

Affordable Housing Plan for Eden Prairie, Minnesota

By Sarah Schewe

Eden Prairie: Community Resources & Needs

Eden Prairie is a suburb of Minneapolis which was originally prairie and farm land. Our history has not been forgotten. Eden Prairie boasts 1,300 acres of open space; however, as the city has grown, there have been land use conflicts. In 2006 the city ranked 10th nationally in the “Best Places to Live” feature by *Money* magazine. Eden Prairie has also been recognized in the book *50 Fabulous Places to Raise your Family* (one of only two Minnesota cities that made the cut) and in 2005, *Parents* magazine named Eden Prairie the “Best Suburban City to Raise Kids.”¹

Eden Prairie is the sixth fastest growing city in the Minneapolis-St. Paul greater metropolitan area² and is remarkably diverse for a suburban area. There are 35 native languages spoken in Eden Prairie homes and the Twin Cities is home to the largest Hmong and Somali population outside of their home countries³. I’ve seen our community’s diversity first hand as a swimming lesson instructor at the community center where I frequently teach Somali and Chinese children who may speak little or no English.

Eden Prairie is a city of families, and 71.27% of housing is currently family housing⁴. Yet an income divide exists between Eden Prairie’s wealthier, predominantly white community (90.66%)⁵ and immigrant families. While for whites the income per capita is \$40,510, for Asians it falls to just \$24,649 and for “Other” (which includes Somalis), it is only \$12,687⁶. This gap is growing – in the Twin Cities from 1989-1999, “the average household income of the wealthiest 20 percent of Twin Cities’ households rose 24 percent... the poorest 20 percent rose at just 16 percent.”⁷ Eden Prairie food shelves saw a dramatic increase in need from 1,500 visits in 2000 to nearly 10,000 in 2005⁸. Meanwhile, with a median rate of \$1,166 per month, Hennepin County has one of the highest mortgage costs in Minnesota. More affordable housing in Eden Prairie could help the city better support its growth and serve our immigrant families.

Eden Prairie’s Planning Commission provides an open review for all development proposals “with regard to the City’s Strategic Plan, Comprehensive Guide Plan and City land use.”⁹ Providing more

¹ City of Eden Prairie. *MONEY Magazine Names Eden Prairie, Minnesota the 10th Best Place to Live*. [cited 12 January 2007]. Available from www.edenprairie.org/vCurrent/live/news.asp?r=3441

² Metropolitan Council. *Press Release: Region's growth strong and steady*. [updated 18 July 2006; cited 13 January 2007]. Available from www.metrocouncil.org/news/2006/news_540.htm

³ Ibid.

⁴ Area Connect. *Eden Prairie City, Minnesota Statistics and Demographics (US Census 2000)*. [cited 14 January 2007]. Available from <http://edenprairie.areacconnect.com/statistics.htm>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census; ePodunk. *Per Capita Income by Race or Ethnicity*. [cited 11 January 2007]. Available from www.epodunk.com/cgi-bin/incomeOverview.php?locIndex=21009

⁷ Greater Twin Cities United Way. *Did You Know?* [updated 23 June 2006; cited 15 January 2007]. Available from www.unitedwaytwincities.org/communityinfo/documents/DidYouKnow.pdf

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ City of Eden Prairie. *Planning Commission*. [cited 13 January 2007]. Available from www.edenprairie.org/vCurrent/live/article.asp?r=1479

housing is in line with our Comprehensive Plan, which dictates “the majority of existing vacant land for residential use.” While all the proposed plans have benefits, affordable housing serves the greatest need and fulfills our land use goals – most other proposals have some redundancy with the city’s current facilities. Eden Prairie Center, the downtown mall was renovated in 2001 and now includes an 18-screen theatre. Our library was renovated in 2002, moving it from a 15,000 square foot building to a 40,000 foot space which features a large fireplace, 92 computers, wireless internet and cozy reading areas.¹⁰ The city’s need for a civic auditorium is served by several existing spaces, including a 340,000 square foot mega-church which has a multi-use 4,200-seat auditorium.¹¹ Eden Prairie also is home to two environmental learning centers.

Using a five acre area for a combination of affordable and traditional housing for rent meets the growing housing needs for our community’s diverse population.

The Housing Plan: One Option

The housing plan is for duplex multi-family housing coupled with an on site co-op day care which would be available for families in the new development, for the adjacent neighborhood and for parents working in the commercial district. Twenty-five percent of the housing would be designated as affordable housing. Integrating affordable housing into the housing mix helps address the fundamental need to house everyone while preserving housing values. Historically, when housing is designated solely as affordable or low income housing, the surrounding neighborhoods see erosion in property values. In the ideal, housing for a mix of incomes and ages provides the greatest neighborhood stability.

