



4646 Dakota St. SE
Prior Lake, MN 55372

Sept. 2, 2014

A Message from the Mayor

Change is Coming Every Day

A recent column in the Prior Lake American focused on the intersection of Main Ave. and County Rd. 21. The roots of our current traffic difficulties can be traced to the project in about 1960, to relocate the route of Hwy. 13 out of downtown Prior Lake to its current location. Decisions to move state highways to bypasses were made in that era to protect rural downtowns from truck traffic and ensure the smooth flow of goods. Prior Lake decided to keep the reroute close by in an effort to avoid a decline of downtown. It was the smart thing to do at the time.

It's easy with 55 years of hindsight to criticize a highway decision. Yet, it was surely done with the best of intentions based on available information.

Residents consistently highlight that they are attracted to the "small town feel" of our city. Small town atmosphere occupies a central place in the vision and strategic plan of the city, updated now eight times since 2002. In truth, Prior Lake hasn't been a small town for 30 years or more, yet we have retained a small town feel, and a thriving downtown plays a central role.

Some argue that we should keep things as they are to retain a small town feel. Yet, over the past 30 years, Prior Lake grew by 17,000 residents. Over the next 30 years, we will grow by an additional 15,000 to 20,000. Our downtown needs to respond to the needs of the whole community of 40,000 residents while retaining the small town feel we cherish.

Is that possible? How can we do it? What will downtown look like when it serves the needs of over 40,000 people?

Change is coming every day, big changes over several decades. What are some of the most problematic circumstances we need to address?

Traffic at County Rd. 21 and Hwy. 13 near downtown is a mess today during the afternoon and morning rushes. We know that changes must take place to avoid having the traffic become completely unsafe and congested as it increases. Traffic levels, after declining during the Housing Crash and Great Recession, resumed double digit increases recently. The county has concluded that County Rd. 21 through downtown and Hwy. 13 is very close to non-functioning right now. We're working with the county to determine the right timing of solutions to this problem.

Traffic along Duluth Ave. past St. Michael's church and school is already 4,000 per day, and projected to reach 8,000 per day over time. Even the 4,000 figure borders on dangerous levels for safe access to St. Michael's, and 8,000 is totally unacceptable.

The stoplight at Duluth Ave. and Hwy. 13 is one of the busiest around, and surrounded by thriving businesses (Holiday, KleinBank, Lund's, Subway, Honest One, Wells Fargo, ACE Hardware, DQ, etc.) It's already difficult getting through those lights smoothly and safely most times of day.

Your city council has wrestled with the appropriate road network around and through our downtown for nearly a decade, once the corridor study of 2004-2005 was completed, highlighting all of these issues and more.

One step was to construct the intersection at Arcadia Ave. and County Rd. 21, extending Arcadia to Colorado St. We will signalize that intersection as soon as the county allows, only when matched with making Main Ave. right-in, right-out at County Rd. 21. Last year by unanimous vote, the council added to our Comprehensive Plan a future roadway connecting Downtown with the Southlake Village area. Soon we will debate whether to extend Arcadia to Pleasant. We know that 21 & 13 will be completely reconstructed in about five years, creating turn lanes that will extend well past the Main Ave intersection on 21. Left turns from Duluth onto 21 northbound will be blocked by a median at that time. The state has funded a new stop light at Hwy. 13 and Duluth Ave. within the next couple of years. Along with the County staff, we're considering whether all these changes should be implemented together in a few years.

Our decisions over time must consider how to retain a small town feel when our population exceeds 40,000. These aren't easy, but the long view is essential to making the best decisions for our whole community.

Sincerely,
Mayor Ken Hedberg