

St. Paul still a good town for radio

After some creative urging, a city panel backs Minnesota Public Radio's expansion plans.

By Kevin Duchscher
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A tall, shy person, fortified perhaps by several Powdermilk Biscuits, found the strength to get up and do what needed to be done Wednesday.

Writer and radio host Garrison Keillor visited St. Paul City Hall to encourage council members to approve Minnesota Public Radio's plans to expand its downtown headquarters, a project that includes a \$3.3 million forgivable loan from the St. Paul Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) to help MPR buy and renovate the Public Housing Agency building across the street.

"I'm just pleased at the thought, after all this uncertainty, that we may be able to stay in our building and expand it," Keillor told council members, who were meeting as the HRA.

Keillor drolly explained the differences between St. Paul and Minneapolis — differences he said helped explain why St. Paul was a good town for radio.

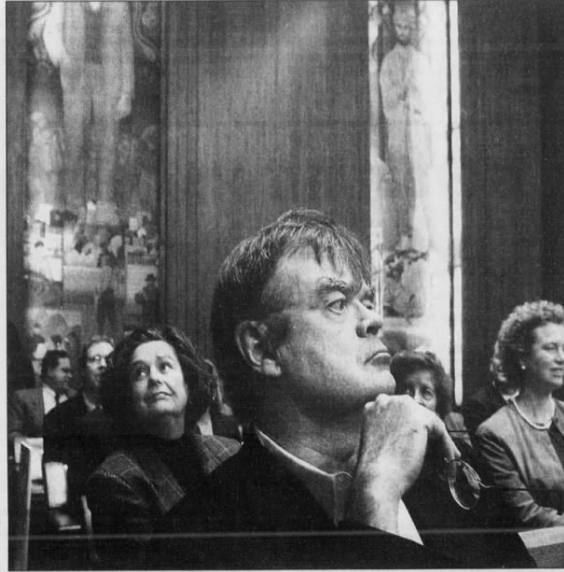
"St. Paul is a city that does not mind having a Class D baseball team," he said. "Minneapolis is a city that would die if it were associated with Sioux Falls and Fargo and Duluth. They would absolutely perish."

"So that's why God made us No. 2, because God knew that we were able to bear it and knew that they were not."

The council members, acting as the HRA, then unanimously passed the resolution, although members Chris Coleman and Pat Harris said that they wanted to hear from other property owners before closing 9th Street at Cedar Street, as required by the MPR plan.

MPR President Bill Kling announced last Thursday that the nonprofit radio network had decided to remain in downtown St. Paul, after a two-year search that examined 26 possible expansion sites in Minneapolis and St. Paul. MPR wanted to consolidate its employees in a single downtown setting, he said.

The site was chosen because MPR's studios would have been expensive to replicate in another building and because the nearby housing agency build-



Star Tribune photo by Mike Zerby

Garrison Keillor, host of Minnesota Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion," listened as MPR President Bill Kling gave a presentation in St. Paul City Council chambers on Wednesday.

ing offered the kind of horizontal space Kling said was necessary to allow people to collaborate.

MPR plans to buy the agency's building with the city loan and \$4.5 million donated by local foundations. MPR has not said what the expansion would cost, but some city planners estimate it could run as high as \$40 million.

Jon Gutzmann, the Public Housing Agency's executive director, told council members that its planned new offices north of the Minnesota Business Academy on Wabasha Street would cost \$12 million to \$13 million.

Kling said he was encouraged by Wednesday's vote. The financing needs to be in place by the end of the year or MPR will lose funding from the foundations. "It's a good next step. There are several more pieces to the process," Kling said.

Keillor said after the meeting that he thought it was important for MPR to stay in St. Paul, where it has been based for 30 years. "That's a long time in our history. I really would worry about it picking up and moving," he said.

And Keillor added that he was pleased MPR would con-



Proposed green space on 7th Street, with current MPR building, right.

At a glance:

MPR expansion

The St. Paul Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) on Wednesday approved a plan to help Minnesota Public Radio expand its downtown headquarters. The deal includes:

- **\$3.3 million forgivable loan:** The HRA loan, to be paid out during the next three years, would be forgiven in 2016 if MPR adds 100 employees to its current work force of 250.
- **Transfer of green space:** The HRA would convey the triangle of green space at 7th and Cedar Sts. to MPR for \$1, for use as an outdoor amphitheater and future expansion.
- **Closing off 9th Street:** The street would be closed at 9th Street to allow connection of the MPR building with the Public Housing Agency building across the street.
- **Air rights over Cedar Street:** Would permit a skyway linking MPR with possible expansion across Cedar.

tinue to use the same building at 7th and Cedar Sts., a converted bank it moved to in 1979.

"It's not a great architectural treasure, but it's a very friendly building," he said. "It was built in a pre-skyway era and it's less

corporate, somehow, and less fortresslike, so that when you walk past it you look in windows and see people working."

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