

The Smallest Cog Bike Shop
115 S. Minnesota Avenue
St. Peter, MN 56082

Minnesota State Senate Transportation Committee
Attn: Beth Ethier, Committee Administrator
Minnesota Senate Building
Room 1100
St. Paul, MN 55155

March 2, 2024

Dear Senators,

Subject: Written testimony in support of SF 3993

MnDOT District 7 is the reason that Complete Streets policy on Trunk Highways must be made mandatory as proposed by SF 3993. Our District views Complete Streets as an unfunded mandate, and a compilation of the 2023-2032 Capital Highway Investment Plans submitted by all eight MnDOT districts (see enclosure) makes this disparity and their disdain clear: Our combined project count (46) for pedestrian and bicycle projects over next 10 years lags other out-state districts—even those with half our projected budget. Why? Because in those other districts all users are planned for with each new transportation project; our district doesn't do that. Ask around and you may find that D7's reputation precedes us.

Let me articulate the real world effects of this indifference to other users of our highway system. My retail business is located on Trunk Highway 169 in St. Peter, otherwise known as Minnesota Avenue. Our Main Street will soon have the only traffic signals on 169 between North Mankato and Bloomington. Since 2009, when our Main Street was reconstructed as an ARRA project, every change to it has benefited thru traffic, to the determinant of our community, central business district, residents living along the road, and anyone making local trips. Simply put: MnDOT cares more about the people moving through our community than the people who live in it. This is the reality, despite a decade or more of a Complete Streets policy being in place for trunk highways, and the more recent legislative guidance to consider the needs of all users with each trunk highway project.

As a former transportation planner who has worked on Complete Streets policies, I can tell you that one of the first tasks in developing a Complete Streets approach is to engage all stakeholders when a project is proposed. This simply has not happened in St. Peter. In 2017, MnDOT unilaterally raised the speed limit on the north side of our city to 40 mph, after conducting a speed study. Forget that the land use context is residential and the corridor in question lacks any designated crosswalks and medians for residents who wish to traverse MnDOT's road. In 2023, MnDOT synchronized all five of our traffic signals to produce a green wave through our city. This coincided with the start of the holiday shopping season which is

crucial for our central business district, and our city council members learned of this change the same way I did: from a MnDOT press release reprinted in the Mankato Free Press. The upcoming (2027) reconstruction of the 40 mph segment that will widen the road, construct a median, and eliminate most left turns, offers no hope for a change in MnDOT's approach on community engagement and Complete Streets policy. It would surprise no one if the speed limit did not remain at 40 mph.

Getting a project wrong can have effects that reverberate for a generation or more. Consider that a project can take 5 years to plan and another 20 years before it is updated and changed. When our family moved to St. Peter, we looked at houses along Highway 169—many of which were attractive—but we ultimately dismissed them because the road was impossible to cross, dangerous to bike along, and miserable to live on. Just think about what that does to the economic position of families who tie up most of their wealth in their homes.

Absent a legislative mandate and strong oversight from MnDOT's central office, our MnDOT district will continue to do as it pleases, often in contradiction to the wishes of the communities through which its roads pass. Whatever local check there is on MnDOT's sovereignty is muted because cities like ours often rely on the timely maintenance of MnDOT's roads and its good graces when applying for state aid projects. The incentive to go along to get along is strong.

My ask is this: update the legislation to make consideration of all users an inescapable part of transportation planning; require that district engineers walk their proposed projects; train all districts on Complete Streets design, operations, and maintenance; and periodically revisit the question of Complete Streets to ensure that MnDOT is following legislative intent. That last part is critical for it was only with pushback from citizens and local press coverage (see attached) that included the words 'MnDOT Ombudsman' that District 7 came back to the table and made some concessions. It still takes up to 3 minutes to get a WALK signal in our central business district, but at least we now have a Leading Pedestrian Indicator.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide my testimony. Please do not hesitate to contact me for clarification of my remarks or with requests for additional information.

