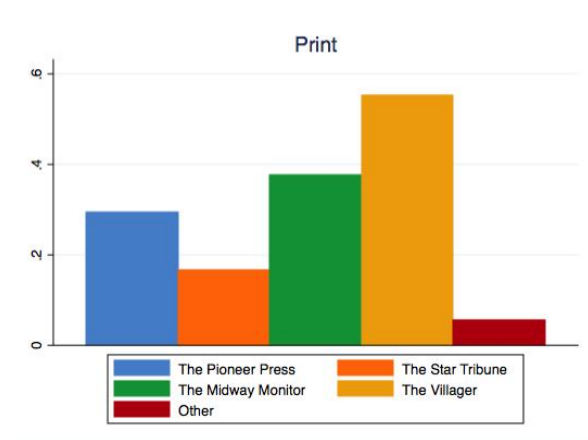


Figure 3: Print

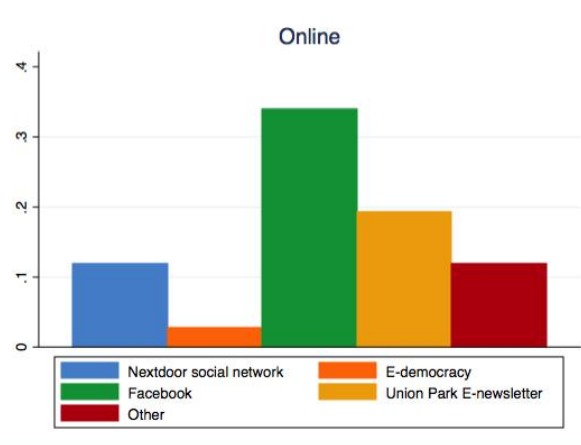


Figure 4: Online

Some write-in responses categorized as “Other” in the Face to Face category include community center, landlord, work, and Neighborhood Night Out. In the Print category, respondents wrote bulletin board, flyers, *The Como Monitor*, *The Bulge*, and other local print media. In the Online category respondents wrote block listserve, Google, television programs, Zillow, and Facebook groups.

The graphs above show that the most widely used method of getting information is “Talking to my neighbors.” *The Villager* and *The Midway Monitor* represent the next most utilized forms of getting information, followed closely by Facebook and *The Pioneer Press*. The category with the least variability of responses is Face to Face. Additionally, survey respondents were asked to circle their most preferred method of communication. These answers were organized by category and are presented by age groups under and above or equal to 40 years old. There are 49 survey respondents under 40 years old and 59 respondents above or equal to 40 years old.

As seen in Figures 5 and 6, of survey respondents under 40 years old, the most frequently listed method for receiving information is Face to Face and then Online. In contrast, survey respondents above 40 years old most frequently stated Print and then Face to Face as their preferred method for receiving information. Of respondents that chose a preferred method in the Face to Face category, the vast majority of respondents chose “Talking to my neighbors”.

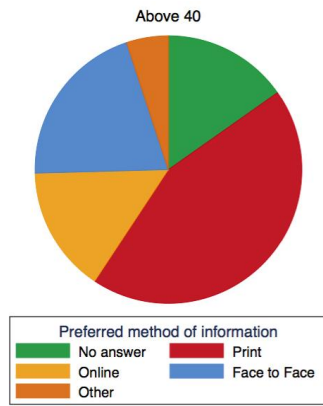


Figure 5: Above 40 years

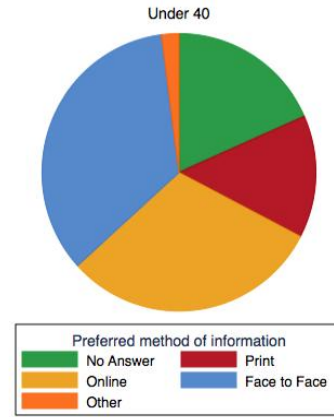


Figure 6: Under 40 years

*Often-Frequented Businesses*

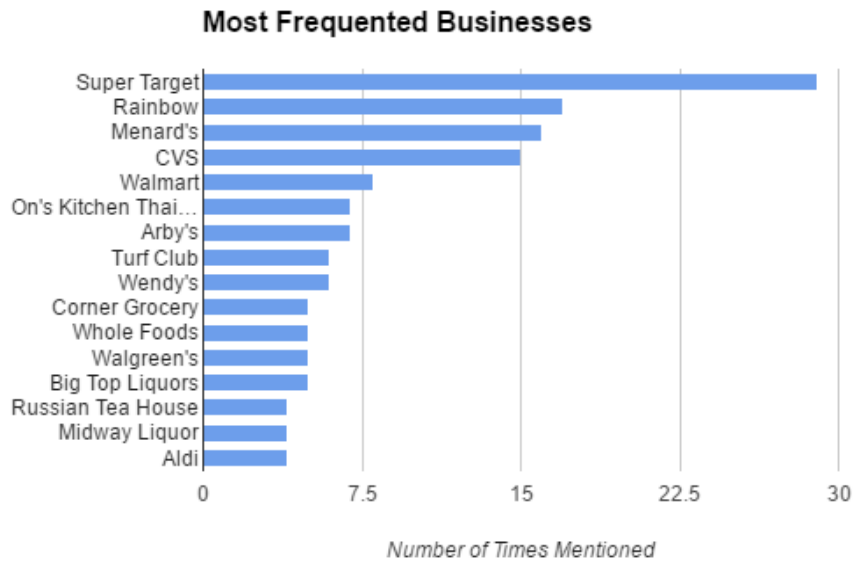


Figure 7: Most Frequented Businesses

Figure 7 displays answers to the question, “[In your neighborhood] What businesses do you go to most?” Due to varied perceptions of the extent of the neighborhood, participants responded with disparate answers. These are the most common answers among survey respondents. Most of the businesses that respondents mentioned are

chain stores that sell food, health products, or general goods, perhaps because these businesses are more familiar, more accessible, offer lower prices, or provide a greater variety of goods than smaller, independent options. Menard’s appears to be an important resource among residents for house maintenance and hardware. One notable business is On’s Kitchen Thai Cuisine, which is the most frequently cited business that is not a chain. Another unique business to the area that was mentioned often is the Turf Club, which is also the only entertainment-based business that appears in this list.

*Places in the Neighborhood that Participants Would Show a Friend*

We also asked residents to indicate places they would show a friend visiting the neighborhood, resulting in a wide variety of places inside and outside of the study area (Figure 8). There were, however, common themes that arose from responses. Perhaps the most prominent theme is showing people the outdoor spaces in the area, including Iris Park, Merriam Park, Aldine Park, parks in general, and community gardens. Additionally, many people appear to deem the light rail infrastructure interesting or important enough to show a friend. Another relatively recent change in the neighborhood is the new YMCA building, which 12 people mentioned. Lastly, once again, On’s Kitchen Thai Cuisine and the Turf Club appear to be popular destinations, solidifying their uniqueness and importance as staples of the neighborhood.

