

## **Peter Bell, Chair, Metropolitan Council, 2003-2011**

Interviewed by Peter Myers at St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, St. Paul,  
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Q You mentioned growing up at 912 St. Anthony. Your family moved when you were young?

A I grew up at 912 St. Anthony, went to Maxfield grade school for kindergarten and then our family moved when I was about six years old; I was going into the first grade. It was a very traumatic event in my life. I had a number of friends around our house and you're just kind of bonding with them and we were uprooted by the freeway coming through and moved to the north end of town.

Q Do you remember conversations that people had at the time?

A I think there were mixed feelings. I think that this is where our family had settled. We had a number of relatives in that area, but I think my family viewed it also as an opportunity to build their own house – a better house, a nicer house. So there was some excitement about that. But I would say there was mixed feelings there; that's the sense I recall.

Q How has University Avenue changed during your lifetime?

A Well, I think it's evolved in many ways. When I was a child, it was the center of the African American community. There was a lot of businesses there, there of course were a number of car dealerships there. So it was a commercial hub of the Twin Cities area. Probably my most vivid recollection of University Avenue was a restaurant called Road Buddies. They had the best ribs to this day there and occasionally – a couple of times a year – my father would take us all out to dinner there and that was always really an exciting event in our family's life. So it was a vibrant, thriving Avenue, is really how I recall it. And it remains so to this day. Of course it has gone through a number of changes. Now a lot of the businesses are run by first generation immigrants into this country who have really put a lot of time and energy and resources into that, and in some respects revitalized it. The auto dealerships are, of course, long since gone. So it's gone through a lot of transformations.

Q Somebody had a great quote: "streets like University Avenue and Lake Street are the incubators of capitalism." How do you react to that statement?

A I think that is true. I think that they are, to the extent to which there are mom and pop enterprises – viable mom and pop enterprises – in America today. They primarily exist on avenues like University Avenue and like Lake Street. And they really are, I think, a source for revitalization. I tend to think that immigrant populations coming into this country, starting businesses, are the most important source of urban revitalization we have in this country. They do more to revitalize and energize communities and corridors than really anything else I have seen.

Q How do you think the influx of immigrants has impacted University Ave.?

A I think it's been overwhelmingly positive. Immigrant populations coming into University Avenue has been overwhelmingly positive. I think the light rail line, hopefully, will carry that even further. I think they've stabilized University Avenue and really energized University Avenue. I think without immigrant communities and the attendant businesses, University Avenue would really be a struggling thoroughfare. And it's very challenged today, but it would be even more so if small businesses primarily started by first generation immigrants, didn't exist there.

Q How do you think light rail is going to affect the Minneapolis portion of University Avenue?

A I think it won't be as significant. I think that whenever you build a \$957 million project in a settled urban environment, a certain amount of dislocation is going to result from that. No matter how hard we try, no matter what we do, no matter how many resources we throw at it to minimize the dislocation, some will take place.

I think there will be less of that in the Minneapolis portion, in part because it's only 30% of the line; 70% of it is in Ramsey County or in St. Paul. And there isn't a strong business corridor in Minneapolis that will be disrupted. It will go through the University of Minnesota and of course there's been numerous challenges in accommodating their concerns. But after it leaves the University campus, then it really goes to the West Bank and there were a few challenges there – some small business concerns – but then it really heads toward the Metrodome and downtown Minneapolis and really hooks up with the Hiawatha light rail line at that time and then I think the challenges start becoming much less significant.

Q Can you explain how this particular corridor surfaced as the most logical next step in the transit plan?

