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# Bridging Policy and Placemaking to Activate Vacant Properties:

## Exploring Barriers and Potential in St. Paul

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## ABOUT CENTER FOR COMMUNITY PROGRESS

The mission of Center for Community Progress is to foster strong, equitable communities where vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties are transformed into assets for neighbors and neighborhoods. Founded in 2010, Community Progress is the leading national, nonprofit resource for urban, suburban, and rural communities seeking to address the full cycle of property revitalization. The organization fulfills its mission by nurturing strong leadership and supporting systemic reforms. Community Progress works to ensure that public, private, and community leaders have the knowledge and capacity to create and sustain change. It also works to ensure that all communities have the policies, tools, and resources they need to support the effective, equitable reuse of vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties. More information is available at [www.communityprogress.net](http://www.communityprogress.net).

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# INTRODUCTION

Creative placemaking is a powerful tool to activate vacant spaces or abandoned buildings. Well-executed creative placemaking projects bring residents together to support artistic expression, lift up the cultural roots of the neighborhood, and support economic development and equitable revitalization. The Kresge Foundation defines creative placemaking as “an approach to community development and urban planning that integrates arts, culture, and community-engaged design strategies.”<sup>1</sup> It’s a process through which resident voices are heard, creativity can flourish, and profound positive change can result that extends far beyond aesthetic improvements. The National Endowment for the Arts recognizes that “creative placemaking animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired.”<sup>2</sup>

Arts and community development organizations are actively involved in creative placemaking on vacant or underused parcels of land in communities around the country, and residents are reaping the benefits (please see insert on page 5). Ensuring that principles of creative placemaking are leveraged more broadly, however, to help shape planning and urban design decisions in a systematic fashion, requires meaningful multi-sector partnerships among policy-makers, community development professionals, arts organizations, residents, and philanthropic leaders.

To support further creative placemaking efforts on vacant properties, in communities across the country, the Center for Community Progress developed this report (and its companion report on Minneapolis), based on a series of stakeholder interviews in Minneapolis and St. Paul. This report is designed to improve the reader’s understanding of the bridges that can be built between policy-makers, particularly municipal government, and the arts, culture, and placemaking community, to support the reuse of vacant properties for creative placemaking projects. While more can be done to ensure that

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<sup>1</sup> <http://kresge.org/programs/arts-culture-0>

<sup>2</sup> A White Paper for The Mayors’ Institute on City Design, a leadership initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with the United States Conference of Mayors and American Architectural Foundation, <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf>.



neighborhoods in St. Paul are reaping the benefits of creative placemaking on otherwise vacant or underutilized properties, there are a number of examples of successful creative placemaking projects in the city. This report identifies and highlights two that stood out as examples from which others can learn. The report then explores more broadly how placemaking has (or has not) been incorporated into city systems, the effectiveness of such programs, and how that integration of arts and culture into city systems has impacted, or could more effectively impact, placemaking projects on vacant land. This report should be seen as a preliminary exploration of strengths and opportunities to support creative placemaking on vacant or underutilized properties, particularly in the St. Paul neighborhoods with the highest concentrations of vacant properties. The authors hope that this report becomes the jumping-off point for more in-depth discussions and, ultimately, collaborations, in St. Paul. They also hope that this report informs conversations around the country, as part of a burgeoning interdisciplinary field of practice focused on creative placemaking as a key part of equitable revitalization in distressed neighborhoods.

### Benefits of Creative Placemaking

Among its many benefits, creative placemaking fosters economic development. Excerpted from a 2010 NEA white paper, creative placemaking:

- Recirculates residents' incomes locally at a higher rate re-uses vacant and underutilized land, buildings, and infrastructure
- Creates jobs in construction, local businesses, and cultural activity
- Expands entrepreneurial ranks of artists and designers
- Trains the next generation of cultural workers
- Attracts and retains non-arts-related businesses and skills

Source: [Creative Placemaking](#) (2010)

# CREATIVE PLACEMAKING ON UNDERUTILIZED PROPERTIES IN ST. PAUL: SUCCESSFUL PROJECTS

Maybe it's the long St. Paul winters or just a love for the outdoors that has influenced the placemaking community to focus on outdoor projects such as Frogtown Green and The Urban Flower Field highlighted below. Both of these projects are examples of outstanding placemaking efforts that bridge the gap among residents, municipal government, and the creative community. Frogtown Green is a model for how municipal government can work with the placemaking community to provide access to municipal-owned properties at affordable prices. The Urban Flower Field highlights the use of creative thinking to overcome obstacles in the face of financial limitations. Both of these projects are a testament to the importance of building and maintaining strong relationships among residents, the arts community, and city government.

