Analyzing Tensions Surrounding the Hennepin Avenue Redesign in Minneapolis

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After decades of extreme dependence on, and submission to, the personal automobile and its proponents, cities across the world, and in North America in particular, have been trying to push forward with overarching visions that center alternative modes of transportation. A large facet of these future-oriented visions of the city involves redesigning and reconstructing existing car-oriented streets and infrastructure to focus more on accommodating pedestrians, transit, and cyclists. In many of these cases, cities follow a regimen of policy goals, such as Complete Streets, that idolize accommodating all transportation uses. However, cities often receive fierce pushback from a variety of stakeholders that drastically alter, delay, or even prevent these projects from moving forward (Sukaryavichute & Prytherch, 2018). The city of Minneapolis, Minnesota, is experiencing this exact conundrum as the city's Public Works department is seeking to reconstruct a portion of its Hennepin Avenue, a car-centric arterial roadway.

Hennepin Avenue is one of the busiest streets in Minneapolis. The street claims several of the city's most dangerous intersections, many of which lie within the Uptown neighborhood, a trendy area on the eastern, lake-laden side of the city. These dangerous portions of Hennepin Avenue in Uptown have not been changed or reconstructed in over 60 years, and in an effort to make Hennepin safer and more oriented toward the future, the Minneapolis Public Works department has moved toward a massive $32 million reconstruction project for Hennepin. This project, which would reconstruct a 1.3-mile stretch of Hennepin from Douglas Avenue to Lake Street, aims to calm traffic and make the space safer and more accommodating for pedestrians, cyclists, and transit riders.

Over the past few years, the Public Works department has undergone a lengthy process of community engagement and incorporating stakeholders in order to present a strong proposal

backed by a strong community mandate to the city government. Their final proposed design, construction of which is set to begin in 2024, aligns with several of Minneapolis' ambitious, future-oriented goals. However, throughout their community engagement process, the Public Works department has received fierce pushback from local business interests and neighborhood advocacy groups in Uptown. The reconstruction project has ignited tensions within the community regarding who the redesign is "for" and ultimately whether it will help or hinder the neighborhood. This pushback is illustrative of common issues cities face in trying to make actionable steps toward a more sustainable and resilient future through the built environment. Moreover, many of these tensions have manifested in the form of semi-anonymous comments in the forums of news articles online covering the project. Internet comments serve as a unique and fascinating medium of communication for stakeholders on reconstruction projects, as they enable people to express their deeper-seated concerns without the requirement of being in a specific geographic space, and without consequence.

This paper seeks to scrutinize these internet comments to interrogate and clarify the local tensions surrounding the Hennepin Avenue reconstruction project; specifically, what specific aspects of the project are the most controversial to stakeholders, and what can we learn from analyzing stakeholders' diverging perspectives on these aspects? To do this, I use ATLAS.ti software to perform a thematic analysis on a representative sample of a total of 821 forum comments from a set of six digitally-available articles from two of the premier digital local news outlets of the Twin Cities region: The Star Tribune and MinnPost. I found that the most common themes in comments were parking; biking and bike lanes; driving and cars; businesses, business interests and commercial activity; and public transportation services and infrastructure. Comments revealed diverging philosophies or conceptions on topics such as who local

businesses should cater to; what cities should prioritize through design; mobility, especially for those with mobility concerns; and who is responsible for reconstruction projects. Analyzing comments also revealed an apparent lack of self-awareness or perception of privilege among commenters in favor of car-centric design. These results are important in the greater context of street redesign projects across North America more broadly as they shed light on specific themes and tensions that underlie similar reconstructions and could potentially delay, hinder, or halt them.

Background

Situating Hennepin

Before I discuss important background information on Hennepin Avenue and the proposed reconstruction project, I want to note that I do not live near Hennepin Avenue, nor did I grow up there. This project would not have any direct impact on my livelihood in the way that it would a local business owner, renter, or homeowner. As a consequence of my positionality and lack of direct lived experience pertinent to this project, I will never be able to completely understand the perspective of the most directly affected stakeholders of this project.

Hennepin Avenue is a main arterial transportation thoroughfare in Minneapolis. The street runs across the city from its northeast side, through downtown to the southwest side. This particular portion of Hennepin Avenue is one of the main commercial corridors for the hip and trendy Uptown neighborhood full of newer apartment complexes, and the avenue also serves as the eastern boundary for the wealthy, predominantly single-family-detached Lowry Hill neighborhood. Both of these neighborhoods lie near several of Minneapolis' recreational amenities, including the Lake of the Isles, Bde Maka Ska, and the Midtown Greenway, a

bikeway which runs east-west straight through the neighborhood. In terms of other transportation infrastructure in the neighborhood aside from the main arterial roads and the Greenway, the neighborhood is also home to a prominent transit station, which lies on Hennepin Avenue in the reconstruction zone. Various "bike-friendly" streets, such as Bryant Avenue, cover the neighborhood, but few, if any, contain dedicated, separated-use north-south bike lanes.

