

LISC

Twin Cities

*Helping people
and places prosper*



COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATIONS

Home, Sweet Home

Housing stability in a fast-changing neighborhood

By Jay Walljasper

The Frogtown Rondo district of St. Paul is poised for big changes. When the new Green Line light rail opens next spring, trains will stop there on the way from downtown Minneapolis and downtown St. Paul.

Thanks to a strenuous community organizing campaign, there will be four stops in the community rather than two as originally planned. Better public transit opens up more opportunities for people living in the area (which straddles I-94 between Lexington Avenue and Marion Street, Selby Avenue and Pierce Butler Route) and a spate of new housing and business development is expected to rise along the route.

This district is one of the most diverse pockets in the metropolitan region, home to the Hmongtown Market and a growing cluster of Asian restaurants that draw diners from all over. But no single demographic group dominates Frogtown Rondo. There are large concentrations of Asians, African, and Latin Americans immigrants as well as longstanding communities of African-Americans and European-Americans.

“We have an obligation to see that the folks living here are still around to enjoy the benefits of all these public investments,” says Andy Barnett, City of St. Paul coordinator for the Frogtown Rondo Home Fund.

Helping residents benefit


Too often low-income residents are forced out when neighborhoods start to revive economically. The Rondo neighborhood at the south end of the district has its own heartbreaking history of displacement when I-94 ripped through the heart of St. Paul’s African-American business district, dividing and dispersing the community.

The Frogtown Rondo Home Fund (FRHF) was formed last spring to increase housing stability for low- and moderate-income residents in the area through a wide ranging public/private collaboration among more than 30 partners. “FRHF brings together resident organizations, community development corporations, local government, community institutions, service providers, and foundations to significantly improve housing conditions in the neighborhoods, with a special focus on preserving and producing affordable housing,” explains Barnett.

“The importance of stabilizing the neighborhood and investing in activities that help low-income people stay in their homes was a key priority for the Big Picture Project, notes Gretchen Nicholls, program officer at Twin Cities LISC. “The Frogtown Rondo home Fund aligns perfectly to that goal. This community-led effort is right on the mark by creating strategic partnerships and priorities.”

“At first, we want to guide development in small areas so the impact will be visible and unmistakable,” says Barnett. They are now focusing on 6-8 block areas near Maxfield School, Jackson School, and the St. Agnes church campus, offering a series of services provided directly to both tenants and homeowners:

- foreclosure prevention counseling
- home buyer education
- home improvement loans
- redevelopment of vacant properties
- education and organizing that addresses systemic threats to residents’ housing stability
- assistance for people plagued by poor rental histories, low credit scores or legal records

“We are not primarily a housing funder,” Barnett stresses. “This is a roll-up-your-sleeves and figure-out-new-ways-to-make-things-work effort.” 

Minneapolis writer Jay Walljasper writes, speaks, consults and strategizes about enriching urban and community life. His website: www.JayWalljasper.com