

## Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Groups pressure MnDOT to halt tree cutting along Lake Country Scenic Byway 01GRM1WMRWMXFC2JQR47GN2JCE

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- CATHY** Most highway resurfacing projects are a temporary inconvenience. Usually, they're not that all that controversial.
- WURZER:** But the repaving of a section of Highway 34 in Northern Minnesota has ignited the ire of many residents. MnDOT has begun work to remove some trees along a 21-mile section of the Lake Country Scenic Byway between Osage and Detroit Lakes. That includes a 7-mile stretch where crews will cut down about half of the trees within 100-feet of the median.
- MnDOT says it'll make the road safer. We're going to hear from Shiloh Wahl who's with MnDOT in a moment. But first, some who live near the Lake County Scenic Byway are organizing to stop the project. Willis Mattison is one of the leaders in the effort against the project. He's an ecologist and former regional director of the PCA. He also lives near the Highway. Willis, Thanks for being here.
- WILLIS** Good morning, Cathy. Thanks for having me on.
- MATSON:**
- CATHY** Thanks for being here. You've been speaking out about this project for what? More than a year now. What are the
- WURZER:** main concerns that you have?
- WILLIS** Well, the main concerns is that the MnDOT for whatever reason, chose not to involve the public and get a sense
- MATSON:** of the value of this Highway both in terms of its scenic value and its economic value. And as a result, we got ourselves in a difficult spot. It's not pleasurable to take on a state agency. I worked for a state agency. It's kind of verboten that you cross over each other. But this is unusual and unfortunate. So we have tried in vain to have the project stopped and try to find more reasonable alternatives.
- CATHY** You say this is unusual. Why do you say that?
- WURZER:**
- WILLIS** It's an unusual thing for state government to be so isolated from the community and insensitive to the values
- MATSON:** here. MnDOT has many options. And the tree cutting is totally discretionary. Previous engineers that have occupied this office have recognized the value of having the scenery. It's the gateway to Minnesota's forest and lakes region for everyone coming from the West. You cannot drive down this Highway-- it's the reason I live here-- without having that sense of awe and an actual reaction of awe.
- You just relax. It is so enthusiastically relaxing. That's a contradiction. But it's spectacular. And it's hard for the folks here to communicate that to the engineers who are designing this. We understand engineers have a different sense of beauty. But that breakdown in communication is really unfortunate. And now we're losing-- in the process of losing the thing that's most valuable to us and drew just to live here and many tourists to come.
- CATHY** Now MnDOT says cutting the trees is going to make the roads safer. And that is a good thing, I would think in
- WURZER:** your book too, right?
- WILLIS** Absolutely. Everyone is in favor of reducing the number of crashes. But when you dig deeper into the design of
- MATSON:** this highway has, everything about it has been traffic speeds, which of course, everybody knows will increase crashes. When trees grow closer to highways, it's proven science that people actually slow down for the very reason I mentioned, that you feel relaxed intuitively, you let up on the accelerator and enjoy the scenery.

And speed limits and enforcement don't work. MnDOT has claimed that. And when you move trees away from a Highway, it does the opposite. It induces people to drive faster. So the claim of doing this for safety doesn't wash when you look deeper into the real statistics and research.

**CATHY** Now what do you want MnDOT to do instead of the tree removal project?

**WURZER:**

**WILLIS**  
**MATSON:** We-- obviously no one opposes the repaving. The Highway needs that. And that's fine. What we'd like to do is put a pause and sit down and negotiate over these alternatives, match our research, our supporting documentation and come up with the best idea that actually recognizes the value of the Highway for what it is-- a gateway to the tourist area of Minnesota, and also improve safety.

We believe there's a number of alternative safety measures, including leaving the trees in place. That have been tried elsewhere, demonstrated productive and would preserve the trees and vegetation. MnDOT has 7,000 miles of Highway rights of way across the state, all of which could be managed the non-paved surface for native vegetation. We're in the midst of a climate change and ecological crises.

These state-owned lands are important solutions to those climate problems and managing them this way they're going to contribute more problems than solutions.

**CATHY** All right. Mr. Mattison, I appreciate your time. Thank you so much.

**WURZER:**

**WILLIS**  
**MATSON:** You're welcome, Cathy. Thanks for having me on.

**CATHY**  
**WURZER:** We've been talking to Willis Mattison. He is one of the leaders of the group called Save the Trees Coalition which opposes this tree removal project along the Lake Country Scenic Byway which is around Highway 34 but in northern Minnesota between Osage and Detroit Lakes. We'll here from MnDOT right now. With us is District engineer Shiloh Wahl. Shiloh, thanks for being on the program.

**SHILOH WAHL:** Yeah. Thank you Cathy for having me.

**CATHY**  
**WURZER:** Thanks for being here. Now this is a Scenic Byway. I've actually had the chance to drive it myself. It's a very pretty part of the state of Minnesota and a key part of the scenery as you heard Mr. Mattison say is the forest along the side of the road. If the road resurfacing won't widen the road, what's the point of taking down the trees?