Figure 1: Location of Hennepin Avenue reconstruction project between Douglas Avenue and Lake Street

Impetus behind redesign

An overwhelming majority of transportation use on Hennepin is taken up by the automobile. In its current form, the Hennepin Avenue corridor between Lake Street and Douglas Avenue accommodates up to 31,500 vehicles, 6,660 transit riders, 280 cyclists, and 3,400 pedestrians daily (Minneapolis Public Works, n.d.). This over-reliance on the automobile over the years has caused a myriad of problems for the city. Most notably, the thoroughfare has

become one of the most dangerous in the city for traffic accidents. Most of Hennepin Avenue is a four-lane street with two lanes running in each direction, and the street does not have dedicated turn lanes. The northern portion of the Hennepin Avenue corridor does not run straight north-south; it runs at about a 30-degree angle compared to nearby north-south streets. When Hennepin intersects with streets that run east-west, drivers turning left off of Hennepin risk being rear-ended, especially during rush hour, and must veer across two-lanes of oncoming traffic without the help of a turn arrow. These left turns have caused many accidents over the years. A study by the city of Minneapolis found that, between January 2016 and March 2019, 304 crashes occurred on the corridor, leading to 49 injuries. Of these 304 crashes, 32 percent were rear-end crashes (City of Minneapolis, 2019). The city has tried mitigating these crashes by restricting left-turns during rush hours.

Not only is the design treacherous for automobile users, it has also been a problem for pedestrians and cyclists. According to the aforementioned crash study, compared to Minneapolis as a whole, the Hennepin Avenue transportation corridor has a higher percentage of pedestrian and bicyclist crashes compared to the city overall. Whereas only five percent of Minneapolis' crashes involved pedestrians or cyclists and only 38 percent involved severe injury or were fatal, on the Hennepin Avenue corridor, 11 percent of crashes involved cyclists or pedestrians, and 57 percent were severe or fatal (City of Minneapolis, 2019). Of the 304 crashes that occurred on the corridor from January 2016 to March 2019, 30 of them involved pedestrians and three involved cyclists. Of the 30 crashes that involved pedestrians, half of them occurred in relation to parking activities.

In addition to the city's safety concerns surrounding Hennepin Avenue, Minneapolis also incurs a high cost in maintaining the street's car-catering infrastructure. According to the city,

the pavement of the street is "in very poor condition" and routine maintenance of the street is no longer cost-effective (City of Minneapolis, 2017). The street has not undergone a major reconstruction project since 1957. This proposed redesign is moving forward with the intention to last a similar length of time, bearing important long-term consequences for the surrounding area and for the transit corridor.

To further incentivize the city to move forward with a reconstruction project, a 2016 Neighborhood Park and Street Infrastructure Plans ordinance allotted $20 million in additional funding annually for the next 20 years for improvements in public street infrastructure (City of Minneapolis, 2017). In response to issues of crashes, deaths, and maintenance costs, and with a windfall of funding, the city began planning for the project and started applying for further federal funding in 2018.

Planning the project

Over four years of project planning, the city has carefully studied the Hennepin Avenue corridor and solicited feedback from community stakeholders in order to move forward with the redesign project in a prudent manner. In addition to the aforementioned crash studies that quantified Hennepin's safety issues, the city completed a parking study for the street in March 2018 and found that parking occupancy for on-street parking did not exceed 80 percent throughout the course of the day across four two-hour analysis periods (City of Minneapolis, 2018). The study also found that there existed 2,835 off-street parking spaces, either in parking lots or ramps, within half of a block of the main thoroughfare. This is compared to the 342 on-street spaces on Hennepin in the redesign area, and 453 on-street spaces on cross-streets within half a block of Hennepin along the redesign area (City of Minneapolis, 2018). Public Works'

final plan, if implemented in full, would remove about 90 percent of the on-street, curbside parking in the Hennepin corridor.

Throughout the engagement process, Public Works employed a variety of engagement methods; for example, social media, signage posted throughout the area, mailings, and fliers. Due to the continuing Covid-19 pandemic, in-person solicitation was limited. The city engaged with local residents through social media posts on Facebook, Twitter, and NextDoor and sent a set of three emails to about 1,300 individual accounts registered for project updates. They also distributed announcements to local neighborhood and business interest organizations as well as individually to 53 small business owners and operators in the area. Additionally, the city mailed about 2,400 postcards to local residents, and posted about 120 signs around the corridor soliciting feedback (City of Minneapolis, 2021; City of Minneapolis, 2022).

Figure 2. Vandalized sign soliciting input on the Hennepin Avenue reconstruction project, near the Midtown Greenway and Uptown Transit Station.

Through January 2022, the city received over 10,000 comments from the community. The city received a plurality of these comments, nearly half of all the feedback they received, in

their fourth and final engagement period in winter 2021-2022 (City of Minneapolis, 2022). This is likely as a result of Public Works revealing its final recommended design at the beginning of that time period, which drew ire from local stakeholders. Initially, Public Works had narrowed their decision to two proposed designs - one with a separated-use bike trail, and one without - but after further engagement and feedback from stakeholders, the city moved forward with the former design.

Along with implementing a two-way, separated use bike trail, the final proposed design would reduce the street from four car lanes to two in order to calm traffic, incorporate left turn lanes to make turning safer, implement a median with safer crossing spots for pedestrians, add dedicated bus lanes on each side of the street, and implement curb cuts and possibly add elevated crosswalks to improve pedestrian safety. The bus lines are especially relevant, as the Metropolitan Council, the overarching regional planning body for the Twin Cities, is seeking future implementation of a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) route, the E Line, that would include Hennepin Avenue as a part of its route.

