

COLUMNS

Local View Column: Duluthians' input needed to determine which streets to fix first

Written By: Kris Liljeblad | Sep 27th 2019 - 10am.



In September 2016 I attended a public meeting at Denfeld High School to kick off the Imagine Duluth 2035 plan. Mayor Emily Larson and a lot of city staff were there, listening to citizens tell them what changes they wanted to see in Duluth's future. It had been just a month since I retired as planning director for Akron Metro Transit in Ohio and moved back to Duluth.

People often ask me and my wife why we moved back to Duluth — as if it's only a place to leave. Aside from loving it here, this is where we grew up, went to school, married, started our family, and began our professional careers. It's always been "home" even when it wasn't.

Anyway, that kickoff meeting was inspiring — but it was only the beginning. An arduous two-year effort followed, reaching thousands of citizens and visitors through meetings, focus groups, surveys, emails, and social media. The excellent Imagine Duluth 2035 plan was adopted by the City Council in June 2018.

My contribution? I ate cookies and filled out a comment card. I was retired. There were home improvements to tackle, friends and family to be reconnected with, and a 50-year Central class reunion to plan. I know that dates me, but so what? I'm "experienced."

Why recount this ancient history? Because citizens like me expressed our frustration with the city's street conditions (over and over again), and no wonder: 55% of Duluth's streets were, and still are, in poor condition. In 2017, 91% of residents said they lacked confidence in the city's streets. That November, we city residents approved a referendum to impose a one-half-percent sales tax dedicated to street improvements. It took two sessions, but, finally, in 2019, the Minnesota Legislature authorized the city to levy the new sales tax. Yea!

Next year the city expects to collect about \$7 million in new revenue from the tax — which will increase by 600% the street mileage the city can repave annually. Mayor Larson and the Public Works Department have rolled out a 2020 program of 51 different streets to be improved, adding up to 17 miles and maybe more, depending on construction bids. The sales tax will continue for another 24 years, allowing the city to proactively address the remaining 230 street miles that are in poor condition. That will happen through the normal Capital Improvement Program, or CIP, that is updated annually for a rolling five-year window. The next update for the five-year plan is coming up for review in November.

The city intends to identify priority improvement projects for all modes of travel within each of the 12 Core Investment Areas, or CIAs, as identified in the Imagine Duluth 2035 plan. They are located in neighborhoods throughout the city, from Gary New-Duluth to Lakeside and from the hillside to the mall area. Many candidate projects, including those in CIAs, will be identified through the city's pavement-management program, which is used to track and rate pavement conditions on all streets citywide.

Figuring out which streets to fix and when will be one part of my new position as senior transportation planner in the city's Planning and Development Division. I competed for the job because I am passionate about improving the infrastructure in Duluth for all of us who depend on it daily to walk, bike, ride the bus, and drive our vehicles.

I feel that the 2035 plan and the newly authorized sales tax establish a solid foundation to improve our streets in ways that can improve the safety and vibrancy of the neighborhoods we citizens call "home."

The experience that won me the job includes 40-plus years of transportation project work for cities and transit agencies in Akron; Bellevue, Everett, and Seattle in Washington; Phoenix and Tucson in Arizona; and here in Duluth, where I worked for the city and the Arrowhead Regional Development Commission.

The city is well-equipped for this job, but we need your help. We believe the best ideas will come from citizens, and we need your input to prepare the rollout for future years. There are nine City Hall in the City public meetings scheduled throughout the city where the 2020 Street Plan will be shared.

You can find the meeting schedule on the city website at <https://bit.ly/2mtLFRs>, on the city's Facebook page, or by calling the communications number in City Hall at (218) 730-5309.

Together, we can do this!

Kris Liljeblad is the city of Duluth's new senior transportation planner. He wrote this for the News Tribune.