**SHILOH WAHL:** Well, as Willis mentioned, it is a beautiful corridor. In MnDOT, we also-- all our staff, we live there, we drive these same roads, and we love the scenic part of it also. And so we took a lot of measures and a lot of the input of the Save the Trees Coalition and other folks that live along the corridor. We took a lot of those considerations into our design, so we went from something that was more robust and we were going to remove a lot more trees, and we really scaled it back to allow for the environmental and a lot of the concerns that the public had.

And so now we really we have two sections in there that we're really addressing. And it's the clear zone that's the project that's going on right now. The clear zone or I'll just call it a recovery zone. So that's if you're going let's be limited to 60 miles an hour. However, as Willis mentioned, speeds have increased, especially during COVID. We've been seeing a lot higher speeds out there on our highways, which is not a good thing.

But it's reality right now. And so we're taking--

**CATHY** If you take the trees-- so you're going to take-- if you're going to take the trees on either side of the road to go further in, right? So you're going to kind of widen the sense the scope, your view widens. Wouldn't you increase your speed though, given what Mr. Mattison said? Wouldn't slow you down.

**SHILOH WAHL:** We've done-- So back when speeds went up from 55 to 60 miles an hour, the legislature wanted MnDOT to do studies on every Highway that we have on our right of way system. And so we did. Speeds on Highway 34 with the trees were already hovering around that-- I believe it's around 67, 68 miles an hour. And that was with a 55-mile an hour zone. So studies have shown that people are going to drive to their natural how they feel that is-- that they're comfortable with.

That's the speed that they're going to be going. And so by cutting the trees, no, we do not anticipate any speed going up. We're not cutting that far out from 65-feet out from the center line. So if you went from the edge of the shoulder and you go about 40 feet out, that's as far as we're going. We're really not cutting that far but that does remove the trees that are in that recovery zone. So when somebody does go off the road, we want them to either be able to stop or traverse back on to the Highway without hitting a fixed object.

Unfortunately, a couple of years ago, we did have somebody that went off the road, hit a tree, and it was a fatality. So it's a proactive measure. On MnDOT, we-- we're always trying to balance safety with the environmental impacts out there on our highways. And we've worked with our environmental-- we have an office of environmental stewardship in St. Paul that has worked very closely with the district and Willis and others have met with these staff members also.

And we've talked about ways that we could mitigate a lot of these concerns. We feel that we've really listened to-- folks out there have really made an impact on our project. And I want folks to know that this is not MnDOT deafening our ears and not hearing people. We've really made a lot of accommodations to take those concerns into or take the comments into place and get it into our design and really scaled back the tree removal that we're doing.

**CATHY** Let me ask you about the ecological impacts also, of if I'm not mistaken, I remember seeing the state flower along that roadway, the Showy Lady Slippers. In fact, I remember thinking, oh, my gosh, there's a bunch of them, right? Are you-- I hope you're protecting them, right?

**SHILOH WAHL:** We are. That's one thing. We went out there and actually GPS a lot of these locations where we do have the Lady Slippers in there. One of the reasons we're cutting the trees right now is because it's the ground's frozen. You're not doing any impact to those flowers that are there. And we're not cutting the trees far enough back that we feel that you're going to damage any kind of the ecology of that Lady Slipper.

Yes, they do thrive in shaded conditions. And most of the areas that we're cutting it's still going to be a remain-- there going to be a lot of shade in those locations. And there's going to be trees. It's just going to be a little bit further back than what it is.

**CATHY** And final question for you, Shiloh. I'm sorry. I'm running out of time, Shiloh. And just a final question. So the  
**WURZER:** trees-- so cutting is going on right now, right? Is there any way to stop this?

**SHILOH WAHL:** We've let the contract, Cathy-- the contractors out there right now. We've followed our environmental process, our Federal Highway Administration, that we've worked with them. They approve our environmental document. They also coordinated with our office of environmental stewardship in St. Paul. Everybody is in agreement that this is the right thing to do is. MnDOT is doing things in the best interest of public safety and also trying to address environmental concerns.

So at this point, the project is going to proceed and like I said, I know you're running out of time, but there's two projects here. The first is just trying to get rid of some of these trees in that clear zone area. But then we did hire the University of Minnesota to look at some of the shade reduction areas by the Smokey Hills and help us determine what, if sunlight when sunlight hits the road, how does that affect our pavements?

We know the temperature of the Highway goes up, we can get a faster regain time with our snowplows out there and get that all the way back to a more of a bare pavement type condition with the help of sunlight. So we're going to hire them to help us walk through a path of how much shade reduction is needed. Can we leave these out there and still obtain the desired effect of getting some sunlight on that road and not having to shade it all winter. But we're looking at doing that the following winter.

**CATHY** All right. Shiloh. I've run out of time. Thank you so much. I appreciate your time.  
**WURZER:**