

Rethinking I-94

Alternatives Evaluation Messaging

Background Messaging

- The I-94 corridor is one of Minnesota's most frequently traveled corridors and supports a variety of multimodal transportation needs. The corridor, which connects the Twin Cities across the river, **plays a critical role in the movement of people, freight and goods for the Twin Cities metropolitan area**, offers express and limited-stop transit opportunities, serves up to 167,000 vehicles per day and acts as a vital route for emergency response organizations such as emergency medical response teams, hospitals and law enforcement agencies.
- **MnDOT's mission** is to connect and serve all people through a safe, equitable and sustainable transportation system. Our multimodal transportation system seeks to maximize the health of people, the environment and our economy.
- In carrying out this work, we recognize that **communities must have a voice in the decisions** that impact their future, and we are continually seeking ways to enhance our engagement and communication with community members.
- At the onset of this project, MnDOT made a promise to the communities along I-94 to do better. **Since 2016, MnDOT has spent time in communities along the corridor, listening to what community members have to say about transportation and how MnDOT can better serve community interests.**
- What we heard:
 - Community members expressed frustration related to **congestion** when trying to get to and from work, school, or running errands, and voiced a need for **more frequent and reliable transit** during convenient times.
 - Community members told us that **safety on the highway and when walking/bicycling** to and from places within the community is a top concern.
 - Community members voiced a need for MnDOT to address the **poor condition of the roadway and connected infrastructure.**
 - Community members expressed interest in **land bridges, stitches, caps and tunnels.**
 - Community members told us that **rail alternatives** such as light rail transit, highspeed rail, heavy rail and a S-Bahn system, were important to them.
 - **One of the alternatives that received the most attention was the at-grade option.** MnDOT heard both **strong support** and **strong opposition** to the at-grade options from community members and stakeholders via community events, open houses, the public survey in 2023, and in written communications to the project team. For example, while local advocacy groups expressed the most interest in and support for at-grade alternatives, other community members, such as corridor commuters, expressed opposition against at-grade alternatives more frequently than support.
 - MnDOT also heard there were **items in addition to transportation** that were important to the community. Personal safety, green space, noise, pollution, and many other interests were identified. These comments were taken to heart by MnDOT and

incorporated into the evaluation criteria through our livability framework. The federal **National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) was created, in part, because of past practices in transportation decisions. Those decisions did not include meaningful public involvement and did not include a rigorous process for evaluating impacts to social, economic or environmental resources.** Following the federal example, Minnesota adopted the Minnesota Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). Both NEPA and MEPA have established guidance that is required to be followed in project development and evaluation.

- **It's important to note that we are following the federal National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) which was created, in part, because of past practices in transportation decisions. In following this law, we are building more equitable outcomes on transportation projects - increasing the role the community plays in providing feedback.**
 - On Rethinking 94, **MnDOT has exceeded the requirements put forward in law – engaging the public and incorporating their feedback** and sharing information with communities more frequently than what is required.
 - NEPA was designed to produce more meaningful public involvement on major transportation initiatives, which had not previously included a rigorous process for evaluating impacts to social, economic or environmental resources.
- Prior to identifying alternatives, and **in collaboration with agency partners** (Minneapolis, St. Paul, Hennepin County, Ramsey County, Metropolitan Council, Metro Transit, and the Federal Highway Administration), **MnDOT identified several criteria to evaluate potential solutions** (alternatives). MnDOT shared these criteria with the public, listened to their comments and updated the criteria based upon their input.
- **MnDOT did not pre-select alternatives. We applied an objective approach to this project by first defining the problem, creating measurable evaluation criteria and evaluating all alternatives fairly. This was all done in partnership with the community to avoid bias towards or against any specific alternative.**
- There were **four different types of evaluation criteria identified**. These include:
 - **Purpose and Need:** These criteria are used to see if an alternative fixes the transportation problems on I-94. Problems on I-94 include safety/crashes, congestion, the condition of the roadway, and the ability of and comfort for people to walk or bicycle across or along the highway.
 - **Social, economic and environmental (SEE) Resources:** These criteria are used to see what impacts to important things along I-94 could happen if an alternative is built. Important resources include things such as: air quality, noise, historic/archaeological sites, property not owned by MnDOT, wetlands, parks and trails, and threatened and endangered plants/animals.
 - **Goals/Livability:** These criteria were included based upon what MnDOT heard from the public during the deep community engagement work in Phase 1. They assess the potential benefits and drawbacks of alternatives in terms of fostering a sense of place, promoting economic vitality, enhancing public health, and strengthening connections within the community.