While high rises would allow more people to live in the five acres, Eden Prairie zoning restricts high rises due to the local airport. The housing plan I recommend would include approximately 5 duplexes per acre, sharing green space collectively as if the houses were all dispersed throughout one big “backyard.” One acre would be reserved for the wetlands, with community garden space bordering the wetlands and green space. This plan is also in accordance with Eden Prairie’s Comprehensive Plan which states that of the city’s 1,877.76 vacant acres (as of 2000), 105.45 are designated as “medium density residential” (2.5 to 10 dwelling units per acre).¹²

The units would incorporate universal design which allows elderly and disabled residents to live more independently in their homes. First floor units would be accessible from the garage via ramp and would have roll in showers and no steps within the unit itself. First floor doors would be a minimum of 36” and entrances would be a minimum width of 42”. Many elder Eden Prairie residents have lived in the community since its earlier farming days. As these seniors retire and move to other housing, many cannot afford to stay in the community where they raised their children. Additionally, the lack of accessible design in many affordable housing units puts additional strain on low income families who are caring for a disabled child or parent.

¹⁰ Hennepin County Library. *Eden Prairie Library: Library FAQs*. [cited 12 January 2007]. Available from www.hclib.org/News.cfm?ID=970

¹¹ Grace Church History. *2000: Construction Begins on New Church Campus*. [cited 11 January 2007]. Available from www.atgrace.com/about/history.php

¹² City of Eden Prairie. *Comprehensive Plan Update: Vacant Acreage by Guided Land Use*. [cited 15 January 2007]. Available from www.edenprairie.org/vCurrent/upload/contents/228/Chapters%201-4.pdf

Unlike most duplexes, which share a common wall and have two-floor units, these units would be split by floor, with additional sound proofing between the units for privacy. Of the 20 duplexes (totaling 39 units and one day care unit), 10 units would be designated as affordable. This designation would not apply to individual units, but to the project as a whole—thus unit 1-B would not be forever known as “affordable” while 2-B was designated as a market rate unit. The overall commitment of the community would be to maintain 10 units at affordable housing prices, renting the other 29 at market rate. By renting rather than selling, the city can more easily manage the development, and keep it affordable.

Each duplex unit would include three bedrooms and one bath with an open floor plan including an eat-in kitchen and family area. The 1200 square foot units would all include a large mudroom/laundry room/storage area—a significant need given Minnesota’s climate. Since all units share green space, each unit would have a deck or patio area. This would designate some private outdoor space per unit, while sharing a park-like “backyard.” One particularly important detail in Eden Prairie is including one garage space for each unit. Since Eden Prairie has a comprehensive bus system, and is the southwest bus hub into the Twin Cities, it is possible to live in the community without a car. Alternatively, without garage space, the units would be unattractive to the broader community.

Preserving the wetlands is a crucial part of the development. Not only are wetlands protected by City Code, but according to local surveys, nearby wetlands increase property values: “[Two-thirds of] Residents showed ... willingness to pay at least 10 percent more for a home if it was within walking distance of ... parks and playgrounds, trails and bikeways, and wetlands.”¹³ A community garden would honor the history of the land and take advantage of the fertile soil that has been maintained by the former land owner’s nursery. The garden would also act as a wetland buffer strip in accordance with City Code 11.51, subdivision 9. Eden Prairie classifies wetlands based on how they have been maintained (from exceptional to low) and requires different buffers depending on the classification. Given that the wetland has been left untouched, it would likely rate as “Exceptional,” requiring the 50-foot wide garden to be 65 feet from the wetlands, with a 15 foot setback from the garden to the nearest duplex¹⁴. Recognizing that a quarter of families in the development are being given a hand up, they will give others a hand as well – 25% of the garden’s harvest would be donated to a local food shelf.

The last component of the development would be a co-op daycare. Local residents could either pay for daycare or work in the daycare in exchange for leaving their kids there. A daycare is ideal because it meets both the needs of families in the area and it requires minimal parking. Further, a daycare meets the needs of the broader community, and would garner support from other interest groups in the community. Retailers and commercial interests would benefit from the convenience of having a daycare right next to downtown and young families have additional affordable day care options. Environmentalists would support the plan because the wetland preserved and the garden and wetland could be teaching resources for the day care center, helping children appreciate early on the value of our land.

¹³ Metropolitan Council. *Parks, natural areas raise value of nearby homes*. [cited 13 January 2007]. Available from www.metrocouncil.org/directions/parks/parks2005/openspace.htm

¹⁴ City of Eden Prairie. *City Code, Chapter 11: Land Use Regulations (Zoning)*. [cited 13 January 2007]. Available from www.edenprairie.org/vCurrent/upload/contents/228/city%20code%20ch%2011.pdf

I believe this affordable housing plan celebrates the diversity of our community and could be a model for other small scale affordable housing projects. This project could be another reason Eden Prairie is chosen as one of the “Best Places to Live.”

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