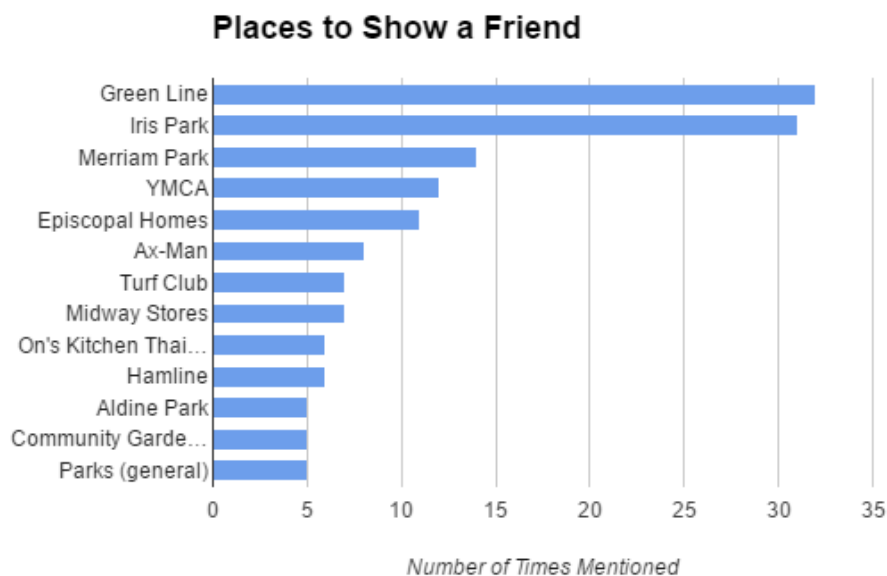


Figure 8: Places to Show a Friend

*Name Used for the Neighborhood*

Survey respondents were also asked to indicate what name or names they used to refer to the neighborhood. Figure 9 indicates the number of occurrences of the most commonly used names for the neighborhood; in instances where the survey respondent listed multiple names (n=19), the individual names, rather than the response as a whole, were counted. On 30 of the surveys we received, respondents did not answer this question. Of the total responses received (n =85), “Midway” was the most common response across the entire area, with 32 respondents indicating that they used this name at least occasionally. Midway was also indirectly mentioned in 2 more responses, “next to Midway” and “in between Midway and Frogtown.” Merriam Park, Union Park, and Iris Park, also had significant levels of use, with 24, 14, and 12 responses, respectively. These top four were frequently listed

together on the same responses; it is not clear whether the respondents use them interchangeably, or rather in different circumstances.

Responses that occurred 5 or fewer times were grouped into the “Others” category, with 22 responses to 15 different names. Within this category, 8 respondents indicated that they used their street or nearest intersection to describe their neighborhood, 5 mentioned that they considered Episcopal Homes to be their neighborhood, and 2 gave answers in reference to the location of other neighborhoods.

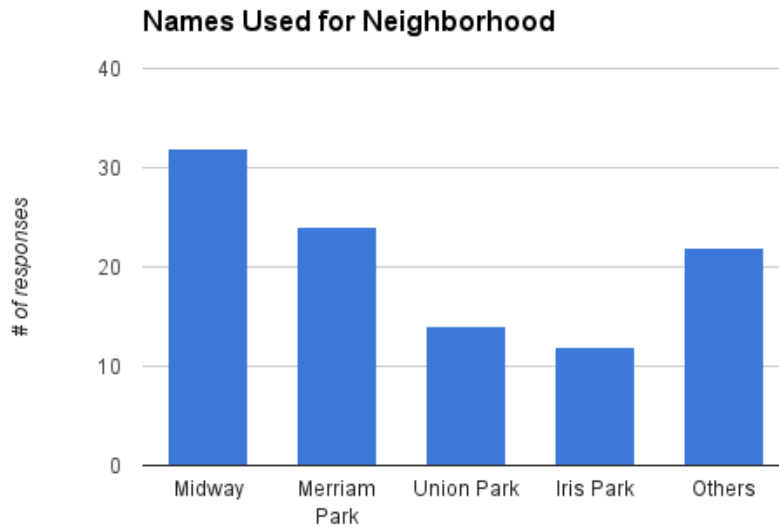


Figure 9: Names Used for Neighborhood

## Analysis of Interview Themes

### *Introduction to Interview Themes*

After analysis of our interviews, we discovered a number of asset-based themes that we chose to further develop and examine. The asset-based themes that we generated from our in-depth interviews can be viewed as tangible or intangible, as these categories provide a useful framework for analysis. In our report, tangible assets refer to material aspects of the study area, including transportation, commercial areas, gathering spaces and infrastructure in general. Intangible assets refer to immaterial or more nebulous contributions to the study area, including sense of community, affordability, perceptions of change and diversity, feeling of agency and emotional attachment, and the “tucked away” and secluded nature of the neighborhood. Clearly, there is overlap and connection between these categories and among the assets listed. The following interpretation of our interview themes attempts to explore these assets and their connections and contradictions, while considering the importance of both tangible and intangible assets. We cite specific Interview Respondents by number (e.g., IR #9) in order to keep the identities of our respondents confidential. At the same time, a list of pertinent characteristics of the 17 interview respondents is provided in the appendix.

### *“Tucked Away” and “Secluded”*

Over the course of our survey analysis, we discovered several complementary themes. First, when asked to list three words that would describe the neighborhood, resident participants frequently listed “quiet,” “peaceful,” “calm,” “secluded,” and other variants that suggested a perception of the neighborhood as a relatively restful, tucked-away space. In contrast, when asked to describe aspects of the neighborhood that made it unique, many survey respondents pointed out its central location and the advantage of being located between the downtowns of Saint Paul and Minneapolis with easy access to public transportation, namely the light rail. While these two traits may initially seem contrary to one another, based on our subsequent interviews with residents and business owners, we came to the conclusion that the physical seclusion and quiet of the neighborhood does not translate into isolation, given its central location and easy access to amenities both within the neighborhood and outside of it. In fact, based on our research, it appears that when explored together, the quiet atmosphere and the area’s location-based advantages are some of the neighborhood’s strongest assets.

To encapsulate the various perspectives related to the secluded, peaceful atmosphere of Union Park, we devised 5 descriptive codes through the process described in the methodology. We used the code “secluded” where interview respondents spoke positively of the neighborhood’s isolation and “restricted” when they spoke negatively about it. We chose to distinguish the idea of seclusion from the idea of peacefulness, because seclusion is largely physical and spatial, while peacefulness is related to activity within the neighborhood (or a lack thereof). Descriptions of the neighborhood as quiet or calm received the code “peaceful,” whereas descriptions of the neighborhood as energetic or bustling received the code “active.” When respondents spoke negatively of activity within the neighborhood, usually in reference to instances of isolated noise disturbances, we used the code “noise.”

Throughout all 34 interviews with residents and businesses, the code “secluded” appeared 29 times while “restricted” appeared 27 times, after omitting comments from Episcopal Homes Residents who often discussed Episcopal Homes specifically rather than our study area neighborhood as a whole. Though these numbers are quite close, there are a number of caveats to consider. First, it is important to note that where the code “secluded” appeared, the respondents’ attitudes were very clear. Many respondents affectionately referred to their neighborhood as a “pocket” (IR #2, #11, #13, #14, #16). When asked about her first impressions of the neighborhood, respondent 13 said, “We actually really like that it was kind of sequestered.” She later stated that she felt the neighborhood was “unique where we were getting this little pocket of privacy in the middle of the city.” Similarly, respondent 14 prefaced a description of the “pocket” aspect of the neighborhood with the statement, “they seemed to really like it.”

By contrast, we found that “restricted” codes tended to appear where statement intent was somewhat unclear. The following quotation from respondent 13 serves as good example: “It’s very disconnected from the rest of the neighborhood just because of where it is geographically. It feels like the people that live in that specific area are very protective of that area but there’s not much else going on there.” We coded this quotation as “restricted” because of the negative connotations often associated with the phrases “disconnected” and “not much going on.” However, we have to question whether or not this statement truly demonstrates a negative attitude toward their neighborhood’s isolation because the respondent subsequently expresses a positive attitude towards it in the interview. Because this ambiguity occurred with many of our “restricted” codes, we must lean toward the idea that residents’ attitudes toward their neighborhoods isolated quality are generally positive.

The code “peaceful” appeared 37 times, versus 14 times for “noise.” Most of the contexts in which the code “noise” appeared were residents describing isolated instances of disruption, such as commotion in Iris Park at night or occasional construction or highway noise (IR #6, #9, #11, #12, #13, #14, #16). Only one respondent suggested that the neighborhood is typically noisy, mentioning a constant blaring of emergency sirens at night (IR #3). Most others felt that the neighborhood was pleasantly quiet and calm for its urban setting. The code “active” came up 19 times and appeared much more frequently in business interviews. Of the 10 interviews in which “active” appeared, 7 were from businesses. This result is to be expected because many of the businesses we interviewed are located along University Avenue, which many resident respondents view as typically busier than the interior of the neighborhood where most of them live.