- **Additional Considerations:** are criteria that look at how much an alternative will cost to build and maintain over time, and if it supports state and regional plans.
- **Alternatives that best meet these criteria will be recommended to be further studied in the next step of the state and federal environmental process, which MnDOT must follow to build improvements on I-94. Alternatives that do not meet the standards set for the project will be recommended to not be studied in the next step.**
- **It is important to note that these are MnDOT's recommendations. While we are confident in our analysis and the decisions we lay out, the public will be asked to provide additional input before we move forward to the next phase of this project.**
- In working through years of analysis, listening to community organizations and members and engaging with stakeholders and partners across every level of government, we have the information available to us to move this project forward in a way that benefits people and communities.
- **While MnDOT is responsible for this project, we cannot do this alone.** As this project moves forward, it will require continued collaboration with partners and members of the community.
- MnDOT will host a public comment period for the "Rethinking I-94" project, inviting community feedback on the alternatives selected to move forward in the Tier 1 phase. This public comment period is currently planned to begin late 2025 / early 2026. During this time, MnDOT is eager to hear from the public on proposed concepts that aim to improve the I-94 corridor, considering factors like congestion relief, safety, and environmental impact. This feedback will help shape the next steps in the planning process as MnDOT refines its approach to addressing the corridor's needs. Nothing is final until we have incorporated this input.

Retain/Dismiss - Evaluation Messaging

The alternatives not moving forward for further evaluation include:

- **Expanded A and B** – Rebuild of the existing freeway and addition of one lane.
- **At-Grade A and B** – Removal of the existing freeway, filling in the corridor, and constructing a new at-grade roadway and BRT lanes.
- **Local/Regional** – Separation of the freeway into two roadway systems, providing a separate local traffic roadway and freeway space for through trips with limited access for regional traffic and accommodates transit on the shoulder.
- **Maintenance A** – Maintain the existing infrastructure and transit service.

While these options may address some identified transportation problems, **these alternatives would have negative impacts on community members and to resources within the community.**

Negative impacts associated to property not owned by MnDOT, noise, air quality, historic and cultural resources, parks, water quality, plants and animals living adjacent to the corridor, and others indicate these alternatives should not be further studied.

These are the alternatives moving forward for further study:

- **No Build** – I-94 would remain as is. No improvements to transit would be made, existing transit service would continue.
- **General Maintenance B** – Updates the existing infrastructure to current standards with consistent shoulders. This would allow transit to run on bus shoulders between downtown Minneapolis and downtown St. Paul.
- **Reduced Freeway A** – Rebuilds the existing freeway, reducing to 3 lanes throughout in total. Of the three lanes made available in both directions, two lanes would be general purpose lanes with one lane being converted to a managed lane in each direction for BRT and E-ZPass.
- **Reconfigure Freeway** – Rebuilds the existing freeway to provide 4 consistent lanes in each direction, with one lane being converted to a managed lane in each direction for BRT and E-ZPass.

While the No Build option is required to move forward as the baseline for future comparison, **these alternatives improve the safety and comfort of pedestrians and motorists, improve pavement and bridge conditions, improve mobility, and provide transit benefits through access and travel time. In addition, these alternatives show a unique ability to advance the project goals and livability priorities expressed by the community, while improving air quality and negative impacts to environmental justice communities along the corridor.**

Because these alternatives demonstrate significant opportunities to achieve a more sustainable and safer future for I-94 and the community, while meeting the critical transportation needs of our region, it is our recommendation that they move forward for further evaluation.

MnDOT is excited about the opportunity that these alternatives offer to improve our multi-modal transportation system, connect communities and build towards a clean future.

Retain/Dismiss - Alternatives Messaging

No Build: Retain

- The No Build alternative is required to be evaluated in the Federal environmental process (Tier 1 EIS) and will be used as a baseline for comparison of build alternatives.
- The No Build alternative does not improve safety, mobility and infrastructure condition.

General Maintenance A: Dismiss

- General Maintenance A is dismissed from further consideration.
 - General Maintenance A does not offer sufficient improvements to safety and mobility.

- This option provides very little in terms of improvements to both walkability and bikeability.

General Maintenance B: Retain

- General Maintenance B is retained and will continue to be studied.
 - This option provides notable improvements compared to the no build. Pavement and bridges are reconstructed, creating an opportunity for bicycle and pedestrian crossing improvements. Bus shoulders are extended through the whole corridor, which would improve mobility for transit users. The option provides for the safety benefits associated with widened roadway shoulders.
 - However, there are concerns about the ability of this alternative to fully address project goals outside of infrastructure condition due to the limited changes to the corridor.

At-Grade A/At-Grade B: Dismiss

- **Option One:** At-grade A and B are being dismissed due to concerns related to safety, mobility, impacts to environmental justice communities, and short- and long-term costs.
- **Option Two:** The decision to eliminate At-Grade alternatives is driven by **significant safety concerns**, as these designs result in **increased traffic issues and a higher risk of crashes** – especially among **vulnerable users**, including walkers, bikers, and neighborhood residents. Furthermore, retaining the At-Grade options will **negatively impact mobility**. As one of Minnesota’s most traveled corridors, a significant change to the roadway would negatively impact not only daily commuters but also freight and transit, resulting in negative impacts to the local economy. Freight travel times in the corridor would increase to 18-23 minutes, compared to 8-11 minutes with the No Build. This also presents a variety of concerns for emergency response vehicles. Heavy traffic areas, such as Snelling Ave. in St. Paul and the Mississippi River crossing in Minneapolis, **would become so severely congested that it would be non-functional and unsafe for vehicles and pedestrians**. Environmental justice communities are also vulnerable to mobility impacts. At-grade alternatives will also **further existing inequities in air quality and noise pollution – as additional traffic would be displaced to neighboring local streets**. The likelihood of introducing new or additional negative impacts on these communities, combined with higher costs, extended project duration, and overall disruption to daily lives associated with building At-Grade infrastructure, reinforces the need to prioritize more sustainable and safer alternatives.
 - The At-Grade alternatives do not address the number and severity of crashes for people in motorized vehicles. At-Grade alternatives push additional traffic to surrounding roadways, which have higher crash rates than the existing freeway.
 - The At-Grade alternatives would require redesignating the freeway system to a local roadway and would require Federal approval.