## FROGTOWN GREEN

Historically a neighborhood for new immigrants and middle-income households, St. Paul's Frogtown Neighborhood is one that is racially, ethnically, and economically diverse. The neighborhood has a high concentration of rental properties, and following the foreclosure crisis in 2008-2010, many properties in the neighborhood were demolished. The result is a relatively high concentration of vacant lots throughout the neighborhood, unique among other St. Paul neighborhoods. Yet, these lots are largely deemed unmarketable for housing development at this time. Additionally, after a large foundation vacated a 13-acre campus in the neighborhood, intending to seek a developer to construct apartments, the Frogtown Neighborhood Association and others advocated for the vacant land to be redeveloped as a park and urban farm. As a result, the owners eventually sold the property to the Trust for Public Land for a much lower price than originally sought. Private, public and philanthropic funds were then assembled to develop the campus into a public park, including an urban farm known as Frogtown Farm.

Born of this effort is volunteer-powered, neighborhood-led initiative called Frogtown Green. Building on the success of Frogtown Farm, [Frogtown Green](#) seeks to activate smaller, vacant lots throughout the

neighborhood. Activated lots include a 40-bed community garden, pollinators, and a tree nursery. Aided by the neighborhood's councilman, Frogtown Green leases vacant lots from the City of St. Paul, paying \$1 per year, with proof of insurance required. Lots are identified based on a mapping project undertaken in conjunction with the City. Activation occurs on various types of vacant lots, including lots that are standard sized and those that are odd-shaped and unbuildable.

Complementing the work of Frogtown Green, other groups are now working in Frogtown. These include both for-profit and nonprofit enterprises who are utilizing the lots for gardens and farms. Not only are these activities sprucing up otherwise vacant lots, they are providing meeting spaces and growing opportunities for recent immigrants.

Yet, despite this success, Frogtown Green still faces some policy barriers to furthering its work. First, while the leases are working well, the leases are typically for one year, which limits the ability to plan long-term. If and when development is desirable on these lots, it is likely this placemaking work will end. This may not be a pressing need given the current housing market, but given the small number of lots available for development, the risk is present. Likewise, Frogtown Green has found it difficult to navigate the county program for vacant lots, which does not currently have a process in place for leasing vacant properties. Finding a way for the county to make lots available to nonprofit organizations, either for lease or for purchase, will allow groups like Frogtown Green to continue to nurture their efforts to activate vacant properties.



## BUILDING BRIDGES

In neighborhoods with little housing development demand, make vacant lots available for long-term community based projects such as pollinator gardens through long-term leases at low or no cost or through the donation of municipal owned property to interested, qualified nonprofits.

## URBAN FLOWER FIELD

The [Urban Flower Field](#) is the brainchild of St. Paul's City Artist, Amanda Lovelee. Utilizing minimal funds and leveraging contacts within city government, the City Artist turned a long-neglected lot into a beautiful space for residents and visitors to enjoy. The downtown lot, owned by the city, was acquired for the purposes of developing a public park. However, since funds were not readily available, the lot became a staging ground and parking lot for an adjacent development. Residents were particularly frustrated by this use, given the lack of public space in the immediate area. Recognizing the need for public space downtown, particularly due to dense housing in the area, city employees suggested to Amanda that she focus on trying to create a public space. Given a small budget of \$40,000 (the amount set aside for the space in previous years) and six months, Amanda and her partners transformed the space into the Urban Flower Field. Deploying a landscape architect and muralist, Amanda created a pattern spanning from the park to the building. Plus, the plantings include sunflowers to help remediate the soil and other native plantings, and this project's results in this remediation effort will be published in a scientific journal. The space is programmed with films, environmental conversations, and community artmaking, in addition to being a place for residents to sit, eat lunch, or take a short walk. This temporary use has extended into its fourth year. However, the temporary use is not ideal, and neighboring development may dictate how the park space evolves. A conversation about the long-term plan and use for the property is necessary.