Overall, it appeared the residents of Union Park who we talked to enjoyed the tucked-away, quiet feeling of their neighborhood. Instances in which respondents clearly and intentionally articulated negative feelings toward the neighborhood's seclusion were few compared to the amount of times it was cited as an asset, and the distinct lack of noise within the neighborhood was overwhelmingly listed as a positive by our interview respondents. This quality may create a heightened sensitivity among residents to noisy activity, as many respondents who brought up incidents of noise also mentioned that those incidents were met with a swift response from their neighbors (IR #6, #9, #11, #12, #13, #14, #16). The interviews also reveal that perceptions of the neighborhood's character and assets differ between businesses and residents because businesses tend to view the high amount of activity they experience on a daily basis along University Avenue as one of the neighborhood's top assets.

### *Location-Based Assets*

While residents of the study area who participated in our research may feel the neighborhood is tucked away, they still feel well-connected to key places both within their immediate vicinity and the greater Twin Cities. Interview respondents frequently cited the neighborhood's location in relation to the Twin Cities as one of its major assets, noting everything from the light rail to access to amenities to affordability. When asked why they moved into the neighborhood, our participants often responded similarly to this participant, who said, "It was the most convenient for job transportation, so it's right on the light rail" (IR #3). Another participant hit more specifically on the idea we called "situational advantage", explaining that "I do like the location here...it's centrally located between Minneapolis and Saint Paul" (IR #5). Therefore, we chose to analyze the views of residents and businesses regarding the neighborhood's location and its implications. There are several facets to the importance of this location: public transportation, situational advantage, and affordability. Because residents and businesses clearly perceive the location as an advantage, demonstrated both in our surveys and our interviews, we hope that by exploring the factors influencing that perception we can create a comprehensive view of location-based assets.

### *Transportation*

Transportation is an asset and a subject that seemed to never be far from the minds of the participants in our in-depth interviews. Although we offered some specific questions regarding transportation in our study area, it is notable that residents often mentioned transportation multiple times throughout their interview, often bringing up transportation-related assets unsolicited. Most interview participants mentioned some form of transportation or transportation infrastructure as an asset over the course of the interview. It is perhaps most interesting that we were hard-pressed to find one instance in any of the resident interviews where the resident was overtly negative or disparaged transportation options in the study area in any way. We can state definitively that the various transportation-related assets mentioned by our participants were the highest and most consistently mentioned tangible assets in the neighborhood.

Residents' opinions on transportation assets in the neighborhood often centered, perhaps not surprisingly, on the light rail. Many residents' opinions on the almost two and a half year-old light rail line were similar to this measured but positive example:

Oh, I love it. That's one of the reasons why we moved where we did. I think it's run well. It seems to be used pretty well. I think there's a few too many stops. I kind of get why they did the initial stops, I forgot what they were, I can't remember if it was Hamline or Victoria that were the two extras...But overall, I think it's a good thing...It has its detractors, but I think it's good overall. (IR #16)

For some interview participants, the neighborhood's transportation options—including both transit and highway access—were specific assets and *reasons* that drew them to live in the neighborhood. The majority of interviewees who have moved to the neighborhood since the Green Line or A Line opened cited this proximity to transit as



reasons for locating in the neighborhood, while some longtime residents also mentioned transit proximity as a reason for moving to the neighborhood. “When I moved in here...I worked at [redacted] and I was close to bus mass transit, so that was a positive thing” (IR #11). In the case of the resident in Interview 5, the combination of the neighborhood’s location and proximity to mobility-enhancing transit has entirely altered her paradigm on future neighborhood and housing choice:

I probably would have sold it [her house] beforehand, especially as I got older, but then when light rail came, which I think is a huge improvement... Now I'm thinking, maybe I should stay there so when I get old and can't drive I can just ride the train. I can go to Minneapolis. I can go downtown St. Paul (IR #5).

Transportation, therefore, is one of the strongest aspects of location-based assets, and often served as an important factor in residents’ decisions to move to the neighborhood.

### *Situational Advantage*

Location is often inherently tied to transportation and was often mentioned in the same breath as transportation. The majority of all interviewed residents and businesses mentioned some variation of location as a situational advantage with very nearly as much frequency as they did transportation-based assets. We used three codes: “best of both worlds,” “external neighborhood connection,” and “internal neighborhood connection” to explore how the central location of the neighborhood influences “Best of both worlds” refers specifically to the neighborhood’s central location, which easily allows residents to connect to both Minneapolis and St. Paul. “External neighborhood connection” refers to the ease of connecting with places outside the neighborhood, while “internal neighborhood connection” refers to the ease of access to amenities and services within the neighborhood.

Businesses and residents had different perspectives on the situational advantages of the neighborhood. Businesses focused on outsider accessibility to the neighborhood. This perception is exemplified by Bremer Bank. “Well our business is here because it's a midway point between Minneapolis and St. Paul... obviously the advantages are the concept that we have: easy access for clients.” Residents tend to perceive the neighborhood’s location at the midpoint between Minneapolis and St. Paul as an asset because it allows them to access or identify with both cities. For some, it grants multiple family members easy access to jobs or amenities. “This is literally the easiest location for everyone... it’s kind of like the perfect compromise,” said one respondent (IR #13). We coded this idea as “best of both worlds.”

Internal neighborhood connection was generally referenced in terms of the ease of accessing services within the neighborhood, usually referring to grocery stores and businesses along University Avenue. While many residents described accessibility to commercial areas as an important asset to their neighborhood, the actual number of options considered to be within the neighborhood varied greatly depending on the residents’ perceptions of boundaries. Some viewed the commercial areas as far away as Grand Avenue to be within the neighborhood, while others did not even consider businesses on University Avenue to be within the boundaries. As one resident remarked, “As far as I know there are no grocery stores in Union Park, because I don't think Cub or Rainbow are in Union Park. I think that's Hamline Midway” (IR #2). Regardless if they are within the technical boundaries of the neighborhood, “big box” grocery and general merchandise stores were considered by almost all residents interviewed to be close, convenient, and of great abundance and most residents reported going to them frequently. One resident claimed, “I have access to everything, grocery stores, food... I can get everything from what I need in my household to what kind of food I need to eat. It’s just a nice, centralized location” (IR #8).

Despite the fact that almost all respondents reported using these “big box” businesses, there was disagreement on how accessible and beneficial to the area they are. Most respondents claimed that the “big box” stores were extremely accessible and one resident even described Midway as being “kind of the only place where you can go to Target, and Walmart, and the grocery store, and the haircutting place, and all of those things that

lower and middle class people need when they don't have a car. It's all right there" (IR #4). Some residents even noted the ability to bike or walk to a store, with one relatively younger resident remarking, "We walk to Target because it's just a mile and a half from the house, and that's not a long walk for us. But yeah, we live so close to everything, why not?" (IR #17). However, despite this, a few respondents disagreed and commented that although the "big box" stores were a short drive away, without a car they would be hard to access. A few residents described how shopping carts would end up being abandoned in the traffic circle and one resident hypothesized that this was an indication of how inaccessible the "big box" stores were without a vehicle. The residents who noted this were car drivers themselves. Most residents interviewed were also car drivers and the majority did not share their concerns.

Regardless of whether considered convenient or not, there was disagreement of regarding the utility of the these stores to the area. One of the residents noted, "As handy as they are I do think there's too much big box" (IR #5). In contrast to the abundance of "big box" stores, many residents commented on the lack of small businesses in their general vicinity. Several residents specifically mentioned the lack of coffee shops and restaurants within the neighborhood and "the problem of this area, is that there's no business that you can go often" (IR #16) "...we don't have a lot of stuff, [in] my neighborhood, as far as restaurants, the Blue Door, or you know...there's other stuff like down Marshall, like Izzy's. In some ways that's my neighborhood, in some ways it's not." (IR #15) and another: "I'm kind of disappointed in the selection of restaurants; if I'm going out to eat it's downtown or Grand Avenue or Selby or Minneapolis or somewhere else" (IR #6). Despite this, most noted that right outside the neighborhood there was an abundance of options. A resident summed up this sentiment by saying, "If you step out of the neighborhood, you have practically everything" (IR #8).

