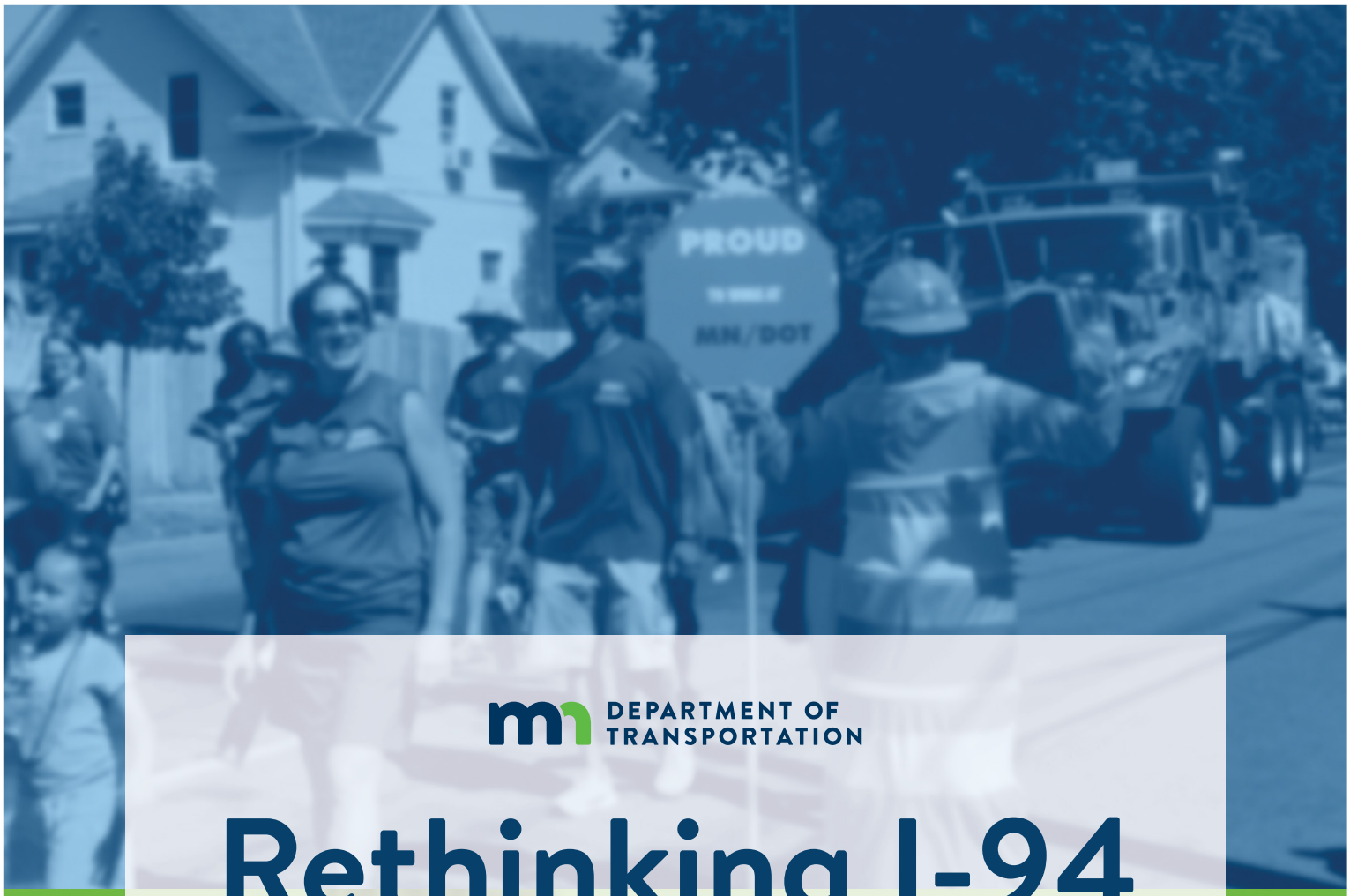


DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Rethinking I-94

PHASE 1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

08.01.2018

Welcome

In the summer of 2015 during the Rondo Healing Ceremony in St. Paul, I joined with my colleagues former St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman and Congresswoman Betty McCollum to make a formal public acknowledgement and apology to the Rondo community for the impact of the past policies and practices that disrupted and dismantled the community. This acknowledgement recognized that the decision-making process in the 1960s led to the destruction of a vibrant community.

