

NINA MIONI: Neighbors in the North Loop neighborhood of Minneapolis are coming together this week to discuss a proposed data center. Developer Legacy Investing has signed a deal to buy the old *Minnesota Star Tribune* printing facility with intentions to turn it into a data center. Joining me now with more is president of the North Loop Neighborhood Association, Mary Binkley. Great to talk with you, Mary.

MARY BINKLEY: Thanks for having me. Good afternoon.

NINA MIONI: Also joining me is Fernando Burga, an assistant professor in urban and regional planning with the University of Minnesota, who's helping facilitate the neighborhood workshops. Thanks for your time as well, Professor.

FERNANDO BURGA: Great to be here.

NINA MIONI: Mary, I'd love to start with you. These workshops are going to be happening I understand three days this week. Why did you decide to bring the neighborhood together like this and have this space to talk about this proposed data center?

MARY BINKLEY: We're bringing the community together over these three nights to facilitate a more thoughtful conversation that goes beyond the data center and what the community really wants to see in this 13-acre parcel. So just looking at what data center-- what data center proposals turn into in communities throughout the country where it's-- where the public shows up and states their feelings about them, usually in opposition to it, we-- and we're going to absolutely take all of that in this week, but we just wanted to answer the question then what. If no, then what and just provide a forum to have that conversation. And that's where Professor Berger comes in.

NINA MIONI: That makes sense. And, Professor, I understand you actually live in the neighborhood as well. You volunteer for the Association, but professionally you are researching data centers. Would you tell us a little bit about how these workshops are a part of your research?

FERNANDO BURGA: Certainly. So we were planning to carry out an intensive research and engagement week at the Minnesota Design Center this week before the announcement of the *Star Tribune* site redevelopment. So this is a classic case of essentially neighbors helping neighbors in a sense and also putting research into action and engagement.

At the Minnesota Design Center, we are interested in questions related to design, architectural, urban design, planning, policy issues, and also how can we use design as a tool to face the grand challenges that are faced by communities from urban to rural Minnesota. So we were essentially at the beginning stages of dealing with this question. We didn't know how to consider the broad implications of this topic. We were looking for case studies. We were studying different examples from rural to urban areas, and everything aligned to be able to do a deep dive in the North Loop and carry out this workshop in-- this series of workshops in collaboration with the North Loop Neighborhood Association.

NINA MIONI: Mary talked a little bit about what we've seen across the state, across the country really where this idea of bringing data centers to different communities, whether it be urban or rural, has become really divisive and politically charged. How do you feel these community workshops, how important do you feel they are when it comes to the research and the discussion around data centers?

FERNANDO BURGA: They are crucial. They allow us academics who focus on community engaged research to work with community, to identify the questions, to identify ways to collect information, to share information, and to use research as an advocacy tool. And that is the spirit of the Minnesota Design Center at the University of Minnesota.

NINA MIONI: You're wanting to go beyond is this a good or a bad idea and really dive in, and, Mary, you mentioned the then what question. I understand you had around 50 or so people show up last night. That's quite a few people. What were you hearing from your neighbors?

MARY BINKLEY: It was a really nice exercise that Dr. Burga and his colleagues from the U had US go through. There were giant maps of the North Loop at several tables, and they asked us to plot where in the North Loop, where are the things that we love about the North Loop, what do we think is missing, and what are the concerns about data centers.

And as I was looking at what people put on their Post-It notes, I learned that people really, really value the green space that we have in the North Loop along the Mississippi River as well as our small business community. This is a community that has everybody's favorite restaurants and coffee shops and gyms and retailers, and that definitely came out in the feedback on the maps that we saw last night. It was a good exercise.

NINA MIONI: You were asking people what do you value. What do you like about this community that you wouldn't want to see maybe disrupted, and I understand, Professor, that each of the workshops is going to have a different focus. And last night was about what you value. Can you talk about why you're zeroing in on these different ways to guide the conversations?

FERNANDO BURGA: Certainly. Because we have to understand what is important for the community to be able to guide the work. So we start by understanding exactly how the community sees itself. What are the values, locations, histories that define the community.

From there, we move into a more systematic way to understanding impacts, which is what we're going to be doing today. Today we're going to be focusing on the question of data center impacts. And similarly to the maps, we have a series of tools that have been developed by our researchers here at the Minnesota Design Center to continue the process of collecting information and understanding the hopes, the dreams, the stories that define essentially how people see themselves, how they see their community impacted, and how they see the region impacted.

These tools are going to be geared around issues related to water, energy, economy, society, family, neighborhood, and also neighborhoods, people that live in other places that may enjoy coming to the North Loop. So we're aiming to develop essentially an archive, also a system of information that we can then look at, and then on Thursday, we're going to be considering alternatives. What are the ways that we can think about moving forward? Based on tomorrow's presentation, we're going to be able to develop that workshop, and then on Saturday we're going to have a final share out with the community about next steps.

Yeah, mentioned tomorrow, Mary, that's nice that you're going to have the data center developer do a presentation for the neighborhood association. What are you hoping to learn, and that's great that you're able to have them come to the table as well.

MARY BINKLEY: Correct. And this is part of the routine of-- this is one of the boxes any business has to check when they want to do business in the city of Minneapolis. They have to notify the neighborhood that they plan to do business in. So they are checking this box to come before our planning and zoning committee to specifically show us their plans on how to convert the actual printing press building into a data center.

So that's why the neighborhood association-- we don't yet have a position on it because we don't what it is. So we are really eager to see their plans and be able to have that conversation with them.

We're also really eager to see Dr. Burga and Minnesota Design Center's final report because getting back to the answer to that question, well, now what, we really want to provide the developer with something useful, our city leaders with something useful beyond opposition, but rather here are the really thoughtful ideas and the thoughtful dialogue that we've had throughout the week to talk about what we feel is best for the neighborhood.

NINA MIONI: Thinking about North Loop for folks who may not live in this area, it is very dense. There's a lot going on. There are also lovely green spaces, and, Professor, I understand you're doing research across Minnesota so in rural areas, too. Would you tell us before we have to go what are the similarities or differences you're seeing between conversations in rural and urban communities?

FERNANDO BURGA: So the main similarity is that there's deep concern and confusion about data centers coming to people's communities. There is a lack of information, transparency. There is misinformation. People do not know what they don't know. People feel paralyzed.

In many ways, each community is different and unique. We're finding that specific communities across rural Minnesota are developing alternatives that include thinking about the design and the placement of buildings, for example. Some of them are in complete opposition, and this is a very divisive topic, one which is really affecting people emotionally and mentally also.

Through our work in empowering small Minnesota communities' partnership with University of Minnesota Extension, we are considering these questions, and we are developing essentially a set of engagement, models, kits, tools but also developing the research and the questions that allow us then to move forward proactively and work with a community like the North Loop Neighbors Association in the North Loop that is open and available to be able to have this type of conversation with the public.

NINA MIONI: Thank you both for your time and helping us to dive in on how one neighborhood and community is handling the issue of data centers. Really appreciate your time.

FERNANDO BURGA: Thank you.

MARY BINKLEY: Thank you.

NINA MIONI: Mary Binkley is President of the North Loop Neighborhood Association, and Fernando Burga is an assistant professor in urban and regional planning with the University of Minnesota.