Several residents mentioned that with the completion of the Green Line these nicer areas became more accessible. Their views of the neighborhood as a whole had expanded and they more frequently interacted with businesses that were farther away. While the economic development that the light rail was supposed to bring was found questionable by a few respondents, most agreed how it made shopping more convenient and different commercial areas more available.

Many respondents expressed how the neighborhood needs development and has potential, noting the many vacant buildings in the area. "But then you look down the street and the Midway-Griggs Building is just this albatross of 1970s decor that probably should be gutted and leveled or something, and, two vacant buildings, or three now, the old Second Debut, the Finn-Sisu Swedish ski shop, and this other religious building, and they're just vacant storefronts..." (IR #2) One resident even noted, "I don't really like that whole area. It hurts to look at. So much pavement and parking, and it's so unused. We don't really go over there often" (IR #13). Some respondents were hopeful that the construction of the MLS soccer stadium would bring in new small and local businesses to the area. Others, however, voiced concerns over the new stadium with one of the main worries being that Rainbow Foods on University, the closest grocery store to the neighborhood, would not be there anymore.

These perceptions of ease of access to commercial areas differed depending on how residents defined their neighborhood boundaries. Residents who had broader definitions of their neighborhood tended to talk about internal neighborhood connections more positively, as many of the businesses that residents mentioned are located outside of the boundaries of our study area. Many residents mentioned Cub Foods, Rainbow, and Target. One resident said, "...we live so close to everything, why not. We just kind of walk down to Target and walk back. Again, just a really nice, convenient place to be..." (IR #13), while another said, "Honestly, if I need milk, coffee, or whatever, I go to Menards. I can just zip over and grab something, I'm two blocks from there. Or otherwise, within two or three miles you just drive to everything, so if I need to get to Whole Foods, or Target, or Hamline Park, I go to all [of them], so no shortage of places to go" (IR #16). Residents who perceived neighborhood boundaries to be more limited viewed the internal neighborhood connection as lacking, as fewer businesses and amenities are located within the official boundaries. One respondent felt that his neighborhood was lacking in services that he could walk to, claiming, "I don't really think it's walkable, there's not much here that I walk to" (IR #2). Several interview participants expressed grievances over a convenience store on Herschel Street and University Avenue because it is not as well-stocked as they would like. Thus, it seems that participants with a narrower perception of their neighborhood boundaries were less satisfied with their options than those with looser perceptions, suggesting that there is some potential for business development directly in our study area.

In terms of external neighborhood connections, residents tended to perceive the central location as an asset when talking about commuting to work or getting to amenities in other parts of the Twin Cities. Residents

repeatedly mentioned the ease and reliability of the Green Line to connect both to downtown St. Paul and downtown Minneapolis. As mentioned before, although the neighborhood is physically secluded, its location in relation to the broader Twin Cities means that residents can easily get to their daily activities outside of the neighborhood, especially given the abundance of public transportation. One respondent noted that “there’s such good transit options that I don’t even have to look at schedules. I’m about a block away from the westbound light rail station. I just walk over and two blocks from the Eastbound station, the A line. I hardly have to think about that at all, I just go out there” (IR #2). Several businesses also discussed the light rail as a way to bring customers to the area. “As they’re passing by or as they are going to work or maybe coming home from work- downtown Minneapolis, and/or St. Paul- it’s easy for them to come and make a deposit here or just run to the bank” (Bremer Bank). The situational advantage was repeatedly mentioned by both businesses and residents, and serves as one of the main assets of the neighborhood.

### *Affordability*

Participants frequently cited the neighborhood’s affordability as an asset and reason for moving to the neighborhood in the first place. The reason this aligns with the previously mentioned location-based assets is simple: there are other Twin Cities neighborhoods with excellent access to public transportation, close proximity to shopping and amenities, and overall situational advantage like we see in our study area. But few of these neighborhoods are seen as truly affordable. One statement by a young mother we interviewed represents this perspective: “We had lived sort of nearby for years, and we were going to buy a house. But we needed a big house with five bedrooms or more. So there weren’t very many that were under half a million dollars. So there were two basically in this general section of Saint Paul that we could afford, so that’s where we went” (IR #4).

Without prompting, many residents mentioned the affordability of the neighborhood as having a significant role in attracting them to the area. Some statements from residents include “[the] neighborhood had a nice house that really wasn’t that expensive,” “we found the price range fit with our budget,” and “really nice place to stay. Which is much more affordable than other places,” (IR #5, #14, #15). This sentiment was common among renters and homeowners, including homeowners who moved to the area in years ranging from 1986 to 2015. This indicates that affordability has been and continues to be a valuable intangible asset of the neighborhood, and an important factor to take into consideration for any future development projects.

It seems apparent that while location-based assets and peaceful atmosphere might appear to contrast one another, they in fact complement each other and form some of the neighborhood’s most powerful assets. While residents are able to have a quiet, peaceful neighborhood uninterrupted by the activity of University Ave, they are also able to utilize the central location of the neighborhood to access nearby amenities and the broader Twin Cities as a whole. The businesses, meanwhile, serve as a buffer between the secluded residential neighborhood and the activity of University Avenue and the Green Line, and are able to take full advantage of customers coming from across the Twin Cities. While changes in the neighborhood from light rail development to the potential soccer stadium certainly have residents and businesses alert, there appears to be a cautious optimism among our interview participants about improving the neighborhood’s situational advantage, though possibly harming the quiet secluded nature of the neighborhood. It is important to keep these traits in mind for future development projects.

### *Neighborhood Perceptions of Diversity, Change, and Walkability*

In this section we examine residents’ perceptions of their neighborhood, specifically regarding diversity, change, and walkability, drawing from in-depth interviews and survey responses. We found that residents were excited about their perceptions of future change in the neighborhood, including new businesses and developments, more young families and homeowners, and increased mobility. Some residents were also concerned about losing important assets in the neighborhood like diversity in race and socioeconomic status and walkability.

## *Perceptions of Change*

In this section, we discuss neighborhood changes that residents were excited about, as well as positive assets in our study area that people worried they may lose. Many individuals expressed both hope and concern about neighborhood change, though there are also interesting differences between demographic groups. Residents were generally more hopeful about neighborhood change and more likely to mention increasing property values than business owners, who were more likely to mention construction and a loss of parking. Newer residents who moved into the neighborhood between 2014 and 2016 were the most hopeful about neighborhood change. The idea of potential is often related to people's belief in their neighbors' willingness or capability to make improvements. "I think people want a strong, safe neighborhood and are willing to make sure that happens" and "It's making a huge difference already--just people being able to keep on top of maintaining their yards" demonstrate this attitude (IR #10, #13).

Residents who moved to the neighborhood between 1980 and 1989 were the most concerned about neighborhood change generally and most commonly mentioned increasing property values. Also, residents who completed 13 or fewer years of education were more concerned and less hopeful about change than residents who completed 16 or more years of education. When discussing neighborhood change, most people in Union Park mentioned change related to the light rail and the potential new Major League Soccer stadium.

