



From the Flats to the Future

Community-Led Visions for Belonging and Repair

Introduction

The story of the West Side Flats is one of resilience, displacement, and the ongoing pursuit of justice. The Research in Action (RIA) report, commissioned by WSCO, documented the history of the Flats, the lasting harm caused by displacement, and community-driven solutions for repair.

This proposal builds directly on the first three recommendations from the RIA report on the West Side Flats:

1. **Acknowledgment and Memorialization** of the displacement
2. **Economic Remedies** for displaced families and their descendants
3. **Neighborhood Belonging** for displaced residents, their descendants, current residents, and future residents

The following sections outline concrete steps WSCO and community partners can take to advance these goals, ensuring descendant voices guide the process and outcomes.

Proposal 1: Memorialization

One of RIA's key recommendations is the memorialization of the Flats. This proposal envisions a **multi-medium, interactive memorialization** that integrates community-suggested ideas into a cohesive, accessible experience.

Bike/Walk Path of Remembrance

- **Starting Point:** The location of the former “Black Bridge,” a multi-modal bridge that connected the Flats to the eastern part of the West Side
- **Recreation of the Black Bridge:** As both a functional pedestrian/bike bridge and a symbolic gateway to the path.
- **Route:** Primarily along State Street, ending at a new community plaza or pavilion on the river—potentially at 10 River Park Plaza, reclaiming existing parking lots for community use.
- **Along the Path:** Memorial installations could include sculptures, murals, plaques with instant play recordings of descendant oral histories, and kiosks with QR codes linking to the West Side Flats database of family stories and photos.

Artistic Collaboration

Memorial sites will be developed as collaborative art projects, centering West Side artists, with a strong preference for partnerships with the MN Latino Museum.

Digital Memorialization

A publicly accessible digital archive with oral histories, photographs, articles, news clippings, and an interactive map pinpointing historic businesses and gathering spaces. Intended for use by schools, community centers, and the public to preserve and teach the Flats' history.

Potential Partners

Minnesota Historical Society, University of Minnesota Archives, City of Saint Paul (Public Art Ordinance Program), McKnight Foundation, Ramsey County, West Side churches, Heritage Preservation Committee, MN Latino Museum

Visual Aid:

Proposal 2: Our Reparative Legacy

Before displacement, the Flats were a place of deep connection—neighbors knew one another, supported each other, and felt safe. This proposal seeks to carry forward that **sense of belonging** through initiatives that honor the Flats' culture, build community strength, and serve future generations.

Community & Cultural Initiatives

- **Summer Camp:** A cultural and educational camp in honor of the West Side Flats, combining traditional community activities with lessons on local history, gentrification, displacement, and environmental racism. Aimed at fostering compassion and awareness so injustices like the Flats displacement are never repeated.
- **Scholarship:** For high school seniors, GED recipients, and adults returning to school. Recipient(s) would embody the Flats' values: compassion, inclusivity, and community engagement. Criteria to be determined in collaboration with descendants.
- **Sport Complex:** Convert the old American Can Company (139 Eva St, St. Paul, MN) into a multi-generational sports hub named after the Flats, offering programs and physical activities (like an indoor jungle gym or playground) that reflect the neighborhood's history and meet current needs.
- **Grocery Co-op:** Affordable, community-owned grocery store within 55107, modeled on the Flats' spirit of sharing and mutual support. Offers collective ownership so residents share profits and decision-making.
- **Music Education Program(s):** Build on the Flats' strong musical traditions with programs that encourage students to learn instruments or study voice, preserving a core part of the neighborhood's cultural heritage.

Potential Partners

Our Lady of Guadalupe, Neighborhood House, MN Latino Museum, West Side Boosters, Schubert Club, MacPhail Center for Music, Dodge Nature Center, Al Lenzmeier West Side Boys &

Girls Club, Girl Scouts River Valley, Friends of the Mississippi River, St. Paul Conservatory of Music, Los Alegres Bailadores

Proposal 3: Economic Repair for Descendants

While the Inheritance Fund's down payment assistance is a step toward repairing generational wealth loss, **descendants widely feel it was developed without their involvement and fails to address the full scope of harm.** Many community proposals center on **expanding economic repair** options to meet diverse needs.

Concerns with the Current Inheritance Fund

- Eligibility criteria exclude many descendants who deserve repair
- Focus on homeownership does not serve seniors or those uninterested in buying property

Proposed Changes and Alternatives

- Revise eligibility guidelines with descendant input
- Remove income and asset limits
- Remove restrictive deadlines
- Revive and expand the Home Rehabilitation Program, especially for seniors who already own homes but need repairs

If these changes cannot be integrated into the current Inheritance Fund or Home Rehab Program, WSCO recommends the creation of **a new, descendant-designed economic repair initiative** that incorporates these principles from the start. Such a program should be flexible and accessible across generations and economic status.

Right to Return

WSCO recommends a descendant-centered *Right to Return* framework that restores access and stability across housing types. In practice, a Right to Return framework has three core principles:

- **Acknowledgment of harm** – recognizing that renters, as well as homeowners, suffered economic and cultural loss when displaced.
- **Pathways back into community** – creating real, accessible housing opportunities for descendants, including rentals, ownership, and mixed models.

- **Protection against future displacement** – ensuring affordability and stability so descendants who return are not pushed out again.

Examples of how a Right to Return framework could be implemented include:

- **Rental Repair & Stabilization Fund** – Provide direct support to descendants of displaced renters through rental assistance, eviction prevention, and resources for deposits or first/last month’s rent. This mitigates the instability descendants face today, directly repairing the loss of affordable rentals their families once relied on.
- **Descendant Housing Preference Policy** – Establish housing preference policies that prioritize descendants in new and existing affordable rental developments on the West Side. Any developer receiving public funding or city incentives would be required to implement this policy, ensuring displaced families have a pathway to return.
- **Community Land Trust with Descendant Units** – Create or expand a community land trust model that includes permanently affordable rental and ownership units reserved for descendants. This structural solution prevents displacement pressures long-term and secures intergenerational access to housing in the neighborhood.

A Right to Return framework therefore extends the idea of repair beyond wealth restoration for homeowners, ensuring that renters and their descendants also regain what was taken: the right to belong, to remain, and to return to the West Side.

Potential Partners

NEDA (Neighborhood Development Alliance), Rondo Community Land Trust

Next Steps

We recognize that this proposal encompasses a range of ideas for diverse programs and projects. Some elements may be implemented in the short term, while others will require longer-term planning and sustained effort. The purpose of this document is to bring these proposals to your attention and lay the groundwork for ongoing discussion in future meetings. These recommendations will also be integrated into our 10-Year Community Plan.

As an initial step, we would like to confirm a meeting in the Fall of 2025 with Councilmember Rebecca Noecker, a senior Department of Planning and Economic Development (PED) staff

member, and staff members from any other relevant City departments to review these proposals in detail, with a focus on the following items:

- **Proposal 1:** Assess feasibility of the [proposed bridge, path, and plaza location](#).
- **Proposal 2:** Explore opportunities for a community center at the former American Can Company site (139 Eva St, St. Paul, MN) and identify potential locations for a grocery co-op.
- **Proposal 3:** Discuss proposed changes to the Inheritance Fund, reopening of the Home Rehabilitation Program, and Right to Return proposals.