

ST. PAUL

A bus line far in St. Paul's future caught the eye of some developers

Developers are pitching a complex near an expected bus rapid-transit project.

By Don Jacobson Special to the Star Tribune | MARCH 3, 2016 — 6:30PM

Transit-oriented development in St. Paul has almost exclusively been focused on the Green Line light-rail corridor in recent years. The Metropolitan Council estimated last year that at least 13,700 housing units have been built or are in the pipeline within a half-mile of the line's total length.

Now, however, there are signs that the Green Line isn't the only mass-transit corridor in the city attracting new multifamily housing investment.

On St. Paul's East Side, the Gateway Corridor Gold Line bus rapid-transit project — still 10 ARTICLES EVERY 30 DAYS > [SUBSCRIBE \(HTTPS://USERS.STARTRIBUNE.COM/PLACEMENT/6/ENVIRONMENT/3/SIGN-UP/START\)](https://users.startribune.com/placement/6/environment/3/sign-up/start) FOR MORE LOG IN
years away from possible funding and build-out — has already prompted a pair of well-known developers to pull the trigger on new construction near a proposed stop. (HTTPS://USERS.STARTRIBUNE.COM/MEMBER_CENTER)

Minneapolis-based Lupe Development and Wall Cos., each boasting many years of housing development savvy, have teamed to pitch a 113-unit “workforce housing” complex on a vacant lot next to the existing Wilson Ridge Apartments.

The spot is just two blocks from the planned Etna Station on the Gold Line in a part of the city that has a considerable unmet need for affordable housing.

That station is one of five envisioned for the St. Paul portion of the 12-mile, \$485 million Gold Line, which, if built, would run from downtown's Union Depot eastward to Mounds Boulevard, then along the north frontage of Interstate 94 to Oakdale in Washington County. After that point, the route is undecided, but its eventual terminus is likely to be in Woodbury.

The dedicated bus transitway wouldn't open for riders until 2023. And that assumes the Gateway Corridor's backers in Ramsey and Washington counties can successfully secure the federal funding needed to pay for 45 percent of the project in a timely fashion and then persuade the state Legislature to kick in another 10 percent.

That lengthy time frame, however, hasn't deterred Lupe Development and Wall Cos., which committed to investing along the Gold Line last year when they purchased and then renovated the existing 102-unit Wilson Ridge Apartments at 1276 Wilson Av.

The property also came with a big area of adjacent open space which presented another opportunity, according to Steve Minn, Lupe Development's vice principal and chief financial officer.

“We bought it primarily because we think the [Gold Line] transit corridor is going to wake up that part of town,” he said. “The other reason is that it was sitting on 4.2 acres of land and had only 102 units of housing. That situation really wasn't consistent with the transit scheme or the kind of urban density you should see that close to downtown.”

Thus the development team last month submitted requests to split the big parcel and obtain re-zonings to allow for the greater density the new building would bring. The idea was enthusiastically backed by the Dayton's Bluff Community Council, which hailed the effort as an “important asset” for an East Side neighborhood that has chronically lacked investments in new affordable housing and transit infrastructure.

The developers' request was approved unanimously by the St. Paul Planning Commission's Zoning Committee last month.

The Wilson Ridge addition is probably the first new development in St. Paul to be specifically inspired by the bus rapid transit proposal, city officials said, and despite the still-uncertain status of the transit line, demonstrates how the Green Line's success in luring new housing can be duplicated elsewhere in the area.

“To have private investors who otherwise wouldn't be investing their own time, money and effort but for a new transit opportunity on the East Side is pretty big for us,” said Gary Leavitt, the city's transit-oriented development manager.



(http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_1457049)

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Developers are taking advantage of future transit. A rendering of Wilson Ridge Apartments.

The proposed Etna Station is near the interchange of I-94 and Hwy. 61, which currently lacks good pedestrian connections between the north and south sides of the freeway.

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