In 2010, construction of the Metro Transit Light Rail Green Line system began along University Avenue in Union Park, and in 2014 it was opened to the public. People enjoy the new public transit service in terms of not having to drive and the increased accessibility to the city centers. They mentioned positive transit-oriented development and excitement about the new businesses and residential developments moving in along University, particularly Habitat for Humanity and the YMCA. In addition, homeowners were happy about the increasing market value of houses. People also expressed excitement about a general 'up-and-coming-ness' of the neighborhood and an improved physical appearance. Many residents and local business owners echoed sentiments like the following:

I think the positive is there's this major business hub that has so much potential right in my neighborhood. I think the Green Line makes this metro incredibly accessible. And, you know, for a long time this particular neighborhood was economically depressed and probably continues to be so, but there's a lot of little signs I think of upward trends. There's a lot of independent businesses opening up on University. . . I guess I'd take that as a big sign of progress. (Neighborhood Energy Connection)

I think the word I think of is emerging like this area has seen some hard times like economically. So it seems like there's momentum, because of the Green Line, commercial stuff, the stadium... I don't know if this is right word but like this area is kind of the underdog and now it's ready. (HealthEast)

Many people simultaneously expressed concern about losing parts of the neighborhood they value. Residents and business owners both reported a loss of parking, increasing taxes, noise complaints, inhibited mobility for pedestrians, the closing or moving of small businesses they like – for example a Goodwill store on University Ave-- and a general changing culture. This indicates they appreciate the drivability, quiet, walkability, affordability, and eclectic mix of businesses of Union Park. Businesses, however, did express a cautiously optimistic view about how changes would affect their own development. For example, one business representative said:

Yeah, you know in all honesty we view [the stadium] quite favorably because yes, the stadium may disrupt a little bit of our operation here at this location, but I think in the long-term future business prospects that may bank with our organization may increase just simply because we're

here, I mean come on, we're right across the street. We're so near that it's probably going to increase our business clientele that we have here. (Bremer Bank)

It seems that a number of business representatives hope that development projects will increase their situational advantage and further develop their clientele to more customers beyond the neighborhood, even while expressing concerns about the process of construction affecting their business.

Many residents are also concerned about increasing displacement of low-income residents; they appreciate the income diversity and more affordable housing currently in the neighborhood:

And I just hope that, you know my only other concern is that people don't get priced out

of the neighborhood as things get built, new things come up, you know we have the light rail, I just, I would hate to see . . . I don't know what the pricing is for the new lofts, residences on University and new apartments, but I would hope that it wouldn't have an impact on those people who want to live near the light rail and be in this neighborhood. (Red House Records)

Similarly, people were both hopeful and concerned about the potential new Major League Soccer stadium. There is hope it will stimulate the economy, improve the community, bring exciting change to a neighborhood that could use some love, and make Union Park special. Many participants cited the beautiful design of the stadium as a vast improvement over the current "big box" stores and empty lot. . At the same time, many people expressed concern about congestion and parking, construction, increasing taxes, displacement of local businesses like the family-owned restaurants, losing the big box stores like Rainbow Foods, losing the 'tucked-away feeling' of Union Park, and the gentrification and displacement of low-income residents. This resident summed up the conflicting feelings:

I think the soccer stadium is a pretty huge variable with a lot of questions marks around it. I think to me it's a little bit exciting . . . it just feels kind of uncertain because I think it has the potential to impact the neighborhood in a positive way [that] also comes at a cost for other people. So if the neighborhood, either my part of the neighborhood or even heading north into the Midway, if that starts to gentrify, which I think is a possibility, um, low-income folks get displaced and then where do they go? Where can they afford to go? And I think if you are a homeowner, a property owner, in some ways that's great but it also comes at a cost and to me that cost concerns me because even poor people have to live somewhere and feel safe and like its [their] home and [feel] connected to the community...And we kind of think about and talk about it a lot, just it's hard to predict you know ten years from now, what if there's a stadium and if there's been significant development along the Green Line, what else? What comes next? And we don't know and so yeah I think we've seen some change, we anticipate more change and yeah I think that's pretty normal. At least in a city. I think (IR #9).

### *Perceptions of Diversity*

This section will explore residents' perceptions of diversity in their neighborhood. The importance of diversity-in socio-economic status, race, housing tenure, age, and others-emerged from our survey results, which motivated this analysis. The residents' responses provide a more nuanced understanding of how diversity is perceived in the neighborhood, with particular attention to its potential role as a community asset.

The vast majority of interviewees, who were primarily white homeowners, identified racial diversity in the neighborhood, and many of those same residents considered this diversity to be a positive contribution to their

experiences in the neighborhood. One mother identified diversity as an important element in raising her children: “We wanted our kids to grow up with diversity of races and diversity of income, so that's the main reason why we chose to stay in Saint Paul as our family grew” (IR #4).

Conversely, about half of interviewed residents considered the neighborhood to be relatively homogenous in economic status (most identified the neighborhood as lower-middle class), while others noticed significant differences. Residents considered income and racial diversity as factors influencing their decisions to live here. For instance, when asked about diversity in the neighborhood, a renter stated, “That’s what I love so much about my neighborhood. We’ve always been very welcoming to our neighbors” (IR #8).

Other important themes came to light from our analysis of in-depth interviews and survey responses, including the association of lack of safety with the presence of diverse populations. Some homeowners we interviewed expressed concerns with security in the neighborhood, particularly in relation to renters and rental properties. Additionally, several others perceived that because renters often live in the neighborhood for shorter periods of time, they hindered efforts at building community or closeness with neighbors. One homeowner conveys these often linked sentiments: “[T]he very nature of it being rental housing and a lot of high-turnover housing is that kind of thing contributes to the kind of lack of community and the lack of safety” (IR #16).

Notably, we interviewed far more homeowners than renters, so in order to access views of renters, we examined the survey data more closely, as we received more responses from renters in our surveys. Many respondents described the neighborhood as “friendly,” and when asked to explain the uniqueness of the neighborhood, they cited community events and important interactions. One survey respondent said: “Neighbors looking out for the neighbors” (SR # 95). This points to a sense of community that exists among renters as well. Additionally, of the few renters we did interview, appreciation for diversity of people and housing options was indicated.

In some interviews, it was clear that their responses were dependent on their conceptions of the boundaries of the neighborhood. For instance, when one homeowner was asked about diversity, they initially considered their neighborhood to be relatively homogenous, especially in relation to income. Later in the interview, they acknowledged the presence of diversity in income and race a few blocks from their immediate neighbors. This common response also illustrates the spatial differences that interviewees perceived in the neighborhood. Responses identify landmarks and barriers, including University Avenue, Snelling Avenue and HealthEast buildings, that physically separate different types of people. In particular, there is a perception that more renters and low-income residents live closer to Snelling and University Avenues.

### *Perceptions of Walkability*

There is a little convenience store and haircutting shop right around the corner. The Y is across the street...So there is a lot going on. Those are places that we walk to. But it’s like six or eight blocks or something to the grocery store, which is really convenient. And all of the Midway shopping is really close. We drive but it’s like a two or three minute drive. It's fantastic...Generally we go to Rainbow, which is six or eight blocks. We have walked there but...it's not a nice walk. You have to cross Snelling...which is not so fun (IR #4).

This section deals with how residents consider the walkability of their neighborhood. Interview participants identified a number of routes and destinations that they frequent within their neighborhood. Routes mentioned include University Avenue, Saint Anthony Avenue, Snelling Avenue, Fairview Avenue, Prior Avenue, and Feronia Avenue. Destinations for walking in the neighborhood include Iris Park, Fairview Avenue Station, Snelling & University, Aldine Park, Snelling Avenue Station, Prior & University, Lynnhurst & University, Merriam Station Community Garden, and Newell Park (in Hamline-Midway, but identified by one interview participant as within

their neighborhood). Three of these destinations (Iris Park, Fairview Avenue Station, and Prior & University) are densely clustered near the Lynnhurst & University intersection.

Some participants cited a lack of places to walk to and unpleasantness as the main problems with walkability in their neighborhood. One resident stated definitively, “I don't really think it's walkable, there's not much here that I walk to” (IR #2). The Snelling and University intersection was mentioned a number of times as a particularly unpleasant location (especially for its automobile traffic), although a frequently walked location as well, for people heading to Snelling Avenue Station and the South Midway shopping centers. Iris Park was also mentioned by participants as a common and convenient destination to walk to and around, although several were unimpressed by the park's amenities and atmosphere.

Bikeability is another aspect to consider related to walkability. Respondent #16 mentioned the bikeability of the neighborhood as an asset, saying, “I bike a lot, I'm typically biking south from there, biking here to work [off Ayd Mill], or biking to the grocery store and stuff like that. I mean, it's a good ride off from Prior, so it's a very bikeable area” (IR #16). Some residents, however, adopted a different viewpoint: “I don't think biking is quite as safe as I'd like it to be” (IR #11). When asked why this was, they explained that they generally saw useful commuter and recreational bike infrastructure well to the south of the neighborhood, and said, “I mean, I would never bike down University” (IR #11).