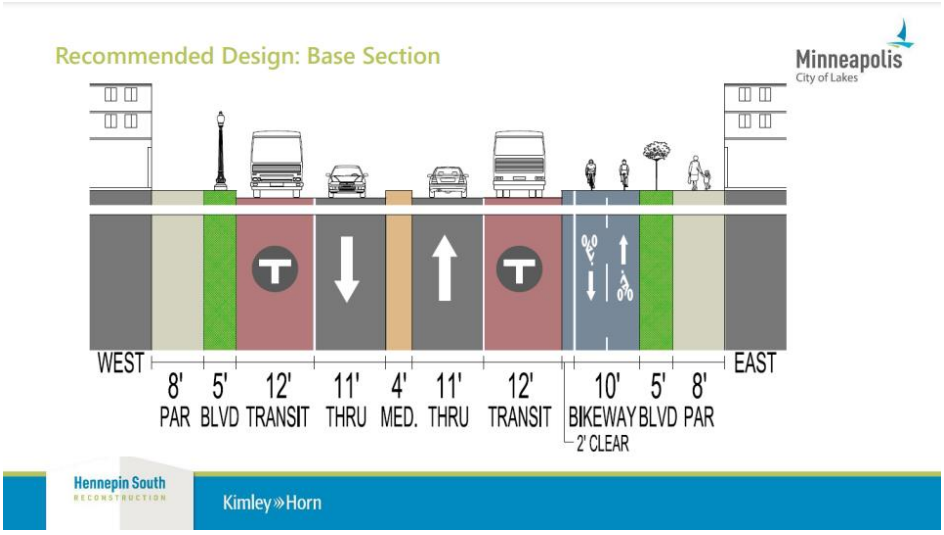

Figure 3: Cross-section of Minneapolis Public Works' proposed redesign of Hennepin Avenue

Overarching goals

The final proposed design for Hennepin Avenue appears to align well with several of Minneapolis' overarching policy goals. In particular, Public Works cites the city's Transportation Action Plan, Vision Zero Initiative, Complete Streets Policy, and Climate Action Plan as four benchmarks that guided their process. Altogether, these policies are oriented toward the future and center issues like equity, mobility, safety, and climate.

Minneapolis' Transportation Action Plan (TAP) is a ten-year plan that lays out the city's aims to "meet climate, safety, mobility and other goals" as well as create more travel options for people in the city. It was most recently adopted in December 2020. Particularly, one of the goals of the TAP is to "ensure that three of every five trips are taken by walking, rolling, bicycling, or transit" ("Transportation Action Plan", 2022). The Vision Zero Initiative is the city's goal of eliminating deaths and severe injuries from automobile crashes. Minneapolis hopes to achieve zero annual deaths by the year 2027 - ten years after the city adopted the goal in 2017. This goal is particularly ambitious because from 2016 to 2019, on average, about 166 people died or suffered from severe injuries in traffic crashes on Minneapolis streets annually ("Mission and vision", 2022).

Complete Streets is a nationwide initiative adopted by various cities to incorporate all modes of transportation on city streets. Minneapolis' Complete Streets policy, originally adopted in 2016, specifically prioritizes the most vulnerable forms of transportation, namely walking, transit, and cycling. Their policy aims to reduce dependence on the automobile, as well as promote green stormwater infrastructure ("Complete Streets", 2022). Lastly, the Climate Action Plan is the city's resolve to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and combat climate change. Among the transportation-related goals in the plan are to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 30 percent

and raise bicycle commute mode share to 15 percent by 2025 (“Minneapolis climate action plan”, 2022).

Barriers to implementation

Despite the plethora of evidence suggesting a redesign of the street is long overdue, reconstruction projects like that of Hennepin are often difficult to implement. For the Hennepin project specifically, during the third period of public engagement for the project, the Uptown Business Association, a local neighborhood advocacy group for businesses, culled together over 900 signatures for a petition requesting a delay for the project, citing a lack of input from local business owners and residents on the project. Several local news stations aired stories about the project that featured interviews with local business owners who opposed the project (McGuire, 2021; Hassanzadeh, 2022; Spewak, 2022). Business owners said they would leave Hennepin Avenue if parking was removed, and they felt that Minneapolis did not care about their livelihoods. In Chicago, plans for a similar street redesign project on Ashland Avenue materialized in the early 2010s. The Chicago Transit Authority proposed implementing a north-south BRT line on Ashland to connect with various elevated rail lines. However, the project never materialized in part due to complicated politics, but also due to familiar public controversy and pushback over on-street parking on behalf of conservative vehicle and business interests. This failure was despite positive feedback from community members (Sukaryavichute & Prytherch, 2018).

In sum, the city aims to reconstruct Hennepin Avenue for three main reasons: First, the avenue’s infrastructure is aging and expensive and difficult to maintain, and the city has the financial resources to replace it; second, the street is dangerous for users of all modes of

transportation, and lacks the proper infrastructure to remedy these safety concerns; and third, the corridor has not been redesigned in over 60 years, and the city wants to design it sustainably and resiliently for the future. However, despite the necessity for an overhaul, the reconstruction project has struggled to get off the ground as a result of strong pushback from local car and business interests.

