

CITIZENS LEAGUE
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CITIZENS LEAGUE STATEMENT TO METROPOLITAN COUNCIL
CONCERNING I-35E

At this time, two months before a final decision is supposed to be made, a consensus on a construction plan for Interstate 35E from the Lexington Ave. bridge into downtown Saint Paul has not been reached.

Nearby residents are strongly opposed to a freeway with trucks along this five-mile stretch known as the Pleasant Ave. corridor. During the 1960s, right-of-way was acquired and cleared, and construction began on a six-lane freeway. This was halted in the early 1970s by legal action brought by the city of Saint Paul and neighborhood organizations and individuals.

Currently, the Metropolitan Council is preparing a report for the State Commissioner of Transportation, as required by law, which analyzes several options for a corridor ranging from a full-fledged freeway to "no-build." This report is known as a draft environmental impact statement (EIS). The Council intends to submit the draft EIS to the Commissioner in November so that a decision on what, if anything, to build can be made before the end of the year. Then a final EIS will be prepared on the preferred alternative. Federal law requires that a project will be withdrawn from the interstate system if the final EIS is not completed by September 30, 1983, and if a construction contract is not awarded by September 30, 1986. The EIS is subject to approval by the Minnesota Environmental Quality Board and the Federal Highway Administration.

Dakota County interests are seeking an unrestricted link for cars and trucks using I-35E from the north and the south through Saint Paul. Consequently, they favor a six-lane freeway in the Pleasant Ave. corridor.

Within Saint Paul the freeway option has little support. Instead, neighborhood, business and government groups appear to agree on an alternative with these outlines: a four-lane parkway, with special landscaping, bike trails, reduced

speed limits, and, most significantly, a prohibition on truck traffic. Trucks would be diverted to Shepard Road along the Mississippi River to downtown and then would go north of the east edge of downtown along a new right-of-way to link up with I-35E. This is called the "east CBD (central business district) bypass."

While there seems to be little disagreement about the acceptability of a special route for trucks, many persons question whether the east CBD bypass is a realistic option. There is no such route on existing state highway plans and it isn't known whether the estimated \$19 million can be found to build it.

Because of the uncertainty surrounding the east CBD bypass, some persons fear that, current intentions notwithstanding, trucks eventually would be allowed to use the parkway.

To reduce that likelihood -- and to discourage too many cars -- neighborhood residents near the parkway are supporting an alternative in which the parkway would not be connected to the freeways on the north edge of downtown Saint Paul. Instead, the traffic using the parkway and continuing on I-35E to the north would be diverted along local streets on the northern edge of downtown to a freeway access ramp. This alternative is known as the "indirect connection." A parkway with an indirect connection is the only option that could be built consistent with an amendment to state law enacted in 1978. A few months ago Saint Paul Mayor George Latimer urged the adoption of the indirect connection. Since then, the Saint Paul Planning Commission and then the Saint Paul City Council adopted resolutions, which Latimer did not veto, favoring a parkway with a non-stop, or "direct," connection to I-94 and then to I-35E going north. A change in state law would be needed to implement that alternative.

Supporters of a direct connection say they want to avoid unnecessary traffic on downtown streets. The additional car traffic on the parkway as a result of the direct connection would not produce appreciably higher noise levels in the neighborhoods, since trucks, the chief producers of freeway noise, still would be prohibited, according to these supporters.

Supporters of the indirect connection contend that it is the only option possible under state law. Thus, they argue, nothing will ever be built in the corridor without an indirect connection. They believe the noise level difference would be significant. And, because the east CBD bypass may not get built, they want the indirect connection to guard against the parkway becoming an attractive option for trucks in the coming years.

One related issue concerns how the parkway would connect to the Short Line Road, a depressed, controlled-access, north-south highway built in the 1960s in central Saint Paul. Now it does not connect with any freeway. Originally, it was contemplated that the Short Line would connect with I-35E. But there always has been controversy over how the road should connect at its northern end. For several years it has just emptied out at Selby Ave. near Snelling Ave. Residents near the Short Line strongly oppose truck traffic on that road. There appears to be general agreement in Saint Paul that the parkway should not be connected to the Short Line, even for cars, until a decision is made on where traffic would go at the northern end.