## FACTORS AFFECTING CREATIVE PLACEMAKING ON VACANT PROPERTIES IN ST. PAUL

Situated on the east bank of the Mississippi River, St. Paul was founded near Native American settlements, which served as a trading and transportation center. The city was founded here for similar reasons and continues to serve as a trading and transportation hub, alongside its sister city, Minneapolis. However, as Minneapolis grew in population and commercial activity, becoming a center for milling and trade, St. Paul retained its prominence as the state capital, including the various governmental and nonprofit institutions typically located in capital cities. Recreation, especially winter sports and activities, dominate St. Paul's culture scene, including the Winter Carnival, attracting several



hundred thousand visitors each year. The city is dotted with several state parks and recreation areas. And, while Minneapolis's size attracts many notable music contributions, St. Paul also has a thriving music scene, home to the Minnesota Opera, a full-time chamber orchestra, and a rich jazz legacy. The region's strong economy, along with residents who possess a deep loyalty to their city, make St. Paul a prosperous city with a strong residential market and low vacancy. Yet, like so many other cities, St. Paul's vacancy is concentrated in neighborhoods home predominantly to people of color and new immigrants—residents often left outside the typical development and redevelopment processes. However, these residents bring with them their rich and diverse cultural and artistic expressions, which manifest in community agricultural projects, public art, and pop up-markets. Understanding the specific, and at times unique, characteristics of the city's governmental and real estate environment as well as the artistic and philanthropic landscape, is essential in evaluating the climate for placemaking projects.

## GOVERNANCE

Sitting in Ramsey County, Minnesota, St. Paul is the second most populous city in Minnesota and the state capitol. The city, along with Minneapolis, forms the core of the 16th largest metropolitan area in the United States. The City of St. Paul, in contrast to Minneapolis, is often referred to as a “strong-mayor city.” The Mayor of St. Paul serves as the chief executive and chief administrator, and the City Council serves as the legislative body. This gives the mayor the ability to quickly implement policy decisions and broad authority to appoint, and dismiss, department heads. In strong-mayor cities, the mayor and his appointed staff are often able to move quickly to address problems or to implement new initiatives, without requiring input or approval from the city council. That ability gives St. Paul the advantage of moving rapidly from a creative placemaking idea to implementation. Additionally, St. Paul is divided into 17 planning districts/community councils, which are given funds from the City of St. Paul to distribute throughout each district for efforts which can include placemaking and supporting the arts and culture projects. These districts also have a voice in land use and development decisions and seek to organize neighborhood residents who provide a voice for the arts, culture, and creative placemaking communities.

## VACANCY

While, anecdotally, residents claim St. Paul has a weaker housing market than Minneapolis's, St. Paul's housing market is relatively strong compared to other Midwestern cities, resulting in few city-owned

and tax-foreclosed properties. The median sale price for homes in April 2017 was \$187,000, significantly lower than Minneapolis's median sale price of over \$245,000, but still demonstrative of a healthy market. The overall residential housing market is predicted to raise 5% in 2017, largely due to the low inventory of homes on the market.

Despite this strong market, vacancy is a large enough concern for the city to enact a vacant building registry. This registry regulates vacant and unoccupied structures. Typically, properties vacant for over a year and/or with code violations, condemned, or otherwise in violation of the vacant building code must be registered with the city. Currently, this list includes 781 buildings citywide, of which 528 are single-family residential structures. Additionally, the City of St. Paul owns vacant homes and lots throughout the city, numbering over 500. These properties are typically acquired with an eye to future redevelopment opportunities, either through rehabilitation of vacant houses or new construction on vacant lots. The placemaking community should view these properties as an opportunity for future projects including artist work/live/sell spaces, public art installations, and cultural gathering spots.

St. Paul is located in Ramsey County, and like many county governments, Ramsey County holds two auctions each year to sell tax-foreclosed properties. Yet, unlike many counties in Midwestern cities, the number of tax foreclosures is low. For example, in 2016, only 41 St. Paul properties were included in the published Tax Sale lists, and in 2015, only 82 St. Paul properties were included in the published Tax Sale lists. But, this low level of tax foreclosure is not just a new phenomenon due to a strong housing market. Many cities struggle with how to absorb properties that go unsold at these tax foreclosure auctions. As such, many counties often have processes to sell properties that remain unsold following earlier tax foreclosure proceedings. Perhaps even more demonstrative of the relatively strong demand for properties, only four St. Paul properties from previous tax foreclosure auctions remain unsold and available for immediate sale through Ramsey County.