Literature Review

Benefits to reconstruction

As I have mentioned, much of the pushback against the project is present in the form of comments on digital news articles. There is a gap in scholarship analyzing digital news comments, particularly pertaining to urban or city planning-related projects and issues. However, there is a lot of scholarship on the role of the internet as a public space, as well as street redesign projects and their functions, such as Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) and bike lanes. This paper hopes to suture the gap between these two discourses, with particular attention to the disconnect between the positive impacts of redesign projects and the negative perception thereof in digital comments.

There is a myriad of existing scholarship on the positive impacts of BRT systems in cities. First, BRT is seen and acknowledged as an easier-to-implement form of transportation in comparison to LRT (Deng & Nelson, 2009; Wood, 2015; Clifton, Mulley, & Hensher, 2014; Cervero & Dai, 2014) that is also more cost-effective in the short run (Davis, 2013). In addition to this, buses are a more efficient use of space than cars, the primary mode of transport buses aim to supplant. Buses on Hennepin Avenue are a great example of this - according to Minneapolis Public Works and Metro Transit data, on a typical weekday during AM and PM peak hours,

buses are 3 percent of motor vehicles and move 47 percent of people on Hennepin Avenue (Minneapolis Public Works, n.d.).

Moreover, BRT - when implemented properly - is shown to improve transit efficiency and reduce fuel consumption as a result of faster, more uninterrupted service and less idling (Shaheen & Lipman, 2007). Hennepin Avenue serves as a great example of the potential of efficient BRT systems as well. In fall 2019, Minneapolis placed bus-only lanes on portions of Hennepin Avenue between Franklin Avenue and Lake Street and found that they reduced travel times by between 15 and 18 percent, and passenger delay, or travel time in peak congestion hours, fell by between 27 and 36 percent. They also found that these lanes made transit 50 to 75 percent more reliable, greatly decreasing the variation in time it took for riders to get from point A to point B (Metro Transit & City of Minneapolis, 2020). BRT is also shown to be impactful during periods of inclement weather. For example, in the aforementioned bus lane trial run, Minneapolis found that these bus-only lanes were most effective on days with snow, when congestion was at its worst. On these days, the bus lanes reduced passenger delay by 81 percent in the morning and 31 percent in the evening for transit riders (Metro Transit & City of Minneapolis, 2020).

BRT can encourage drivers to switch to riding transit, reducing emissions (Glaeser & Khan, 2008). Additionally, BRT can foster denser, transit-oriented development, as well as increase real estate values, for better or for worse (Smith & Gihring, 2006). This denser development around transit can encourage physical activity, specifically walking and cycling (Chang, Miranda-Moreno, Cao, & Welle, 2017), as well as discourage the use of personal automobiles (Boulange et al., 2017; Park et al., 2019) and reduce vehicle miles traveled (Andrews, 2008). Making cities more walkable through denser development is shown to also

positively correlate with neighborhood housing values and reductions in neighborhood abandonment and crime, and walkability is also possibly related to longer lifespans (Gilderbloom, Riggs, & Meares, 2015). Designing denser cities away from automobile dependence and toward walking as transportation is beneficial for children as well. Discouraging driving is imperative for improving children's livelihoods, as street traffic impairs children's social and motor development and places undue burden on parents (Hüttenmoser, 1995). Walkability and safety in neighborhoods is also important for increasing children's independent mobility - particularly for girls (Villanueva et al., 2014) and encourages active travel and physical activity (Marzi & Reimers, 2018). Finally, walking commutes are associated with higher life satisfaction (Chng et al., 2016).

In addition to BRT, the proposed bike path could also be a boon for the transportation corridor, both in terms of safety and commercial activity. In Toronto, a similar street redesign project took place in the mid 2010s that trialed bike lanes on Bloor Street, a commercial corridor similar to Hennepin Avenue in Toronto's Annex neighborhood. Similarly to Hennepin Avenue, the street was primarily a vehicle-oriented street and was dangerous for cyclists and pedestrians. After the installation of bike lanes, the city found that cycling on the corridor increased by 49 percent, with 25 percent of that increase consisting of new riders. They also found that the bike lanes significantly increased levels of comfort and safety, both for motorists and cyclists. The project decreased the total number of conflicts between all road users by 44 percent. Furthermore, the city found that the number of customers to businesses on Bloor and nearby streets increased, and visitors to the area reported increases in monthly spending in these spaces. Vacancy rates of storefronts on Bloor stayed constant at seven percent (Bloor Street West Bike Lane Pilot Project Evaluation, 2017). After trialing the bike lanes, the city found them to be

successful and decided to make them permanent. This data suggests that the removal of parking in the proposed Hennepin Avenue redesign in lieu of bike lanes might not negatively impact local businesses as seriously as they fear.

