

Episode 95: The toll of I-94, 35W and their futures

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KNOW

The Daily reported on how two highways affected BIPOC communities in the Twin Cities during and after construction. Neighbors and organizers put forth their ideas for the future of these highways.

by Sean Ericson

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INTRO MUSIC

SEAN ERICSON: Hi, everyone. My name is Sean Ericson and you're listening to In The Know, a podcast by the Minnesota Daily. Together, we'll be exploring the University of Minnesota's students and communities with each episode.

In this episode, we'll be discussing Interstate 94, specifically connections from downtown Minneapolis to downtown Saint Paul. We'll learn about the history of its construction, and how it and other highways harmed BIPOC communities. We'll also discuss proposals for how to improve this transportation system and repair these historical harms.

When this section of I-94 was first built, it intersected multiple neighborhoods, most famously the predominantly Black Rondo neighborhood of Saint Paul. According to the Minnesota Department of Transportation website, also known as MNDOT, this construction "destroyed homes and disconnected neighborhoods." According to the MNDOT website, this led to a long-term pattern of distrust towards the Minnesota Highway Department in the affected communities. This department would become MNDOT in 1976. According to the Minnesota Historical Society, 600 families lost their homes in Rondo alone.

According to researchers from the A Public History of 35W project, in total, highway construction displaced 24,000 people from their homes in Minneapolis and 6,000 people in Saint Paul. MNDOT apologized for these harms in 2015. In 2016, MNDOT started the Rethinking I-94 project to solicit feedback from the community and develop a plan on what to do with this corridor of I-94.

Louis Moore was born in the early 1950s, where he lived in Rondo for about 12 years. He then moved to South Minneapolis before he was a teen. In Moore's early teens, construction of 35W first began.

LOUIS MOORE: So once you started hearing the noise over there, like I said, it was like half a block a block at the most away from the actual construction area. You start wandering over there, and you see them moving houses, tearing down houses, chopping down trees, tearing up the street, just complete destruction of the whole area. Now you know, like I said I was 12, 13, 14, something like that.

ERICSON: Moore still lives in South Minneapolis. And more than half a century later, the highway's noise and construction still negatively affects his home life.

MOORE: I can still hear it. And I'm seven blocks from it. They put up the sound barriers, which obviously made a big difference. But, you know, late at night, we got these dudes out there and motorcycles and I think they race at like two or three o'clock in the morning. You can hear that sucker all the way over here.

ERICSON: This neighborhood destruction was not unique to I-94 and 35W. According to an article in the “Iowa Law Review” by Deborah Archer, a professor at New York University School of Law and president of the American Civil Liberties Union, highway planners at both the federal and state levels target Black communities.

A similar pattern occurs in Rondo, near St. Paul. The pattern that happened in Rondo, of destroyed homes and businesses, was present “[i]n states around the country,” Professor Archer wrote.

According to Evan Roberts, professor of sociology and population studies at the University of Minnesota, there were other options to build the highway that would not have cut through the Rondo neighborhood.

EVAN ROBERTS: There was an alternative route which was proposed. Sort of, use, acquiring land from the railroads in sort of the trench sort of north, about a mile or two. It varies because it’s sort of following a natural – natural gully with the stream.

ERICSON: Dr. Ernest Lloyd is the community and research advisor for the Public History of 35W project. Lloyd used to work for MNDOT. The Public History of 35W is a research project hosted at the Hennepin History Museum that aims to document the history and effects concerning the construction of highway 35W.

For the project, Lloyd interviewed community elders and reviewed a wide variety of historical data. He says that the construction of I-35W through South Minneapolis disrupted a racially integrated community which previously supported a thriving Black middle class.

ERNEST LLOYD: Not only was there a thriving African American community, It was a middle class African American community and a thriving business district there. It was a good place to live, a good place to raise a family. It was a good place to, they felt safe in that community.

ERICSON: According to Lloyd, many African-American families living in South Minneapolis neighborhoods, like Cedar-Riverside and Hiawatha, had come to the Twin Cities from the South in order to escape Jim Crow during the early to mid 1900s.

LLOYD: An elder told me it was a promised land, if you will. Coming from a place they came from, the other part of the country, mainly the southern part of the country at that time. And the racism and oppression and all forms of degradation, lynching, what have you like that.

ERICSON: According to interviews of locals conducted by Lloyd, the construction of 35W had a dramatic effect on what had previously been a somewhat integrated community, increasing racial segregation. Archer also wrote that when an interstate was built in Syracuse, New York, displaced Black residents mainly moved to other areas of the city while white residents mostly went to the suburbs.

Anthony Scott is a long-time Twin Cities resident, having lived in the area for seventy years. He has co-authored multiple books about the African-American community in Minnesota, including “The Scott Collection” and “Minnesota’s Black Community in the 21st Century.” When asked if highway construction increased segregation, he said yes.