However, while the St. Paul housing market is relatively strong and abandonment and tax foreclosure rates are low, the vacant properties tend to be grouped in a few neighborhoods. Unfortunately, like many cities, these neighborhoods are often historically populated by people of color and new immigrants. St. Paul is no exception. One of the neighborhoods with the highest concentration of vacancy is the Frogtown Neighborhood (also known as Thomas Dale). St. Paul is roughly 56% white/non-Latino, 16% African-American, and 15% Asian. However, Frogtown is known as an enclave for many new immigrants, including a large majority of the city's Vietnamese and Hmong immigrants. Likewise, the North End Neighborhood, adjacent to Frogtown, has higher levels of vacancy and is home to many recent immigrants from Burma. The higher level of vacancy in the Frogtown and North End Neighborhood presents an opportunity for the arts and culture community to work with municipal government on placemaking projects to activate the spaces with public art projects, community centers, and farmers' markets. These vacant and abandoned lots and buildings can provide

much needed services including cultural gathering spaces and artist studios and retail outlets for the creative community.

Similar to challenges faced by Minneapolis, St. Paul is faced with increasing demand for housing and thus understandably needs to maximize its available land and chronically vacant housing stock to create housing opportunities to meet this demand. Yet, at the same time, many of these available properties are in areas with high concentrations of poverty or immigrant groups largely outside the typical development framework. And, it is here where artists and engaged neighborhood residents see an opportunity to transform vacant spaces not in demand for traditional housing development into spaces to connect residents to cultural and artistic expression.

## ARTISTIC, CULTURAL, AND NEIGHBORHOOD-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

St. Paul, like Minneapolis, has a rich history of active arts, culture, and neighborhood-based organizations. Benefiting from the strong milling industry of its past, the Twin Cities have a wealth of philanthropic foundations which have bolstered this history through the support of community-based theater, music, and art initiatives. Although many of these institutions are based in Minneapolis and not St. Paul, St. Paul benefits from the region's strong cultural assets and history. The strong support of the philanthropic community translates into not only strong cultural assets like the Minnesota Opera, the symphony and multiple theater and musical assets but also to support for neighborhood-based cultural activities. Art, theater, and music are alive in community centers, public art, and even in the methodology of various health and job training programs in the area. But, not only does the city have strong philanthropic and nonprofit artistic institutions, it also boasts an understanding of the value artists bring to a community. This understanding includes supporting organizations with the mission to formally train and cultivate artists and their work in social practice for community benefit, such as [Springboard for the Arts](https://springboardforthearts.org/about-us/principles-vision/), an organization that is committed to “creating communities and artists that have a reciprocal relationship, where artists are key contributors to community issues and are visible and valued for the impact they create.”<sup>3</sup> St. Paul, and the Twin Cities region, clearly values the arts and its culture and seeks to cultivate their impact in society.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://springboardforthearts.org/about-us/principles-vision/>

# BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN POLICYMAKERS AND PLACEMAKERS IN ST. PAUL: OPPORTUNITIES AND EXAMPLES

The City of St. Paul has many of the characteristics needed for successfully activating vacant properties through creative placemaking, including some of the infrastructure and technical assistance that often separates artistic and cultural voices from the formal municipal processes.

## CITY ARTIST POSITION

Over a decade ago, the McKnight Foundation made the strategic decision to support the City of St. Paul through the creation of the City Artist position. The program's success has allowed it to expand supporting two city artist positions in St. Paul. While funded through a philanthropic grant, the City Artists work from a city office, with a municipal phone number and e-mail address, and thus function as city employees. Today the City Artists function much like a City Planner or City Engineer. The Artists participate in project meetings and future planning meetings, ensuring an artistic mind, eye and voice is at the table for most city projects. In addition to adding a creative lens to community development and land use planning projects, the City Artists are given great leeway to undertake placemaking and creative projects, spending approximately 30% of their time on large-scale public art projects. These projects range from [urban flower fields](#) in vacant properties to sidewalk poetry.