Methodology

For this research project, I used ATLAS.ti software to perform a thematic content analysis using a set of digital comments from popular local news media sources. Local media coverage of the proposed Hennepin Avenue reconstruction project sparked tensions between those in favor of the project and those against the project, and many of these tensions came into the fore in the form of public comments on digital newspaper articles. Particularly, a few of the Twin Cities' more prominent regional newspapers—most notably, The Star Tribune, the region's largest newspaper and one of the largest newsrooms in the country; and the local, online-only news outlet MinnPost—ran a few articles on the project, and local readers submitted several opinion articles relating to the project. Local independent newsblogs like the Twin Cities-centric urbanist blog streets.mn featured several opinion articles on the Hennepin Avenue reconstruction project, and the project became intensely scrutinized by readers and stakeholders, especially in the final community engagement campaign in late 2021 and early 2022. Throughout these articles, many readers were engaging in lengthy and often fiery discussions in the comment sections, and from these discussions emerged several prominent themes.

I compiled 821 individual comments across six digitally available news articles—three StarTribune articles and three MinnPost articles. Of the StarTribune articles, one was an opinion article, and the other two were written by a journalist covering the project. All three MinnPost articles were opinion pieces, but two were written by community members, and one by a

columnist. Of the StarTribune articles, two were written in April 2021 around the same time as Minneapolis Public Works' third engagement period, and one was written in December 2021 during the fourth round of public engagement. As for the MinnPost articles, all three articles were written in January 2022, during Minneapolis Public Works' fourth and final community input and engagement period. Of the 821 comments compiled, about 730 of these comments were from StarTribune articles, and the remaining ~90 were from MinnPost. Compiled together, all of these comments yielded over 100 pages worth of text.

Using ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software, I began coding lines of comments through an iterative, inductive coding approach. Through this approach, I built up my set of thematic codes from the ground up, identifying major themes that emerged in my data rather than classing themes from a pre-existing set of codes. I set out to capture a representative sample of comments that reflected a summation of the themes from both the MinnPost and StarTribune articles. The proportional split of comments was roughly 60 percent StarTribune, 40 percent MinnPost and does not necessarily accurately reflect the proportion of comments from each outlet. It should be noted that the user base of MinnPost could be considered more left-leaning than that of the StarTribune, although I did not find data supporting this claim. I coded comments thematically, so I did not code lines with just one code—every time a theme was present in a line or comment, I coded for that theme. Altogether, I coded 391 individual "lines" of text—it is unclear how many comments specifically I coded because some comments were split into separate lines of text.

Results

Of the 391 strings of text that I coded, the five most common themes coded for were parking and loading (120); cyclists, cycling and bike infrastructure, including bike lanes (114); cars, drivers, and driving (108); businesses and general commercial activity (107); and transit, buses, and other public transportation services (84). Again, many comments were coded with multiple themes, so the total code count exceeds 391. Generally, discussion revolved around the removal of parking. Many comments featured multiple themes of parking, car use, and bike use, as in the context of this redesign project, cars and car infrastructure and bikes and bike infrastructure were often viewed as antithetical to each other. Comments on StarTribune articles largely seemed divided among pro-project and anti-project sentiments, but the most popular comments expressed general disapproval of the project, indicating a general negative sentiment toward the Hennepin project among commenters. For the MinnPost articles, there was also a split among pro-project commenters and anti-project commenters, although the split was relatively more even compared to the StarTribune commenters, and general sentiment in the MinnPost comments may have even been more in favor of the project than against it. Several comments on both publications painted local government in a negative light and many commenters expressed their frustration with the city government, the mayor, and the city council.

Code/Group of codes	Count	Example
Parking/loading	120	"Yet we have to have stupid debates over vastly-over supplied free parking."
Bikes/bikers/biking/bike lanes	114	"Bike Lanes DO NOT need to be on every major thoroughfare in the city. The city is installing a bike freeway just a couple blocks over in Bryant. A much safer road for bikes."
Cars/drivers/driving; car-brainedness	108	"The war on the car continues…"
Business/commercial activity	107	"So Jessica's Cafe Meow goes out of business, building becomes a parking lot? (And the invisible hand plays on.)"
Transit/buses/Metro Mobility	84	"If i'm correct Hennepin Ave had an exclusive bus lane on certain stretches. Why am i wondering as to why it's not being talked about."
Traffic/idling/gridlock/congestion	54	"For a number of years I've tended to avoid going to the Lake and Hennepin area to shop, because of traffic and parking problems."

