

November 22, 2024

Neighborhood Context Report

FORMER SOUTH ST. PAUL PUBLIC LIBRARY

106 3rd Avenue North

South Saint Paul, Minnesota

Prepared for | City of South St. Paul



Neighborhood Context

To better identify the reuse potential of the former South St. Paul Library (former library), it's essential to understand the existing conditions and neighborhood context. The analysis involved examining the current conditions of the site, street, and surrounding neighborhood, as well as reviewing policy documents such as the zoning code, comprehensive plan and relevant plans related to the former library site and building. This comprehensive review will help unveil issues, opportunities, and considerations that can serve as a foundation for exploring the future adaptive reuse of the former library.

SITE CONDITIONS

The former library is currently owned by the City of St. Paul, situated on a corner lot at the cross streets of 3rd Avenue and Marie Avenue. The lot is approximately 0.47 acres or 20,477 sq ft; with a building coverage of approximately 58%. It is a prominent and historic marker of South St. Paul's Concord/Grand gateway when you reach the top of the hill.

ZONING & LAND USES

The former library property is currently vacant as a result of the relocation to the new library facility in December 2023. The existing land use map identifies the property as institutional, the same as City Hall and Lawshe Memorial Museum. The Comprehensive Plan's future land use map was recently amended to change the former library property's future land use from public to mixed-use. The current zoning classification is C-1, Retail Business District. The current zoning requirements may increase the complexity of potential reuse options since there are a number of C-1 uses that require a conditional use permit (CUP). These uses include apartment houses with 12 units or less, amusement or entertainment, craft production, on-sale and off-sale liquor establishments, funeral homes/mortuaries, and day care facilities. The CUP process can cause time and financial constraints where there may be even further development conditions determined by the City Council that could make a project unfeasible.

Existing Land Use Map



Current Zoning Map



Future Land Use Map



According to the current zoning map, properties near the former library are also currently zoned as C-1, including the Lawshe Memorial Museum to the north and City Hall to the west. Other surrounding properties are zoned as R-4, Multifamily Residential District, including the Nan McKay senior housing building owned and operated by the South St. Paul HRA directly to the east and Wakota on 4th Condominiums. The remainder of the surrounding blocks are primarily zoned R-2-, Single- and Two-Family Residence District and R-3, General Residence District which encompasses single- and two-family residences and low-rise apartments to the south and west. The broader context of the neighborhood is considered part of the city center which consists of a broad mix of residential, commercial and public uses. Within a quarter mile of the former library site are the following notable neighborhood features and amenities as noted in the 2040 Comprehensive Plan:

- » The well-established Southview Hill neighborhood, which features a mix of small-apartments, single and two-family residences;
- » A neighborhood commercial corridor, consisting of small business retail and personal services;
- » Two senior high-rise apartments – Nan McKay and John Carroll
- » Dakota County Historical Society and Museum;
- » School District Administration Offices;
- » Six religious institutions;
- » Four parks including Grandview and Lawshe Park;
- » The local high school;
- » The new (2024) Kaposia Library; and
- » A community center.

Building Occupancy Along the 3rd Avenue and Marie Avenue Corridors

The primary context for the former library site in terms of building occupancy is the 3rd Avenue and Marie Avenue corridors. Grand Avenue is the prominent gateway “up the hill” that turns into 3rd Avenue where the former library sits at the intersection with Marie Avenue. It has long been the city’s civic core with the City Hall, police, fire, library, Lawshe Park, and historical society/museum. Marie Avenue functions as a neighborhood corridor with a mix of business, public, quasi-public, and residential uses, particularly from 3rd Avenue to 8th Avenue. Most of the Marie Avenue corridor continues to have a traditional pedestrian-scale commercial character, with nonresidential buildings positioned along the sidewalks. Two exceptions are the SSP School District’s offices that operate out of a redeveloped former grocery store building, which is setback from the sidewalk and is surrounded by surface parking areas on all sides, and an adjacent auto service business that is setback from the street to the northeast.

The table below shows the mix of businesses along the Marie Avenue neighborhood corridor in terms of number of businesses and lot square footage. While Marie Avenue is just a snapshot of this commercial corridor, it is representative of the current character and market activity of the area proximate to the former library. From a space perspective, the corridor consists of more offices, healthcare, and funeral services (71%) than retail and restaurants (15%). Lot square footages have been estimated per business to provide a sense of square footage needs by business type, including the building footprint and parking areas, in the table below. This data was derived from Dakota County GIS, which has finished square footages for buildings, however the data is incomplete across the lots along the Marie Avenue corridor and therefore has been omitted from this analysis.

