

Bridge Avenue Corridor Survey Questions & Answers

(The Chamber only offers these documents as a service to our members. They are not intended to indicate our preference for any particular solution, at this time.)

Responses from Freeborn County & the City of Albert Lea

What will the impact be on local property taxes?

It is difficult to answer that question when there has not been a design selection. Design options range from \$7.4M to rebuild exactly what exists today to \$20.6M build to a four lane configuration. By setting a direction, either two lane, two lane modified, three lane or four lane, then city and county staff can begin staging the construction and seeking outside state and federal funding. Construction would be phased into multiple construction projects scheduled every few years as state or federal grants could be obtained. The objective is to limit the property tax burden by seeking federal grants that are traditionally 80% federal funding and 20% state aid with minimal local funds. The City of Albert Lea and Freeborn County staff cannot apply for these grants until a direction is set. The soonest grant monies would be available is 2014 by traditional funding cycles. (Non traditional sources could be obtained earlier by future economic stimulus or earmark).

How many homes and businesses would be demolished and has the impact to tax base been considered?

There has been no detailed design for any of the options presented so it is premature to state exactly what acquisition is necessary. We have been told that the drawings in the plan are concepts and alternate designs may require more or less acquisition or a different area all together depending on how best to make a connection between Bridge Avenue and Main Street. (For example, the drawing showing Marshall and Sibley combined together going through the Chamber building and by the B&B Café is only a concept.) To eliminate the high density of access points and allow widening, residential homes would need to be purchased. There could be opportunities to redevelop properties with access from side streets minimizing the loss of tax base.

Would property owners be paid fair market value?

Especially if federal monies are used, the City and the County would need to follow strict rules for developing appraisals and formulating offers. Under federal relocation guidelines, similar housing would also need to be available to relocate too or a premium is paid. If there is only limited widening acquiring just a few feet, the City may not be in a position to acquire the whole property in the homeowner no longer wanted to stay.

Current and projected traffic counts seem inflated?

Several comments questioned the existing traffic on Bridge Avenue. The State of MN provides the counts and publishes the results to their web site. Projected traffic is an *estimate* based on potential development or redevelopment in the future. It is possible that the 20 year projection may not be met. The City and County Engineer ask us to keep in mind though that this new construction will serve a useful life of 70 years or so. Estimating what the traffic

demand will be in 20 years is difficult and 70 years is even more difficult, but most agree that if our community is to grow in the next 70 years, traffic demand will probably increase.

What happens to the business community if we don't accept the four lane recommendation?

All agree that minor improvements along the corridor such as a left turn lane on Hawthorne and possibly vacating a portion of Bridge Avenue from Clark Street to Fountain Street would eliminate bottlenecks and hazard points. The roadway could function just as it does today for several years, but as traffic increases it may become increasingly difficult to make left turns on to or off of Bridge Avenue. Whether or not that difficulty would drive customers away is unknown.

Didn't we have a recommendation in 2005 that could have been followed then?

The 2005 study considered growth and development of the city, safety and mobility and then presented options for short, intermediate and long term solutions. The follow up study included "estimated" costs including right of way acquisition for each long term solution as one conclusion from the 2005 study was that the underground utilities are nearing the end of their useful life on the majority of the corridor. As it would not make sense to spend money for short term fixes and then tear them out to replace water main and sewer pipes, the focus shifted to long term solutions. This study also completed the initial environmental documentation and design option study required to apply for federal funding whether that funding is targeted toward a \$10M project or a \$20M project.

Can a four lane facility be constructed "GREEN" and without destroying the charm and small town feel?

One element of "GREEN" construction is to build once and build right the first time. There are ways to incorporate traffic calming and aesthetics into a four lane design to make Bridge Avenue a much more appealing gateway entrance to our community. For example, a four lane design would include a vegetation plan for aesthetics and screening remaining homes. Multi-modal improvements could be accommodated such as transit stops and a 10' bike/pedestrian path that would be more easily maintained in winter conditions as it would not be right next to the roadway where snow and ice from the driving lane are deposited on the walkways.

Are there alternates that haven't been considered and where does connecting the downtown fit?

Beltway concepts routing traffic away from downtown were not considered as an alternate. Several parallel corridors were evaluated without meeting a cost benefit. Keeping downtown directly connected to all commercial and retail regions of the City had been the consensus of the various public meetings specific to the corridor as well as other more general community planning initiatives such as Albert Lea Listens.

Can't we just put in more stoplights to solve the problems?

The city and county responded that more stop lights will be part of the solution. But the Hawthorne intersection is a good example of constructing a stop light without thought of the impact to the corridor. When stop lights are proposed, impact of other access points, right of way to accommodate turn lanes, etc needs to be part of the initial

design, not as an after thought as in the Hawthorne situation. Regardless of stop light construction, the complete roadway will still need to be reconstructed in the near future as the infrastructure is failing due to age. Underground utilities have not been scheduled for replacement as of yet but will need to be replaced in the near future.