Pedestrians/walking/walkability	54	"If pedestrian crossings are really that dangerous, why not a tunnel or skyway instead of further clogging the road"
Planners, city gov't etc. are bad at their jobs	48	"We have city leaders that think enforcing rules is racist."
Environmental/sustainability concerns (e.g. emissions)	37	"As for the pollution of idling cars…you have to prove that congestion will get worse before you can even trot out that canard."
"Utopian"/propaganda/agenda/for specific sub-demographic	33	"Trying to make every road "all things to all people" is a Utopian pipe dream. The problem with Utopia is everyone has their own idea of it. How many Utopias can we afford? ZERO."
Safety/comfort/danger	31	"I have NEVER understood why someone would ride a bicycle through that area, it's dangerous just driving around there."
Local weather/climate (i.e. winter, summer)	29	"There is a pay-ramp at Lake St., but are people going to pay to park and walk 6 or 7 blocks in the winter to do to a cafe or visit any of the other stores up Hennepin?"
Regarding aging/elderly or people with mobility concerns	29	"Minneapolis' leaders hate mothers with children, seniors and the disabled who rely on convenient parking in commercial area. I'm not sure why but it's sad to see."
Cost/tax money/taxpayers, or lack thereof	22	"Parking is paid for by those using the space and the business owners who pay taxes for that space."
Future (general)	16	"If anything, electric cars are the "50 years into the future" of personal transportation – not bikes. This design is more like 1870 than 2070. Where is the planning for charging stations?"
Emergency/essential vehicles and services	14	"This plan calls for Emergency Vehicles to use the bus lanes. How is that going to work? [...] If you're touting the "safety" of this plan I would say that's a pretty major thing to overlook."
Impact on residents/neighborhood/livelihoods	13	"This will be another city improvement that will have to be redone in 10 years. South Hennepin is a ghost town."
Covid/pandemics in general	13	"I am curious if the City has taken into account any of the lower traffic flows that happened since Covid hit. It isn't just Covid impacting the traffic counts, it is the rise of crime as well. Are these long term trends? If so, why are we headed down the same path?"
Accommodating visitors vs supporting locals	11	"Quite frankly it makes more sense for cities to be designed to the needs of their own population rather than accommodating outside visitors at its citizens' expense."
Regarding parents/children	11	"Groups with elders, disabled, parents with kids. All need cars. All need parking near the business they wish to access."

Figure 4. Table of codes with more than 10 uses

Interpretation

After completing my analysis, I noted several prominent points of intrigue that surfaced through the process. These included the impact of parking, or the lack thereof, on businesses; safety, or the lack of concern for safety; mobility for those with mobility concerns, especially in relation to local weather and climate; implications for families and children; misconceptions

about who in the city is responsible for reconstruction projects; and general disapproval of car problems, both by car-users themselves as well as non-car users.

Parking and businesses

The most fervent sentiment expressed by commenters revolved around the proposed removal of parking to accommodate alternative transportation uses. Many commenters lamented the removal of on-street parking specifically as a direct affront to local businesses who they argued depended on these quick-stop parking spots to accommodate car-using patrons. This topic was particularly interesting, as the tension between local businesses and the city administration is a deeply embedded issue. There seemed to be two clear philosophies on businesses among commenters. The first and by far the most prevalent point of view was that local businesses are the heart of the neighborhood, that people should hear their concerns, and the city should heed to their demands. As one commenter posits:

> "Hennepin is great as is. Two traffic lanes in each direction, plus parking. Handles lots of traffic efficiently. No need to change it, busses do just fine in the present configuration. The city needs to listen to business people and do its best to serve the needs of personal vehicles using Hennepin - they give the city vitality and prosperity."

Particularly, commenters expressing this philosophy pointed to the apparent "failure" of an earlier phase of the Hennepin Avenue reconstruction project that redesigned a block stretch of the street south of Lake Street to add dedicated bike lanes:

> "This plan is completely removed from reality. The businesses on Hennepin between Lake St & 31st St. have been gutted because their on street parking has been taken away. No one walks around there shopping. Its a ghost town (Apple and a few others shuttered ages ago) and this was before Covid. Shoppers will not come if there is no parking. Period. These kinds of plans do not work in cities where it is pretty much winter weather for mot of the year."

The second perspective was that parking is already in great supply, and that the redesign will be helpful for businesses, who are unnecessarily overly concerned. As for commenters expressing the latter philosophy, commenters tended to discuss previous studies or research that show the positive impacts of pedestrianization and livable design. For example:

> "Studies show that pedestrianizing a shopping street increases business. People don't go places only to park."
>
> "I recommend doing an internet search for "business impact of on-street parking conversion". You will find a great mountain of research and articles detailing that, overall, the trend is that, regardless of geographic location, businesses along corridors that had on-street parking converted to serve pedestrians, cyclists, and/or transit saw significant increases in both the number of people patronizing those businesses and also the amount of money brought in."

This debate brings up important questions about the nature of businesses on the Hennepin Avenue corridor. Many businesses specifically cater to automobile users; for instance, many businesses such as the Chipotle on Hennepin have large parking lots specifically for drivers, and there are multiple gas stations on Hennepin, as well as an oil change/car servicer. In a city moving toward less reliance on the automobile, one important question to ask is whether businesses like these are necessary and if the city should heed their demands.

In addition to raising questions about the nature of businesses, this debate reveals the underlying gravity of the situation of local businesses being dependent on commerce from outside the neighborhood, primarily from automobile users. Some commenters started explicitly debating how cities ought to be designed from a business perspective. As some comments state:

> "Quite frankly it makes more sense for cities to be designed to the needs of their own population rather than accommodating outside visitors at its citizens' expense."
>
> "Housing density and the population of the Minneapolis urban core is exploding in that area (and the rest of the city), too. It won't be long until the local population is all that's needed for local businesses to survive.

> Once we hit that critical mass, it'll be MUCH more preferable to have streets made for those who live there first and visitors second."

These comments point to the disagreement between those who believe the street should uphold the status quo of reliance on automobiles and those who support designing the street around denser development and local, short-distance commutes by pedestrians and cyclists.