MARIE AVENUE BUSINESS TYPES	NUMBER OF BUSINESSES/STOREFRONTS	TOTAL LOT SQUARE FOOTAGE	% OF TOTAL SQ. FT.	SQ. FT. PER BUSINESS
Offices	1	56,386	30.2%	56,386
Funeral Services	2	43,217	23.1%	21,609
Healthcare/Social Services*	5	33,542	17.9%	6,708
Restaurants	2	13,868	7.4%	6,934
Retail Stores	3	13,752	7.4%	4,584
Auto Services	1	13,198	7.1%	13,198
Personal Services / Salons	5	10,901	5.8%	2,180
Vacant	1	2,040	3.2%	2,040
Total	20	145,596	100.0%	9,345

* Includes dental clinics, mental health treatment services, disability services

This information provides an indication of the types of businesses that are currently drawn to the neighborhood which may be relevant to potential reuses of the former library building. The area per business provides an indication of space needs for different uses in relation to the former library's lot area of 20,477 square feet and building area of 11,840 square feet.

The Marie Avenue corridor currently has one vacant storefront and another store soon closing down; B & G Crossing which was a long-time business on the corridor. This has been a trend along this corridor, which has experienced frequent turnover in recent years, particularly with retail. have experienced frequent turnover of businesses, particularly retail, in recent years.

B&G Crossing (601 Marie Avenue)



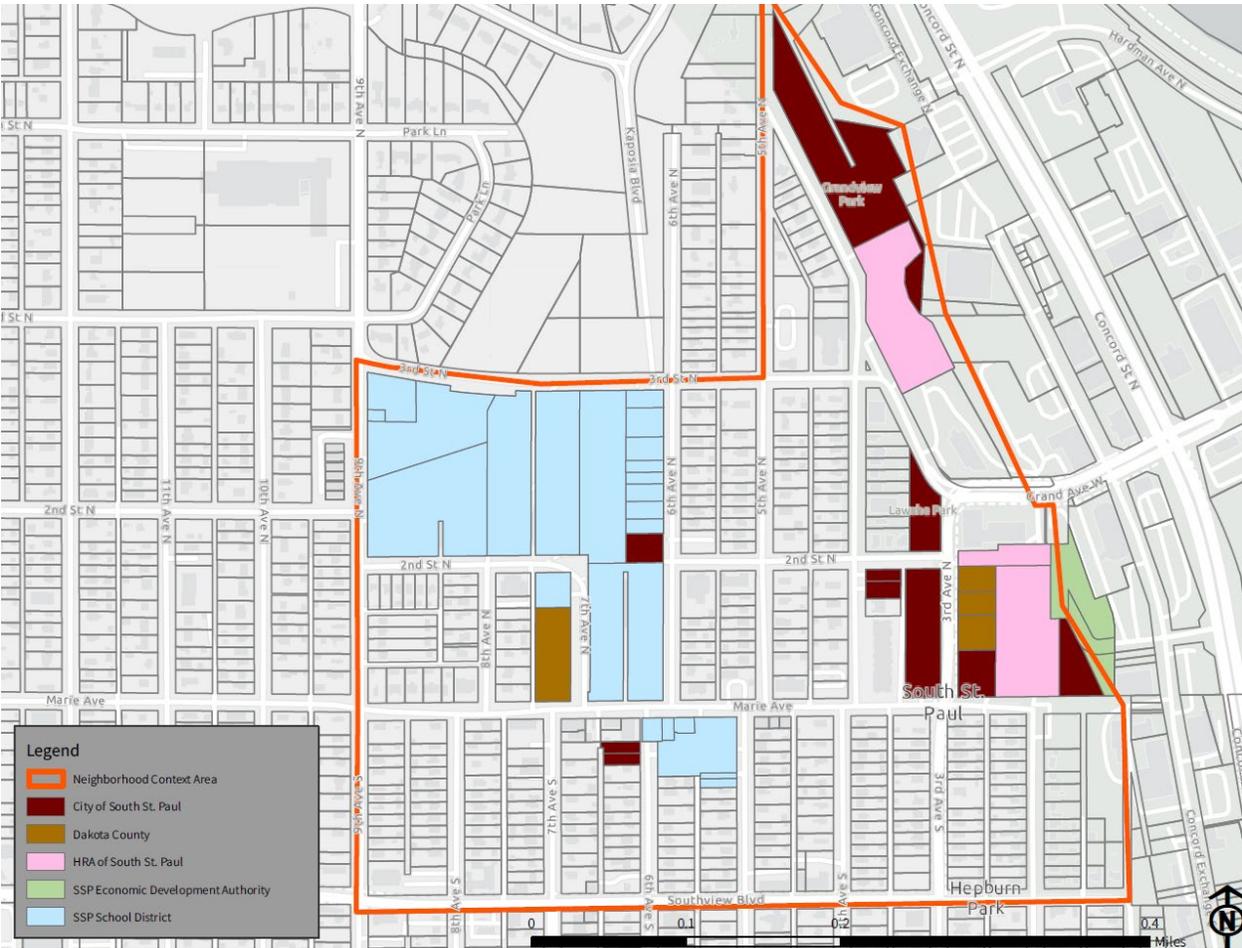
Hilltop International Cuisine (417 Marie Avenue)



