Legislation Text

File #: RES 21-164, **Version:** 1

Expressing the City's Priorities for the MnDOT "Rethinking I-94" Project.

WHEREAS, the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) in conjunction with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) is planning for a major investment in I-94 between I-35W and I-35E in its Rethinking I-94 project; and

WHEREAS, the condition of the roadway has deteriorated to the point where action is required and MnDOT has entered Phase 2 of its environmental documentation phase and will be drafting its purpose and need statement and goals for the project and are working with stakeholders, including the City of St. Paul to finalize it; and

WHEREAS, the City of Saint Paul has adopted the Saint Paul 2040 Comprehensive Plan, a policy framework that prioritizes walking, bicycling, and transit, with goals of increasing equity in transportation, reducing carbon emissions, improving human health through better air quality and increased active travel, and enabling the safe movement of people, goods, and services across the city; and

WHEREAS, the proposed project area is a rich and diverse community wherein 42% of residents are people of color and 32.6% of residents live below the federal poverty threshold; and

WHEREAS, the City of St. Paul passed Resolution 21-77 apologizing for its role in institutional racism and agreed to form a new commission to study reparations for Black residents whose ancestors were enslaved; and

WHEREAS, the original construction of the Saint Paul portion of I-94 in the 1960s extracted wealth from a historic, predominately African-American community through the destruction of businesses, over 700 homes, places of worship, and other community assets, and physically divided neighborhoods all along the corridor; and

WHEREAS, a recent study completed for ReConnect Rondo, Inc. by Yorth Group estimates that the construction of I-94 contributed to a loss of at least $157 million in home equity values and the flat line of homeownership rates, remaining at 34%, the same as it were in the 1950's; and

WHEREAS, a 2019 study conducted by Dr. Ed Goetz, Dr. Brittany Lewis, and others, at the University of Minnesota's Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, found significant evidence of gentrification in neighborhoods along the Re-Thinking I-94 project areas and found that gentrification looks different from one neighborhood to the next; and

WHEREAS, the City has adopted the small area plan of Frogtown Neighborhood Association which calls for development without displacement, providing a blueprint for both private and public investments to follow and minimize displacement of residents and small businesses; and

WHEREAS, the residents of neighborhoods adjacent to I-94 in the project corridor, including St. Anthony Park, Merriam Park, Snelling-Hamline, Lexington-Hamline, Hamline-Midway, Frogtown, Summit-University, Downtown, and Dayton's Bluff are continually subjected to harmful noise and air pollution from the high volume of traffic on I-94 and its connecting roadways; and

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WHEREAS, transportation is the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in Minnesota and approximately 31% of all emissions in Saint Paul, and the City aims to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050; and

WHEREAS, the Saint Paul Climate Action and Resilience Plan has stated goals to reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT) in the city and supports the Metropolitan Council's goal of doubling regional transit ridership by 2030; and

WHEREAS, low-carbon transportation modes are essential to providing transportation choices and accessibility while combating climate change and reducing economic disparities; and

WHEREAS, according to a Geometric and Traffic Conditions Summary prepared by the WSP, Community Design Group, and MnDOT, the vast majority of the vehicle trips originating in this corridor are short-distance, local trips; and

WHEREAS, the recent development of electric bicycles has made decarbonized private trips of three to five miles accessible and affordable; and

WHEREAS, new mobility infrastructure such as bicycle highways and protected bicycle lanes create local travel opportunities that are inexpensive, safe, fast, and convenient, rendering many local trips by interstate highway unnecessary; and,

WHEREAS, observed traffic within the study area ranges between 140,000 and 160,000 vehicles per day, emitting carbon emissions and generating air toxins and fine-particulate pollution that drifts into communities within one-half mile on either side of the highway; and

WHEREAS, research shows exposure to pollution from traffic can result in fetal and newborn illnesses, asthma attacks among children and adults, plus impaired lung function, impaired cognitive function, cardiovascular illness, multiple cancers, and premature death; and

WHEREAS, a 2014 Minnesota Department of Health study shows that asthma hospitalization rates are highest along a corridor that starts in downtown Minneapolis and tracks north and west, roughly along the I-94 freeway through the metro area; and

