



**SPECIAL CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION**  
**City Hall—Shared Vision Room, 3989 Central Ave NE**  
**Monday, October 14, 2024**  
**5:00 PM**

**Mayor**  
*Amada Márquez Simula*  
**Councilmembers**  
*Connie Buesgens*  
*Kt Jacobs*  
*Rachel James*  
*Justice Spriggs*  
**City Manager**  
*Aaron Chirpich*

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## MINUTES

### CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

Mayor Márquez Simula called the special work session meeting to order at 5:00 pm.

City Council Members present: Mayor Márquez Simula, Councilmember Buesgens, Jacobs, James, Spriggs

City of Columbia Heights Staff present: Kevin Hansen, Sara Ion, Sulmaan Khan

MN House of Representatives: Representative Erin Koegel

City of Hilltop Staff present: Ruth Nelson

Anoka County Staff present: Joe MacPherson

MNDOT Staff: Chris Bower, Dale Gade, Tim Lincoln

### WORK SESSION ITEMS

#### 1. **Central Avenue Project Discussion with MnDOT.**

Public Works Director Kevin Hansen introduced the Work Session items as well as presenter Chris Bower. Chris Bower led the presentation related to the project updates for Central Avenue now that the PEL Study has been completed with a specific focus on public engagement and business engagement as well as traffic studies. Bower clarified that the purpose of the project is to reduce traffic deaths / fatal crashes on Central, and not create a similar issue on other side streets. MNDOT wants to bring forward a holistic plan for Columbia Heights and Hill Top in regard to the work that will need to be completed. Bower stated that Central Avenue is a contender for the busiest section of road being considered for a road diet in the entire state. MNDOT wants to be deliberate with the designs and answer the communities' questions and concerns. Based on the PEL Study it is hard to apply a one size that fits all for the entirety of the length of Central.

Bower showed examples with comparable traffic volumes to Central: Hwy 169 in St. Peters, 36<sup>th</sup> Street in St. Louis Park, Lake Street in Minneapolis, Hwy 41 in Chaska. Mr. Bower stated that recent studies indicate that three quarters of all traffic has a destination they are going to / coming from in Columbia Heights. He reviewed that most of the traffic is consistent throughout the day, and there are not really any specific peak times. Bower highlighted areas that could have queue and platoon issues with a specific focus on the intersection at 53<sup>rd</sup> and Central Avenue as well as 37<sup>th</sup> and Reservoir.

Bower additionally clarified that lane reduction is one of the most powerful safety measures. In 2022 there was a sewer project that occurred on Central Avenue and gave data points to review against the computer traffic models. Overall, MNDOT believes that there were people using alternate routes during the construction in 2022, and that traffic

does find a way to balance out. Bower also stated that there are roads in the community that can take additional load, but the side streets cannot.

Bower specifically reviewed the North and South portions of Central Avenue, as well as additional areas where they will consider alternate intersections. Bower stated that from 41<sup>st</sup> to 47<sup>th</sup> is the biggest concern for safety and how the lanes should be adjusted. MNDOT wants to consider many options and more data to come up with a proposed plan that will most impact these key areas.

Bower additionally stated that MNDOT would recommend updates to the intersection at 37<sup>th</sup> and Central. They would want to remove the 5<sup>th</sup> intersection at the intersection of the South bound lane / right turn on Reservoir. He also highlighted the intersection at 42<sup>nd</sup> and Central as this has also had a considerable accident history and there would be concerns with platooning that will allow not allow gaps related to turns.

Bower indicated that MNDOT feels that they can reduce the lanes at 53<sup>rd</sup> and Central from 8 to 7, and to also add a roundabout in this area. There is a benefit for pedestrians because you will only need to cross two intersections at one time, however roundabouts can be very hard to navigate for both pedestrians and drivers. MNDOT will need to do education to make sure that users are proceeding safely (utilizing flashing lights and overhead signage). They want to share this concept and information with the public at the next open house.

Councilmember Buesgens thanked MNDOT for all the work that they have done. She indicated that she had invited a lot of residents to the work session meeting as well. She wants the opportunity to review the projects' impacts, both big and small and would like to make designs that will work for the City for residents up to seven generations from now. She specifically wants to focus on the next 50 years, as it will be very impactful to both residents and businesses.

Councilmember Buesgens stated that she is very concerned about the side street traffic and the impact on the construction work on businesses. Additionally, she is concerned about the computer models and feels that she is "being ghosted" and that there have been issues like this in the past. She has concerns that there is more of a focus on staff worrying about the cost of maintenance and not the impact of the medians and plantings.

Councilmember Buesgens additionally wanted to know when the traffic data was collected related to the use of the road and what the top 4/5 destinations are in the city (as well as how accurate the information is). She feels if she knows the specifics of the information and how it is collected, she would be better able to decide how redesigns should proceed. She would also like to know the difference between weekend and weekday traffic.

Councilmember Buesgens stated that she would also like to see Columbia Heights treated the same as Minneapolis. She would like to see people encouraged into utilizing alternate modes of transportation. She would also like to know about future developments occurring

in the area north of 47<sup>th</sup> and Central and how this will impact the planning for the next thirty years.

Councilmember Buesgens also stated that residents would also like to see the data sets and information used for this meeting presentation at the upcoming outreach meeting. She also inquired about what guarantee there would be that the bus lines will remain bus lanes.

Councilmember Buesgens posed several additional questions related to concerns that were posed by residents related to medians, crosswalks and road design.

Representative Koegel asked why the MNDOT computer data was reviewing / emphasizing the peak time periods for vehicle travel as she felt that this was not congruent with the overall MNDOT mission and goals for projects.

Anoka County Engineer Joe MacPherson stated that he is glad that there is this level of focus on how Central will be used in the future. He acknowledges that this is a difficult process and that there will be much more input needed going forward.

Councilmember James thanked MNDOT for the presentation and clarified that she wants to make sure that MNDOT and the City are partners with the businesses impacted by the construction.

Mayor Márquez Simula asked what Reservoir would look like with these updates. She does not want to see Jeff Bobbys and Steves utilized as a turnaround space. She would also like to see Central more walkable / enjoyable up to 45<sup>th</sup> and further north.

Bower mentioned that there are designs laid out that focus on a cul-de-sac in the Reservoir Blvd space. He is grateful for the conversation that the community is having and that he wants to make sure that the cooperation continues into the next phase of the project.

Mr. Gade stated that MNDOT has a commitment to the community to do this the right way and that this is a process building on the communities' foundation to achieve the right design.

## ADJOURNMENT

Meeting was adjourned at 6:03pm.

Respectfully Submitted,



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Sara Ion, City Clerk/Council Secretary