With the support of many partner agencies, MnDOT subsequently initiated the Rethinking I-94 effort, a new way of understanding and engaging with communities for the long-term benefit of the highway and the communities. The implicit promise of Rethinking I-94 to the Rondo community — and all the communities in the I-94 corridor — was to do better.

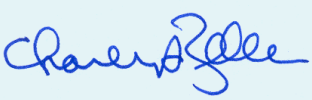
After two and a half years, I am proud of what our Rethinking I-94 team and partner agencies have learned and accomplished. Some highlights include:

- Directly engaged with hundreds of stakeholders in the corridor, developed new relationships and opened new lines of communication
- Learned that our stakeholders want more transparency and partnership from MnDOT, and that their issues with I-94 go beyond just transportation
- Began training our staff in new methods of engagement that they will bring to future projects in the I-94 corridor
- Developed a rich understanding of the state of the I-94 freeway that will inform our development of solutions going forward
- Created a set of guiding principles for working with communities along I-94
- Initiated Rethinking I-94 Phase 2: Environmental Document to develop and evaluate transportation improvement actions for I-94

Despite these achievements, I believe MnDOT and our partners can and should do even more to enhance the transportation and community assets in the I-94 corridor. To that end, I have laid out a draft vision for the I-94 corridor (see next page) that I hope to advance in collaboration with a regional partnership.

In the meantime, I hope you will carefully read this summary of our work to date and watch for our next steps on I-94, including how you can participate.

Sincerely,



Charles A. Zelle
Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Transportation

WHY THIS VISION?

During the first phase of Rethinking I-94, people frequently described I-94 as a "main street." The freeway is a vital connection and a front door for residents and visitors alike to many of the corridor communities. When we asked I-94 community members what their concerns were, here is what we heard most commonly, in no particular order:

- Congestion issues
- Safety issues
- Improved health and environment
- Identity or sense of place
- More job opportunities
- Better connections across the freeway
- More inclusivity in planning

While clearly transportation was a common issue, so were jobs, sense of place, health and environment. It has become clear that Rethinking I-94 is about more than the freeway. As a result, I am challenging our agency — and our partner agencies — to reach beyond our usual roles and try to help.

WHAT IF?

With this experience in mind, here are some questions my staff and I are thinking about for the future:

- What if we developed a regional coalition of public agencies, private businesses, and nonprofit and philanthropic organizations?
- What if that coalition could do things that none of us individually can do?
- What if this transformation could lead to new community and economic activity, and serve as a model for urban living where people of all backgrounds and income levels can thrive?
- What if we could do all this while making sure new investment in the corridor benefits the current residents and minimizes gentrification?

WHY NOW?

I-94 needs new investment and we are actively planning the 20-year future for the corridor. Now is the time to make sure new investment works not just for the highway itself, but for neighbors too. Minneapolis and St. Paul are experiencing continued population growth as more people seek the benefits of urban living. Now is the time to capitalize on this trend for the benefit of I-94 corridor neighborhoods and the region. Finally, unchecked economic growth in our neighborhoods can displace the people it is intended to benefit. Now is the time to apply best practices to harness economic growth that benefits the neighborhoods.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Here is what my staff and I will be doing in the months ahead:

- Soliciting interest from local and regional partners to participate in this new collaboration
- Getting initial input on the vision concepts we have developed so far
- Identifying next steps to finalize the vision and move toward implementation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Rethinking I-94

Construction of Interstate 94 in the 1960s destroyed homes and disconnected neighborhoods, including the Rondo neighborhood in St. Paul. This led to a pattern of community distrust with the Minnesota Highway Department, which would later become the Minnesota Department of Transportation. More than 50 years later in the summer of 2015, MnDOT Commissioner Charles Zelle joined a group of community members and elected officials at a healing ceremony in the heart of the Rondo community. Commissioner Zelle publicly acknowledged past transportation policies and practices that disrupted and dismantled the neighborhood, and formally apologized to the community. This acknowledgment recognized the decision-making process in the 1960s that led to the destruction of a vibrant community. As a result, MnDOT formed Rethinking I-94 as part of a promise to the Rondo community — and all the communities in the I-94 corridor — to do better. This report documents the activities and results from the first phase of Rethinking I-94, which took place between 2016 and mid-2018. It also outlines next steps leading into the second phase of the study.