Sincerely,

Mark Plotz
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Enclosures

- "Quicker traffic signal times on 169 prompt pedestrian backlash," Hughes, Carson, St. Peter Herald, November 22, 2023. Retrieved on 3/02/2024.
- MnDOT 2023-2032 Capital Highway Investment Plan, Plotz, Mark. Created on 2/7/2023.

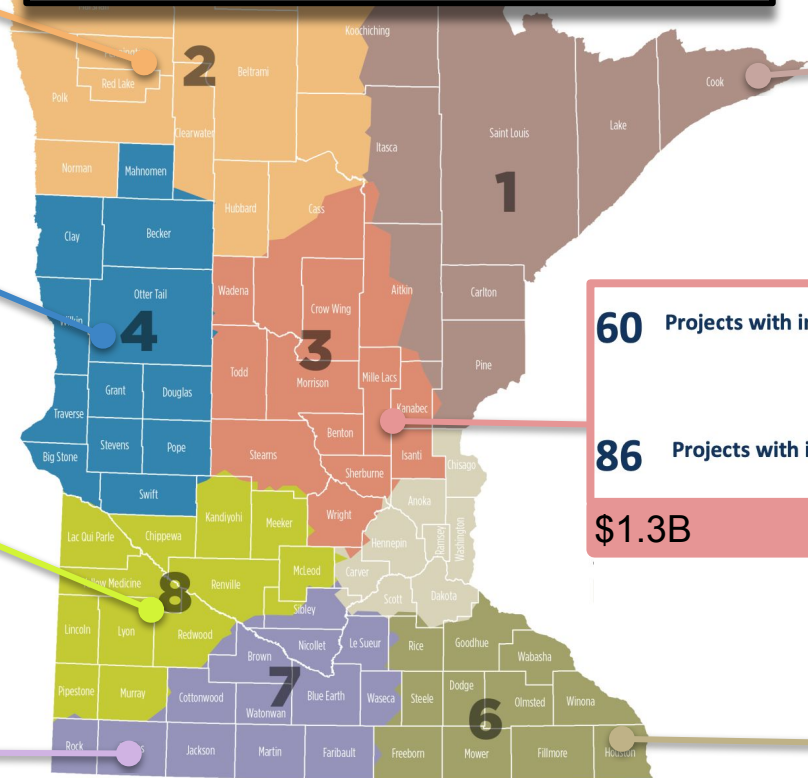
44 Projects with improvements for bikers 

54 Projects with improvements for walkers 

\$585M

Capital Highway Investment Plan 2023 - 2032

Active Transportation Project Count &
Ten Year Surface Transportation Investment



73 Projects with improvements for bikers 

77 Projects with improvements for walkers 

\$1.2B

21 Projects with improvements for bikers 

29 Projects with improvements for walkers 

\$736M

24 Projects with improvements for bikers 

25 Projects with improvements for walkers 

\$577M

19 Projects with improvements for bikers 

27 Projects with improvements for walkers 

\$960M

60 Projects with improvements for bikers 

86 Projects with improvements for walkers 

\$1.3B

48 Projects with improvements for bikers 

48 Projects with improvements for walkers 

\$868M

https://www.southernminn.com/st_peter_herald/news/quicker-traffic-signal-times-on-169-prompt-pedestrian-backlash/article_9bcdd7ea-875c-11ee-8189-1f47b8ff934c.html

SPOTLIGHT

Quicker traffic signal times on 169 prompt pedestrian backlash

By CARSON HUGHES carson.hughes@apgsomn.com

Nov 22, 2023

Due to new traffic signals installed on Highway 169 Nov. 13, motorists should be seeing more green lights and fewer delays driving through downtown St. Peter. But local pedestrian travelers have raised concerns these timing changes will make crossing the highway more difficult than ever.

During the public comment of the city of St. Peter's City Council meeting, The Smallest Cog owner Mark Plotz protested that the signal timing updates to all five traffic signals on Highway 169 would only serve to move traffic in and out of St. Peter faster to the detriment of pedestrians crossing the street.

