

# University UNITED

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## **An Open Letter to the Community**

Stuart Alger, Board Chair  
July 31, 2012

University UNITED is reinventing the way it provides services to the community that it has served for over thirty-five years. Budgetary constraints and a challenging fundraising environment demand that we place greater reliance upon earned income. I am writing to give you a look at how we envision the new University UNITED. We welcome your feedback.

### **Where We Have Been**

For over thirty-five years University UNITED has anticipated critical issues affecting University Avenue and its neighboring communities and has positioned itself to meet those challenges. Whether it was promoting safe streets, providing opportunities for new Asian immigrant businesses, strengthening the manufacturing base in the Midway, planning for transit oriented development, or promoting environmental policies, University UNITED's foresight helped prepare the community for the future.

UNITED organized the first comprehensive planning study for University Avenue in 1988. One of its key recommendations was that housing should be built along the corridor - a concept that was widely considered unrealistic.

In the early 1990s, UNITED mobilized the community to support the new Asian immigrants to University Avenue. It organized the Asian Business Association and developed the first Asian-themed retail mall at University and Western Avenues.

UNITED advocated for the principles of transit-oriented development (TOD) - even before that term was coined. In 2004 UNITED created the "Uni" Annual Awards program to honor the high quality TOD projects that were being built along the corridor. It was also instrumental in organizing the first station-area planning efforts and drafted and advocated for revisions to the land use and zoning code.

UNITED may be best known for its controversial positions opposing suburban style big box development. In 2001, it successfully opposed a Home Depot store at Lexington and University, and several years later it again fought against splitting up the same 8 acre site for development. While it wasn't always successful, UNITED can take enormous credit for raising the bar on development expectations. Today, Wilder Center sits on that

Lexington site with 300 jobs, as well as a senior housing complex, and a two story TCF bank.

To help prepare the community for light rail, UNITED created **U-PLAN**, a program that provided maps, architectural graphics and data analysis to hundreds of community organizations, business groups, and small business owners. Located in a storefront at Prior and University, it was initially staffed by students and working professionals who volunteered their technical skills, but as it demonstrated its value, funding was secured for full time employees. Over the years, U-PLAN helped train a cadre of very talented and committed people who went on to successful careers around the country in city planning, the Met Council, state agencies, and the private sector.

University UNITED has helped to create and adapt organizational structures to meet the changing needs of the community. If UNITED saw a particular need that was not being met, it would sometimes serve as a catalyst and would set up ad-hoc working groups or even other independent organizations. In the 1980s, it convened a broad-based group to undertake a Business Retention and Expansion Program for the industrial Midway. It created and staffed the Asian Business Association, and a decade later, it organized and staffed the University Avenue Business Association. In 2005, it organized a coalition of neighborhood groups, now known as the District Councils Collaborative, to better prepare residents for the light rail project.

UNITED's own organizational structure was unique. Established in the 1970s, it evolved over time as a coalition of a dozen community groups and representatives from the business community. Several years ago UNITED revised its board structure to support its work helping property owners at key nodes on University Avenue collaborate to achieve more intensive and efficient development in connection with anticipated light rail.

UNITED is adapting again, now with a focus on generating good-paying manufacturing jobs in a way that is consistent with the values of the communities that UNITED has always served.

### **Going Forward**

The pioneering and innovative legacy of University UNITED gives confidence for the future. Our organization has recently focused on strengthening the manufacturing sector with the goal of increasing the number of living wage jobs. This, we believe, is one of the most pressing needs of our time, and we are committed to meeting the challenge. We have added Board members who are 'makers' of products, who can provide first-hand insights into the challenges of production.

We are also changing the way our organization is funded. Of economic necessity we are moving away from dependency on foundation grants towards a more entrepreneurial model which will generate fees for services and revenues from development projects. We have downsized our office as we shift to this more self-sustaining and entrepreneurial

organization. For the interim period, we will operate mainly with volunteer staff and Board members, as it was in the early years of the organization. Given the considerable success of those early efforts we are confident that UNITED can continue to play an important role in the community. The following are several specific steps we are taking:

**U-PLAN** University UNITED has entered into a joint venture agreement with the Asian Economic Development Association (AEDA), to house the technical equipment of U-PLAN at its offices at 379 University Ave W, Suite 213, Saint Paul. By keeping all the equipment and software together, this will continue to be an important resource for the community. University UNITED and AEDA will be jointly applying for funding to help train a new cadre of skilled GIS technicians who can carry on this important work.

**Supporting Manufacturing** University UNITED will continue to work on promoting manufacturing and living wage jobs. We are in the early stages of organizing an Industrial Business Improvement District, bringing together property owners in the industrial Midway into a new, independent, organization that will promote the needs of the industrial sector.

University UNITED is also envisioning acting as a nonprofit developer of industrial buildings to provide affordable and stable work spaces for small manufacturers. UNITED has partnered with the St. Anthony Park Community Council and Sparc, and with funding from the Saint Paul Foundation and the Central Corridor Funders Collaborative, is completing a feasibility study to determine whether it is possible to replicate the “Greenpoint model” in the Twin Cities. The Greenpoint Manufacturing and Design Center ([www.gmdconline.org](http://www.gmdconline.org)), based in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, has successfully developed six industrial projects. Their CEO, Brian Coleman, is the lead consultant for the St. Paul study, joined by market research experts at Stantec, Inc., and the architectural firm of Lunning Wende.

This feasibility study, including financial pro-formas, will be completed by September, 2012. Based upon work to date, one or more specific projects will be identified as suitable candidates for development. University UNITED would act as developer of the project, either independently or with partners. Executive Director Brian McMahon has considerable development experience in his native New York City, and even played a role in establishing the Greenpoint Manufacturing and Design Center in the 1980s. Brian is a trained architect and licensed real estate broker, and will lead the efforts for UNITED. A portfolio of several of his projects is posted at [www.universityunited.com](http://www.universityunited.com).

Given that Brian McMahon is a licensed real estate broker in Minnesota, we are also exploring the possibility that University UNITED could work with Brian to provide brokerage services as a means of generating fees.

As we make plans for the next phase of UNITED’s work, we recognize the challenges ahead for both our community and our organization. We look forward to the important cause of helping create living wage jobs. And we believe that our new entrepreneurial

model is the right organizational structure for our time. Please let us know what you think. I can be reached at (612) 961-5334.

Thank you for your consideration,

**Stuart Alger**

Board Chair