Originally the City Artist position was envisioned as a rotating 18-month position. However, organizers quickly realized an artist with the ability to bridge relationships between city government employees and community partners and to learn various municipal decision-making structures deserves a permanent voice within municipal government. Thus, the position is now permanent. Additionally, a second position was added shortly after the original position's creation, as the demand and need for artist participation in community development and land use planning efforts demonstrated the value of

the position. Because of the success of the partnership, the City has maintained philanthropic funding and municipal support for the positions through changes in mayoral administrations.

## BUILDING BRIDGES



Embedding an artist in city government can bring an invaluable perspective to community development and land use planning decisions. Artists can serve as city ambassadors to neighborhoods and not only provide a conduit for the community's expression of culture and arts, but can also carry the municipality's message to residents.

One of the biggest benefits the City Artist position has brought to the City of St. Paul is simply a new perspective on typical city processes. For example, after attending a typical municipal public input session held at city hall, City Artist Amanda Lovelee noticed the small turnout and subsequently developed a plan to successfully reach more residents. A simple shift in time and location, to a nearby playground, and offering of free popsicles in exchange for public input on the project at hand, led to a dramatic increase in participation. 70% of attendees had never previously attended a public meeting.

The autonomy of the City Artists can be beneficial. Operating outside of typical government structures allows the artists to define their own projects and welcomes them to the table to work across all departments, thereby allowing the artists to bridge some of the barriers presented when municipal departments work in silos. And, this autonomy may allow the artists to exercise more creativity without the need to conform to a department's structure and goals.

From our interviews, it became apparent that without a dedicated funding stream, the artists' reach and impact is limited. We heard several suggestions for bringing additional recognition and funding to the program and ways to expand the City Artists' reach in the community. For example, when artists identify new projects they must have the ability to tap into existing city resources for funding or face the need to raise funds from outside sources. Actively seeking the national recognition the program warrants by publicizing its activities through trade journals, entering national arts competitions or partnering with university programs may lead to additional support for the City Artist positions and their projects. This support would allow the City Artists to focus more on their core work of integrating the arts into city government and activating public art projects. Additionally, the City Artists must navigate city government processes and bureaucracy on their own. Currently the City Artists are well



equipped to bring an artist perspective to city processes, but they could broaden their impact by bringing the city government perspective back to other artists. The artists would benefit from training in topics such as code enforcement, property tax foreclosure, drainage, and sanitation. By learning the municipal ins and outs of permitting, taxation, and land use planning, city artists can more effectively engage communities and provide much-needed transparency on how municipal decisions are made and how to most effectively navigate city systems when planning a creative placemaking project.

### BUILDING BRIDGES



City Artists should be well versed in city systems and processes and provide assistance to residents trying to navigate bureaucratic and opaque regulatory requirements to successfully launch creative placemaking projects. City artists can serve as a bridge the regulatory and creative.

Recognizing that municipal governments and personnel are already stretched and that the position is unique within St. Paul, one means of helping the position continue to grow and evolve may be to create a formal or informal network, facilitated by philanthropy or a national arts or policy organization, among city artists, or similar positions, across cities who have established this position. Each city would identify a “champion” within city government to work closely with the city’s artist position, and these champions and artists across various cities could form a network for idea sharing and capacity building.

Formalizing structure and networks in this way may feel limiting at first to artists accustomed to a high degree of flexibility. But, the goal of the structure will be to maintain the flexibility for the artists while equipping them to navigate city government systems, to gain access to resources to amplify their work, to translate these systems to other artists, and to direct their work to neighborhoods.

## LEASES AND LOT AVAILABILITY

How to activate vacant properties is a problem for many cities, especially when the activity is an artistic or cultural expression and, possibly, temporary. Even when a city realizes the potential benefits of

activating vacant spaces for quality of life in its neighborhoods, the hesitancy to sell properties for interim uses and the difficulties of working out a lease often stop conversations from continuing.

Unlike many cities, the City of St Paul has clear policies in place for short-term use leases (up to 30 days) and for [garden leases](#) lasting for a full growing season. Having these leases in place offers clear guidelines to community residents and artists who may wish to activate city-owned vacant properties. These leases outline the various insurance requirements necessary for a lease, the term of the lease, and eligible activities.