Lack of emphasis on safety

Safety was not one of the ten most common themes, despite the danger of the intersection being the main impetus behind the reconstruction project in the first place. Compared to the main contention of parking removal, for many commenters, it appeared that safety was merely an afterthought. Discussion focused heavily on the removal of parking or lanes and how that would impact businesses and people who use cars, as opposed to how this would impact pedestrians and cyclists, who were often scorned by commenters. For instance, many commenters argued that reducing the number of lanes from four to two would create further traffic, neglecting the positive safety implications of such changes:

> "The writer says that Hennepin feels congested and stressful for car drivers today. The changes aren't going to make things any better for drivers. It will make things even worse for drivers with one narrow lane in direction. Drivers will also not be able to turn left at some intersections."

Those who did emphasize safety often specified their lived experience as having used a more vulnerable type of transportation:

> "As a Minneapolis resident who has lived in either downtown or uptown neighborhoods since 2007, I can say Hennepin has always been treacherous especially in Uptown (and I say this as someone who has been a motorist, a user of public transit, and a pedestrian). The goal – and I think this redesign accomplishes that – should be to get all traffic – motorists, public transit, pedestrians, and cyclists – through more efficiently. If

> you want to frequent a spot on Hennepin it's far simpler to park on a side street and walk a block or two … not that big of a deal"

This hints at an underlying philosophy among commenters that businesses and the economy take first priority over the safety and livelihoods of residents regardless of their mode of transportation. Commenters seemed much more concerned with how the city was supporting business owners rather than ensuring the safety of users of all modes of transportation in the corridor, which is often a life-and-death matter compared to the mere location of a commercial function. This could largely be a result of the topics of the articles being much more focused on business responses to the proposed project, but it is interesting how so many of these articles take the business angle rather than the safety angle. This lack of emphasis on safety in coverage by the media could be a major problem for the implementation of projects like Hennepin in the future, and warrants further steps to overcome this barrier.

Mobility and local climate

Many people cited the removal of on-street parking as disproportionately negatively impacting people with mobility concerns, forcing them to walk unbearably longer distances to access essential businesses and services:

> "I'm over 50 with a disability and have a difficult time accessing 2 of my favorite NE venues that had multiple street spaces adjacent removed for bike lanes. I frequent them less then half the time previous because of the difficulties accessing the primary entrances. Someone should present the disabilities act to the wayward City Council. I'm too tired from hobbling around 2 blocks for dining."

Alongside bringing up mobility concerns, several commenters also specifically mentioned being unwilling to walk long distances in the cold to access businesses:

> "I'm one of those people you don't want to hear from. Late 60's, short of breath, crappy knees, have a handicap placard. I will not - cannot - walk a few blocks, shop, then walk a few blocks back to my car. I

> absolutely wouldn't even consider it in the winter. I have paid a fair bit of taxes in my lifetime, and I don't expect the cities I live in to make it HARDER for me to live my life. So, stick that in your bicycle basket and ride it."

These responses were interesting because they are illustrative of the preference many people with mobility concerns have for the personal automobile. Many people seemed to write off the local public transit system as inadequate for meeting the needs of those with mobility issues. When services like Metro Mobility were brought up, commenters pointed out a poor perceived quality of service and noted how the personal vehicle is by far and away the best option for the elderly and people with mobility concerns. For example:

> "I know from personal experience that you can literally wait for hours for Metro Mobility. By definition they can't be on schedule. They struggle to board people with disabilities from all over the city, not using a designated route but responding to specific calls. It's good if you don't care when you arrive. Otherwise, forget it."

This could be a major sticking point and concern for cities seeking to implement reconstruction projects like the Hennepin project in the future, and more consideration for those with mobility concerns should be undertaken.

Designing for families and children

In addition to people with mobility concerns, commenters often mentioned families with children, claiming that they depend on cars and parking to access essential services. For example:

> "Anyone over 50, parents with young children, and people with disabilities should sue the city. Public transit is sketchy and inconvenient, and for these people riding bikes as a mode of transport is impossible. These council members can't leave soon enough."

This logic neglects to understand that denser development and multimodal transportation extricates people from forced reliance on the automobile. It seemed that commenters mindful of children assumed that the removal of parking and implementation of safety measures would inhibit parents from being able to shuttle their children around and nothing more, rather than enable children to walk and bike places across shorter distances more safely, as research suggests. Related to this, commenters lamented safety concerns, particularly among women and children, regarding the Twin Cities' public transit system, highlighting that Metro Transit has a way to go before people with safety concerns will feel comfortable regularly riding transit:

> "I used to take the bus daily for work and going to eat and shop. Now it has become too unsafe to even consider using it at any time of day. I worked in NY for eight years and took the subway daily, but no way you'd ever get me on a light rail train here."

In the meantime, as research suggests, denser development is desired to decrease the importance of the automobile, and accompanying transit should become a much more favorable option among the car-driving public. Commenters that discussed mobility in the context of accessing things they need tended to do so in justifying the automobile. A few commenters expressed an opposing viewpoint in favor of the alternative solution of transforming our built environment around short walks to essential services. The difference between comments like these reveal opposing philosophies on mobility and show the interconnectedness of housing and transportation:

> "The thing is that the more people who don't need cars, but drive because it's easy and convenient, that we can shift into a reduced-car or no-car lifestyle, by means of enhancing existing and building out new multi-modal infrastructure to increase the access to, safety of, and reliability of transit/bikes/etc., and adding a few friction points to private vehicle ownership, the more we'll free up existing infrastructure for the folks, like yourself, who need it the most."

