

Little Mekong

August 2010

INSIDE

What is Little Mekong?

PAGE 1

Little Mekong businesses discussed key issues

PAGE 2

Asian businesses prepare for LRT

PAGE 2

\$1.5 million business loans for University Ave

PAGE 2



AEDA fights for small businesses all the way to the Obama Administration

AEDA (Asian Economic Development Association) has made a lot of progress this past year fighting for University Avenue Asian entrepreneurs and small businesses. AEDA has made it possible for Asian businesses to voice their concerns and be heard by officials about the light rail. AEDA has worked with community groups and talked with public officials to make sure that the light rail transit will benefit Asian businesses. AEDA is working for real solutions that protect small businesses and create a long-term place on University Avenue for Asian businesses and entrepreneurs.

“AEDA’s ultimate goal is to see University Avenue prosper with vibrant, diverse businesses and cultural attractions,” said Wameng Moua, AEDA board president. “AEDA’s fight for Asian small businesses has gone all the way to the Obama Administration.”

AEDA and Asian businesses have influenced federal policy on transportation, community development, and support for small business.

These are some of the Federal and local officials AEDA has met:

- Officials of the Obama White House
- The Assistant Secretary for Transportation Policy
- The Federal Transit Administrator
- Office of US Senator Al Franken
- Office of US Representative Betty McCollum
- Office of US Representative Keith Ellison
- St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman
- Met Council Chair Peter Bell

AEDA has collaborated with community groups to advocate successfully for:

- \$1.5 million in loans for business support during LRT construction
- \$1.3 million for improving off-street parking for businesses
- \$2.9 million in assessment fees deferred for businesses and properties
- 3 new LRT stations added at Western, Victoria, and Hamline

AEDA has successfully provided for Asian businesses:

- Information on the negative impacts of LRT on small businesses
- Information on the opportunities of LRT
- Training and information on preparing businesses for LRT impact
- Filing a FTA complaint against the Central Corridor Light Rail Transit project to protect the rights of Asian businesses.

One of the most important things AEDA has done in the past year is bringing University Avenue Asian businesses and entrepreneurs together. By working together, Asian businesses

and entrepreneurs can solve problems, be stronger, and benefit each other.

“If Asian businesses don’t work together, LRT could put them out of business and the vision of a more vibrant avenue will not come true,” Wameng Moua said.

Why is AEDA doing all of this? AEDA shares the vision of light rail bringing new opportunities to benefit the community. Asian businesses helped to revitalize University Avenue, and with needed resources to strengthen and protect Asian businesses, they can continue making contributions to make this community better after LRT construction.



Little Mekong...What is it?

Little Mekong is made up of the Asian businesses on University Avenue. It is named after the Mekong River. One of the largest rivers in the world, the Mekong River flows from Tibet in China through Laos, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Cultures from all these regions along the river and more are represented on University Avenue in Saint Paul. It is only fitting that the Asian businesses on this part of University Avenue are dubbed “Little Mekong.”

Little Mekong unites Asian businesses and entrepreneurs so they can solve problems, create resources, and support each other. Little Mekong

Please See Little Mekong, Page 2

Little Mekong, From Page 1

is a unique vision for supporting Asian businesses on University Avenue to create jobs and support the local community and economy. With the new light rail, Little Mekong has the potential to protect Asian businesses against negative LRT effects and to bring in much-needed investments to this part of University Avenue. Little Mekong reflects and supports the diversity of the surrounding Frogtown and Summit-U neighborhoods.

Little Mekong has a steering committee that meets often to make decisions and address issues affecting Asian businesses. AEDA coordinates and organizes the committee, which advises AEDA's board of directors.



Little Mekong businesses met to discuss key issues

This month Asian businesses along University Avenue met at Lao Family Community to discuss issues associated with the Central Corridor LRT. On the agenda was the recent announcement of the \$1.5 million loan program the City of Saint Paul and the Met Council will offer to small businesses.

In addition, business owners identified the loss of on-street parking, the disruption associated with LRT construction, the lack of customer access, and the rise in property taxes as key problems small businesses will face.

There was a consensus that the \$1.5 million loan program was inadequate and will not help businesses survive the impact of the light rail transit. As one of the proprietors put it, "We don't need more debt, we're not asking for a hand-out! We helped built up the community, and we want to stay here!"

In the conversations that ensued business owners came up with ways to organize and strengthen University Ave businesses as a whole. Everyone agreed Asian businesses needed to unite their advocacy efforts and collaborate to provide solutions.

Alex Pham, the owner of Pho Ca Dao, stated: "We need to work together. We need to solve problems. We need to hold the politicians accountable. We need to let them know that Asian

businesses are not passive!"

In a unanimous vote, the Little Mekong Committee's first proposal was to create a response to the loan program.

By working together, Little Mekong business owners declared their united intention to create mutually beneficial solutions and fight for more prosperity for the community along University Avenue.

Asian businesses prepare for light rail

Asian businesses, in anticipation of the LRT, plan to reach out to other businesses along University Avenue for input and discuss shared concerns about the community and disruptions due to LRT construction. They are also educating others about construction impact mitigation, learning about parking improvement, taking initiative about how businesses should lead advocacy efforts, and working with planners and community organizations to create new approaches to economic development.

Businesses are also evaluating strategies for marketing and considering how branding Little Mekong could help attract customers and tourists to the area.

In addition to what businesses are doing together they are also strengthening their own business operations. They are looking to reduce overhead and operating costs for potential revenue loss during LRT construction. Some steps businesses are taking include an analysis and review of their financial records and expenses. Others focus on staff management and adjusting future employment levels. Taking stock of inventory, shipping and operations is also crucial to organizing for LRT construction.

Finally building customer relations, such as reaching out to new customers through marketing and improving service, is also a priority on many business owners' minds.

For more information, contact AEDA at 651.222.7798 or info@aeda-mn.org.

\$1.5 million in loans for University Ave businesses

The City of Saint Paul announced that \$1.5 million in loans will be available for businesses negatively impacted by the construction of the LRT. These loans are intended to help businesses survive the period of LRT construction in front of their building.

To qualify for the loans businesses must:

- Make \$2 million or less per year
- Be on University Avenue for at least one year
- Have all required financial documents
- Participate in "Ready for Rail" workshops

These are some of the terms of the loans:

- 0% interest
- \$10,000 maximum
- Payable in five years, the first year deferred
- Loan balance payable if the business is sold or relocated from the avenue.

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Little Mekong is coordinated by AEDA

AEDA
Asian Economic Development Association

712 University Ave W, Ste 105
Saint Paul, MN 55104
651.222.7798, info@aeda-mn.org