The existence of a lease program opens the door to creative use. Having a lease program in place will allow the city to continue to refine and update these leases in order to adapt to the creative ideas put forward by the community while ensuring city priorities—such as insurance and maintenance standards—remain up-to-date. Likewise, making sure residents and communities are aware of the vacant properties in their neighborhoods and how to access these leases is a key component of their usage. St. Paul already has these leases easily accessible on their website and, in our interviews, engaged community residents seemed familiar with the process.

The City does post a list of houses and vacant buildings eligible for sale, but the list of vacant lots is either not available or extremely difficult to locate. Presumably, the City prefers to tap into development opportunity by strategically grouping and releasing properties for development proposals at particularly opportune moments. However, this may also prevent artists or others from utilizing the lease program and unintentionally limit the creative efforts that could both create neighborhood vibrancy and identity while spurring development. The city could consider a listening tour to gain perspective from neighborhood leaders about the need for access to these properties for creative placemaking projects, artist housing, or exhibition space.

Likewise, some permitting requirements may prevent some artists from taking advantage of the lease program to enact creative placemaking projects. The City Artists may be a resource to navigate this system and provide technical support to ensure artists are provided every opportunity to develop successful projects. One way in which the City Artists may be helpful is by holding community meetings to present information on what properties are available and how to access them for placemaking projects, or purchase them for permanent uses.

## BUILDING BRIDGES



Disposition strategies for municipal-owned lots and structures should take into consideration the need for neighborhood artistic and cultural expression. Include voices from the creative community in land use decisions and develop strategies to ensure placemakers have affordable access to municipal owned property.

## SHORT-TERM VS. LONG-TERM USE TENSION

The tension between short-term use and long-term use is one every city confronts, and St. Paul is no different. The desire for the highest and best use for a property is understandable, especially since city and county governments must continually look to the economic health of their areas and the need to maximize property tax returns. The desire by the municipality to maximize direct financial return on investments made on vacant land, such as maximizing property taxes, is often in conflict with a neighborhood's desire to see short and long-term creative uses on vacant land. Often, placemaking projects are highly beneficial to the vitality—economic and otherwise—of the neighborhood and its residents but the vacant property may be seen only as a potential direct income source for the municipality. Decisions on the best use of vacant land must balance the need for artistic and cultural expressions within the community with the immediate financial needs of the municipality.

St. Paul's current policy is to sell land only for housing redevelopment. The city offers an annual lease for gardens and other greening improvements, restricting permanent non-housing improvements. This places neighborhood-based groups and arts and culture groups in a difficult position. It is challenging to cultivate soil for a garden and takes several years to produce ideal conditions. Knowing an annual lease may not be renewed may prevent some groups from mobilizing to activate a space. Likewise, the annual lease puts city government employees in a difficult position. Some groups have assumed the annual risks of not having a lease renewed and leased a vacant lot for years. When a viable development emerges, city employees must have difficult conversations with neighbors and residents who have cared for the land, sometimes for a long period of time.

Additionally, projects such as the Urban Flower Field were designed as a temporary use but may have become “permanent” in the minds of both policy-makers, who are pressed for resources to fully develop the park, and for residents, who grow attached to the current design and use of the space. Having an open dialogue with community groups, residents, and the creative placemaking community to gain an understanding of needs is recommended. The input can be used to develop a transparent policy for short- and long-term lease strategies for particular properties which will alleviate some of this tension.

## CITY AND COUNTY DIFFERENCES IN PROPERTY DISPOSITION

Like many cities across the country, the City of St. Paul and Ramsey County utilize different policies and procedures for the disposition of property. Like most counties, Ramsey County operates the county Tax Sale, designed to dispose of tax-foreclosed properties and recoup lost property tax revenue. The City of St. Paul disposes properties for new development, typically residential development, and offers short-term and garden leases for interim uses, as discussed earlier in this report. The City’s process to sell properties is typically restricted to new housing development, whether new construction or rehabilitation, and is conducted through a Request For Proposals (RFP) process. These distinctive processes across the city and the county can cause confusion for residents, neighborhood-based groups, and other interested buyers seeking to access these properties, especially when the process of identifying whether a property is owned by the city or county can be difficult to navigate. This multifaceted approach to accessing properties is especially daunting to neighborhood-based arts and culture institutions that are untrained in the nuance of property disposition by the City/County, which can stifle creative placemaking projects.

### BUILDING BRIDGES



Take into consideration the need for *long-term* access to municipal-owned lots for creative uses and develop policies to support community needs.