Participants often regarded the convenient proximity of particular destinations within their neighborhood as contributing to their neighborhood's walkability. Iris Park, Merriam Station Community Garden, Fairview Avenue Station, and Snelling Avenue Station, as well as commercial (and bus-connected) clusters along University Avenue, including Prior and University and Lynnhurst and University, were all mentioned by interview participants as being convenient to walk to.

### *Understanding the Gathering Spaces where Community is Formed*

Residents we interviewed mentioned the formation of sense of community in differing ways, often citing common gathering spaces as important to community building. Although most residents feel there is a strong sense of community within the neighborhood, there are some deviations from this mindset. Many residents provided anecdotes about instances when neighbors welcomed them to the neighborhood, supported them, or notified them about relevant neighborhood information. For example:

“We were really happy because the neighbors across the street, they came over and they introduced themselves to us right away, and they held a barbecue for us with all the other neighbors” (IR #14).

“I'd say taking care of peoples' places when they're gone, looking in on things and taking care of the animals, shoveling” (IR #16).

While potentially resulting from a low sample size, there seems to be a lower sense of community among people living west of Fairview. Nearly all residents living east of Fairview described a high level of community, for example one resident who reported that they “see everybody all the time, which is really great. And we know everybody's names” and another said “I chat with all of them whenever possible...yeah, we really get to know our neighbors and talk with them” (IR #4, #8). In contrast, residents living west of Fairview seemed to feel less connected. When asked if they felt connected to anyone in the neighborhood, a resident responded with “yeah I know that neighbor, we *used* to get along, eh, no longer. But...outside of my direct neighbors, no, nobody,” while another resident west of Fairview said “I connect with some people,” both of which imply a less strong sense of community (IR #10, #15). Significant to the sense of community mentioned in the study area are the spaces in which community is formed.

In our study area, community formation takes place at both spontaneous and planned gatherings. In addition to large block parties and late summer cookouts, connections often form when neighbors stop to chat on the

sidewalk when out walking their dogs or meet outside to shovel snow in alleyways. One of the residents we interviewed mentioned that he sees his neighbors the most after a snowstorm when folks venture outside to shovel their driveways. The unplanned neighborhood maintenance gatherings are not restricted to winter. Another resident said that “you can’t really miss your neighbors” when everyone is out “raking and mowing” in the summer (IR #4). She also remarked that the physical boundaries of the neighborhood such as railroad tracks and University Avenue make it feel small and that helps neighbors “see each other a lot, which is wonderful” (IR #4).

Aside from outdoor maintenance, gatherings also take shape when neighbors have impromptu social interactions. A few interviewed residents said that they “like to enjoy the sunshine” together because “all of our backyards are connected” (IR #8). Additionally, folks spontaneously gather together for recreational purposes as well. This type of unplanned gathering usually takes place in a public space such as Iris Park or on the street. During the winter, one resident said she enjoys going to Merriam Park because it’s a “really a nice little park [and] you can go ice skating” (IR #8). Likewise other “kind of random” winter gatherings take place indoors “during the holidays” because of the cold (IR #8). The vast majority of unplanned gatherings revolve around social, recreational, and maintenance activities. Overall, these interactions are overwhelmingly positive: people take pleasure and find satisfaction in friendly faces, having fun in an informal setting, and cooperatively resolving community-wide issues.

We also noticed one important issue involving unexpected gatherings. Many residents mentioned instances of police involvement in neighborhood affairs due to burglary or other reported suspicious activity. Since law enforcement officials are inherently part of the neighborhoods they serve, we think it is appropriate to mention the significance of these instances. One interviewee, a middle-aged male who identifies as mixed race, recounted that out of seven interactions with police, five were very negative. One example of this interviewee’s negative gathering experiences with police officers occurred when they “dragged [him] out of [his] house, cuffed [him], walked around [his] house” because they “got a report of disturbances in the area” (IR #10). On the other hand, this man also remembers a time when a police officer was pursuing a suspect in the area and politely asked him if he would show some identification. After seeing that he was not the man they were looking for, our interviewee thought it “was a *great* interaction and wished he could “replicate [the police officer] throughout the entire state” (IR #10). We note that interactions with the police, in planned and unplanned settings, are also a form of community gatherings. We recounted this interviewee’s experience to emphasize that racism and discrimination can be a barrier for positive interactions with the community for marginalized populations such as people of color.

From these interviews we were able to surmise that most residents are very open to the idea of participating in more planned gatherings through community events like block parties or local “night out” celebrations. Many folks exhibited disappointment in what they see as a lack of planned gatherings. One resident notes that other neighborhoods have “whole intersections painted and decorated” with “community murals” (IR #7). One resident feels content to keep to herself and is not “actively looking for additional opportunities because we’re pretty busy,” but at the same time, she says that if “those opportunities were to exist, I would certainly take advantage of them (IR #9). Other members of the community feel more inclined to be the change they wish to see in the neighborhood. A longtime resident who has “been there longer than almost anybody” said that “I’m sitting around waiting for other people to do it, maybe it should be me!” (IR #5). While most residents enjoy the friendly, yet infrequent, unplanned gatherings, the prospect of there being more possibilities for planned community events is exciting and would most likely be used to foster community development.

Planned gatherings are either organized by the residents, the businesses, or community organizations. Oftentimes, people plan gatherings with their neighbors. These gatherings can be initiated by the neighbors, or by the residents themselves. For example, one resident noted that they hosted 4th of July gatherings for their neighbors. Another interviewee shared that their neighbors hosted a barbecue for them when they first moved in. In that sense, sharing a meal together seems to be a common type of planned gathering. These typically take place inside a resident’s house or backyard. Another type of planned gathering on the residential scale happens in the form of community meetings in response to safety concerns. One interviewee shared that when they “got burglarized a little over three years ago and it was twice within like three weeks so [they] had a community meeting and that is when [the interviewee] met some of [the] neighborhoods” (IR #14).

Planned gatherings can also be organized by businesses around the area. For instance, Blasted Ink hosts art classes for kids, paint nights, and business workshops for youth. Furthermore, Blasted Ink is also planning on hosting concerts with electronic dance music artists. Other gatherings are planned but less formal. For example, DPS



Treasure hosted a barbecue in the back parking lot. Generally, businesses participate in other planned gatherings such as the Midway Chamber luncheon or the Saint Paul Police Department Community meeting.

Another significant form of planned gatherings are those put on by community organizations. One resident shares that “I go to the 50 Plus Generation, at the Midway Bridge, that's another organization. We talk about elections and ...homeless people and...democracy and stuff like that” (IR #1). Another interviewee views the community garden as a positive neighborhood gathering space, recounting “I've been gardening there since the late '90s, so I've come to know those folks a lot...we get together periodically for...meetings and for barbeques and for other events, plus the committee itself meets every month to deal with garden business all year round, and we sometimes socialize together too (IR #13).” Undoubtedly, community organizations play an important role in bringing people together.

It is important to note that both unplanned and planned interactions are integral to community building. For example, people can meet each other during unplanned meeting while walking the dog or caring for their lawn, for instance. Getting to know each other in this way can produce more intentional gatherings. On the other hand, several interviewees also explained that they met their neighbors for the first time at planned gatherings, such as serving on a board together or participating in community gardening. Understanding the ways people gather is instrumental in encouraging community formation.

### *Green Space*

One additional component of gathering spaces is green space, in the form of parks, boulevards, and other open, publicly accessible outdoor spaces. We examined mentions of any type of outdoor space, which for the vast majority of our participants meant a public park of some kind. A large portion of interviewees harbored negative feelings towards public space available in or near their neighborhood. An interesting example of some residents' feelings towards parks comes from Interview Respondent 10, a mixed-race man, who first said that he did not have an opinion on outdoor neighborhood spaces because he “...[doesn't] frequent them...” and subsequently referenced Iris Park, saying, “There's the small Iris Park right in front of me. That's awesome because it's there in front of me” (IR #10).

