



[Home](#)
[About Us](#)
[News+Events](#)
[Transportation](#)
[Wastewater+Water](#)
[Parks](#)

> [News+Events](#) > [Newsletter](#) > [Planning - December 2012](#)

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## Asad Aliweyd steering Somali community toward bright future along Southwest Corridor

### Corridors of Opportunity grant makes entrepreneurial training possible

Every evening between 5 and 9 p.m. the New American Academy on the border of Edina and Eden Prairie comes to life with more energy, dreams and goals than can be easily contained within this industrial office space.

Somali students, aged kindergarten through high school, and their parents, attend classes on the English language and citizenship. A new addition this year is training to be an entrepreneur. These East Africans have made starting new businesses to support their families and community a focus as they establish themselves in their new society.

Asad Aliweyd, founder and executive director of the New American Academy, was awarded a \$30,000 community engagement grant by the Corridors of Opportunity initiative to help him engage the Somali community in planning for new businesses, jobs, and housing along the Southwest light rail corridor.

"The Golden Triangle light rail stop in Eden Prairie will be key to many opportunities for our Somali community, linking us to the southwest, downtown Minneapolis, and the University where many of our children attend school," said Aliweyd.

"In order to succeed, we need to have good education for our children," he said. "We need affordable housing. We would like to build equity and assets through home ownership. We want to grow our job opportunities and we need reliable transportation."

### Engaging underrepresented communities along transit corridors

Corridors of Opportunity is a partnership of government, foundations and nonprofits promoting transit-oriented development, affordable housing, small business support and investment, and engagement of underrepresented communities along seven transit corridors in the region.

Repa Mekha, Corridors of Opportunity Community Engagement Team (CET) member and president of Nexus Community Partners, encouraged Aliweyd to apply for a community engagement grant when his work with New American Academy clearly showed the kind of success sought by CET.

"We are looking for three levels of success – people engaged around transit corridors, people who want to be part of the decision making, and people who clearly see the benefit of how the expanding transit corridor can improve their quality of life," said Mekha. "Asad has these three levels covered, with the excitement and vision he has built up for the rail line in his community."

### Somali community seeks seat at the table when decisions are made

"We are learning the democratic process and practicing our rights as

[Corridors of Opportunity overview \(pdf\)](#)  
[Community outreach and engagement on the corridors](#)

The Corridors of Opportunity Community Engagement Team identifies and promotes existing community assets along transitway corridors and ensures that the communities along those corridors are involved in the planning process.

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– Asad Aliweyd, founder, New American Academy

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– Repa Mekha, President, Nexus Community Partners



Asad Aliweyd talks about the opportunities for economic development for the Somali community near the site of the future Golden Triangle stop on the Southwest LRT line.

citizens," Aliweyd said. "We all came out to vote. I haven't talked to one person who said they did not vote. In 10 years you may see Somali neighbors on the ticket."



Aliweyd tutors students at the New American Academy in Edina. Adults also take language and citizenship classes, and thanks to a Corridors of Opportunity grant, get entrepreneurial training.

The 35-year-old married father of 7 children had been a high school math teacher in the Eden Prairie Schools. He opened the New American Academy in 2008 while completing his MBA at Hamline University. His goal: to help Somali students bridge their achievement gap through extra tutoring after school.

The school's unassuming location behind a trucking warehouse situated next to Highway 169 belies the academy's significance in helping the community of 3,000 new East African immigrant families living in Eden Prairie,

Edina, Hopkins, and St. Louis Park.

"We learned from Asad that the Somali community relies on 'word of mouth' to spread information," said Susan Hoyt, coordinator of Corridors of Opportunity community engagement efforts. "We believe they would greatly benefit from the Southwest light rail line. This community is underrepresented, low-income and ready to embrace this as an opportunity to improve their quality of life."

### **What light-rail stops could mean to an immigrant community**

The key to this community engagement work is to connect community members with transportation and land-use planners, and transitway engineers, so prime locations for businesses and for affordable housing are identified early. On a late afternoon, Aliweyd led a short field trip to look at the sites where Somali community members might realize their dreams.

"In the Golden Triangle where we will have a light rail stop, we would like to see an opportunity for housing, economic development, and jobs for our community," said Aliweyd, as he gestured at the open fields and industrial office park. "The light rail will reduce the financial stress for many of our families. We can send our children on the light rail to classes at the university without worry about the weather, and fewer cars per family means less insurance cost."

At a second stop on Prairie Center Drive, a vacant Hennepin County leasing office appears to be another prime location for several businesses within a short walk from apartment complexes housing Somali residents

As a result of the New American Academy's connection to the CET, 16 Somali adults interested in developing businesses along the corridor graduated from a 20-week entrepreneurial training class taught by the Neighborhood Development Center, which is experienced in training new immigrant communities. "We want the entrepreneurs to be visible, in highly trafficked areas," said Mike Temali, CEO and founder of the NDC. "This radiates a message to those who drive by or near a light rail stop."



Students strengthens their reading skills at the Academy.

Following the 10-week classroom training, the Somali business students received one-on-one assistance to develop business plans. A bus trip with potential lenders followed to see possible locations for these developments. "Their success in the end really depends on their business ideas, their assets and abilities," said Temali.

### **Planning new businesses in the Southwest corridor**

Ibrahim Ali and Amina Ali (who are not related) completed the entrepreneur business classes in anticipation of the SWLRT economic opportunities. Amina Ali, a married mother of five, would like to open a restaurant that serves Somali and American food. More business ideas include a few coffee shops, a day care, computer store, bookstore, salons and a clothing store.

Ibrahim Ali, 52, a married father of six and a community elder, plans to open an auto body shop in Eden Prairie, similar to what he worked at in Africa.

"I am prepared to work very hard and struggle for the first two years to establish my business," said Ali, through Aliweyd as his interpreter. When he opens, Ali expects to provide jobs for 12 to 14 skilled workers. He remains hopeful, but not blind to the challenges.

"Our aim is to always have better relationships with the current business community," Ali said. "It's the first time. We will see what the people are like and their reaction to it."

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