"While none of you operate retail businesses, I think it should be evident that the goal of moving vehicles past my front door as quickly as possible is no strategy for my economic success," said Plotz. "But whatever, I can take care of myself, and if I can't make a living here, then I will go somewhere where I can. The real problem is the expectation among drivers that is created by these operational changes — that they don't have to stop, slow down or yield when moving through our city."

While the signal timing changes have been shown to reduce traffic delay between 15-40% and travel times by 25% nationally, according to MNDOT, District Traffic Engineer Scott Thompson said the updates were more likely to encourage drivers to travel the speed limit than at faster speeds.

"One of the more common misconceptions with signal timing is that it could potentially increase speeds through a community and what needs to be remembered is when these timing plans get developed, they're based on the posted speed limit," said Thompson. "So if motorists are going faster than speed limit, more likely than not, they're going to encounter multiple red lights because they're going faster than the program is designed for."

Thompson noted that MNDOT was also implementing leading pedestrian intervals at the 169 traffic lights as part of the signal retiming effort. The leading pedestrian interval brings up the walk sign around 3 seconds before vehicles heading in a parallel direction are given a green light, allowing pedestrians a head-start before vehicles can turn onto the intersection.

"That helps to make the pedestrian much more visible to those motorists turning left or turning right so that there are less



New signal timing updates by MNDOT are designed to bring about more efficient travel on the Highway 169 through St. Peter, but local residents have raised concerns the changes will lead to increased speeds and more hazardous crossings. (Carson Hughes/southernminn.com)

chances of pedestrians getting hit when they have the right-of-way," said Thompson.

But Plotz argued that for the people and business owners who make their living on Highway 169, vehicle traffic was already too fast and should be slowed down. At the current speed limit, Plotz said vehicles were treating St. Peter as a place to get through as quickly as possible, making road crossings more hazardous for pedestrians. He cited his own recent experience of attempting to cross 169 on his bike with his kids trailer when a driver blew past a red light.

"I want to be able to have a conversation in front of my shop. I want to be able to cross on the green without worrying that drivers will stop. I want to see people of all ages and abilities able to cross the street safely, even at the uncontrolled crosswalks," Plotz wrote in his full remarks. "I want my customers to feel safe enough to park in front of my business without fear of having their door torn off by an 18-wheeler."

Patty Conlin, who lives and works out of her home studio on Highway 169 Stone's Throw Gallery, added to Plotz's concerns. She said traffic on the highway has only gotten noisier and faster over her past 17 years living in town and had multiple stories of nearly getting hit by vehicles.

"St. Peter is a delightful town, I love living here except for that. We can't sleep at night because of that truck traffic," said Conlin.

Local resident Dean Pertle also raised complaints that the speed limits on Highway 169 weren't being enforced.

"I think we can all agree people are not driving the speed limit on 169, and it does not make for an enjoyable experience walking downtown at all, and I think St. Peter would benefit from less traffic, certainly less high speed traffic," said Pertle. "I find it remarkable that there is never any enforcement of the speed laws as you drive 169."

In a letter to the City Council, Plotz urged local leaders to pass a complete streets policy that would set their own goals for Highway 169 to slow down traffic and appeal to the MNDOT Office of Ombudsman if the state's operations of the highway violate the city's wishes.

Due to Highway 169's status as an arterial road that connects Mankato and Southern Minnesota to the Twin Cities area, Thompson said that MNDOT had to balance the needs of the local area with the need to accommodate the average 16,000 vehicles that travel the highway on an average day.

"We have to balance the fact that it's in an urban environment with the fact that it is a US Highway and the speed limits do seem appropriate based upon the behavior we're seeing as well as the absence of very severe crashes," said Thompson. "The overwhelming majority of crashes that are happening in the St. Peter area on 169 are property damage only."

Thompson added there were significant benefits to reducing the amount of time vehicles have to stop, not only in reducing traffic times but fuel usage and wear and tear on vehicles as well.

"Every dollar we invest in this effort yields \$50 in benefit," said Thompson. "It is a low-cost high benefit improvement to those that are walking to those that are driving."

Reach Reporter Carson Hughes at 507-931-8575. ©Copyright 2022 APG Media of Southern Minnesota. All Rights Reserved.

Carson Hughes