A There's a number of considerations, of course, whenever you're selecting a major transit investment. A lot of factors come into this. One, of course, was the success of the Hiawatha light rail line. It far exceeded what our expectations were. The public really gravitated toward it. I think that was the most successful public works project in the Twin Cities perhaps in the last 50 years. It created a lot of excitement and a lot of buzz and a lot of momentum. And I think that there was a strong feeling that because that was in the western part of the metropolitan area, that kind of getting some geographical balance it might make sense to look at what was the most promising line on the east, or primarily on the eastern side of the metro area. And of course, without question that was the central corridor. Its ridership actually is projected to be higher than the Hiawatha light rail line. It will really connect – I think one of the strong features is - downtown St. Paul with downtown Minneapolis. But someone literally will be able to go from Woodbury to the MOA to a Twins ballgame to the airport, from really all points east. Conversely, someone from Big Lake will be able to go to the State Capitol. They'll be able to take the Northstar commuter rail line and then come east and go to the State Capitol. Or dine in one of the wonderful restaurants along University Avenue. Of course the merchants there are quite interested in a system that will allow for that. So there was really not much question that after the Hiawatha light rail line and its success that the central corridor would be the next line.

Q Talk about Federal funding...how do you think this corridor is viewed by the officials at the FTA?

A The Federal Transit Administration – the FTA – has rated the central corridor the Number One what’s known as “new starts” project. So kind of in their priority list, they have our project – the central corridor – as the number one project. And I think they are strongly supportive of it. And I think that support is demonstrated by a number of things. One is they’re allowing us to do those three so-called infill stations along University Avenue, which is very, very important to the community and at the end of the day I think the right thing to do, even though that kind of affected what is known as the cost effectiveness index and made that worse because the time to go from one end of the line to the other end would be lengthened because of the additional stops, and that really hurt the formula they used. It still remains the number one project. I think the federal government by and large has been a good partner and a strong supporter of this project. And I think that’s evidenced by they have given it - or they’re in the process of giving it - its final approval now, which we anticipate receiving really any day.

Q Speaking of the extra stops, how do you go about balancing the needs of the longer-run traveler with the needs of people who need to travel a short distance?

A You know, with projects like this they are one part art and one part science. And of course there’s a technical component to building these lines and all kinds of requirements to secure funding, and then there’s kind of the art part of the lines and that question really hits on that. Efficiency is a big, big component of this. Getting people from point A to point B as efficiently as possible. But you also really have to take local concerns into consideration as well and I think the residents, particularly along University Avenue, didn’t want this to be an express line, didn’t want to just facilitate people going from the State Capitol to downtown Minneapolis with no stops in between. They rightly said, what about us? We have to have our needs met and maybe we just want to go from Dale Street to Snelling Avenue to go grocery shopping, and we want to have our service enhanced as well, our transit experience and service enhanced. So really we have tried to do both. I think it’ll be for others to determine how good a balance we’ve struck between efficiency – getting people to travel efficiently over long points, from long distances – but also really meeting the needs of local citizens. We’re going to maintain the 16A bus. The exact number of buses that will run and their scheduling is yet to be determined and these things will be fine-tuned; as the project evolves it will be fine-tuned. The commitment that I thought it was important to make was the 16A bus was not going to go away. We added the three stops and then there’s plenty of time for discussion and debate about how frequently it should run. And we’ll fine-tune that as we fine-tune all parts of our transit system, trying to maximize revenue and customer service. It’s a balancing act you’re always trying to strike.

Q How do you see the role of the central corridor helping to encourage healthy business growth?

A I think the central corridor will be a strong catalyst for the further growth and development of University Avenue, and really for the City of St. Paul. I think the Mayor of St. Paul looks at the central Corridor as the major economic development catalyst for his city over the foreseeable future. And I think he’s right to do that. I think the prospects of that are quite strong, both for commercial development and for housing. The extent to which that should be factored into the federal government’s determination of what to fund is a very difficult question, in part because it’s very hard to quantify the exact nature of economic development that will result. And frankly people – not just

here, but across the country – can kind of get fast and loose with that kind of analysis and can project more economic growth than might actually take place to increase where they stand in that priority ranking. So then it gets...you have to have a system that has integrity with the public. And if people get the sense that you can kind of gain the system a little bit by projecting economic growth and development that may or may not happen, then the system kind of loses its integrity, and I think that taps into a major concern that I have about the public's level of cynicism and skepticism about government operations. So I'm cautious about that. It's not that I don't think it will happen, but I'm cautious about formalizing that into any kind of decision-making process. Not because it wouldn't benefit us, but I think competition for these dollars are going to get more intense and of course everybody around the country will do exactly the same thing and then the system loses a measure of integrity in my judgment.