What is Rethinking I-94?

Rethinking I-94 is a long-term effort to improve MnDOT's engagement and relationships with communities along a 15-mile stretch of I-94 between Broadway Avenue in Minneapolis and Highway 61 in St. Paul. The geographic limits of Rethinking I-94 reflect both portions of the two cities most impacted by the freeway's initial construction and areas where traffic, safety and highway improvements are most needed.

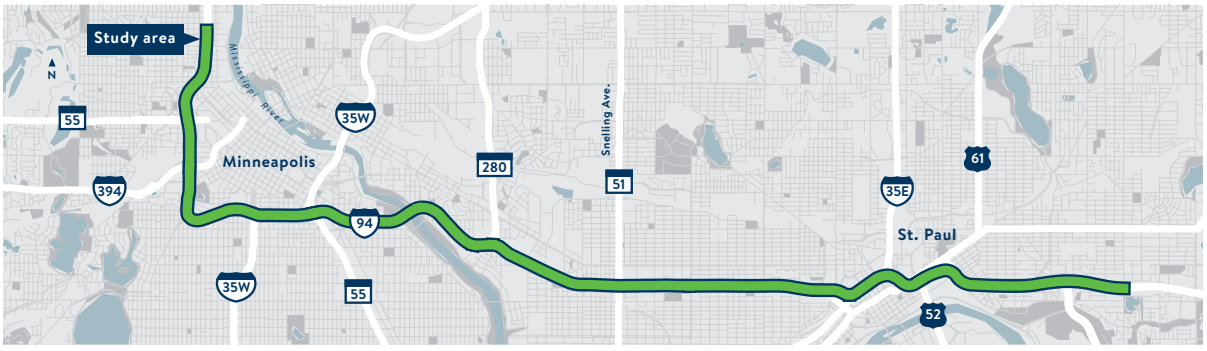
Rethinking I-94 began as a two-year study to develop a new vision for I-94 between Minneapolis and St. Paul. Through public engagement, stakeholders and MnDOT partners would help define and develop a plan for the corridor. MnDOT's responsibility is to preserve and repair bridges, walls, tunnels and pavement along the corridor, with the goals of enhancing mobility, safety and interconnectivity. However, Rethinking I-94 also prioritizes the well-being of those who live, work and play along the corridor.

MnDOT initiated Rethinking I-94 in 2016 in cooperation with partner agencies and the participation of many corridor community groups and individuals. Partner agencies include the Federal Highway Administration, Metropolitan Council, Hennepin County, Ramsey County, city of Minneapolis and city of St. Paul. The agency also worked with other non-profit and government agencies who proposed transportation actions within the I-94 corridor. Examples include Seward Redesign, ReConnectRondo and the Capitol Area Architecture and Planning Board.

Rethinking I-94 has three main purposes:

- Make it easier to travel to, along and across the I-94 corridor and establish a sense of place for the communities that live, work and play there.
- Enhance safety and mobility for people walking, biking, driving and using transit.
- Develop a community-based approach focused on reconnecting neighborhoods, revitalizing communities and ensuring residents have a meaningful voice in transportation decisions that affect their lives.

The Rethinking I-94 study team designed an adaptive process that allows them to adjust and pivot their work based on results and lessons learned along the way. This requires the team to listen, reflect and be willing to make changes based on feedback and results.



The Rethinking I-94 study area extends between West Broadway Avenue in Minneapolis and Highway 61 in St. Paul.

