

Northwestern Bloomington Traffic Plan
Councilmember Steve Elkins
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Introduction:

As most of us are well aware, neighborhood traffic volumes and speed are the single biggest complaint of Bloomington voters, by a wide margin. Nowhere are these complaints more deeply felt than in the neighborhoods adjacent to highway 169 and 494 in northwestern Bloomington. To a large degree, these complaints are driven by the inability of these two principal arterials to handle current traffic volumes, let alone projected increases in traffic volumes driven by commercial redevelopment along the “Bloomington Strip” and by rapid residential growth in the suburbs to our south and west. Scott and Carver counties both grew by more than 50% during the 90’s. The Met Council projects continuing growth in these communities over the next twenty years as indicated in the following chart:

Population 2000		Projected 2010	Projected 2020
Bloomington	88,500	90,500	91,000
Chaska	15,700	19,700	23,200
Eden Prairie	33,500	56,500	59,500
Shakopee	17,500	28,000	38,900

* Source Metropolitan Council website:
<http://www.metrocouncil.org/metroarea/levpop.htm>

Along most of Bloomington’s northern border, neighborhoods are buffered by Bloomington’s 79th/80th Street “ring road”, which is being renamed American Blvd. American Blvd is a “reliever” arterial highway that is explicitly designed to absorb overflow traffic spilling over from 494 and to handle longer east-west trips within Bloomington. However, west of France Ave. the ring road fails to serve this purpose, either because it is relatively inaccessible (as it is between France Ave and Normandale Blvd) or non-existent (as it is between Normandale and 169). Because of this gap in the ring road, large volumes of longer haul automobile trips spill over onto northwestern Bloomington’s residential collector streets, most notably 84th Street and Highwood Drive.

Purpose:

The purpose of this paper is to describe a proposed high-level Traffic Plan for northwestern Bloomington that can serve as a communication tool for the affected neighborhoods; and provide a basis for discussion among neighborhoods, Bloomington city staff and elected officials, MnDOT, the Federal Highway Administration and others impacted by the rapid growth of travel in the 169 and 494 corridors.

Opportunities:

Subject to the vagaries of state highway funding, there are already plans in the works to address these shortcomings over the next decade, specifically:

- The addition of a third lane to 494 between Hwy 100 and Eden Prairie (2002-2003)
- The replacement of the lights on 169 at both Anderson Lakes Parkway and Pioneer Trail with freeway style interchanges (2007-2009)
- The reconstruction of the Hwy 100 and Hwy 169 interchanges on I494 (2012+)
- The reconstruction of the East Bush Lake Road Interchange on I494 (2003-2004)
- The reconstruction of East Bush Lake Rd between 494 and 84th Street (2006-2007).

There is no doubt that these actions will reduce cut-through traffic in northwestern Bloomington neighborhoods by making it relatively more convenient for commuters to stay on 169 and 494 instead of using “surface routes” through our residential neighborhoods.

Overall Objective:

However, after reviewing the current plans and discussing their implications with neighborhood leaders, I have concluded that we can (and must) do an even better job of addressing legitimate neighborhood concerns by looking at northwestern Bloomington’s transportation problems in a comprehensive and context-sensitive manner. While each of the individual components of the current designs undoubtedly represents good engineering practice when viewed in isolation, the sum of the parts does not comprise a solution to the overall needs of either Bloomington residents or Bloomington workers. We need to create a joint State-City plan that addresses the needs of both the motoring public *and* Bloomington residents. **The hallmark of such a plan is that it would do an even better job of moving traffic *around* our residential neighborhoods rather than *through* our neighborhoods.**

Specific Problems:

From a neighborhood perspective, current plans suffer the following specific shortcomings:

1. The utility of the American Blvd “ring road” as a reliever for I494 and a diverter of traffic from parallel collector streets such as Highwood Drive, 86th Street and 84th Street breaks down west of France Ave. Nothing in the current plans addresses this deficiency. In order to address this problem, the plan needs to include components such as:
 - A. **The extension of the ring road from Bridge Road (Normandale Blvd) all the way to the Eden Prairie border along the 494 frontage.** This would enable local traffic and 494 overflow traffic to travel between Eden Prairie and Bloomington without traversing Highwood Drive (or 86th Street) and 84th Street. It is physically possible to connect the 494 frontage road (Marth Road) at West Bush Lake Road on the west with the current western terminus of the ring road on the east (what is now Green Valley Drive at East Bush Lake Road) without encroaching on any wetlands, and the City already owns almost all of the required land. In order to accomplish this, the following obstacles would have to be overcome:

- i. Some of the City land bears legal encumbrances because it was acquired under a federal parkland program. Any of this land that is used for a road would have to be replaced with other parkland.
- ii. It is not clear that there is presently sufficient clearance under the railroad tracks at East Bush Lake Road to accommodate an underpass. However, this section of track is already slated to be reconstructed as part of the East Bush Lake Road interchange reconstruction.
- iii. The current design of the new I494/East Bush Lake Rd Interchange would not accommodate such an extension and would have to be modified (more on this, later).
- iv. In order to secure Federal TEA funding to help build this stretch of the ring road, the City would have to
 - 1. Include the extension in its Comprehensive Plan and Capital Improvement Program.
 - 2. Petition the Met Council to include it in the regional “A Minor Arterial System” as a Reliever road. (The rest of the ring road, from Normandale Blvd - east, already bears this designation.)

