



Duluth-Superior Metropolitan Interstate Council

Guiding the Future of Transportation for the Twin Ports Area

8/1/2019

Jennifer Moses
Taryn Erickson
Duluth City Hall
411 West First Street, Room 160
Duluth, Minnesota 55802

RE: First Street Study Project – MIC Staff Comments

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the First Street Study Project. The MIC staff is in support of restoring two-way traffic flow on First Street in Duluth along its entirety.

The mission of the Duluth-Superior Metropolitan Interstate Council (MIC) is “guiding the future of transportation for the Twin Ports.” As the MIC is set to release the latest update to the Duluth-Superior Metropolitan Area’s Long Range Transportation Plan, Sustainable Choices 2045, one of the key and most significant takeaways is that continuing to follow the status quo is not sustainable for a variety of reasons, including the lack of resources to maintain the existing infrastructure. Therefore, re-thinking the transportation system is called for at this time. This shift in perspective focuses on five key transportation planning perspectives, which are supporting great places and neighborhoods, improving health outcomes for people and the environment, increasing economic vitality, moving people and goods, and having a safe system for people to utilize.

The one-way urban transportation system, particularly in the downtown area, is due for a reassessment. First Street in Downtown Duluth is one of the downtown roads that were converted to a system of one-way streets many years ago, prior to the extension of I-35. This was common in cities across the U.S. in the 1950s that converted their downtown streets to one-ways to alleviate motor vehicle traffic congestion. It was a rational solution at a time when downtown Duluth was the primary commercial, office and retail hub for the region, coupled with major medical and educational facilities.

However, since that time, downtown Duluth no longer serves as the primary retail center for the region as the Miller Hill commercial hub now serves that role, nor as an education hub, as Central High, Washington Junior High and Nettleton Elementary have all been closed. Furthermore, major infrastructure investments have dramatically changed traffic patterns through and around downtown, including the extension of I-35 to East Duluth and the expansion of US Hwy 53 to a four-lane facility (Piedmont Ave/Trinity Rd) to the Miller Hill commercial hub.

In response to these transportation system changes, nearly all of the low volume one-way streets have been converted back to two-way streets in the past 10 years. The one-way segment of First Street that remains is clearly a remnant of a prior solution to a traffic problem that no longer exists, or certainly not to the previous extent.

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The MIC staff strongly supports converting the remaining one-way sections of First Street to two way traffic flow. Please note that we reviewed both the advantages and disadvantages of one-way streets before making this conclusion. The following table is a summary:

One-Way Street Advantages	One-Way Street Disadvantages
Increased traffic flow	Creates longer, circuitous routes; can be confusing to those unfamiliar with area
Reduces congestion	Can increase traffic volumes
Minimizes vehicle conflicts	Can result in higher travel speeds
Facilitates good signal progression	Discourages pedestrian traffic
Loading zones and transit stops are less disruptive to motor vehicle traffic	Transit stops for opposing directions are located on separate streets

Some additional points that build upon the items in this table are discussed below.

- **Safety Issues:**
 - Currently the section of First Street under consideration has multiple one-way and two-way configurations in less than a 2-mile stretch. This set up leads to a confusing and illogical traffic direction pattern. In turn, it is not uncommon to see a motorist traveling the wrong way on the one-way segments, creating a clear safety issue for all the roadway users.
 - One-way streets may appear easier and therefore safer to cross for pedestrians, bicyclists and motorists, as a person only has to look one-way to cross. However, looking both ways should happen before crossing all streets, even one-way streets, as there is pedestrian traffic (which does travel in both directions) as well as the fact that motorists are known to drive the wrong way down this one-way street.
 - A two-lane one-way street, like First Street, creates a serious safety concern due to the blind 2nd lane for crossings by any user, but particularly the more vulnerable people walking or cycling. A motorist in the 2nd lane, may be blinded from seeing people crossing due to limited sight distances from seeing oncoming traffic or someone crossing when a vehicle is in the next lane, particularly if the vehicle is a large truck, bus, or van. A person crossing is also blinded and may see that a vehicle in the first lane has stopped, but it may not be clear that a motor vehicle in the 2nd lane has stopped as well.
 - One-way streets encourage higher speeds, particularly in short bursts as motorists tend to jockey for position and create unpredictable traffic movements.
 - In an urban downtown environment, two-way streets are more uncomfortable to drive and require greater awareness of the surroundings, thereby reducing speed and creating predictable and calm motor vehicle movements.
 - Slower motor vehicle traffic speeds are appropriate on urban downtown streets and make for a safer environment for all users as motorists can see more of their surroundings, and have time to react and to slow down and stop when something unexpected happens.
 - Crime deterrence – One-way streets create “shadow zones” between buildings where people can hide. Natural surveillance is the best deterrent to crime and a two-way street creates better visibility as traffic will be moving in both directions, eliminating “shadow

zones” with slower moving vehicle traffic that allows for motorists to see more of their surroundings.

- Two-way streets will facilitate better response times for emergencies, particularly with the main fire station located on the western edge of First Street in Downtown Duluth.
- Loading Zones, Drop Off/Pick Up
 - Two-way traffic flows allows for passenger pick up and drop off to be on the sidewalk and not into the traffic lane. This is especially key at the YMCA on First Street where buses with children can not directly drop off children in front of the building without having to enter or cross a motor vehicle traffic lane.
 - One-way configuration allows for maximum flexibility. Converting to a two-way will require an assessment of need and use in both the short term for interim solutions as well as long term for more permanent ones. Note that the loading zone and pick up and drop off issue (regardless of change) is expected to grow as an issue into the future as there is an increase in online sales as well as on-demand ride share services.
- Traffic Movement
 - Two-way streets can reduce traffic circulating on the surrounding blocks as motorists have to “circle the block” to reach their destination.
 - Two-way streets allow for more flexibility when diverting traffic when an event or construction takes places restricting parallel nearby streets.
 - Traffic patterns, and more so a motorist’s behavior, are dynamic as people adjust to the built environment and any changes in the transportation system. The traffic patterns will change, in both expected and unexpected ways, including on surrounding streets.
- Access
 - Two-way streets allow for buildings to have increased access with traffic moving in both directions.
 - Two-way streets allow for direct access from I-35 to two of the three public parking ramps along First Street; such as the Tech Village ramp on the corner of Lake Avenue.
 - A two-way street gives people riding a bicycle with an additional eastbound, relatively flat and lower motor vehicle traffic option, when compared to Superior Street and 2nd Street, to traverse across and through Downtown.
- Economic Development
 - One-way streets discourage pedestrian traffic and restrict the amount of store frontage viewed by passing motorists, which can result in an overall decrease in businesses along a one-way street network.
 - Two-way streets with slower traffic, more access (can reach from both directions) have a more human scale and neighborhood feel and are more inviting and hence create better places. The better the place, the more people want to be there. The more people want to be there, the better opportunities for economic activity.

In summary, changing this street to two-way flow will create challenges. Loading zones, including drop off and pick up areas will need to be reconsidered through the entire downtown commercial corridor. While the needs of businesses today will have to be considered, particularly the parking ramp ingress/egress and the loading zone issues, understanding the overall needs of the city as well as those of future businesses should also be taken into consideration. With that lens, the benefits of a two-way street outweigh the one-way and therefore the MIC staff is in support of converting First Street into a two-way street for its entire length through Duluth.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ron Chicka".

Ron Chicka, Director
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