What we learned

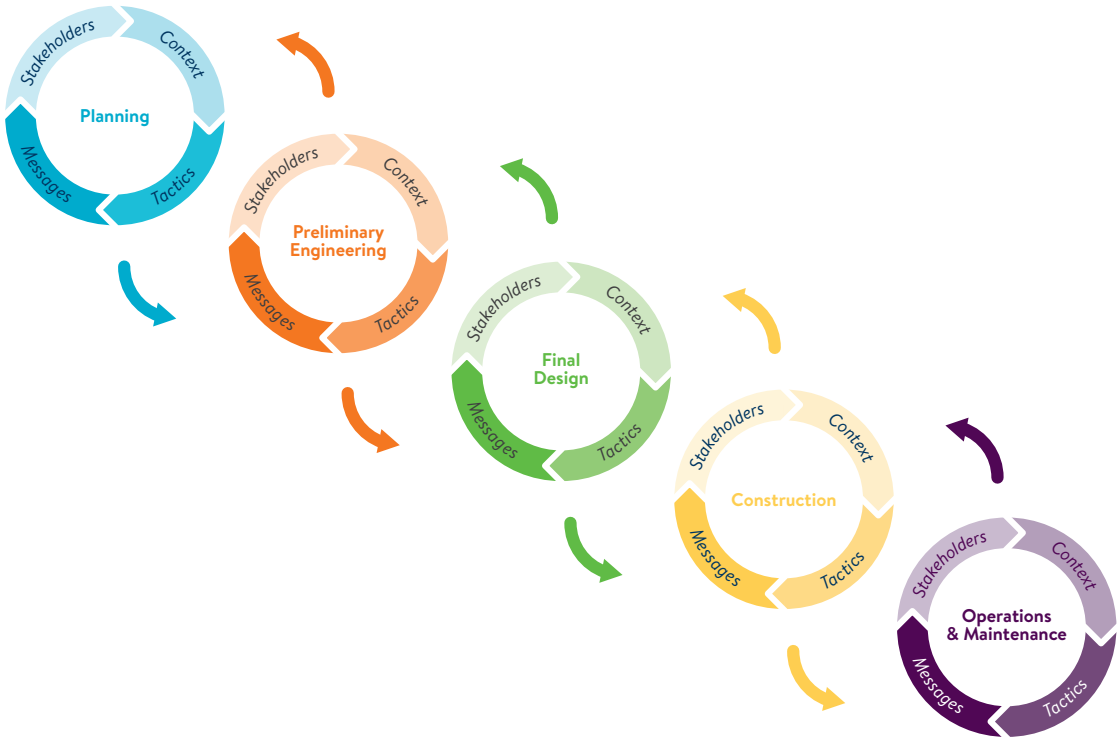
A key outcome of the innovative and comprehensive community engagement conducted during Phase 1 has been a new understanding of what communities in the I-94 corridor want from MnDOT.

People want to be involved early and continuously, and to be respected and provided with accurate, timely information. They want engagement to be inclusive and robust, and their values and visions to be reflected in designs (see figure below).

The extensive engagement efforts conducted during Phase 1 led directly to the development of two sets of guidelines for this corridor. These will guide MnDOT's interactions with communities along this corridor and how they plan and design projects — both are described in detail in the report:

- **Guiding Commitments for project teams:** The guiding commitments were developed based on what people expect from MnDOT. These commitments will guide how MnDOT works with communities in the future.
- **Livability Framework for communities:** The framework is based on what people expect from MnDOT's project work. It will guide how MnDOT will design and evaluate projects in the future.

The environmental process to be conducted during Phase 2 bridges the "Planning" and "Preliminary Engineering" steps in the figure below. This proposed engagement process is a more people-centered, adaptable approach to planning and implementing projects that impact where people live, work and play.



Rethinking I-94's engagement process provides feedback and input opportunities at every step in the process.

Phase 1 accomplishments

Phase 1 of Rethinking I-94 included a wealth of engagement and technical work to develop a baseline understanding of the corridor communities and the highway, both of which will inform subsequent phases of Rethinking I-94.