- The At-Grade alternatives would require expanding 694 and 494 to handle the additional traffic that would be diverted to those roadways from an At-Grade I-94. Expanding these roadways would require Federal Highway Administration approval.
- **Option Three:** The decision to eliminate At-Grade alternatives is based on serious safety concerns, as these options introduce new traffic conflicts and a higher risk of crashes. Keeping these options would limit mobility and would negatively impact air quality and noise pollution to those along the corridor and for vulnerable communities, worsening existing inequities. These impacts combined with the overall costs associated with building At-Grade A and B, highlight the need to prioritize safer and more sustainable alternatives.

Local/Regional: Dismiss

- Local/Regional option is dismissed from further consideration.
 - Local/Regional increases travel time for motorized vehicles, freight, and public transit.
 - Opportunities to improve bikeability and walkability would be limited.
 - Local/Regional would shift traffic closer to homes and through residential neighborhoods, increasing noise and air pollution.

Reduced Freeway: Retain

- Reduced Freeway is retained and will continue to be studied.
 - Reduced Freeway provides opportunities to improve the safety and comfort of people walking, bicycling or rolling.
 - Reduced Freeway addresses transportation problems related to safety (the number and severity of crashes would be reduced) and would improve pavement and bridge conditions.
 - Reduced Freeway would provide transit benefits through higher-speed bus rapid transit and improve transit access for those living near the highway.
 - Reduced Freeway enhances connectivity by creating opportunities for locally planned improvements across the corridor – including pedestrian and bicycle improvements.
 - Reduced Freeway will reduce the amount of noise heard by nearby homes and shows opportunities to provide new green space and other community enhancements.
 - However, Reduced Freeway will increase congestion. Increased congestion is shown to have negative impacts to air quality because cars, trucks, and buses are traveling at slower speeds and because of stop and go conditions.

Reconfigure Freeway: Retain

- Reconfigure Freeway is retained and will continue to be studied.
 - Reconfigure Freeway improves the safety and comfort of people walking, bicycling or rolling.

- Reconfigure Freeway reduces travel time and provides opportunities to advance project goals and livability – including improvements to public health through the expansion of green space.

Expanded Freeway/Expanded Freeway B: Dismiss

- The Expanded Freeway option is dismissed from further consideration.
 - While the Expanded Freeway option would improve mobility in the corridor, this option would have negative impacts on public health and the environment – particularly to those most vulnerable such as environmental justice populations along the corridor.
 - Expanded Freeway alternatives would increase air and noise pollution and would not contribute to the project goals identified.

Next Steps Messaging

At this stage, no final decisions have been made.

MnDOT is continuing to work with agency partners and established working groups to evaluate the alternatives and finalize recommendations for the Rethinking I-94 project. The alternatives being evaluated along with the criteria being used to evaluate them were developed out of a comprehensive review process that includes agency partners, established working groups, and the community. Once the evaluation materials and our recommendations are finalized, we will share the information widely for public review and comment.

In late 2025 / early 2026, an official public comment period will be held on a Scoping Document/Draft Scoping Decision Document that will include evaluation results and the alternatives we recommend for further study in the next phase of the Rethinking I-94 project.

These comments will be gathered, categorized by theme, and analyzed to identify key concerns. The identified themes will play a crucial role in shaping the environmental review process as we progress into Tier 1. They will assist MnDOT in prioritizing areas for comprehensive study and will inform the ongoing development of retained project alternatives and potential mitigation strategies related to their impacts. The final Scoping Decision Document will record comments received and will document how feedback has influenced decisions. Comments and public input received prior to or outside of the “official public comment period” will be collected but will not be part of the official record.

We continue to encourage community members and stakeholders to provide input, and we remain committed to maintaining transparency throughout the project. From the start, MnDOT engaged community members and other government agencies to gather input, provide regular project updates and share accurate/updated information as it has become available for public feedback. We will continue to engage with the community by attending community events, hosting public meetings, and providing presentations to stakeholder groups.

In working through years of analysis, listening to community organizations and members and engaging with stakeholders and partners across every level of government, **we have the information available to us to move this project forward** in a way that benefits people and communities.

MnDOT appreciates continued interest and engagement in Rethinking I-94 as we work to plan the future of this important corridor.