Leadership by the Metropolitan Council is critical. -- Legally, the Metropolitan Council can fulfill its obligation by passing on to the Commissioner of Transportation its analysis of alternatives, without suggesting a preferred alternative. The Commissioner then would decide.

We think the Council should propose a preferred alternative. The entire region has a stake in the outcome. Although only five miles in length, this segment will affect traffic on other major roads in the metropolitan area. And it affects the degree of access which the rest of the area, particularly the southern part, has to downtown Saint Paul, one of the region's two "metropolitan centers."

The Metropolitan Council was created to determine a regional consensus on issues just as this one. In fact, only the Council may be able to assemble the necessary components of a strategy that can succeed.

The Council has a respected history of leadership on transportation issues in the region. Most recently it was able to settle highway controversy on the western side of the metropolitan area which had spanned almost two decades.

Ironically, even if the Commissioner of Transportation selects a preferred alternative, state law (the Metropolitan Reorganization Act) gives the Council veto power over that choice.

Our chief interest here lies in the process which is followed. But in our review of the controversy over the last few weeks, we have developed some general feeling about the nature of a workable solution.

First, it is difficult to imagine a solution which does not provide for a parkway with trucks prohibited on the Pleasant Ave. corridor, accompanied by a separate route for trucks with an east CBD bypass.

There seems to be widespread agreement in Saint Paul on the double route approach. It represents a continuing redefinition of a "freeway." Originally, freeways provided unrestricted access to all types of vehicles at all times of the day. Then preference was given at access points during certain times of the day to buses, vans and carpools. The next change occurred when the lanes were authorized exclusively for certain destinations or for certain types of vehicles (such as the high-occupancy-vehicle lanes approved for I-394). Now the double route approach involves the concept of an entire roadway set aside for certain vehicles.

Second, and most controversial at this time, is the question of an indirect or direct connection of the parkway with the freeways to the north of downtown.

We think the Council's interest might be better served by concentrating on the *sequence* of the decision first, before getting into the *substance*.

It is difficult for us to see how the Council can decide on indirect versus direct connection until it knows whether the east CBD bypass can be built.

Perhaps, therefore, the Council can submit its preferred choice to the Commissioner in two parts, sequentially. The first part would deal with the double

route (parkway and truck route). Later, when the Council learns from the Commissioner about the availability of funds for the bypass, the Council can decide whether to provide a direct or indirect connection.

The Council might draw the attention of the Commissioner to several factors which could bear on the availability of dollars for the bypass (currently estimated to cost \$19 million):

(1) The fact that the city of Saint Paul using its own funds built Shepard Road as a local street, but which now would be part of the bypass route. This could count as a contribution by the city toward the expense of the project.

(2) The fact that the total cost of construction of the remaining sections of interstate highway in the metropolitan area is about \$500 million, of which the \$19 million bypass would be less than 4 per cent.

(3) The fact that modifications in other freeway designs have been made elsewhere in the metropolitan area to accommodate special circumstances, costing several million dollars.

(4) The fact that the parkway, with trucks removed, does not need to be built to the same standards as a freeway, which must accommodate heavy trucks. The parkway should be built to no higher standard than is required for the type of traffic it will accommodate, with whatever dollar savings that are realized being diverted to the bypass.

(If the parkway is built to standards which accommodate car traffic -- but not to standards required for accommodating the heavy truck traffic -- this will provide further assurance that the parkway never will be opened to trucks.)

(5) The possibility of some sort of user fee or toll imposed on vehicles using the bypass.

If funds can be found for the bypass, then the Council will be in a much better position to decide on the merits of an indirect or direct connection, free of the question of trucks using the parkway.

If funding cannot be found, it might then be desirable for the Council to explore other routes for truck traffic that haven't yet come to be discussed as serious options. One such option would be to channel trucks along the yet-to-be-completed I-494 link in Dakota County and then north on the Lafayette Freeway. That approach, of course, would not likely be popular with another set of neighborhoods. But, if a truck route alternative can be found, then the Metropolitan Council might again be able to make a decision on the indirect-direct issue without the complicating factor of the trucks on the parkway.

If options for truck routes cannot be found, then the Council must decide on the direct-indirect issue, knowing that pressures always will be present to open the parkway to trucks.