NEIGHBORHOOD PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS & PROPERTY OWNERSHIP

The neighborhood contains a significant number of publicly owned properties, which is to be expected in the city's civic core. In addition to the City Hall, the former South St. Paul library, the recently constructed Kaposia library, Lawshe Park, and the Lawshe Memorial Museum, the neighborhood is home to the SSP District's high school, middle school, district offices, and Central Square Community Center. Adjacent to the former library site is the Nan McKay Building, which is senior-focused public housing owned by the South St. Paul HRA. This level of public uses and destinations clustered in one neighborhood could provide opportunities for the former library's reuse in terms of complimentary public uses and partnerships between public entities, including the City of South St. Paul, Dakota County, and the SSP School District.

Public Property Owners Map



Mississippi River Corridor Critical Area (MRCCA) Overlay

South St. Paul’s municipal boundary includes approximately 5.8 miles of the Mississippi River. The city’s physical character is dominated by the natural landscape of the river’s bluffs and ravines. These natural features catalyzed the city’s economy during the early 20th century, with river-related industrialization driving population growth. Large stockyards and meatpacking plants benefitted from proximity to the Mississippi River, which spurred expansion of residential and commercial development into and above the bluffs. While South St. Paul’s history and development were closely tied to its unique topography, there were not many development regulations related to environmental protections until the 1970s. Since then, there has been increased awareness of the impact of development on environmentally sensitive areas, such as shorelines, bluffs, and steep slopes. These environmental impacts have increased environmental regulations through the Mississippi River Corridor Critical Area (MRCCA) program and oversight by other governmental agencies such as the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), highlighting the need for careful planning and land management around these environmentally sensitive areas.

One of the former library’s many unique features is its location near the bluff line. This environmentally sensitive site is a significant consideration for the future reuse. Located at the top of the bluff, the site is within the Mississippi River Corridor Critical Area (MRCCA) boundary (denoted by a thick blue line on the current zoning map), which triggers additional zoning regulations and development review. While previous development in the city has already significantly disturbed the bluff areas within MRCCA boundaries, the updated 2020 MRCCA rules are designed to prevent any further negative development impacts on the bluff.

Current Zoning Map



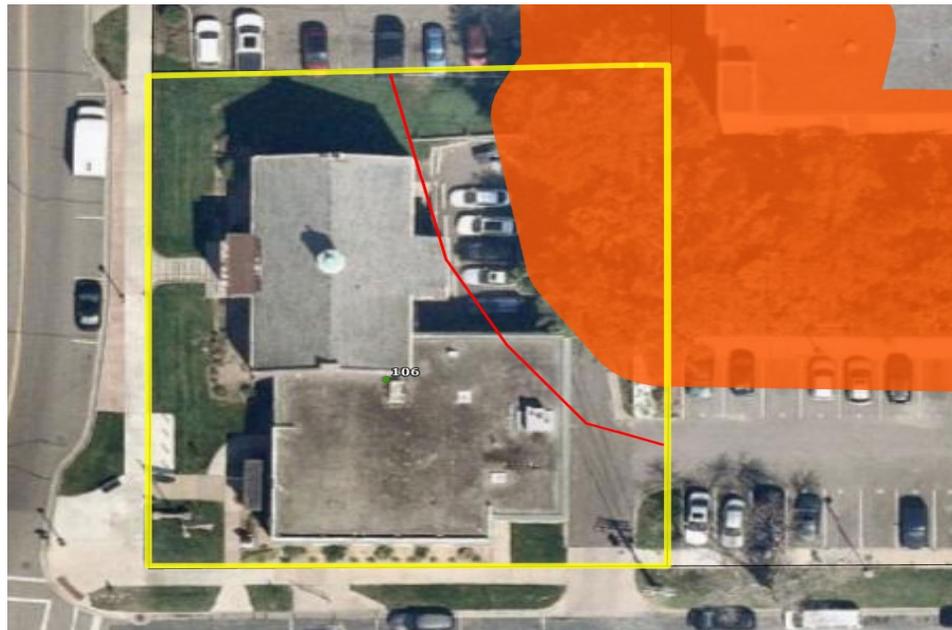
The MRCCA regulations have been adopted into the City’s zoning code as an overlay district to the city’s base zoning districts. The zoning code contains four sub-districts, as defined by MRCCA, based on the natural and built character of each area of the river corridor. The former library site is designated within the CA-SR (Separated from the River) District, which encompasses properties that are both physically and visually distant from the Mississippi River. This district aims to provide flexibility in managing development while avoiding negative impacts on key resources and features of the river corridor. These key resources and features are considered Primary Conservation Areas (PCAs) and are given priority for protection. At this site, the only PCA is the bluff and the bluff impact zone. The bluff impact zone is defined as the area encompassing the bluff, as well as the land within 20 feet of the top and bottom. There is also a setback defined that is 40ft back from the top of the bluff. The original 1927 building and the 1964 addition appear to be narrowly outside of the bluff impact zone but portions of both structures appear to fall just within the 40-foot top-of-bluff setback.

