

# FINANCE AND COMMERCE

## Business News

June 9, 2008

### St. Paul tapped for community-planning pilot project

by [Burl Gilyard](#) Staff Writer

St. Paul will be one of four U.S. cities participating in a pilot community-planning program sponsored by the New York-based Environmental Simulation Center (ESC).

The nonprofit ESC deploys technology and computer-design tools to aid with urban planning. The \$892 million Central Corridor light rail transit line is slated to open in 2014. The line is expected to bring substantial redevelopment along University Avenue in St. Paul.

"We're thrilled we got funded," said Brian McMahon, executive director for University United and the project coordinator for the newly-created Frogtown Rondo Partnership, which will implement the ESC program locally. McMahon will be working halftime for the new initiative.

The program calls for opening a new Community Change Center at 533 N. Dale St., at the offices of the Greater Frogtown Community Development Corporation.

There, residents will be able to access computers that plot out an array of visual and statistical data about the area. The concept is that better visual access to the data will be a boon for both individual residents and broader community planning.

Project partners admit that explaining the program with words alone is complicated.

"It's a very visual process," said Steve Boland, executive director for the Greater Frogtown CDC.

ESC's web site, [www.simcenter.org](http://www.simcenter.org), gives a sense of the nonprofit's past work, which includes long-range planning and "visioning" studies of various urban areas.

There's also a social service component to the effort. Boland said that the project will be able to map out services in the area, and in the process, may highlight new areas of need.

"Our first thought is we need to map everything that's already out there. It has the potential of indicating where there's some gaps," Boland said.

The St. Paul team includes six partners: the Greater Frogtown Community Development Corporation, University United/U-Plan, the District 7 Planning Council, District 8 Planning Council, Aurora/St. Anthony Neighborhood Development Corporation and the City of St. Paul.

"The approach that they're testing out here does have the potential of transforming the way that we do community-development work," McMahon said.

Nancy Homans, policy director in Mayor Chris Coleman's office, said that the program will allow area residents to access information that's has traditionally only available in planning offices.

"I think we're all going to be learning something. Is there a way that we can make visible the invisible changes [in the community] that go on underneath the surface?" Homans said. "It's going to be a great adventure. This is about trying some things and seeing where they lead us."

The program targets "shifting sands" communities, which are "undergoing rapid change due to major redevelopment projects, infrastructure investments, public policy and regulatory actions, or other pressures."

The grant provides a total of \$375,000 for St. Paul — \$125,000 a year for three years.

St. Paul is one of four U.S. cities to be selected; the other three are Boston, Los Angeles and Astoria, Ore. The selections were announced at a Thursday news conference.

McMahon, Boland and other partnership representatives will head to New York soon for training sessions and workshops related to the grants.

"We are just a perfect match for this pilot project, I think. It's not specifically tied to light rail, I would say it's more land use," McMahon said. "That's why the city is really our partner. This gives us some tools to help manage the change."