

INTERVIEWER: Driving along St. Paul's historic Summit Avenue, you're going to see a growing number of lawn signs with SOS on them, asking the city to save our street. Members of the St. Paul Bicycle Coalition are rallying for a new bike trail along Summit Avenue.

While some bicyclists are happy about more accessible bike paths, some residents worry that the potential trail will uproot many of the street's majestic trees and change the feel of the historic neighborhood. Fred Melo is a reporter at the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* who's been following this story. Hey, Fred, how are you?

FRED MELO: I'm good. It's a great day for a bike ride, actually. Beautiful out.

INTERVIEWER: It is. It's lovely, it's lovely. Thanks for joining us. Say, tell us about this bike path idea. How extensive is this?

FRED MELO: Well, I think it will be extensive. But we don't really know exactly what the final plan will look like. There's no draft master plan out. There's been a lot of talk, a lot of community engagement from the city. The city says, hey, look, we need to fix Summit Avenue. There's a big stretch, half mile from Lexington Parkway to Victoria Avenue that could be reconstructed as soon as next year.

The entire Avenue-- it's home to the governor's residence. It's home to 373 Victorian-era mansions, I mean the longest stretch of Victorian-era mansions in the nation. But the road is bogus. The road is bumpy. It's crap. So it needs to be fixed.

While we do that, can we maybe do something for the bikes? Can we add some kind of elevated trail on the sidewalk level, an off-street trail that would be a little more accessible than the in-street trails that are there now. Folks are-- a lot of homeowners have signs up in their lawns. They're freaking out. They're saying, what does that mean? Are you going to get rid of my trees?

And the city is saying no, no, we didn't say that. The plan isn't published yet. But let's study parking. There's a lot of areas where parking is really underutilized on the avenue. So we don't know what that final plan will look like. But some members of the St. Paul Bicycle Coalition are saying talking about trees is a red herring. They're not going to remove all these trees that you're envisioning. We don't know yet.

INTERVIEWER: OK, so the bicyclists are thinking that the residents are worried about, what? More traffic? Less parking? And of course, as you mentioned, the trees?

FRED MELO: Yeah. I mean there's a lot of mature trees I'd say east of Lexington Parkway. And the city has acknowledged that. They want to preserve those. But there's long stretches of Summit where you don't really see that much parking utilization. It gets a little hairier around the University of Saint Thomas. It gets a little hairier around Dale Street.

But elsewhere, there's areas where fewer than 30% of the parking spots are in heavy use or in overnight use. So there's room in certain segments to actually kind of maybe remove some parking and do a trail on one side of the street, or even on two sides of the street.

And there's lots of different segments to Summit Avenue. There's places where there's this big median in the middle of the street that kind of complicates things. And there's areas where there is no median. So it'll probably be different approaches in different segments.

But that whole section from the cathedral to Lexington Parkway, there's a lot of concern among homeowners that if you do a kind of one two-way trail, you're going to have a lot of conflicts between bikes and cars.

INTERVIEWER: And the residents say that the city could and should make some of its existing street lanes safer for biking, that there are ways to do that. So they're not exactly anti-bike.

FRED MELO: No, not at all. In fact, I interviewed a bike-- the owner of a bike shop on Grand Avenue, who-- he has one of the oldest bike shops in the city. And he's going, I love biking. Don't do a two-way trail from the cathedral to Lexington Parkway. So he has very specific sense of what kind of infrastructure he wants. He wants the road repaved. He wants it to be less bumpy. But keep the bike lanes in the street.

The problem there is that the city really wants to create a better connection, more of a network to Mississippi River Boulevard, to the Sam Morgan regional trail, which comes up-- which kind of follows Shepherd Road into downtown. So they want something a bit more accessible.

When you see these elevated bikeways on Wheelock Parkway or an elevated parkway on a big section of Como Avenue, it's right at sidewalk level. It's something I'd feel comfortable on with my kids. It's almost like an extension of the sidewalk than an extension of the street. That kind of off-street trail is kind of the thinking in terms of making biking accessible to everybody.

So there's a lot of interest in that. But there's also opposition, and even a lieutenant governor candidate is weighing in.

INTERVIEWER: I was going to say, there's an interesting war of words between all parties involved. Is there any middle ground here?

FRED MELO: Yeah, I think once we have an actual concrete plan, which a draft master plan will be published later this summer, there'll be an opportunity to kind of say, OK, this is exactly how many trees might be impacted. Until then, we're just kind of talking about hypotheticals. The St. Paul Bicycle Coalition will accuse the homeowners of scare tactics. The homeowners will point to Ramsey County project that happened on Cleveland Avenue. That was only supposed to take out 55 trees, and is now going to take out nearly 106.

So there's certainly a precedent in other parts of the city for projects to get a little bigger than planners expected. So we'll have to wait and see. But certainly, that portion of Summit Avenue from Lexington Parkway to Victoria is going to be the priority in 2023.

INTERVIEWER: By the way, has this been going on for a while now? I mean, if my memory serves me, this idea has been floating out there for quite some time.

FRED MELO: I can't tell you offhand how long that idea of an off-street trail on Summit has been there. Summit was built for bikes in the 1890s. It certainly is one of these historic, beautiful streets, with a big, grassy median in parts that lends itself to biking. And then kind of cars were the later entry into that.

What's not new is the idea of an off-street trail. They're trying to create off-street bike loop downtown. That's moving forward. You already have some of that infrastructure in place. I think the first segment was Jackson Street. You just saw something like that open on Como Avenue, Wheelock Parkway from Dale to Como.

One of the arguments is the more of a network you create, someone says, oh, I don't see a lot of cyclists on this bike trail or that bike trail. Well, that's because it doesn't go anywhere. Once you have a long stretch that actually connects to other trails, you create a network. And that's what will improve our bicycling infrastructure.

INTERVIEWER: OK, interesting story, Fred. Thanks for covering it.

FRED MELO: Thank you for having me on.

INTERVIEWER: And of course, we'll continue to follow your story. Thank you. Fred Melo is a reporter at the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*.