Q Reminds me of...stadium...there's some truth in there, but....

A ....what would be an alternative investment, public investment that could get even more of a return. There's just all kinds of questions that come up. The public's smart and they just kind of say, come on let's...who's fooling who here?

Q Are there any other urban environments that are comparable to ours?

A Yeah, I think perhaps the one that...three that come to mind. One is in Denver. It's a similarly sized city and they're undergoing a rapid expansion of their transit system. The Utah transit system as well, in Salt Lake City, is doing both a number of commuter rail lines as well as light rail lines. And then Seattle as well. And particularly Seattle we looked at fairly closely because they were running their transit system through a world-class research university as well and they had very similar issues of EMI – electromagnetic interference – and vibration affecting research facilities. So we really looked at and studied their experience, because it was somewhat analogous to ours.

Q Could the Twin Cities have accomplished the same transit objective by perhaps enhancing the bus system as opposed to building light rail?

A That's a very intriguing question. I tend to think, yes. You know the question of should the Twin Cities have pursued a BRT strategy – bus rapid transit – or an LRT – light rail transit – or a combination of BRT and LRT, which is what I think we're going to do ultimately, is an intriguing one. I think after the huge success of the Hiawatha light rail line, the east metro powers that be were going to get a line for them. They just wouldn't have been satisfied with a bus rapid transit system and it would have left Hiawatha as kind of an orphan line. And I think it makes sense to have at least the spine of your transit system be LRT. And that is likely here. We have the Hiawatha light rail line, we'll do the central corridor, and then quite likely – though I think not certain – we'll do the southwest light rail system coming in from Eden Prairie and Hopkins, St. Louis Park and end up at the Twins station. Beyond those three, I'm not sure we will have more light rail lines. I think then we will move very quickly to bus rapid transit. We're doing two of those – one from Lakeville on 35W into Minneapolis and another one from Apple Valley on Cedar Avenue into Minneapolis. I think we will have one from Woodbury on 94 that will come into the Union Depot hooking up with the central corridor. BRT is an example, I believe, where you can get 70-80% of the benefit at 20-30% of the cost so it is very compelling in that sense. And I think in really austere budgetary environments, which we're in, that kind of approach is very, very attractive. And I think

our region will now, after focusing on LRT, will do a mixture of both – some BRT and some LRT – just for cost reasons. LRT is about \$100 million a mile and that's just a lot of money. But you don't get...there's a lot of rail bias. The public prefers LRT to BRT. You get more ridership, ultimately your operating costs are a little bit lower with light rail transit than with bus rapid transit. But the initial capital costs are so high and I think our budget challenges are so significant that it will find its way into policy choices that will now skew a little bit more toward BRT and a little bit less focusing on LRT. I've often wondered what would happen when Hiawatha was being discussed and this was before my time at the council, if someone didn't propose doing five or six BRT systems all at once – really a world-class BRT system that would have a wow factor to it and a real sizzle factor to it. But officials at that time, understandably, decided to go with the LRT line – the Hiawatha line – and then I followed up with central corridor. But I also pushed very hard for BRT and we've got two BRT systems that are under construction now.

Q Describe University Avenue to somebody who had never been there.

A I would say University Avenue is a commercial district, primarily populated by first generation immigrant businesses, that is in a period of transition. Hopeful growth and development, but transition. Some parts of it are doing quite well; other parts of it are a bit more challenged.