Likewise, in a relatively strong housing market like St. Paul, these distinct systems run the risk of further limiting the work of the arts and culture community to enact both short-term and long-term placemaking activities. When limited properties are available, different processes for disposition and usage can seem arbitrary to the average resident or artist looking to navigate the system. Not only must residents and neighborhood groups become adept at figuring out which unit of government controls a property, they must also familiarize themselves with the various processes to acquire the properties—only to discover purchase is not an option for city-owned lots without a housing development plan and leasing is not an option for county-controlled lots. These discrepancies and challenge will deter many from considering activating these spaces and perhaps limit the vitality these creative placemaking efforts could bring to a neighborhood. However, the confusion over how to access properties for creative placemaking efforts could be an opportunity for the creative community to work with the City Artists to develop new policies which support and encourage placemaking projects and by providing access to municipal properties through long-term leases or ownership at discounted rates.

## SPRINGBOARD FOR THE ARTS

One of the most impactful reasons to incorporate artistic and cultural, as well as neighborhood organization and resident, voices in the activation of vacant properties is that these fresh perspectives may see problems and solutions differently than those typically working on these issues. Yet, these stakeholders may lack experience navigating complex formal systems of administering municipal government. Thus, without the proper training and assistance, an artist can easily grow frustrated and abandon an idea or worse, launch an idea that lacks neighborhood or municipal support.

In St. Paul, the city benefits from a nonprofit organization whose mission is to alleviate some of these tensions. [Springboard for the Arts](#)' mission is to cultivate vibrant communities by connecting artists with the skills, information, and services they need to make a living and a life. This organization, funded through a mix of foundation as well as state and federal support, connects artists, in St. Paul and Minneapolis, to economic opportunities and provides them with the training they need to actively engage with communities and spaces.

In addition to providing professional development and training artists about topics ranging from fiscal sponsorship to health care, Springboard for the Arts works with communities to understand artists and their work as valuable neighborhood assets. Springboard for the Arts trains artists to use their skills in different ways to address neighborhood concerns. As a result, they have launched projects such as [Ready Go](#), mobile art-for-hire for events and trainings to both start conversations about needed community services and to solicit feedback on current projects and their long-term viability. Each Ready Go project



is designed to be mobile, participatory, attract people, and built to prompt interaction. Examples of Ready Go tools ready for deployment to vacant spaces include a kitchen school, with a program around wellness, a mobile sign shop, where residents can create their own wooden signs, and even a temporary table tennis trailer for pop-up games of ping-pong.

### BUILDING BRIDGES



Being an artist is more than just creating art. It requires skills such as scaling production of products, marketing and sales, and community outreach and participation. Providing access to skills development classes and a “community connector” such as Springboard for the Arts is a powerful means of supporting the health and longevity of neighborhood-based creative placemaking projects.

## CONCLUSION

St. Paul is a city that instills pride in its residents and values the creative responses its residents bring. The supportive philanthropic community, St. Paul’s unique City Artist position, and the position’s longevity across several mayoral administrations, are evidence of the city’s embrace of the arts and the unique voice artists bring to problem solving and planning. Additionally, the city encourages use of vacant properties through its lease program, albeit for short-term uses. And, the artists in St. Paul, and the broader Twin Cities region, benefit from the work of Springboard for the Arts, which well equips and prepares artists and neighborhoods for place-based artistic projects.

Yet, there are opportunities to build on the city’s strengths. One way to do this is by further defining goals and priorities for short-term and long-term use strategies for vacant properties. Clarity around short-term and long-term use strategies may lead to further refining the city and county’s disposition policies and the development of one-stop permitting or making vacant lot availability more widely known to arts and neighborhood organizations.

But perhaps most significantly, the City Artist position has untapped potential. Providing this position with support and infrastructure, along with additional training in city policies, would capitalize on this unique position and its ability to positively influence the city. The position is poised to be a “translator” between the bureaucracy of city government and the artistic community. And, given the city’s philanthropic and creative strengths, supporting this position may result in new resources for projects or even administration of this work.

St. Paul has many of the pieces needed to successfully capture the energy and drive of its artists to positively impact community development practices and support equitable development. Many of its practices are examples from which other cities can learn. With some minor adjustments, the city’s already impressive infrastructure is poised for even broader positive impact.