



Editorial: Planning for a better I-94 in the metro

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People in the Twin Cities should accept an invitation from the Minnesota Department of Transportation to help re-think I-94.

The vital link between St. Paul and Minneapolis — one that’s for many of us an indispensable route to work, school and the region’s cultural attractions — is the subject of public “visioning” workshops that continue through June.

It’s a complicated stretch, carrying 150,000 vehicles a day over 13 miles in the heart of the region, from the East Side of St. Paul at Highway 61 through both downtowns and the Lowry Hill tunnel to North Minneapolis.

But there’s much more to consider, suggests project director Brian Isaacson of MnDOT, including the ways people navigate — via bridges and other road connections — as I-94 traverses their neighborhoods.

The outreach is intentional, and respectful of the past, including I-94 construction in St. Paul in the 1960s that removed Rondo — St. Paul’s largest African American neighborhood — from the map.

“That history is still there,” Isaacson told us, noting the importance of “giving people a voice” in the conversations.

They’re happening at time when technology will bring revolutionary changes and design options create new opportunities:

Autonomous vehicles or so-called “driverless cars.” MnDOT’s work to anticipate the changes includes scenario planning. “We’re developing a number of different potential outcomes,” Isaacson explains. One assumes all vehicles using the region’s transportation system are autonomous and privately owned — another that all vehicles are autonomous and they’re all shared, “like an Uber-type system.”

“We’re essentially trying to establish a whole spectrum and then be able provide good information to our partners and leadership,” Isaacson told us.

Planners will need to anticipate whether people will be driving their own cars or “having cars driving them,” according to Frank Douma, a transportation researcher and director of the State and Local Policy Program at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey School of Public Affairs.

We’ve heard driverless cars are five years away. Instead, Douma said, “we’re probably moving into a world now where they will be five years away for maybe the next 20 years.”

But we’ll see “increasingly autonomous vehicles all the while,” he said.

The “lid” or “land bridge” concept of covering freeways with parks and residential and commercial space. There’s such potential in St. Paul, and Reconnect Rondo is advancing the cause. “We are trying to put the land bridge in the context of a complete vision for the area,” explains Marvin Roger Anderson, co-founder of the nonprofit Rondo Avenue Inc.

In a space of up to 15 acres that would reweave the neighborhood, he told us, the land bridge would provide for housing, economic opportunity, commercial development and a place “to reflect on the cultural history and legacy of the community.”

Advocates have met with MnDOT over the last year, said Anderson, who noted that his “personal vision” for the space includes a business incubator with technical, accounting and other business services that would help support entrepreneurs’ work and grow jobs.

The editorial board met last week with Randal O’Toole, a senior fellow at the liberty-oriented think tank Cato Institute and author of a study on traffic congestion in the Twin Cities from the Center of the American Experiment. It blames the Metropolitan Council and MnDOT for policies said to favor investing in transit over relieving congestion on metro roadways.

As MnDOT approaches its visioning and outreach process, he advises that the agency needs to consider a full range of alternatives.

That should include elevated lanes, MnPASS lanes — like the so-called high-occupancy lanes on I-35E — and “tolling all the lanes,” O’Toole said. “I’m not limiting it to that, but those, at the very least, need to be considered” because one of them “would be probably be the optimal solution.”

Too often, it’s not easy being a driver on I-94 in the heart of the metro. The solutions matter to all of us.