

Twin Cities suburbs are working on their curb appeal

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Coon Rapids among cities brainstorming to stay relevant.



The corner of Hanson and Coon Rapids Boulevards in 2012. Among Coon Rapids' revitalization efforts is a focus to spur business and home redevelopment along Coon Rapids Boulevard. Photo: Megan Tan, Special To The Star Tribune

Coon Rapids came of age when the suburbs were chic. Built out in the 1960s, '70s and '80s, the Anoka County city of 61,000 was designed with the auto and other suburban ideals in mind, including space and privacy. Young families lapped it up.

Today, a new generation is less sold on the suburbs, development experts say. Many young Americans put more value in walkability, easy access to stores, restaurants, mass transit and other urban amenities.

That changing marketplace is forcing Coon Rapids, a city with 341 cul-de-sacs and an aging housing stock heavy on split-levels and ramblers, to reinvent itself. It is just one of dozens of Twin Cities suburbs, shiny and new in the '70s and '80s, that are now plotting, planning and redeveloping for future generations.

"The younger generations are looking for a different kind of lifestyle. They are not as enamored with the car," said Caren Dewar, executive director of the nonprofit Urban Land Institute Minnesota. "The marketplace is definitely responding to that. In order for suburban communities to stay competitive, they will have to respond to that, too."

It isn't a quick change, and it isn't cheap.

Coon Rapids has a three-front approach to revitalization:

- Spur business and home redevelopment along Coon Rapids Boulevard, a main thoroughfare. The city has spent \$20 million on land purchases, demolition, cleanup and relocating some businesses during the past 15 years, city officials said.
- Pour \$100,000 into a home-remodeling program and offer money to homeowners investing in large-scale renovations.
- Spend \$17.4 million on a parks face-lift, with one-third of the money going to trails to improve connectivity.

'The New Normal'

Coon Rapids has invested heavily in redevelopment — using controversial eminent domain powers in the past to acquire some land — but leaders say it will pay off and keep the city competitive, especially with neighboring suburbs that are courting businesses and residents with undeveloped land. Over the years, especially during the recession, some residents questioned the expense.

“Long-term, we think it’s important for us to invest in the city’s future,” said Mayor Tim Howe. “We’ve gotten to that point of near full development. We’ve turned our focus on what we can do to improve our city.”

Suburban leaders across the Twin Cities are rethinking their futures and finding creative ways to meet changing demands. The Urban Land Institute has met with leaders from two dozen cities to talk about “Navigating the New Normal” — how to redevelop under post-Great Recession economic realities.

“I do think Coon Rapids is very conscious of the need to look at the future vision of the community and are making some efforts to be proactive in that,” said Cathy Capone Bennett, of the Urban Land Institute’s housing initiative. “The biggest challenge for residents and for policy leaders to understand is that it take years to make those transformational changes. Redevelopment is not a quick fix.”

Development along ‘ports’

A generation ago, Coon Rapids Boulevard was the pulse of the city’s business district. It was Hwy. 10 through the city and where people shopped. Then the highway was redirected in the 1970s, and Coon Rapids Boulevard languished. Target and other retailers moved out to a new shopping hub, Riverdale.

In 2000, the city first laid out a long-term plan to rebuild along parts of the boulevard, buying land, razing older buildings, cleaning up contamination and wooing developers. The blueprint, updated in 2010, emphasizes building on businesses and institutions anchoring the boulevard, including Mercy Hospital and Anoka-Ramsey Community College.

Coon Rapids has focused on four “port” areas: Port Wellness around Mercy, where a new medical office building is nearing completion; Port Campus Square around Anoka-Ramsey; Port Riverwalk, near the entrance to Coon Rapids Dam, and Port Evergreen, on the border with [Blaine](#) near a park-and-ride, which city officials hope will one day be a second Coon Rapids stop on the Northstar commuter rail line and a proposed passenger rail line to Duluth. In the Campus Square and Riverwalk areas, the city has prepared 25 and 32 acres, respectively, for development.

Taking the lead

Marc Nevinski, Coon Rapids’ community development director, said the city has acted as a master developer in several of the ports, buying small pieces of land, cleaning them up and combining them to create acreage for bigger projects. Coon Rapids, like many suburban cities, has to do the initial land acquisition and cleanup for redevelopment because developers won’t, he said.

“We had to lead the charge. We have been courting the private market for years and not getting anywhere. ... We need to do site assembly to attract the larger developers,” he said. “The talk of public investment gets the private sector engaged.”

Mayor Howe said that he and others on the council understand the city needs to shepherd this project and that it does require public investment. “It’s a tough sell to the community itself. We have to make a major investment, but long term, we think it’s worth it,” Howe said.

Land is another issue. Coon Rapids Boulevard is surrounded by established neighborhoods, which can limit the scale of any project. “We don’t have a lot of depth to the properties. They are all sort of small parcels,” Nevinski said.

Assembling larger sites for redevelopment can take years. The city, with the help of state dollars, has cleaned up after an old gas station, a dry cleaner and an unofficial dump site, where crews unearthed 2,000 old tires.

Redevelopment also means change for residents, many of whom still favor older suburban ideals and don’t always embrace the idea of mixed use — new offices and businesses near their neighborhood.

Finally, it takes patience.

“This stuff gets measured in decades. It takes time to do the site assembly. It takes time to attract developers and buyers, and it takes time to absorb. You can only absorb so much housing at one time,” Nevinski said.

One other goal is to change the mood of the boulevard: to add sidewalks, vegetation, trail connections to the community to make it visually appealing and pedestrian-friendly. The city wants to tie the boulevard to the beauty of Coon Creek, the Coon Rapids Dam and other sites. “It’s extremely scenic. We are trying to leverage that,” Nevinski said.

Rethinking Coon Rapids’ future means looking beyond the commercial hub, city leaders say. To attract new residents, the city is also investing in its neighborhoods house by house. Its “Home for Generations” program has attracted national attention.

The city bought five older homes, including a 1960s rambler and a 1970s split level, and remodeled them for modern living. More than 8,000 residents toured the model homes, and the city believes it spurred more than 100 remodels in surrounding neighborhoods, judging by building permit data.

Now the city is offering up to \$5,000 to homeowners undertaking large-scale remodels. More than 40 homeowners have approached officials about the grant program.

In November, voters agreed to spend \$17.4 million to redo nine city parks, build a new park and expand the trails system. City leaders say a flourishing parks and trails system will keep Coon Rapids competitive.

At the same time, Nevinski said that even amid the wave of empty nesters and millennials moving to the urban core, suburbs are still a great place to raise a family and that some reinvestment by cities will add to that strength.

“There will always be a percentage of the population that wants to be in a very urban environment,” he said. “There are more people who want to be in a suburban environment. You have more space. You can own your own home. You’ve got a yard, good schools and safe neighborhoods. And we’ve got great parks.”