Several maps detail the location of the MRCCA regulations and the bluff impact zone in relation to the former library site. These maps should not be considered a formal representation of the exact location of the bluff and the bluff impact zone. Any future or proposed development of the former library site may require a licensed surveyor to prepare a bluff determination on the property.

Primary Conservation Area Map



Bluff Impact Zone (Orange) & Approximate 40ft Bluff Setback Line (Red)



MRCCA's development regulations for the site also include building height, setbacks, and structure placement. In the CA-SR district, the maximum allowable height is determined by the underlying zoning district, provided it is consistent with the mature tree line and surrounding development. The former library site's underlying zoning district is C-1, which means the maximum allowable building height is 3 stories or 38 feet. However, institutional uses in C-1 can exceed this height with a conditional use permit.

The two main MRCCA setback and structure placement requirements that impact this site are the bluff impact zone and the 40-foot setback from the top of the bluff. Structures and impervious surfaces cannot be constructed within the bluff impact zone or within 40 feet of the top of the bluff. As a result, the former library is a legally non-conforming structure within the bluff impact zone and can only be expanded laterally, provided the expansion does not extend into the bluff impact zone or further into the required setback than where the existing structure currently is. There may be some flexibility to construct additional retaining walls or replace the existing one on the east portion of the site which appears to be in the bluff impact zone, but this work would be subject to a land alteration permit and additional regulations.

Additionally, MRCCA regulates landscaping or vegetation removal, and expressly prohibits clear cutting. This means that there are trees between the former library site and the Nan McKay Building that can be selectively removed if they are dead, but the area cannot be clear cut.

Historic properties, including those on the National Historic Registry, are exempt from certain MRCCA standards, but these exemptions do not apply to additions or site alterations. At this time, the former library site is not designated as a historic landmark or on the National Register of Historic Places.

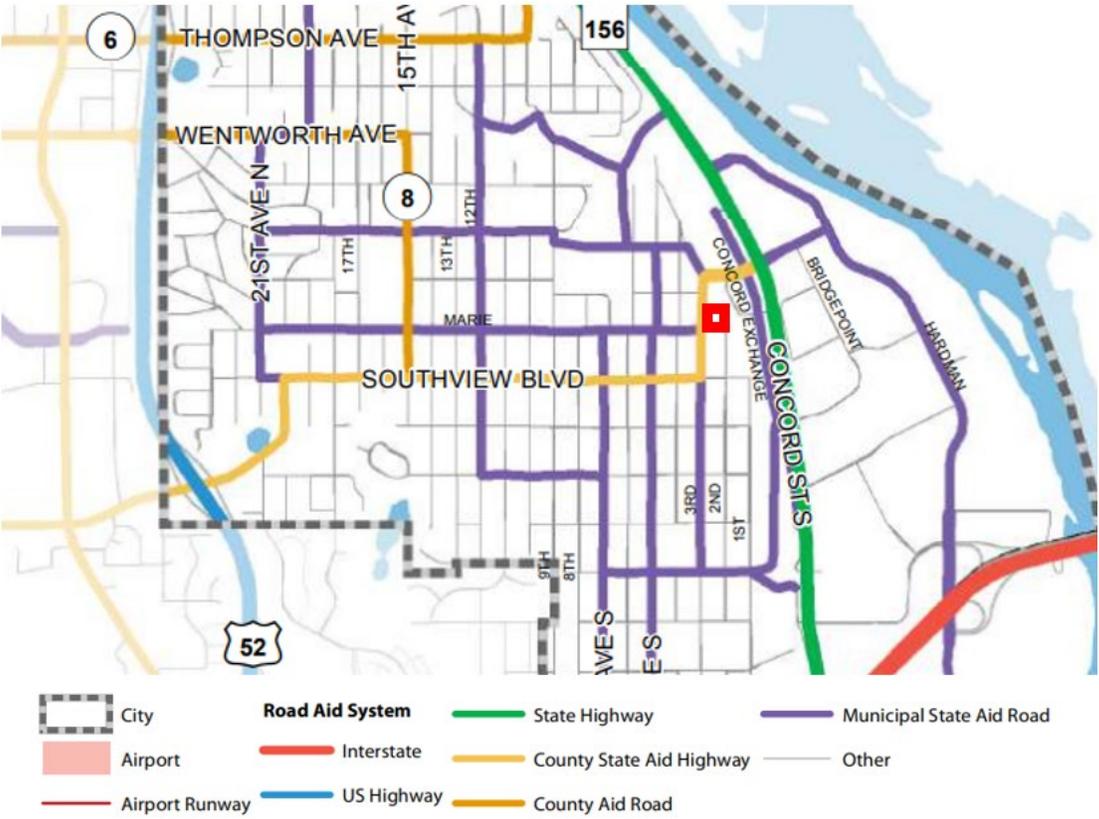
While the MRCCA development regulations may seem daunting, there are still opportunities that should be considered within the neighborhood context and future reuse of the building. The vista views from above the bluff are valuable, and could be a significant asset for the potential reuse and marketing. Recent development projects, such as The Yards and The Backyards, have successfully created rooftop amenities that take advantage of such views, which have been well-received by the community. Thoughtful consideration of MRCCA development standards will be crucial in exploring future reuse opportunities.