ANTHONY SCOTT: I think it did because you’re displaced from areas you could afford, you’re displaced from areas where you are around people, there was schools in those areas. And so all of the communities were taken and you had to disperse. You weren’t welcome to go to the far suburbs.

ERICSON: Overall, Scott said, highways have reinforced segregation.

SCOTT: Highways have really reinforced these kinds of barriers and enforces and continues a segregated mentality. And I, I just don’t know that, how that’s going to be something real difficult. But it has been for this country to really come to grips with.

ERICSON: Highways became dividing lines between racially segregated communities in other places, too. According to Archer’s research, even in places where highway construction didn’t destroy homes, highways became a “racial barrier” segregating communities from one another.

Professor Greg Donofrio, of the U’s School of Architecture, worked with Lloyd on the Public History of 35W project. He described community elders’ memories of how the construction of 35W increased segregation.

GREG DONOFRIO: One of the older gentlemen told a story, and this just sticks with me so much, I can’t get it out of my head. He said, “Yeah, I had a lot of white friends and we played together, you know, until they moved to the suburbs.” That’s the kind of geographic movement of particularly white families moving to the suburbs, moves that were in many ways enabled by construction of the interstate highway system.

ERICSON: Highways were crucial to this process of suburbanization. This is because they reduced the amount of time people needed to drive into the city, making it easier to work in the city and live in the suburbs.

DONOFRIO: Developers saw the potential to build homes that now with the new freeway, would only be maybe 10 minutes from downtown, whereas before the freeway, they were 20 or 25 minutes from downtown on surface roads.

ERICSON: According to Donofrio, banks and realtors deliberately excluded Black people from the suburbs using a variety of racist tactics.

DONOFRIO: You know there were several different mechanisms that this took place, from banks that wouldn't offer loans to prospective Black home builders or homebuyers wanting to buy homes in the suburbs or build homes in the suburbs, to realtors who wouldn't show Black families homes in the suburbs.

ERICSON: According to Lloyd and Donofrio, in total, 24,000 people were displaced from their homes in Minneapolis, and 6,000 were displaced in Saint Paul. Scott says that highway construction and the displacement that followed was yet another part of a rising climate of racism and tension in the 1960s, from the assassinations of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and JFK to the brutality unleashed on civil rights protestors. Scott recalls the day when news broke that King was assassinated.

SCOTT: We'd watch TV and we'd see the things going on in Birmingham with putting dogs on people and putting hoses, and we'd see these things. And it's like all this stuff was just, it's just quite a quite a memory when you put all these things on top of it. It's like Black people were an afterthought. We can put freeways through your area.

ERICSON: In 2015, MNDOT initiated the Rethinking I-94 project, a long-term project that involves apologizing to the communities harmed by I-94's construction and soliciting community input on the future of the corridor. Sheila Kauppi is the Deputy District Engineer for the Metro district at MNDOT and corridor director for the Rethinking I-94 project.

SHEILA KAUPPI: Rethinking I-94 started with a healing ceremony in the Rondo community in 2015, where MNDOT apologized, along with many others from the city and the county, for past practices.

ERICSON: Kauppi said MNDOT did not solicit very much community input when I-94 was first constructed.

KAUPPI: We apologized for the process and such of not, not fully including all voices in the decision making, and recognizing that we all could do better.

ERICSON: Donofrio also said that the lack of public input was a big issue.

DONOFRIO: There was one public meeting held prior to the construction of 35W and one public meeting held prior to the construction of Interstate 94.

ERICSON: And according to Donofrio, MNDOT did not advertise these meetings very well to the communities that were bound to be affected.

DONOFRIO: What Dr. Lloyd and I found is that the notices for these meetings were buried in the backs of the newspapers. Literally between classified advertisements for trailer homes and other things for sale.

ERICSON: According to Moore, these community meetings also happened in his South Minneapolis neighborhood, Regina. The meetings did little to support the local community beyond stating that 35W would soon be built near his childhood home.

MOORE: They just came in and informed everybody that they were going to what they were going to do, but they never asked anybody's opinion. They never asked anybody ideas, or how they would be affected. They just said, we're gonna do ABC, blah, blah, blah. And you know, you really had no say in what was gonna happen.

ERICSON: Kauppi said that this time, MNDOT is placing a big emphasis on soliciting community involvement in the planning process.

KAUPPI: We are still in the process of gathering ideas, right? And making sure that the ideas that we're gathering include those that may not traditionally be part of the overall transportation process and feedback, and making sure that we're listening to those folks as well.

ERICSON: One proposal for how to rethink the highway system has been put forward by the group ReConnect Rondo. ReConnect Rondo has proposed that a land bridge be built over I-94 in the Rondo neighborhood. This is also called putting a cap on the highway.