In Phase 1, MnDOT developed and implemented an innovative, comprehensive and human-centered engagement process to develop a deeper, mutual understanding between the agency and the I-94 communities and users. This included more than 2,200 surveys, 250 meetings and 50 listening sessions preceded by detailed information gathering on the history and demographics of the corridor communities. The results include strengthening of relationships between MnDOT staff and community members, creation of a communications infrastructure to foster ongoing communications and development of a training process for MnDOT staff to continue to apply the Rethinking I-94 engagement process on projects going forward.

Technical work resulted in a rich and detailed understanding of the state of I-94 today and a baseline of information for Phase 2. Details include not just the issues of congestion and safety, but also the magnitude and timing of basic investments to keep the highway functional. Initial ideas for improvements to the freeway corridor include pedestrian and bicycle facilities across and adjacent to I-94, and potential safety and congestion improvements on the freeway itself.

2,200
Completed baseline surveys

1,200+
Online surveys from segment surveys

325+
Comments from online interactive map

75
People participated in listening sessions from more than 50 organizations

6
Visioning workshops

75+
Participants from Smart Growth America

800+
Phone interviews from segment surveys

15
Community events

250+
One-on-one meetings

Community members engage with MnDOT staff during visioning workshop.

MnDOT staff and their families walk in the annual Rondo Days Parade.

I-94 communities: What we understand

NEIGHBORHOODS AND DEMOGRAPHICS

The 15-mile corridor crosses through 14 Minneapolis neighborhood boundaries and nine St. Paul District Council boundaries. The corridor is economically and racially diverse. In addition to the 58 percent of the corridor population that identifies as white, 28 percent identify as African-American, 8 percent as Asian and 6 percent as "Other." There are six primary ethnic communities in the corridor, including American Indians, Euro-Americans, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latinos and recent African immigrants, largely from Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya.

ADVICE FROM LISTENING SESSIONS

The study team conducted more than 50 listening sessions and one-on-one meetings with more than 250 residents, business owners and other stakeholders. The team learned that communities along the corridor value the following top priorities:

- Be transparent about projects, and about how and when community input will be used
- When seeking input, provide communities enough time to develop a community point of view
- Help connect communities to MnDOT but also within themselves and to each other
- Meet community members at locations where they already live, work and gather
- There are hard to reach groups across the corridor, not just in under-resourced areas
- Neighborhood association and district council resources vary
- Clarify the role of MnDOT for any given project or issue
- Be present and listen

COMMON THEMES

Through multiple engagement efforts with community members and stakeholders, the team determined the following responses as common themes for Rethinking I-94. These themes — which are not listed in order of priority — reflect the intent to understand communities more fully, and not just in relation to transportation:

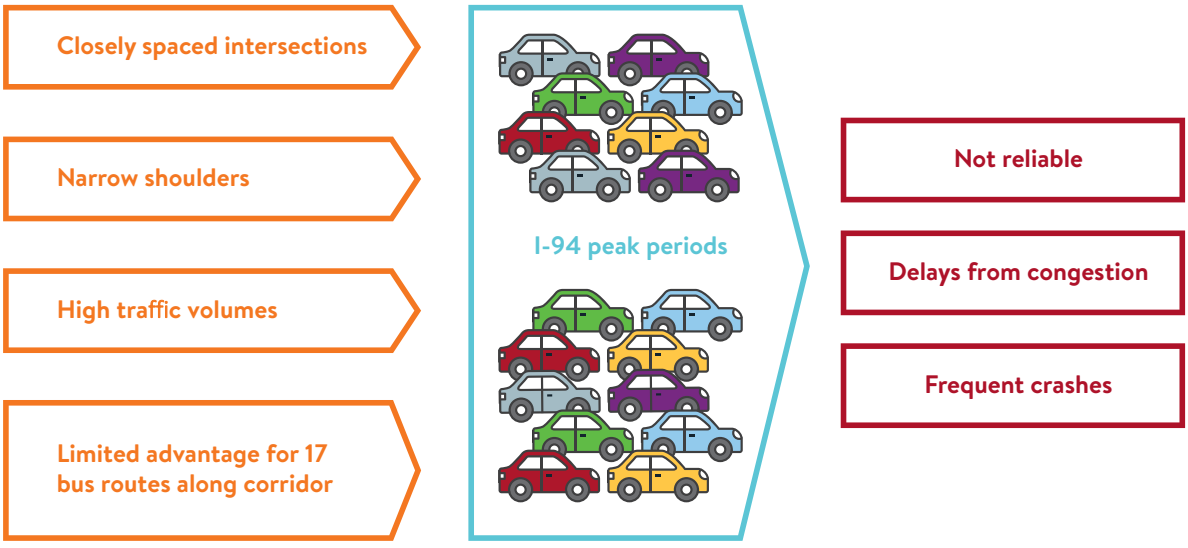
- Congestion issues
- Safety issues — bicycle, pedestrian, motorist
- Improved health and environment — noise, air quality
- No identity or sense of place
- Need for more job opportunities
- Better connections across the freeway
- More inclusivity in planning needed