Misconceptions about responsibility

Many commenters cited local government, and particularly elected officials like the mayor and city council representatives, as being responsible for the demise of the city and its neighborhoods through projects like the Hennepin Avenue proposal. Commenters listed the Hennepin project as but another example of city-level mismanagement, citing rises in crime and lack of order in the city:

> "allow people to commit crimes downtown with consequences- check
>
> Dismantle police- check
>
> raise taxes - check
>
> ruin small businesses - check
>
> handout 27M without hearing evidence- check
>
> the slow erosion of a great city - check"

Additionally, commenters tended to place "blame" for the Hennepin Avenue project on elected officials. Two commenters said, for example:

> "City council listens to input (not) and does opposite."
>
> "Minneapolis needs a complete change in city council and mayor."

Comments like these illustrate a misconception of who is making decisions on projects like the Hennepin project. While policymakers like the city's mayor and the city council ultimately have final say over whether the project moves forward, it is the Minneapolis Public Works department who has largely been in charge of shaping the project within the guidelines of overarching city goals and policies distinct from any individual city governmental regime, and with the feedback they received from residents and stakeholders on the ground. Misconceptions about who is making decisions over projects like the Hennepin redesign, especially in the context of unpopular or highly-criticized mayoral regimes, serve to sabotage them, and projects like Hennepin could benefit from more work to distance them from city politics.

Anti-car sentiment

Lastly, many people mentioned traffic problems as preventing or disincentivizing them from spending time in the area; this is despite an overwhelming negative sentiment towards the proposed design, which aims to reduce car traffic. For example:

> "For a number of years I've tended to avoid going to the Lake and Hennepin area to shop, because of traffic and parking problems."

This anti-traffic sentiment was interesting, as it seemed as though many people who were complaining about traffic and congestion were car users themselves. There appeared to be a lack of awareness among these commenters that they were contributing to the problems that they themselves were complaining about. Both drivers and non-drivers cited traffic as disincentives for using Hennepin Avenue:

> "I am currently without a car, and once I take the bus to Uptown, it is extremely walkable, only not very pleasant, due to all the automobile traffic."

Moreover, most of the people who self-identified as cyclists or pedestrians tended to mention safety concerns and atmosphere as reasons not to bike on the current Hennepin design:

> "I'm a bicyclist but I wouldn't bike on that segment of Hennepin Avenue. I like biking on Bryant Avenue, it's very peaceful."

Comments like these also point to a disconnect between what drivers and cyclists value in their commutes; particularly, drivers value efficiency and time, whereas cyclists value serenity and safety, which seems to be a challenge on busy, car-dominant streets like Hennepin.

Conclusion

The Hennepin Avenue reconstruction project in Minneapolis' Uptown neighborhood has drawn a lot of criticism from a variety of local stakeholders on the grounds of eliminating on-street parking for local businesses. However, the transportation corridor has shown to be dangerous for users of all types of transportation and its upkeep is financially unsustainable to the city in its current, car-oriented state. Minneapolis Public Works' proposed redesign of the street aims to calm traffic, enable safe left turns, introduce a safe, separated-use bike path for cyclists, and improve the transit experience for riders by implementing dedicated-use bus lanes, opening up the possibility of a future Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) route on the corridor.

Local tensions surrounding this proposal have erupted into fierce arguments and discussions in the comments of several local news articles on the internet, and these tensions have revealed several prominent themes, including but not limited to: Parking and the removal thereof; the addition of bike lanes and infrastructure; cars and car use; businesses and commercial activity; and public transportation services and related infrastructure. Analyzing how these themes manifested in different ways revealed a set of different perspectives on what is most important to cities, who businesses should cater to, what "mobility" entails, who is ultimately responsible for redesign projects, and a lack of self-awareness among drivers of the negative externalities they are responsible for.

Although this research has been effective in identifying pertinent themes and ideas revolving around the Hennepin Avenue project, this research project is necessarily limited in scope, as the use of mostly anonymous online comments from local journalism outlets precludes identifying demographics of subjects, where they reside, and any information about their lived experiences. A more broad, overarching analysis involving comments from public-facing stakeholders and community members that includes and accounts for demographics and

geographies is desired to ground this research in reality and produce more meaningful and actionable conclusions. Additionally, further relational analysis is needed to draw out connections between identified themes and potentially identify causality between them.

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Appendix

Articles (and comments) used in this study:

- https://www.minnpost.com/community-voices/2022/01/new-hennepin-avenue-redesign-is-a-major-step-forward/
- https://www.minnpost.com/community-voices/2022/01/hennepin-avenue-needs-a-holistic-redesign-not-another-public-works-mistake/
- https://www.minnpost.com/cityscape/2022/01/for-climate-action-and-equity-hennepin-avenue-is-where-the-rubber-meets-the-road-in-minneapolis/?hilite=%22Hennepin+Avenue%22

- https://www.startribune.com/counterpoint-less-parking-will-mean-more-street-life-for-hennepin-ave/600045203/
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