Can't the City Council and County Board vote not to follow the four lane recommendation?

The Chamber's position on this should be that a decision, any decision needs to be made and soon. Homeowners are in limbo and the business community is nervous about the unknown. There is outside funding (non local property tax revenue) that could be leveraged once a direction is set. County and City staff support the consultant's recommendation for a four lane facility as the design concept that can solve most of the problems of today and the future at the most economical long term cost. However, the staff will follow the direction of the elected officials so if a two lane concept is decided, then parts of the project will be addressed to fit into the overall two lane concept.

Response from Albert Lea
Northside Business & Homeowners Association (NBHA)

What will the impact be on local property taxes?

City & county officials plan on requesting monies from the federal government to pay for a portion of the project. It's very unclear at this time how much of the project would be paid for through government monies. Usually the government will only cover a percent of the total cost of the project. If the project's cost doubles before it is built, the estimated cost could be up to \$40 million dollars. Even if the government agreed to pay for 75% of the project at a \$30 million dollar price tag, \$10 million would still need to be passed along to taxpayers through increased property taxes.

How many homes and businesses would be demolished and has the impact to tax base been considered?

According to the four lane road option plan which is being recommended by the consultants the plan would include the demolition of approximately 30 homes on the west side of Bridge Ave between Marshall St and the fairgrounds. Businesses affected include the Chamber building, and about 3 or 4 other businesses next to the Chamber building and the Quizno's restaurant. To our knowledge there has been no attention given to the negative impact on the tax base by the consultant or the city and county engineers and administrators. Other businesses may not be demolished but would suffer accessibly problems.

Would property owners be paid fair market value?

NBHA response

Properties are to be purchased based on appraiser's estimate of value. This is probably a personal thing since many homeowners value their home at more than what an appraiser would estimate the value at.

Current and projected traffic counts seem inflated?

NBHA response

At certain times of the day Bridge Ave does become busy. Many people feel by simply adding turn lanes and timing the stoplights properly any congestion that happens at these times could easily be better managed. The consultant and engineers for the city and county are talking about building this road for the future, however, the population of Albert Lea has not increased in 30 years and it seems expensive and presumptuous to spend millions of dollars to expand a road that may not need to be expanded.

What happens to the business community if we don't except the four lane recommendation?

NBHA response

First thing that would happen is the taxpayers of Albert Lea could save millions of dollars in property tax increases. The business community located in the Bridge/Marshall business district would not have to consider relocation due to the installation of traffic barriers, the closing of connecting streets between Bridge Ave and Main St, resulting in rerouting of traffic that would make it difficult or even impossible for customers to reach these businesses. By rejecting the four lane recommendation this would greatly benefit the existing business community made up of approximately 15 to 20 businesses.

Didn't we have a recommendation in 2005 that could have been followed then?

NBHA response

This question does not apply to the NBHA

Can a four lane facility be constructed green and without destroying the charm and small town feel?

The four lane recommendation will destroy the charm of the Bridge Ave residential and business area. Rerouting traffic from Bridge Ave to Main St, and restricting access to Bridge Ave businesses will cause many of these businesses to close, leaving empty buildings behind.

Are their alternatives that haven't been considered and where does the connecting the downtown fit?

Rerouting the traffic from Bridge Ave to Main would remove a connecting route to the downtown area via the existing Bridge Ave. The four lane proposal eliminates an existing connection to downtown and will make it harder to reach downtown destinations.

Can we just put in more stoplights to solve the problems?

NBHA response

We feel that the introduction of left hand turn lanes in several key spots and retiming of existing stoplights so they don't back up traffic would be better solutions and much less costly to improving traffic flow.

Can't the City Council and County Board vote not to follow the four lane recommendation?

Yes, the city council and county board can and should reject the four lane recommendation because of the tax increases which would occur, to the residents of Albert Lea and Freeborn County.

These are the main reasons for rejecting the four lane proposal.

1. It will destroy the business climate and accessibility into businesses in this area of Bridge Ave as a result of rerouting traffic, closing streets and adding center islands to Bridge Ave to restrict left hand turns.
2. If businesses are unable to operate because of the road changes it will ultimately mean the closure of many or all of the businesses along this path which will result in decreased tax revenue for the city and county.
3. It will displace many long term homeowners who may not get enough for their property to rebuild or purchase comparable housing.
4. It will double the traffic on Main St creating congestion and an unsafe roadway.
5. It will block off a route to downtown reducing the overall traffic flow to the businesses to the downtown area.
6. There has been no discussion with the businesses located on Bridge Ave to determine if the city is willing to purchase their buildings for appraised value and include relocation costs.