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Minneapolis tour helps tout program's benefits

REVITALIZATION:Bergson and other Duluthians draw inspiration from a program to rebuild neighborhoods.

BY BAIRD HELGESON
NEWS TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

MINNEAPOLIS - Duluth Mayor Herb Bergson sat on a bus designed to look like a trolley car when he took a call from Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak.

Bergson spoke Tuesday with his big-city counterpart during a tour of some of south Minneapolis' most blighted neighborhoods.

Before hanging up, Rybak invited Bergson and the bus of 12 Duluth community leaders to a grand opening of a Mexican restaurant on Lake Street, one of the city's most dilapidated and dangerous streets.

The new restaurant was a symbol of a large-scale revitalization taking place on Lake Street, which is slowly on the upswing after decades of decline.

Bergson and the local community leaders spent Tuesday afternoon touring areas that the Neighborhood Revitalization Program has helped since it started in 1991. It will have spent about \$310 million by the time special tax laws that pay for the program end in 2009.

The tour gave Bergson and others confidence that a similar program could work in Duluth on a smaller scale.

Minneapolis' agency gives money for housing, economic development, community-building, crime and safety, transportation and other areas that improve the community.

Bergson has discussed creating a tax-increment financing district, mostly in the Central Hillside. The proceeds would go mainly for increased policing and for human services targeting children and the elderly -- areas that have taken steep state cuts in recent years. He is unsure how much money the plan might generate.

Tax-increment financing is when the city creates a special taxing district and uses the extra tax collections in that area to pay for roads, sewers and utilities for new development.

Until now, Duluth has primarily used tax-increment financing for projects such as the Technology Village, in Canal Park and for some housing projects.

Using the money for social services and policing is a new idea in Duluth that will require legislative approval, which could come next year at the earliest.

Minneapolis' program takes tax money from around the city -- a plan that Bergson said is too broad for Duluth's tax base. Bergson said that he wants to retire several of Duluth's taxing districts and that the financing scheme was too widely used in Duluth.

Bergson said he believes curbing crime in the Hillside and boosting money for human services will be the genesis of a neighborhood revitalization that will bring new businesses, housing and tax revenue.

Diane Hofstede, board chairwoman of the Minneapolis Neighborhood Revitalization Program, said the more than \$5 million used to improve safety and reduce crime has eased neighborhood concerns and given developers the confidence to build.

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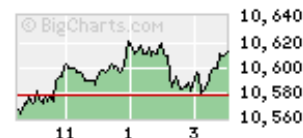
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The agency didn't have specific crime data in the neighborhoods targeted for the crimefighting money.

Duluth city leaders have discussed the idea of doing a revitalization initiative similar to Minneapolis' program for about 10 years.

"Can you imagine what the Hillside would be like now if we did this 10 years ago?" Bergson asked.

Earlier in the day, Bergson and other community leaders toured another one of the city's priority projects. But Duluth officials were less thrilled with the prospects of bringing Taxi 2000's \$24 million, 2,200-foot test track to Duluth.

Taxi 2000 has designed a mass transit system of individual bubble cars that run on a monorail-type track system, called Skyweb Express. The cars carry about three people. They are directed to the riders' final destination -- unlike buses and subways that make stops along the way.

Taxi 2000 needs millions in state bonding money to get the project under way. But Bergson and others said lawmakers don't want to approve money for the project unless the company releases its patent on the product.

Taxi 2000 chairman and chief executive J. Edward Anderson said Tuesday, during a demonstration at the company's Twin Cities headquarters, that he isn't inclined to give up rights to the product that he has spent decades designing.

Even if lawmakers approve the money, Duluth is among half a dozen communities vying for the test track.



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