



Heritage Park
Neighborhood Association



June 20, 2024

To: Sec. Pete Buttigieg, Sen. Tina Smith, Sen. Amy Klobuchar, Rep. Ilhan Omar

CC: MnDOT District Engineer Khani Sahejbam, MnDOT West Area Manager Ryan Wilson, Project Manager Christina Perfetti, MnDOT Metro Bike & Pedestrian Coordinator Mike Samuelson, MnDOT Toward Zero Deaths Coordinator Tara Helm, Minneapolis City Operations Officer Margaret Anderson-Kelliher, Minneapolis Public Works Director Tim Sexton, Minneapolis Vision Zero Coordinator Ethan Fawley, Minneapolis Bicycle and Pedestrian Coordinator Kadence Novak

CC: Mayor Jacob Frey, Council Member Jeremiah Ellison, Council President Elliott Payne, Representative Esther Agbaje, Senator Bobby Joe Champion, Hennepin County Commissioner Irene Fernando

The undersigned organizations are writing on behalf of our communities to share our concerns regarding Olson Memorial Highway. Olson Memorial Highway, or Minnesota State Highway 55, is an urban highway running through Near-North Minneapolis. It is one of many urban highways that divides communities, pollutes the environment, and creates a hazardous environment for our residents. Olson Memorial Highway has a uniquely devastating history: as the result of redlining and racially restrictive covenants, the Near-Northside was one of the only areas in the city where Black and Jewish residents could own property. In 1936, when highway planners decided the route for Olson Highway, they intentionally targeted our communities for demolition. The construction of the highway was at the expense of a thriving Black and Jewish cultural corridor along 6th Avenue N that was home to dozens of shops, businesses and music venues.

Some of these historic infrastructure injustices and safety issues were set to be addressed with the construction of the METRO Blue Line Light Rail Extension, which was originally routed on Olson Memorial Highway. The light rail project was promised to bring modest but much-needed safety improvements as well as improved public transit service, affordable housing, and community-serving commercial amenities. However, after years of planning and development, the Blue Line Extension was rerouted and planned safety improvements and community benefits disappeared. Harrison, Heritage Park and other surrounding Near-North neighborhoods were left to deal with the negative consequences of this decision.

Our Streets, Harrison Neighborhood Association, and other community partners launched a campaign in 2021 to address the harms of Olson Memorial Highway and reclaim the highway land to reconstruct a walkable main street through Near North.

In response to community pressure, MnDOT created a project to reimagine the long-term future of the highway. In 2024 MnDOT and Hennepin County received a Reconnecting Communities and Neighborhoods grant to support these efforts.

While we are encouraged that MnDOT is undertaking efforts to reimagine the highway to better serve the communities it runs through, we are writing to share the following unaddressed concerns:

- 1. The design of Olson Memorial Highway continues to be dangerous and continues to create preventable tragedies every year that it is left in place**
- 2. Unabated property speculation following the original light rail route announcement has created increasingly unaffordable rents and gentrification. These pressures will likely worsen should Olson Memorial Highway be reimaged without proactive policies and protections**

To address these concerns, we have been seeking commitments from MnDOT and project partners to the following actions:

- 1. The implementation of the following safety improvements by MnDOT on Olson Memorial Highway, to be left in place until the corridor is fully constructed:**
 - Improved pedestrian lighting along the eastern portion the corridor
 - Undertake a pilot project to install aesthetic indicators to the pedestrian bump out a Van White & Olson Memorial Highway
 - Source the designs from North Minneapolis youth by contracting them in collaboration with Summit Academy's Best Buy Teen Tech Center
 - Work with the City of Minneapolis to seek a 25 mph speed limit on Highway 55 in Minneapolis, which is consistent with City-owned arterial streets and is necessary to reduce severe and fatal crashes
 - The first step toward this action is to announce a speed study
 - Lengthen crossing times at intersections
 - Restripe the roadway to one 10' lane in each direction, with dedicated left turn lanes, using the repurposed street space to:
 - Add a dedicated bus lane between downtown and Penn to facilitate operational improvements, speed and reliability
 - Add a protected bike lane using temporary construction barriers
- 2. A commitment from the City of Minneapolis, Hennepin County and the Metropolitan Council to collaborate on reparations for historic harms, and to collaborate on proactive anti-displacement and community benefit policies as part**

of the Olson Memorial Highway project. This must begin with the following actions:

- \$1 million investment in HNA's Home Improvement Grant program to assist low-income homeowners in maintaining the habitability of their homes.
- \$1 million investment in HNA's Down Payment Assistance Fund to assist residents in achieving homeownership.
- \$1 million investment in a Harrison Rental Assistance Fund.
- Implementation of the infrastructure improvements outlined in the Van White and Penn Avenue Station Area Plans, which include sidewalk improvements, the construction of a community pavilion and picnic area at Van White Park, new heated bus shelters and lighting improvements throughout the neighborhood.
- A moratorium on the sale of Harrison's four city-owned garden lots to ensure continued community access to fresh and healthy produce.
- A commitment of 300 project-based public housing vouchers to be applied to new housing development projects within the Harrison neighborhood, ensuring units are affordable to residents at or below 30% of Area Median Income.
- A commitment on the part of the Met Council to work with HNA and Harrison community stakeholders to develop a community-serving grocery store at 260 Fremont Avenue North.
- Tax forgiveness or tax waiver for low-income Harrison homeowners who cannot afford their increased property taxes and special assessments in order to assist them in avoiding tax forfeiture of their homes and the loss of generational wealth opportunities.
- Funding for a Heritage Park maintenance fund.

Despite broad community support for these actions, MnDOT and project partners have largely ignored these demands.

In the summer of 2022, MnDOT implemented minor design changes on Olson Memorial Highway in response to community pressure. However, these changes fell well short of community expectations, and Olson Memorial Highway continues to be unsafe and inaccessible for all users. MnDOT continues to oppose needed design changes, including a lowered speed limit and reducing traffic lanes to one lane in each direction.

Furthermore, it is unclear if there is any work underway by MnDOT, Hennepin County, The City of Minneapolis and/or the Metropolitan Council to work with community members on reparations for past injustice and proactive policies to ensure that this project does not facilitate displacement and benefits Northside community members.

We are writing to ask the federal government to bring project partners together to address these urgent concerns before the project moves forward. This project has the opportunity to set the nationwide standard for reparative justice, however, that work must begin by urgently addressing community concerns about roadway safety and displacement.

Sincerely,

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