Existing Street & Parking Conditions

EXISTING STREET CONDITIONS

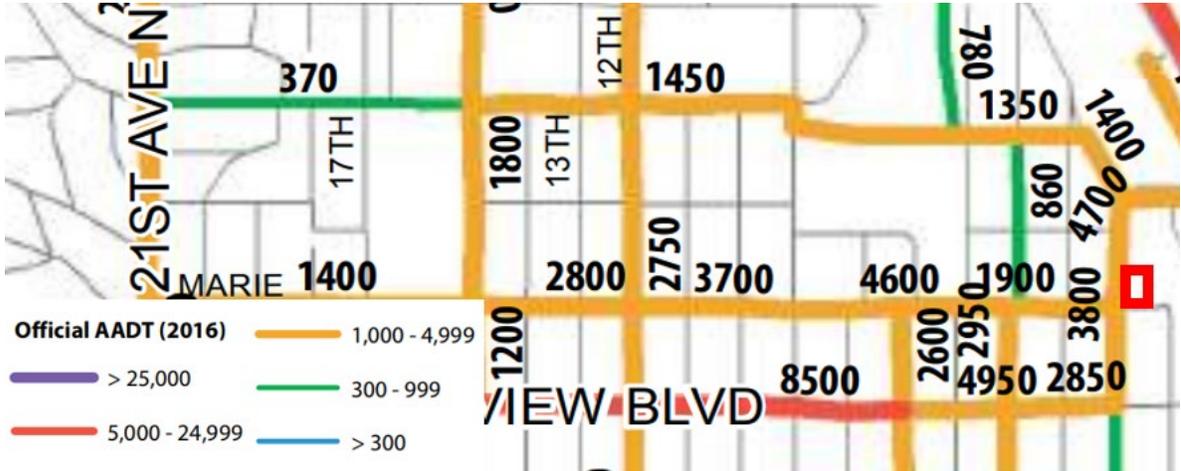
The segment of 3rd Avenue passing the former library is classified as a Major Collector in the city's street network. In conjunction with Southview Blvd to the west and Grand Avenue to the north and east, this Major Collector provides a significant east-west connection between Concord St/CR 156 and State Hwy 52 as well as the heart of the "up the hill" area of South St. Paul. 3rd Avenue is also a County State Aid Highway (CSAH 14) under Dakota County jurisdiction. Marie Avenue, west of 3rd Avenue, is a Municipal State Aid (MSA) road under the City's jurisdiction. The one block segment of Marie Avenue east of 3rd Avenue is also under the City's jurisdiction but not an MSA road.

