
University Avenue project is approved 4-3 by Blaine council

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by Tim Hennagir

Life Editor

The Blaine City Council found itself between a county highway rock and a hard place last week regarding improvements to University Avenue.

Residents attending the council's March 20 meeting weren't pleased city leaders voted 4-3 to approve a controversial Anoka County joint powers agreement (JPA).

Anoka County is ready to reconstruct University Avenue (CSAH 51) from just north of its intersection with County Road 10 to Trunk Highway 10.

The project includes a four-lane divided roadway with limited access, a controversial concrete median, turn lanes, and a traffic signal at 91st Avenue N.E.

Anoka County needed the city of Blaine's project approval by March 31, otherwise it would lose \$2 million in federal funding for the long-awaited project.

City Engineer Jean Keely said city passage of a resolution granting municipal consent to the project was the next step in the approval process.

Blaine city leaders would also have to agree to JPA terms with Anoka County.

The Coon Rapids City Council had previously approved a similar JPA for its part of the project.

Blaine's estimated cost for its share of the project would be \$278,000, Keely concluded in her report. The council then listened to public comments.

A critical issue that's remained a citizen point of contention in recent months involves a neighborhood request for a full-median opening at 92nd Avenue N.E.

Donald Ihlenfeldt lives at 9210 Third St. N.E. He told the council he's lived in the area 30 years and has accessed University approximately 30,000 times.

"I've never been in an accident there," Ihlenfeldt told the city council. "I have no problem with adding left turn lanes. We

need them on 92nd and 92nd Lane to get out.”

When it came to the proposed median, Ihlenfeldt said he had concerns, especially with squad cars and emergency vehicles crossing over such a barrier.

M.L. Judge has lived at 26 92nd Lane N.E. for 33 years.

She said a stop sign on 92nd would be one way to control traffic and still allow residents access to the neighborhood.

“I object to making a U-turn to go south three blocks each way,” Judge told the council. “Mutual turn lanes would be less expensive,” she added.

Jeffery Christensen lives at 9257 Third St. N.E. Christensen told the council he plows streets for Minneapolis, and that the median would create problems.

“It’s just going to be a big pain,” he said. “Why can’t you cut a hole in the median for access and try that? Keep it simple. If it doesn’t work, block it off.”

Scott Sunderlin lives at 9201 Third St. N.E. His comments to the city council were quick and direct. “Please vote no to this plan as it stands now,” he said.

Patricia Ledoux was the seventh and last resident to speak at the March 20 meeting.

Ledoux lives at 9165 Third St. N.E. She said 50 area families felt they did not count.

“I had hoped that government could work together,” Ledoux said, referring to Anoka County and Blaine council members’ differences regarding the joint project.

Councilmember Wes Hovland said he didn’t think there was anyone who didn’t want to see University Avenue improved. “It’s long overdue,” Hovland said.

However, Hovland said he believed that interconnecting traffic lights between Highway 10 and 91st would eliminate “a lot” of the roadway’s problems.

“Mutual turn lanes would work,” he added. “With a median, I feel that we are trading off one safety issue for another. I can’t support this project as it is.”

Councilmember Dick Swanson asked about a study prepared by St. Louis Park-based Spack Consulting that reviewed left turn-only median openings.

Keely said the study prepared by Spack recommended the city council support Anoka County's full University Avenue design without median breaks.

Swanson asked Anoka County's Highway Engineer Doug Fischer if the county would consider the city of Blaine approving left-turns for a two-year period.

"No, we would not, not at this point in the game," Fischer replied, adding that truck drivers would quickly learn how to negotiate a University Avenue median.

Mayor Tom Ryan said that it would be difficult for the city to vote against the University project, since doing so would mean a loss of federal dollars.

"When you turn down funds, you don't see them again," Ryan said. "If we turn it down, it will be a long, long time before we see any money again."

Ryan told residents who spoke against the University Avenue project the city didn't have the ability to change the county's highway policies.

"As far as I'm concerned, we can't turn this down," Ryan said. "You take what you can get and do the best you can. I'm not sure what else to do."

Swanson called the current University Avenue reconstruction design "dismal" and said that if the council approved the JPA, it would set a bad precedent.

"We don't have a good project to vote on," Swanson said. "Do we really want University Avenue to have medians and no left-turn lanes its full length?"

Swanson said he would vote against approval of the JPA. He added it was the council's job to protect residents and businesses near University Avenue.

Councilmember Katherine Kolb said that if the city didn't support the project, future funding could be taken away and given to other cities or projects.

Kolb said she wanted to support the turn lane option and would vote in support of a modified resolution along those lines, but wondered about the county.

"We would be playing ping-pong with them if it wasn't approved," she said. "If this project doesn't go through, the holes in the road still have to be fixed."

Hovland asked Ryan for a roll call vote after Kolb's comments, but Ryan held the vote until he could ask Fischer about getting left turn lanes added.

Fischer told the council such modifications to the currently proposed design would get turned down by the Anoka County Board of Commissioners.

Councilmember Dave Clark told residents, "The county has its policies, whether you like them or not." Clark also praised Fischer for working with the city.

Clark added that he would support the JPA with Anoka County.

"My choice is voting for a road that's 95 percent good as opposed to 5 percent bad," Clark said.

At that point, Clark made a motion to approve the JPA resolution. His motion was seconded by Ryan.

City Clerk Jane Cross then conducted the roll call vote.

Councilmember Mike Bourke passed on voting when his name was initially called. Clark then voted yes. Councilmember Russ Herbst was next with a yes vote.

Hovland voted no, followed by Kolb's yes vote. Swanson voted no and then Ryan voted yes.

The roll call returned to Bourke, who voted no, creating a 4-3 simple majority vote.

After the vote, Bourke said he delayed voting because he remained torn about the issue.

"It's not a good design," he said. "But, we have to improve the road."

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