I-94: What we know about the highway

The Rethinking I-94 study team researched the I-94 freeway to better understand existing infrastructure and transportation conditions.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

The physical characteristics of the Rethinking I-94 corridor influence its performance (see figure below). For example, most interchanges are less than one mile apart, which causes congestion. Additionally, there are many on-and off-ramps on the left-hand side of the corridor — some of these may contribute to safety and congestion issues as drivers merge across the highway. While travel lane widths generally meet current design standards for an urban freeway, shoulder widths often do not. Clearance under most bridges is less than the desired 16 to 16.5 feet. The Lowry Hill tunnel near downtown Minneapolis also is a significant bottleneck with no easy solution. I-94 is aging and some components have met the lifecycle for the materials and need to replaced.



High traffic volumes combined with physical constraints cause poor performance on the highway.

TRAFFIC CONDITIONS AND CONGESTION

This segment of I-94 is one of the most heavily used highways in Minnesota, carrying between 150,000 and 170,000 vehicles per day, including about 8,000 freight trips. Congestion on I-94 is generally considerably higher than in the rest of the Twin Cities metro area. Traffic has not grown much in the last 15 years and this may indicate the freeway is at capacity.

Most congestion in the study area recurs each day, with considerable delay seen regularly around the Lowry Tunnel. The average crash rate for the Rethinking I-94 corridor is about twice the metro and statewide averages for freeway facilities, largely due to I-94's heavy congestion. While most crashes are not severe, they cause cause considerable delay to I-94 travelers and should be addressed as part of future freeway improvements.

About half of the trips in the Rethinking I-94 study area originate in the neighborhoods along the corridor. These local trips between I-94 adjacent neighborhoods create congestion as large numbers of drivers merge on and off the highway in a concentrated area. Only a small percentage of trips are "through" trips that begin and end west of downtown Minneapolis and east of downtown St. Paul.

I-94 plays a critical role in connecting area businesses to regional and national markets. Shippers, carriers, receivers and other businesses involved in the freight transportation system rely on the highway, with an estimated 8,000 freight trips per day. Multiple areas of significant freight activity are located near or immediately adjacent to I-94.

There are 67 crossings over or under I-94 that include either a pedestrian or bicycle facility. The condition of these facilities varies widely, as does the spacing of the crossings.

At least 17 bus routes use some portion of the corridor, carrying more than two million passengers per year.

Improving I-94: Potential options

The Rethinking I-94 study team did not develop a comprehensive set of options for improving I-94 during Phase 1; however, the team did develop initial concepts based on identified needs and stakeholder input. The concepts considered are grouped into two categories: pedestrian and bicycle improvements, and freeway improvements.

PEDESTRIAN AND BICYCLE IMPROVEMENTS

During the first phase of Rethinking I-94, community members frequently commented about their desire for improved pedestrian and bicycle connectivity adjacent to and across I-94. These improvements would restore a pedestrian-friendly neighborhood transportation network that existed before the freeway was built.

Although no specific pedestrian and bicycle crossing improvements were identified, the team developed maps that show potential indicators or populations — such as poverty status, low-wage workers and zero car households — that are in greater need of crossing improvements.