Road Aid System Map



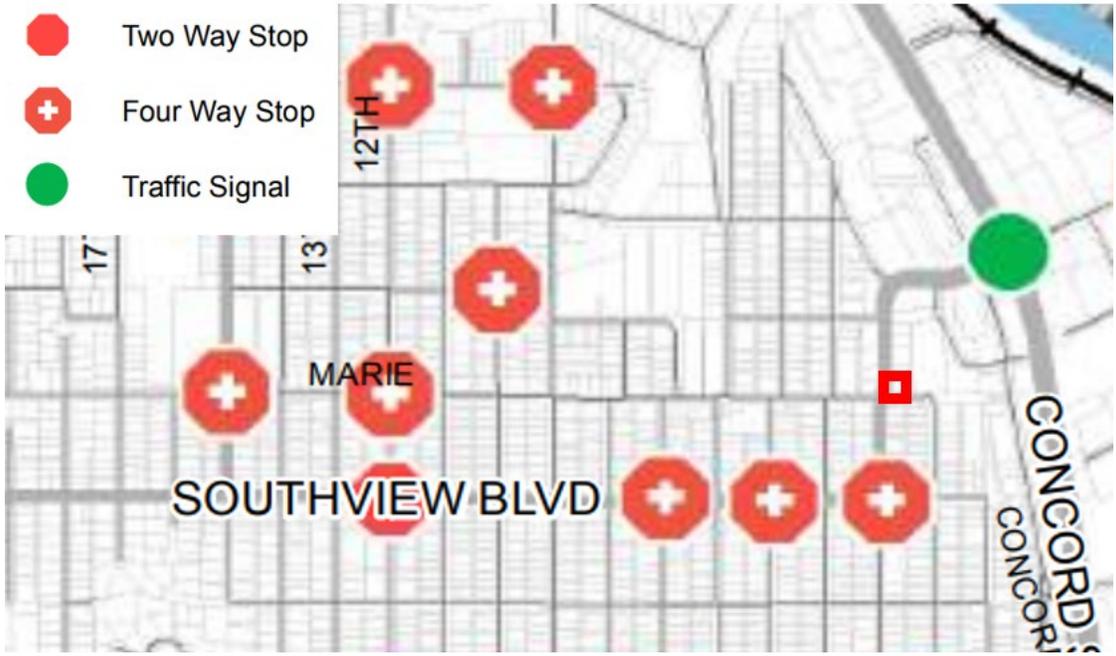
As a Major Collector, 3rd Avenue is one of the highest traffic streets “up the hill”. Southview Boulevard has the highest traffic volume with 3rd Avenue and Marie Avenue having about half the traffic volume of Southview Boulevard. The design of Major Collector roads emphasizes mobility over land access, meaning less driveway accesses to reduce impacts to the flow of traffic. To support the emphasis on traffic flow, 3rd Avenue is a through street at Marie Avenue. While Marie Avenue has stop signs at this intersection, 3rd Avenue does not have traffic controls at this intersection.

2016 Traffic Volumes Map



AADT (Annual Average Daily Traffic)

Controlled Intersections Map



Since 3rd Avenue passes through the city’s civic core, the pedestrian environment is a priority for the city. The streetscape is designed to enhance pedestrian safety and comfort, with sidewalks on both sides of the street and a buffer that provides distance from vehicle traffic. Some portions of the buffer are planted with trees and landscaping, while others feature colorful hardscape. The streetscape also includes pedestrian-scale light fixtures, benches, and trash receptacles.

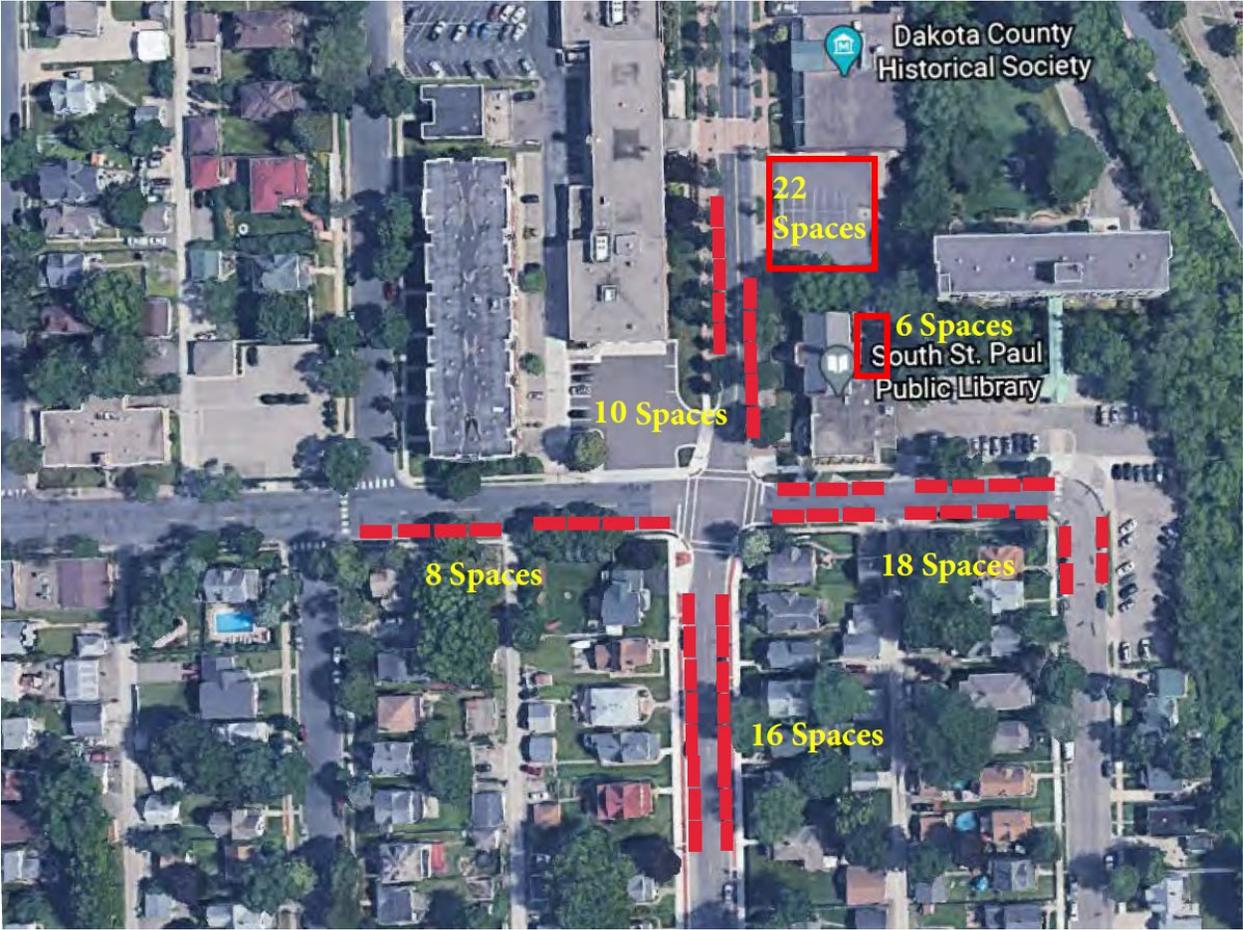
For pedestrian crossings of 3rd Avenue at the Marie Avenue intersection, there are crosswalks with pavement markings and pedestrian crossing signage on each corner. In addition, there is a mid-block pedestrian crossing between City Hall and the historical society/museum, which also has pavement markings and pedestrian crossing signage. Since the former library site is located on the opposite side of 3rd Avenue from the Marie Avenue neighborhood corridor and City Hall, as well as some of the street parking options, providing safe and comfortable pedestrian street crossings is an important element for the reuse of the former library building. Some considerations for improving the pedestrian street crossings are; changing the 3rd Avenue & Marie Avenue intersection to a controlled intersection, more visible pavement markings, pedestrian-activated flashing lights at crosswalks, and raised crosswalks.