Several residents, like Interview Respondent 10, offered a similar theme—the idea that although a few small spaces like Iris Park exist in the neighborhood, they do not usually utilize them, for a variety of reasons. Residents consistently suggest that the neighborhood lacks green space. Several residents harbored a strong belief in the intrinsic value of neighborhood parks and green space. “[There's] Definitely room for more [parks], you know? I had the benefit of growing up in a green space, the suburbs, but it still had parks nearby, and I want that for a family if we have one. I think it's really important” (IR #14).

One particular resident went beyond simple wishes for more green space, stating, “I have really felt let down by the city and by Union Park because the light rail development station plan talked about developing green spaces” (IR #2). This resident expressed frustration with the current state of Iris Park. “People say that it [Iris Park] would be nice if there weren't drunks there, that kind of thing—it could be a really nice little park” (IR #2). In a similar vein, Interviewee 16 said “I mean the...park, which is our main neighborhood asset, goes through phases. It's pretty good now, but it goes through phases in the summer where it's just more of a people coming in and drinking” (IR #16). Another resident was frustrated by the lack of more structured play opportunities saying, “For me, the biggest drawback of the area is there is no park or playground or any community center of any kind” (IR #4).

In general, most residents at least acknowledged the existence of spaces like Iris Park and Dickerman Park while also noting and discussing their visitation of more high-amenity parks located in other neighborhoods, such as Merriam Park, Como Park, Mears Park, and Minnehaha Park. There was not one resident of the 16 interviewed for our in-depth interviews who outright praised or was enthused about parks, green space, or public space in general in their neighborhood. Much more often than not, participants expressed feelings such as, “...there are not really great parks from my point of view” (IR #6) and were generally negative about the state of parks and public space in the study area.

## *Affection and Agency*

In order to pursue an understanding of residents' sense of place, it is necessary to examine residents' emotional connection to their environments. In *Place and Placelessness*, Edward Relph (1976) defines 'place' as a phenomenon: to the human geographer, 'place' consists of one's individual experiences, their sense of emotional connection to the area. Here, we define 'agency' as one's sense that they have the ability to effectively cause change in community-level affairs. We emphasize that we are not using 'agency' and 'initiative' interchangeably, acknowledging that a person's lack of involvement in volunteering or other community actions does not necessarily equate to lacking a sense of agency, nor does a sense of agency necessarily mean that people will be involved. At the neighborhood level, we found that resident interviews generally indicate connection in the forms of relatively small social circles, often consisting of immediate neighbors. Gardening organizations, small meetings of college-aged residents, dog walking, and neighborhood watches were all examples of social attachments to the neighborhood. By and large, the intangible emotional connection that respondents expressed towards the neighborhood was one of contentment; positive, but likely mild, rarely being expressed in explicit or strongly-worded manners.

Our ability to parse out a sense of attachment is not without its limitations, however. Explicit and unambiguous indications of attachment to the neighborhood were rare, and as a result, it was necessary to analyze indirect statements. For example, describing positive characteristics of the neighborhood, mentioning people or places considered by residents to be assets, and noting the presence of developed social circles were all taken to be suggestive of a sense of attachment to the community. None of these subjects are exactly synonymous with a feeling of emotional attachment to the neighborhood itself, and we researchers need to be careful not to impose our own assumptions on value judgments. However, it is not an unsafe step to treat these topics to be thematically correlated to a positive sense of place. Even in cases where the respondent in question may harbor an overall negative impression, these statements are valuable insights to an assets-based approach regardless of the respondent's overall perceptions of the neighborhood.

A common trend that appeared in interviews was a tendency for residents to defend the neighborhood from negative perceptions, specifically in terms of safety. While interviewees frequently mentioned crime in their descriptions of the neighborhood, responses very frequently included statements firmly expressing a sense of safety in spite of those acknowledgements. In the words of one interviewee, "I think we kinda get a bad rep for being a bad neighborhood because it's a poor neighborhood, but I have never felt unsafe, I'm friendly with my neighbors, at least the house next door, I know all their names, and, people on the street say hello. It's fine" (IR #3). An implication of this is a demonstrated importance of dissociating crime and quantitative measures of safety with residents' day-to-day perceptions of safety: while crime is an important consideration, focusing only on safety clearly does not provide the whole picture.

Additionally, we identified a theme of personal investment in projects pertaining to the neighborhood, which we hypothesized to both correlate thematically to a positive sense of place and to constitute an asset. Residents often spoke of a significant amount of time and effort invested in the appearances of homes and gardens. Expressions of concern for other residents was also a frequent subject, and some interviewees describing involvement with outreach to households experiencing break ins. However, though we considered this personal stake in the neighborhood to be reasonably understood as an asset, we did not find any evidence to suggest that it was effectively interchangeable with perceptions of agency or initiative.

## *Agency and Community Action*

In general, many people we interviewed feel they have the ability or agency to affect change in their neighborhood or at least to attempt making change. Of the experiences shared, the vast majority of respondents felt their efforts were successful, and this promotes agency. The multitude of successful examples of community action shows that interview participants feel a sense of agency. Table A highlights these examples and describes the perceived success with an illustrative statement.

**Table A**

Example	Successful community action	Illustrative quote
1	Share opinions at community meetings	“When we have the community meetings and I find out about it I usually go and speak my piece...Because you see the change. And when you see it change that makes you feel better because you managed to say something to it.” (IR# 1)
2	Community organizing to improve “The Berm”	“There is a place called the Berm. It is sort of a green space closer to the freeway. And there are trees and bushes there....We all take turns watering that area, and we help mulch and things like that to make sure that area stays nice, mostly as a sound barrier for the people who live closer to the freeway.” (IR#4)
3	Community organizing about traffic issues	“We had a lot of street noise on University. We had some meetings at the Episcopal Home about the cruising issue....We’ve been getting good support for the traffic calming, so I think the community organizers have been pretty responsive to us at this point.” (IR #11)
4	Alert authority when Green Line is late	“I feel like what we do does have a larger impact because the Green Line, calling for making sure the trains run on time.” (IR #13)
5	Contact law enforcement	“Iris Park's a beautiful park, but a lot of the drinking was pretty bad [during] the summer of 2015, so we were actually in contact with the police department and City Parks Department. Things have gotten somewhat better.” (IR #16)
6	Vote for representatives	“We’re really sort of aggressive voters. We vote for school board, and we do our homework. We make sure that our representatives are the sorts of people who do the sorts of things that we would want.” (IR #4 )
7	Community meetings after house break-ins	“Well, at first we had problems with people trying to break in our house. We found out about block club, you know, looking out for our neighbors. The people [who] were breaking in broke into the people next door too. But then we got that taken care of.” (IR #1)
8	Buy skateboards for kids	“I would actually use personal funds and buy skateboards for kids who don’t have it in the neighborhood, for them to spend time in that skate park.” (IR #10)
9	Organize community garden	“The [Guidance] Committee itself meets every month to deal with garden business all year round...We also have monthly community garden work days where everyone who gardens there is required to put in two hours a month of volunteer time. There is a lot of work involved in maintaining a community garden.” (IR#5)

The quotations in Table A show that successful community action promotes a greater sense of agency because people learn that they can affect change. In Example 1, Interview Respondent 1 attended a community meeting and felt changes were made based on their ideas raised at the meeting. Interview Respondent 1 would likely speak at future meetings because they saw results based on their previous input. In Example 4, Interview Respondent 13 shared that they called authorities when the light rail was late. They felt their action had positive impact on others because they helped ensure the light rail was on time. In Example 9, Interview Respondent 5 said that organizing a community garden is hard work but expressed successful outcomes. While the overwhelming majority of respondents describe achieving their goals with community action, conclusions based on these results should be slightly tempered due to selection bias. People who agreed to be interviewed for this study may be more likely to have experienced positive community action.