Note: The City has just acquired Federal “TEA-21” funding through the Met Council to build new East Bush Lake Road intersections between 494 and 84th Street in the 2006 timeframe. The earliest that the City could secure similar funding for the rest of the extension would be 2007-2008, assuming that the City was prepared to apply for the funding by the summer of 2003.

- v. We would need to implement measures to protect north-south streets like Telegraph Ave and Lea Road from cut-through traffic. (Telegraph is already slated to be cul-de-sac’ed where it currently intersects with Marth Rd and current 494 expansion plans also call for the Tierney’s Woods neighborhood to be disconnected from the 494 frontage road.)

I see no benefit to anyone (and lots of negatives) from simply extending the ring road to a termination at East Bush Lake Road, as is currently planned.

B. The redesign of the I494/Hwy 100 Interchange needs two additional elements. At present, it is simply too difficult to connect between the ring road and Normandale Blvd and, as a result, the ring route is underutilized between France Ave and East Bush Lake Rd (and 84th Street is commensurately over utilized). The 494/100 interchange design needs:

- i. **A direct connection from northbound Normandale Blvd to eastbound American Blvd** that makes this routing preferable to turning right from northbound Normandale to eastbound 84th Street for trips to locations within Bloomington. At present, there is no

good way to get to the ring road from Normandale, and so drivers take a right on 84th, and, once on 84th, they stay on 84th.

- ii. **A connection from eastbound Bridge Road (over Normandale) to northbound Highway 100** (and from there to eastbound and westbound I494) that provides direct egress from the Normandale Lake office complex to Hwy 100 and I494 for commuting office workers, so that they don't have to exit the area via either 84th Street or East Bush Lake Road during the evening rush.

A design incorporating these features would have to contend with additional potential traffic “weaves” on the east side of Hwy 100 between Bridge Road and I494. In addition, the routing of the connection from eastbound Bridge Road to northbound Hwy 100 is problematic. The best suggestion that I have heard is to loop it around from the intersection of Bridge Road and Stanley Road; run it along the south side of the bridge, and then under the bridge to the north to connect with Hwy 100. However, it may not be possible to build such an on-ramp without taking the westernmost building in the adjoining apartment complex. (Alternately, could a ramp be built directly from the bridge?)

- C. **The westbound on-ramp should be restored to the design of the I494 – East Bush Lake Road on-ramp.** The current design for the I494 – Hwy 100 interchange eliminates the existing on-ramp from 76th Street in Edina to southbound Hwy 100 and westbound 494, which serves the adjoining industrial park in Edina. As previously mentioned, the current design also lacks direct access from the Normandale Lake Office complex to Hwy 100 and I494. The only option currently “on the table” for moving traffic from these employment concentrations to westbound I494 is a proposed on-ramp at Picture Drive near the Hotel Sofitel. Given the obvious inconvenience of this option, many commuters will simply choose to continue with their current westbound “surface routes” via Highwood Drive and the equivalent streets on the Edina side of the border.

The Picture Ave option is driven by a Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) policy discouraging at-grade railroad crossings for freeway ramps, which is unavoidable at this location. Obviously, minimizing the potential for deadly car-train collisions is an important design objective. However, the relative risk of such accidents must be balanced against other safety risks, including the ongoing risks associated with continuing current levels of cut-through traffic in residential neighborhoods in Bloomington and Edina.

Since the original FHWA decision, the Minnesota State Legislature has passed a law that precludes further consideration of commuter rail services on the Dan Patch rail line. This means that we are unlikely to *ever* see an increase from the current level of rail service on these tracks. At present, this consists of an average of two round trip trains per day, each with no more than a handful of railcars, traveling under a 15 mph Department of Transportation speed limit and never at rush hour. I have lived near the

East Bush Lake Road / 84th Street railroad crossing for over 17 years, and I can't recall any car-train accidents at that heavily trafficked crossing, located a block from 494.