WHEREAS, high-speed urban highways are an anomaly of post-WWII civil defense planning, and have since been recognized as injurious to economic development, livability, and safety within the dense travel sheds they were intended to serve; and

WHEREAS, the land near an attractive, re-envisioned multimodal transportation corridor would be valuable for residential and commercial development delivering new jobs and tax-base; and

WHEREAS, Hennepin County and the Cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul have all invested significant resources to build critical bicycle facilities on Ayd Mill Road and the Midtown Greenway, and I-94 and CP Railroad lines currently prevent them from being connected and make north-south bicycle and pedestrian travel through the corridor exceedingly difficult; and

WHEREAS, the I-94 shoulder between Highway 280 and downtown Minneapolis, which was previously used by buses to avoid congestion, was converted to a general purpose traffic lane after the I-35W bridge collapse but was never restored by MnDOT after the new bridge opened, thereby ending the transit advantage; and

WHEREAS, the METRO Orange Line Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) from the southern suburbs to downtown Minneapolis will open in 2021 and the Gold Line BRT from the eastern suburbs to downtown Saint Paul is

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planned, a logical and necessary next expansion of the highway BRT system should connect the two downtowns and maximize the value of the investments we are already making; and

WHEREAS, the regional transit system should include fast and frequent express service between downtown Saint Paul and downtown Minneapolis, complementing Green Line Light Rail Transit service on University Avenue, which was never intended to be an express service but has been extremely successful in its intended goal to serve all the neighborhoods along the 18 stations in that corridor; and now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, the City of Saint Paul is supportive of MnDOT and FHWA's efforts to rethink and improve the I-94 corridor and strongly encourages frequent and ongoing stakeholder engagement to include and prioritize the voices of Rondo residents and their descendants who have been displaced by the I-94 construction in the 1960s; and, be it further

RESOLVED, the City of Saint Paul strongly supports and encourages direct appropriations to the impacted I-94 transportation project area for resources to support local hiring on the project, prevent displacement of residents and businesses, and improve air quality along the corridor to decrease asthma-related fatalities; and, be it further

RESOLVED, the Re-Thinking I-94 project must provide economic opportunities accessible to all businesses, especially minority- and women-owned businesses, and not result in further disparities in contracting and procurement; and be it further

RESOLVED, that by the City of Saint Paul strongly opposes the repair or reconstruction of I-94 in its current form and categorically rejects any lane expansion within its boundaries; and, be it further

RESOLVED, that the future I-94 corridor have reduced traffic volume and reduced vehicle miles traveled consistent with state and local goals and plans, leading to improved air quality, better health outcomes, and reduced noise for people living, working, playing, and traveling in the corridor; and

RESOLVED, the Rethinking I-94 project must include Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) service connecting the two downtowns and serving additional intermediate stations enroute by converting an existing lane to an HOV or HOT lane, and at a minimum including an online station at Snelling Avenue to connect to the METRO A Line and a station serving the University of Minnesota, and, be it further

RESOLVED, that parties to the Rethinking I-94 project must analyze existing structural barriers to walking, biking, and transit access that result from the freeway and provide recommendations and remedies to repair those harms, improve access, and increase equity in our transportation system for those in the I-94 corridor who are most negatively impacted and in need; and, be it further

RESOLVED, the Rethinking I-94 project include an extension of the Midtown Greenway across the Mississippi into Saint Paul to connect it with the new trail on Ayd Mill Road and a future Prospect Park Trail to 27th Ave SE, providing valuable access to pedestrians and bicyclists that are currently cut off by the highway; and, be it further

RESOLVED, the Rethinking I-94 project must minimize crash-related fatalities and injuries for all transportation users and pedestrians in the study corridor; and, be it further

RESOLVED, the Rethinking I-94 project should not create negative economic impacts or do anything to exacerbate existing inequities in the adjacent communities, and must actively work to repair some of the economic damage caused by the original construction of I-94; and, be it further

RESOLVED, MnDOT and FHWA must work with project partners to conduct robust public engagement and co-

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create the Rethinking I-94 project with communities, particularly BIPOC residents, along the corridor; and, be it finally

RESOLVED, that the Rethinking I-94 project must redesign the highway corridor to prioritize healthy, safe, affordable, accessible, and equitable mobility.