Phase 1 identified the goal of improving pedestrian and bicycle facilities parallel to the study area to improve connectivity and use the existing public right-of-way. This information will serve as a starting point for potential improvements that will be discussed during the next phase.

FREEWAY IMPROVEMENTS

Although Phase 1 did not result in a formal evaluation of freeway improvement alternatives, the study team worked to develop concepts for future consideration. The team developed two general types of concepts: spot mobility improvement concepts and managed lane concepts. While these two concept types will be carried forward in Phase 2, others may also be developed.

Spot mobility improvement concepts are potential solutions that can address a mobility and/or safety issue in a specific location. These improvements typically come from a smaller project that delivers benefits at a reasonable cost, such as signing and striping, ramp realignments and interchange improvements. The study team identified potential improvements at 19 locations and analyzed each location for improving safety and reducing congestion. Those with clear benefits are recommended for further analysis in Phase 2, or for possible short-term implementation, if applicable.

Previous studies identified I-94 as a corridor that could potentially benefit from a MnPASS lane — a freeway lane that is restricted during peak travel times to transit, motorcycles, vehicles with two or more occupants or solo drivers who pay a fee. The team did not make any recommendations on the concepts identified in Phase 1.

Rethinking I-94 is planned to continue through multiple phases.

Participants at Smart Growth America workshop.

Lessons Learned

The first phase of Rethinking I-94 has been a learning process, as MnDOT has worked to implement a new way of working with communities. As with any similar large effort, there have been lessons learned along the way. These will be incorporated into the ongoing efforts of Rethinking I-94.

Engagement

Understanding the values and beliefs of communities is extremely important. A significant effort should be put into gaining knowledge about an area's community prior to planning engagement efforts.

Engagement fatigue is real. Partnering with as many agencies as possible that also are working in the community is imperative. This leads to a more collaborative effort; provides opportunities to share knowledge and shows the community that their time is valued.

Providing funding to existing community groups or leaders is well worth the time and effort. These groups already have established the knowledge, trust and respect within their communities. By supporting their efforts, MnDOT can better reach all corridor communities, especially those who are underrepresented.

Technical

Some transportation data ages quickly. With a long, multistep process, continued effort must be applied to make sure data is accurate. MnDOT should consider the best timing for pulling data to minimize rework.

The I-94 corridor is different from other freeway corridors in the Twin Cities due to the very heavy traffic volumes, frequent access points and mix of many different trip patterns.

Planning for the future of a corridor with substantial, underlying investment needs, such as pavement, adds complexity to potential mobility and safety solutions.

Process

Applying a new process like Rethinking I-94 to corridor planning takes more time than "business as usual," as people and processes need time to change and adapt.

The new process still needs to incorporate existing processes — such as the environmental documentation process — which is highly prescriptive.

Next Steps

Rethinking I-94 is envisioned to have three phases. Phase 1, conducted between January 2016 and August 2018, is the first phase of activity conducted under the Rethinking I-94 initiative. This phase, which is the focus of this report, is intended to help gather information about the corridor.

Phase 2 of Rethinking I-94 will center on the preparation of a corridor-level environmental document that complies with both the National Environmental Policy Act and the Minnesota Environmental Policy Act. The purpose of the environmental document is to formally detail the transportation needs in the corridor and then develop and evaluate a range of alternatives to address those needs. This will include ongoing opportunities for corridor stakeholders to be involved.

Work beyond Phase 2 consists of ongoing engagement and project implementation in the corridor as funding allows.

Thank You

Phase 1 of Rethinking I-94 has been a collaborative effort among many people, including MnDOT staff, agency partners, hundreds of community members and outside groups. MnDOT would like to formally thank everyone who participated in Phase 1 for their time and commitment to this effort, and to the future of the I-94 corridor. We look forward to your continued participation in Phase 2 and beyond.

For more information on Rethinking I-94, including how you can get involved, please visit **www.dot.state.mn.us/I-94minneapolis-stpaul**.

Learn more at **dot.state.mn.us/I-94minneapolis-stpaul**

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