Interview responses also suggest that people feel represented when community action is successful, and this is correlated with feeling a sense of agency. In Example 3, Interview Respondent 11 expresses that they felt heard by community organizers because their concerns about traffic noises were being addressed. In Example 6, Interview Respondent 4 stated that they voted for representatives that will act on behalf of their interests. Interview Respondent 4 felt able to vote for people that will represent them, and identified voting as a form of community action.

In terms of safety, Example 5 shows that Interview Respondent 16 feels law enforcement has addressed their concerns regarding intoxicated individuals in Iris Park, and Example 7 shows that Interview Respondent 1 feels community watch clubs has solved the issue of home break-ins. Many interview participants stated that they call the police when they see suspicious behavior in their neighborhood. Responses suggest that the appropriate reactions of law enforcement contribute to a sense of agency. People see their needs being met and feel confident law enforcement will continue to meet their needs. However, not all respondents trust law enforcement. Interview respondents of this study were mostly white. A respondent of color shared experiences of maltreatment by the police which is described in the next section.

### *The Observers: Inaction and Next Steps*

Many residents' actions fall along a different side of the spectrum of agency and community action. Not everyone can be a changemaker. Some residents do not want or need to act, and others cannot. The barriers to action based on the reasons they gave include lack of desire, time, and/or information. There were a few residents who cited disenchantment or lack of success as significant challenges to personal agency. Within an asset-based approach, each reason residents gave for their inaction demonstrates an opportunity to promote a communal sense of agency.

The term "observer" in contrast to the section above on agency was a mindful choice. We felt "lack of agency" as a direct contrast, was a pejorative term that could not encompass the neutral stance many of the residents we spoke with held, as observers. One resident in particular, said outright, "Things change and I prefer to have the role of observer, than participant" (IR #15). Another resident described his minimal level of involvement in the neighborhood as, "that's more me though. I more keep to myself" (IR #6). In their words, this is not framed negatively and should be respected as such.

Those who wanted to be more involved in the neighborhood but were not, commonly gave a lack of time as a reason. Comments like, "Yeah I work a 60 hours week, my dad work 40 hours week. So it's not like we have time" and "right now we are kind of busy," fed into a general contemplation of acting on their agency that was ultimately rejected by the residents themselves (IR #8, #4). This desire was clearly voiced by interview respondent 16 when they said, "I feel like I should be doing more." According to these residents, it was not that they lacked motivation, rather time and resources. "I would say, if my life got to a position, got to a level when I am financially completely stable enough and financially stable enough so that my hours of my day can be my own—then certainly I could completely get involved and help" (IR #10). One resident suggested hiring someone in Union Park District Council to door-knock and solicit feedback since the resident did not have the time or resources to, himself.

Another barrier to the residents' perception of agency in their neighborhood was a lack of information. Some statements from residents indicate asset-based assessments of the neighborhood with no clear plan for execution. For example, one resident explained their connections with skilled ex-teachers, artists, and woodworkers, and "...we could probably contribute to neighborhood causes if we knew they existed" (IR #12). A gardener offered to beautify traffic circles, "but who do I even talk to about it?" (IR #6). Another resident stated, "I have no idea what ward I'm in. Or who's my ward representative, or how to contact them, or how to say anything, whatever. I have no idea" (IR #10). In reference to a question about if the resident had a voice in their neighborhood, they said, "I guess other than voting, we don't really have anything. We can run for office I guess" (IR #8).

A final, prohibitive barrier to agency is a history of unsuccessful attempts or disenchantment with the traditional system for community voices to be heard. A mixed-race resident told the police about his car that was broken into and "the police did nothing about it" (IR #10). Beyond this incident, this resident described the form of agency his neighbors cited of calling the police, is not the same agency he experiences:

If I am attacked by an intruder and I call the police, I have more to fear from the police making a poor judgment call—and losing my life—rather than dealing with an intruder. So I have no recourse in my mind—no no, that's not true—I have no safe recourse, 'cause calling the police is a gamble as to whether or not I live (IR #10).

Not all community members feel safe calling the police. This complicated issue needs to be investigated further than our 17 residents we interviewed to include more voices, especially people of color. We chose to highlight this interview to contrast the predominantly white group of residents who participated in our study. The inability to call the police demonstrates a challenge against the resident's sense of agency because, he feels they have no safe alternative options. Although the respondent has agency, they do not feel they have the ability to call the police because they would be risking their life.

Another resident was upset when she perceived that the government took a "one-fix" form of action by cutting down trees due to a fear of the nearby homeless population, "and it didn't seem like that was doing very much to solve the issue, and it was only trying to cover up a population that's already vulnerable, and kicking them out onto the street more" (IR #3). These two residents have not taken action because they are dissatisfied with decisions that have or have not been taken by the authorities in charge. Transparency and inclusion in decision-making and police reform could start to alleviate these barriers to agency.

To conclude, the multiplicity of ways people see their community are generally positive. Many residents personally invested in their community see themselves as agents with previous success. Residents do not experience this agency range from passive observers to those who cannot overcome serious structural barriers. Overall, the residents we interviewed and their power to affect change in their neighborhood should not be simplified into actors and observers without also considering these people are part of a greater community of potential agents.

## Conclusion

Taking an assets-based approach, we have discussed positive aspects of Union Park identified by residents. With that approach in mind, we have also worked to include aspects of the neighborhood that residents are concerned about, in order to honor and fairly represent the responses we received. In this report, we have addressed tangible and intangible assets, how people view the “tucked away” and “centrally-located” qualities of the neighborhood, neighborhood perceptions of diversity, change, and walkability, community gathering spaces, and affection and agency. What we found was a multiplicity of voices and interests in the same neighborhood: different people like different things.

The assets residents reported included a sense of community (even surrounding crime), a “tucked-away” location, situational assets like walkability and ties to both cities, a general up-and-coming feeling in the neighborhood, a diverse mix of residents, and an eclectic range of businesses.

The list of things that people want includes public art, community events, more homeowners, more renters, more local food options, protection against gentrification and affordability for businesses and residents, police reform, safety in the parks, more parks, and more consultation and transparency from Union Park District Council (people want to be asked directly what they think about things).

Moving forward, it will be important to recognize how assets are not uniform across the community, and that actions taken to implement projects have a variety of effects on residents. Recognizing that we bring our own bias as a class to the discussion, we still want to share a few recommendations based on our research and conversations with residents. We do not claim to represent everyone, and with any initiatives or projects we suggest seeking further input from Union Park residents and businesses.

1. We believe caution should be taken to ensure that positive neighborhood changes like increased public art or new restaurants stay accessible to residents with a wide range of levels of income and educational attainment. To achieve this goal, a focus on affordable housing will be key.
2. In terms of what to allocate funding for in the neighborhood, many people would like more parks within walking distance of their homes, especially with younger families moving in. This will help to build community in the neighborhood. It will also be important to ensure these parks feel safe and welcoming for *all* residents.
3. Many people want to participate in community gatherings but do not want to be the ones to plan them. We suggest more events designed to bring the community together, for example block parties, holiday parties, or community dog walks (many residents were very eager to have us meet their dogs - a major asset in the community).
4. In general, residents would really enjoy more open communication about projects in the neighborhood. In some instances, people reported feeling as if they did not know a project was taking place, for example with some roundabouts being filled with dirt for a garden, and others being filled with concrete. Existing facebook pages may be a great asset to take advantage of when looking for ways to contact residents. Because many residents are pressed for time and cannot make time in their schedule for too many community meetings despite caring about the issues discussed, physical fliers advertising projects or online opinion polls may also be good tools to incorporate a greater amount of feedback into Union Park District Council projects.

To summarize, we believe it will be beneficial to keep building on the already existing assets in the neighborhood, but to also try and imagine who different projects and changes will affect the most.

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Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Saint Paul, Ramsey County, Minnesota. Sanborn Map Company, 1903.

## **Appendix**

*Survey Instrument & Sketch Map*

*Interview Questions*

*Interview Respondent Characteristics*

*Composite Results of Sketch Maps*