EXISTING PARKING CONDITIONS

The former library site currently has six on-site parking spaces behind the building, which are accessed by a driveway on Marie Avenue. This driveway is located on the former library parcel but is shared with the parcel to the east, which has an adjacent surface parking lot that is used by the public housing building residents and is owned by the South St. Paul HRA. In addition, there is a surface parking lot with 22 parking spaces north of the former library site that is owned by the County. While this parking lot was available for shared parking between the historical society/museum and city hall staff, it was also used by library visitors.

On-street parking spaces are located on both 3rd Avenue and Marie Avenue. Marie Avenue, west of 3rd Avenue, is planned to be reconstructed in 2025 with on-street parking removed from the north side. Some parking spaces are marked while others are not. Since the reuse of the former library will rely on on-street parking, it would be beneficial to clearly mark on-street parking spaces with pavement marking and signage. The table below is a summary of the number of on-street parking spaces within 350 feet of the former library site.

Potential Parking Spaces



STREET SEGMENT	ON-STREET PARKING SPACES
3 rd Avenue, north of Marie Avenue	10 marked spaces
3 rd Avenue, south of Marie Avenue	16 unmarked spaces
Marie Avenue, east of 3 rd Avenue	3 marked spaces, 15 unmarked spaces
Marie Avenue, west of 3 rd Avenue	8 unmarked spaces
Estimated Total	52 on-street parking spaces

The city amended the zoning code in 2024 to reduce the minimum off-street parking space requirements. Section 118-352 details the modified parking requirements for existing commercial buildings. In short:

- » If the future use of the library is a permitted use, there is no minimum parking requirement.
- » If the future use of the library is a conditional use, the amount of parking that is required may be determined (approved) by the City Council. If the use requires a CUP for on-sale liquor, the use will be treated like a restaurant (which is a permitted use in the district) and so there would be no minimum parking requirement.

Neighborhood Background & Direction from Relevant Plans

2040 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The 2040 Comprehensive Plan provides additional background on the former library site and its surrounding neighborhood. The Land Use chapter identifies the former library site within the ‘city center’ area, characterized by a well-established street grid pattern having 40-foot-wide lots and interconnected sidewalks. However, the challenge of connecting the community between the lower area of the bluffs and the top of the hill has persisted. The Critical Area Plan chapter details the implications of MRCCA regulations on development near the bluffs. While the bluffs serve as a natural barrier, they are also a valuable community asset. Considerations of MRCCA regulations, along with stable soils, vegetation, and other natural elements, will be necessary to prevent the deterioration of the bluffs when considering redevelopment and proposing reuse options of the former library site. One finding from the Community Infrastructure Chapter noted that the Dakota County Lawshe Memorial Museum envisioned that the former library and museum area could be an anchor in the community. However, the development of the new Kaposia library has impacted the trajectory of that idea, which has prompted exploration of reuse options. The Transportation chapter was also reviewed for analysis of the street and parking implications.