This proposal would allow for the preservation of the highway while also increasing the availability of housing, businesses and other amenities in the area. This bridge would be the center of what ReConnect Rondo calls an "African-American cultural enterprise district."

Another proposal for how to rethink I-94 comes from Our Streets, a Twin Cities nonprofit organization that advocates for shifting our transportation system away from cars and towards other forms of transportation.

Our Streets has proposed what they call the Twin Cities Boulevard. This proposal aims to completely remove the highway between the two downtowns, and replace it with a boulevard that would accommodate cars, bikes, pedestrians and a high-speed bus line. This proposal would also reconnect the street grids severed by the initial highway construction.

Alex Burns is the transportation policy coordinator at Our Streets. Our Streets' proposal would replace the I-94 from Hiawatha Avenue in Minneapolis to Marion Street in St. Paul with a variety of transportation options, as well as reconnecting the street grid.

BURNS: So all the streets that were severed, we wouldn't need bridges that are spaced a mile apart anymore, the neighborhoods would be completely stitched back together.

ERICSON: According to Burns, the boulevard proposal would allow more than just cars and trucks, the boulevard would create improved walkways, bike lanes and have a dedicated bus lane. According to Burns, this would also encourage more construction of homes and

businesses along the corridor.

Taking the ever growing and expanding highway system into account, Moore believes that the growing issue of balancing transportation and housing won't disappear with a couple of quick fixes. Moore believes that Twin Cities' residents will have to adapt to the highway system as it continues to modernize.

MOORE: You have to learn to drive on it, you have to learn to be patient with it and you have to learn to understand why it's there. And if you can get over those humps, you'll be fine. But there's no question that transportation is an important issue nowadays. It's an expensive issue. And it's not going to go away.

ERICSON: Scott also expressed skepticism about whether the harms of the highways can effectively be dealt with. Scott said housing affordability will be a major barrier.

SCOTT: If you don't have affordable housing, you don't have affordable areas where people can get started.

ERICSON: Scott believes the lack of affordable housing is at least in part because of the highways.

SCOTT: I just somehow think all these things are cumulative effect, the cumulative effect of the freeways, displacement. And then without owning a home in an area, without having a property, as we know, with no equity with no, that's really where you can gain your wealth. And that's something that's really been denied, I think, to a lot of people, especially Black people in the community here in the Twin Cities.

ERICSON: Burns says that the Our Streets proposal is called a "highway-to-boulevard conversion." A 2019 paper published in the "International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health" by Regan Patterson and Robert Harley studied the replacement of a freeway with a surface boulevard in Oakland, California. The researchers found that the project reduced air pollution. However, it also increased property values, and the Black populations in the area decreased. Patterson and Harley state that the preservation of affordable housing can reduce displacement.

Representatives from Our Streets said that they included policies in their proposal to prevent this potential displacement. José Zayas Cabán is the advocacy director at Our Streets. He explained some of the proposed anti-displacement policies.

JOSÉ ZAYAS CABÁN: It's making sure that we have a good commercial land trust and community land trust, so that the community members themselves can have a direct say on what gets rebuilt into the boulevard, and that they themselves benefit from those development opportunities and those housing opportunities.

ERICSON: Burns explained that a community land trust and other policies would potentially support local entrepreneurs. He said that economic development, combined with these policies, would support wealth creation in the community through businesses and homeownership.

BURNS: Those businesses could be prioritized for, if, for example, like BIPOC entrepreneurs in the area that are looking to have a business opportunity. The housing above those businesses could be ensured to be both affordable, and a wealth-building opportunity so that people can actually own their homes and not, and not just rent and accumulate some wealth.

ERICSON: Lloyd said that whichever proposal ends up being implemented, people from the affected communities need to have a say.

LLOYD: You can see exactly how difficult and how all-encompassing this public engagement process is. And MNDOT know that we can't build highways like we built them in the past. So they are encompassing all the voices. They are bringing all the voices to the table, so to speak.

ERICSON: Lloyd emphasized the human toll that the construction of these highways had, and how it echoes into the present day.

LLOYD: Every time I drive on the interstate going through inner city, especially the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul, I think about, am I driving across the person's front yard? The homeowner's garage? The bedroom? The kitchen? The family room? But one thing that I do know: when I drive across the freeway, I am driving across the souls of Black people.

ERICSON: Listeners can learn more about the history of highway construction in the Twin Cities at humantoll35w.org, or at the Human Toll of 35W exhibit at the Hennepin History Museum. Listeners can learn more about racially motivated housing policies at mappingprejudice.umn.edu.

The Daily would like to thank all of our listeners for tuning in. We'll see you next time. I'm Sean Ericson and this is In the Know.

ALBERTO GOMEZ: Episode 94 states that students may opt out of paying for the Universal Transit Pass. This is not true. The Universal Transit Pass' cost would be charged automatically as a student transportation and safety fee.