

PATH OF (SELF) DESTRUCTION

The case against St. Paul's Summit Avenue bike trail

BY LEAETTA HOUGH

If St. Paul continues to push forward with the Summit Avenue Regional Trail (SART), the result won't be the green progress the city promises. It will be a historic act of civic self-destruction. SART will irreversibly disfigure Summit Avenue, an irreplaceable historic corridor, and trigger financial and environmental consequences which will be felt by every single St. Paul resident. Any superficial strides toward sustainability will be completely eclipsed by the immediate, permanent environmental degradation of losing our mature tree canopy. Ultimately, the taxpayers are being asked to shoulder a staggering economic burden, both in upfront costs and permanent, ongoing losses and liabilities, to fund the most expensive type of bike facility design which will serve only a tiny fraction of our population. The math on this project simply doesn't work.

Summit Avenue is a national treasure, celebrated by the American Planning Association as one of America's "Great Streets" and the finest preserved avenue of Victorian architecture in the country. To construct SART, the city plans to rip up historic granite curbs, destroy the root systems of about 1,000 mature trees, and permanently disfigure this iconic urban landscape. This project represents a catastrophic failure of environmental policy, fiscal discipline, and urban planning. It is time to acknowledge those facts and stop wasting scarce tax dollars on SART.

The city's environmental claims rest on a fantasy. Officials initially "projected" that 221 mature trees, 14% of Summit's canopy, will be lost or compromised. However, this flawed estimate was carelessly extrapolated from past road projects that didn't move most of the curbs, alter driveways, and construct an off-road trail that invades into a tree-lined boulevard. When two independent arborists actually calculated the likely impact of SART on the trees for specific sections of the project, they arrived at a far grimmer reality: approximately two-thirds, or about 1,000 of the trees of Summit's iconic tree canopy, will likely be sacrificed. Trees spared by the initial bulldozers face a ticking clock; construction encroachment routinely leaves mature trees unstable and twice as likely to topple during severe midwestern windstorms. The risk is so severe that the city's own engineering consultant, Bolton & Menk, explicitly warned against moving any of the curbs, which would irreparably damage the adjacent tree root structures developed over decades.

The economic fallout for St. Paul taxpayers and property owners is also devastating. Summit Avenue features roughly 568 taxable properties with a collective market value of approximately \$400 million. Published economic research demonstrates that a 7% loss in tree canopy directly correlates to a 7% reduction in property values. Utilizing the city's conservative 14% tree-loss estimate, property values along the corridor could plunge by \$56 million, inflicting an average equity loss of \$100,000 on each of these homeowners.

When you strip this much value from the city's tax rolls, you create a structural loss to the city's property tax revenues that would range from \$350,000 to \$700,000 annually. This is an unintended consequence that the city has not even considered.

To add insult to injury, the city plans to bill these exact same property owners to fund the devastation via an estimated \$30,000 per homeowner city assessment.

The environmental irony of SART is also breathtaking. While framed as a green initiative to promote carbon-free transit, it eliminates our most effective natural carbon-fighting tools. A single mature tree removes 20 to 50 pounds of CO₂ annually, filters air pollutants, mitigates the urban heat island effect by up to 10°F, and absorbs heavy stormwater runoff.

Major entities, including the Minnesota DNR, the Pollution Control Agency, the Metropolitan Council, and the city's own Parks Department, have long warned against sacrificing this irreplaceable canopy. Sacrificing 1,000 mature trees in the name of "progress" isn't sustainability work. It's environmental vandalism.

Nevertheless, SART is being pushed through by a tiny fraction of anti-car activists. As few as 1% or less of St. Paul's citizens will use this trail regularly. Meanwhile, data from the state demographer shows that St. Paul's population is aging and Ramsey County is actively losing residents.

In the face of these realities, the city is preparing to spend over \$100 million of public money to fully reconstruct all of Summit Avenue just so it can build SART to serve a tiny fraction of an already shrinking population. The cost of full reconstruction of Summit Avenue is astronomically more expensive than the cost of upgrading those portions of Summit needing repair. On top of that, this off-street design will cost twice as much per mile to maintain annually as an on-street alternative.

St. Paul can easily improve its already safe, effective, on-street buffered bike lanes along Summit to uphold a "Tree First" standard without moving a single curb or needlessly cutting into critical root structures. This alternative delivers modern transit infrastructure while protecting the city's mature tree canopy.

We need our elected officials to hear from us loud and clear that it is time to get us off a mindless path to civic self-destruction that will irreversibly ravage one of St. Paul's crown jewels.

Leaetta Hough is a concerned St. Paul resident and member of Save Our Street, an independent group of St. Paul residents who are working to ensure that Summit Avenue remains a viable corridor for everyone, pedestrians, bicyclists, and motorists for generations to come. More information on their work and the research cited in this commentary is available at www.savesummitavenue.org.