It's time to ask the FHWA to revisit their decision. The current decision does not reflect the ban on commuter rail service in this corridor and it does not take into account the overall net impact on the safety of both motorists *and residents* at *all* of the intersections in this area that will be directly or indirectly impacted by this decision. Their decision must also account for the fact that the new on-ramp would undoubtedly reduce the number of vehicles crossing the tracks at the East Bush Lake Road / 84th Street at-grade crossing.

D. The Highwood Drive bridge across 169 should be eliminated from the “full build” design alternative for the I494/169 interchange. Draft designs for both the “interim” and “full build” alternatives for the reconstruction of the Highway 169 – I494 interchange show the elimination of the current signalized intersection connecting Town Line Road on the west side of Highway 169 with Highwood Drive on the east. The current draft of the “full build” alternative shows this connection eventually being reestablished with a bridge over Hwy 169. In both the “interim” and “full build” designs, the frontage road is continued along 494, across 169 to W Bush Lake Road to provide a connection between Eden Prairie and Bloomington, and to connect Bloomington's Ensign Avenue neighborhood with the rest of the city. Neighborhood residents on both sides of 169 express satisfaction with this “interim” solution as a permanent connection for the following reasons:

- i. Building this bridge would require the taking of about a third of the homes in the Ensign Ave. neighborhood. As long as this design alternative is on the table, these residents will be living with the “Sword of Damocles” hanging over their heads.
- ii. Highwood neighborhood residents will see a significant reduction in cut-through traffic when the signalized intersection at 169 is eliminated. The neighborhood residents with whom I have spoken are willing to accept the inconvenience associated with a “detour” up W Bush Lake Road to the expanded frontage road (Marth Road) in order to travel west to Eden Prairie if it will result in permanently reduced through traffic volumes on Highwood.

The expanded frontage road on the Marth Road alignment that is *already a component* of the “interim” design of the new Hwy 169 – I494 interchange would form the western end of the extension of the ring route from East Bush Lake road to Hwy 169 proposed in Item “A”, above.

2. In conjunction with these changes designed to improve traffic flows on Bloomington's I494 arterial ring road and divert through traffic from Bloomington's parallel residential collector streets, I believe that it will be appropriate for the City to address ongoing neighborhood concerns over traffic volumes and speeds by **changing the design of the parallel collectors** to

improve neighborhood safety and livability. Roads that I believe will be appropriate for “[Road Diets](#)” treatment (one through travel lane in each direction, plus a separated left turn lane) include Highwood Drive, East Bush Lake Road and 84th Street. St. Paul saw accident reduction rates of over 50% on the streets in its initial “Road Diets” experiments. As part of this change, these streets should be incorporated into a dedicated system of bicycle routes with separated bike lanes.

Funding and Timing:

I acknowledge that such a plan must also recognize existing fiscal constraints and reflect realistic (i.e., “extended”) time frames for execution. With the exception of elements that are to be built in conjunction with the widening of I494 to three lanes west of Highway 100 over the next couple of years, it is unlikely that any of these proposed features can be funded for construction before 2007, at the earliest. However, planning for these features must commence now in order to secure funding in that timeframe. A City application for federal funding of the Ring Road extension in 2007 would be due to the Met Council Transportation Advisory Board by early summer, 2003, and there is a great deal of design work that would have to be done before the application was submitted.

The most pressing issue that the City must face immediately is the imminent letting of the contracts for the reconstruction of the East Bush Lake Road bridge and interchange, which is currently slated for January, 2003. MnDOT is currently finalizing design work on this interchange in preparation for the letting of the contract. The current design lacks the badly needed westbound on-ramp that the FHWA has blocked, and the current design of the interchange on the south side of I494 would essentially preclude the construction of the ring road extension from East Bush Lake Road west to Highway 169. This issue requires the City’s immediate attention.

Summary:

The City of Bloomington’s current Comprehensive Plan is deficient in its provisions for addressing the traffic safety problems of residential neighborhoods in northwestern Bloomington. Specifically, the lack of an effective 494 reliever “ring route” between France Ave and the Eden Prairie border forces overflow traffic from highways 169 and I494 to use residential collector streets that are not appropriate for that purpose. In order to correct this oversight, the City needs to incorporate an extension of American Boulevard from East Bush Lake Road to the Eden Prairie border into its Comprehensive Plan and apply to the Met Council for federal funding to build the extension.

At the same time, the City must engage MnDOT and Federal Highway Administration officials in St Paul in a discussion aimed at adjusting the current design of the I494 freeway interchanges between Highways 100 and 169 in order to better complement the changes that the City must make. Current designs appear to focus exclusively on optimizing the convenience and safety of individual traffic movements, while ignoring the overall safety impact on the entire area. What is needed is a comprehensive plan that optimizes safety for both motorists and residents by making it more convenient for motorists to drive *around* our residential neighborhoods rather than *through* them.