SOUTHVIEW HILL AREA STUDY (2014)

The Southview Hill Area Study was focused on the large area immediately west of the former library site, generally from 3rd Avenue west to 14th Avenue and 2nd St N south to 3rd St S. The study did not include the library site itself.

Key findings relevant to reuse of the former library site:

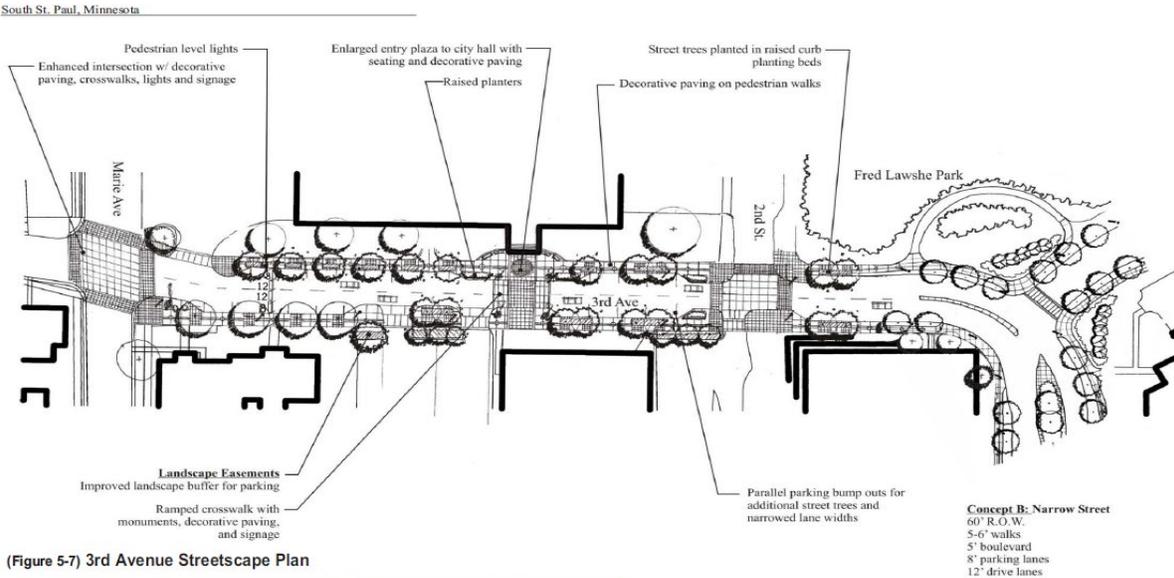
- » The relatively low traffic volumes on 3rd Avenue and Marie Avenue (less than 5,000 AADT) are challenging for supporting commercial uses which generally need traffic levels of 20,000 AADT or higher to survive. In particular, the study identified that Southview Hill has a sufficient population base to support restaurants but the minimum traffic levels needed are much higher than the traffic levels on 3rd Avenue and Marie Avenue.
- » Small lot sizes can be a barrier to retaining and attracting desirable and viable commercial businesses.
- » The neighborhood’s older buildings that have architectural character represent opportunities for creating a desirable neighborhood commercial and civic district.

- » Since chain commercial businesses are not likely to locate on lower traffic streets in Southview Hill, the study recommends that the city focus its business recruitment efforts on attracting successful entrepreneurs, aka “Mom and Pop” businesses, from other parts of the metro area.
- » Restaurants have a much larger parking need than other commercial uses.
- » Community input prioritized concerns about the deteriorating conditions of properties in the neighborhood, inadequate property maintenance/code enforcement, potential blight properties, and the impact of these issues on the neighborhood’s quality of life.

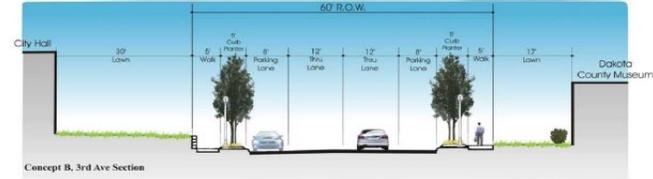
CONCORD/GRAND GATEWAY STREETScape & REDEVELOPMENT PLAN (2003)

While this plan is 20 years old, it includes a 3rd Avenue streetscape plan that appears to have been largely implemented with the exception of the enhanced intersection treatments at Marie Avenue, 2nd St N, and the City Hall mid-block crossing. The envisioned enhancements would make pedestrian crossings of 3rd Avenue safer and more comfortable, calm traffic, and increase the sense of place in this important community gateway area.

3rd Avenue Streetscape Plan (2003)



(Figure 5-7) 3rd Avenue Streetscape Plan



(Figure 5-8) 3rd Avenue Section

DAHLGREN, SHARDLOW AND UBAN, INC.

