

February 3, 2017

To: Mayor Rhonda Pownell and City Councilors

Cc: City Administrator Ben Martig, Public Works Director/City Engineer Dave Bennett

Re: Connecting the community through better design for 246 and Jefferson and nearby infrastructure

Dear Mayor and Council,

Thank you for studying how to improve the transportation infrastructure in the area where Northfield has so many of its schools, playing fields, auditoriums and gyms, as well as its Senior Center and Community Action Center. This area also forms a critical link to other parts of the City. Thank you also for the invitation to provide feedback on the consultant's initial recommendations. We appreciate the City's request for this input and look forward to working with the City to develop the safe, comfortable designs for traveling to the school campus area that the whole community needs and deserves.

The issue is bigger than the intersection: As the city's consultant appropriately acknowledged during the recent open house, although the work on this area tends to be called "246 and Jefferson," the need is to help all Northfield residents, of all age and abilities, reach important places using whatever mode of transportation they wish. The consultants appropriately took as their scope the entire area, and developed opinions about a variety of streets, sidewalks, and driveways on and off public property in the vicinity of the actual intersection to make the connections needed outside the intersection itself.

Northfield can and must do better to connect people and places: As Northfield residents who use these streets and facilities often, we agree that the area needs a substantially redesigned set of transportation facilities. The consultant's report contains some positive recommendations, but does not address the actual transportation needs in this area.

We ask the City to more fully consider the opportunities for safely serving this area: We are asking the Council to not (yet) move forward with the SEH recommendation. We have important reasons to make this request and we have tried to lay these reasons out clearly and fairly below. We ask the Council to move swiftly on our recommendations to ensure this project does not lose momentum.

Sincerely,

1. Bruce Anderson
2. Carl Arnold
3. Melissa Beithon
4. Dave Berglund
5. Katy Berglund
6. Elijah Bisel
7. Joshua Bisel
8. Marcia Bisel
9. Tom Bisel
10. Caroline Brice

11. Martin Brice
12. Sara Brice
13. Tom Brice
14. Betsey Buckheit
15. Elizabeth Buckheit
16. Bill Carlson
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18. Patty Ciernia
19. Linda J. Davis
20. Connie DeGrote
21. Gary DeGrote
22. Sharon Detert
23. Catherine Dominguez
24. Cathy Draves
25. Sandra Drentlaw
26. Bruce Dybvik
27. Helen Ellinger
28. Margaret Enders
29. Pam Fickenscher
30. Tracy Davis Heisler
31. Kevin Herman
32. Daniel Hernandez
33. Gerald Hoekstra
34. Sarah Jansen
35. Steve Janusz
36. Beth Kallestad
37. Chris Kauffeld
38. George Kinney
39. Bonnie Keeler
40. Scott Koehler
41. Doug Kriesel
42. Pat Kriesel
43. Scott Langston
44. Michael Lehmkuhl
45. Anne Larson
46. Justin London
47. Carol Marshall
48. Jane B McWilliams
49. Mark Mellstrom
50. William Metz
51. William F.S. Nelson
52. Douglas M. O'Leary
53. Lois Perkins
54. Peggy Prowe
55. Josh Ramaker
56. Catherine Riggins

57. Dan Riggins
58. Marisela Casper Sanchez
59. Johann Schroeer
60. Katie Schroeer
61. William Schroeer
62. Emily Schmitz
63. Pat Shelby
64. David Sipfle
65. Christopher Tassava
66. Mark Thacher
67. Alice Thomas
68. Emily Thomas
69. Jake Thomas
70. John Thomas
71. Ellen Trotman
72. Lance Trotman
73. Ginny Walsh
74. Larry Walsh
75. David Weeks
76. Jennifer Ross Wolff

An area rich in community assets and number of trips

Northfield citizens have asked for many years for safer transportation options to the many community assets along Jefferson Parkway and on Division Street / Highway 246:

Northfield High School
Northfield Middle School
Bridgewater Elementary School
Montessori Preschool
Northfield Community Resource Center (NCRC: including Northfield Senior Center, Northfield Head Start, Early Childhood and Family Education, and Community Action Center), and
Spring Creek Soccer Complex

The schools and NCRC with their auditoriums, courts, playing fields, stadium, track, and swimming pools and programming form a dense core of Northfield's community life across all ages and interests.

Such a concentration of community assets attracts a lot of people:

Northfield High School	1200 students + 135 staff
Northfield Middle School	925 + 100
Bridgewater Elementary	500 + 91
Northfield Senior Center	300
Spring Creek Soccer Complex	500 children in the Northfield Soccer Association and other community events

School trips alone add up to 5,900 trips per day (adding the number of students and staff x 2 to travel to and from school). The trips per day associated with the schools are far higher than the 5,900 generated by daytime classes, however, as the buildings also serve practices, after-school activities of all kinds, sports events, performances, and community events with the vast majority involving Northfield's children. This is only a partial list; the NCRC is also home to Head Start, Early Childhood Education and the Community Action Center bringing more families with children and some of our lower-income families to the area.

Given these numbers, and the number and size of events at the schools, NCRC, and playing fields, it is likely that on an average day, **the majority of the trips in this area are to and from one of these child- and senior-oriented community institutions**. Certainly the majority of the transportation problems the community currently experiences in this area are associated with trips to and from these places as noted in SEH's report as well.

In addition to these existing facilities, the Mill Towns Trail is planned to be constructed along Jefferson Parkway; the state trail will also help link the off-road trails in Sechler Park, the East Cannon River Trail under construction, and facilitate connections to the south part of the City including the YMCA increasing the number of people walking and biking through this area.

The current street design does not serve the people making these trips

The City has recognized the street network in this area does not work. Getting to schools, especially walking and biking, is particularly difficult. By commissioning the current study by SEH, the City again acknowledged the problem; the consultant's presentation in December, however, did not do a complete job of capturing the difficulties posed by this intersection for connecting important places in Northfield. This intersection is:

1. **Unsafe:** The intersection has been documented as unsafe in Northfield's Safe Routes to School Plan and other plans.

Unsafe now: When approached before the last Bike/Walk To School Day, the Bridgewater School principal said she couldn't publicize the event because of Bridgewater's "precarious" location with senior citizens, inexperienced teen drivers, and teachers and parents all driving to school so inviting more people to walk and bike was simply not safe. The costs of this lack of safety are high: two people have died, multiple vehicle crashes have occurred, and Safety issues create an obstacle to safe, healthy behavior.

Unsafe over time: 25% of Minnesotans are obese and another 37% are overweight. Healthy habits are formed in childhood and studies examining the subject conclude walking or biking to school makes a positive contribution both immediately and over time. Yet parents and Northfield school administrators agree: it is not safe to do so with the current infrastructure.

2. **Unpleasant:** "Unpleasant" is more subjective than measures of safety, but certainly describes reaching any of the schools and other community assets by any mode:

- Delays for cars and buses along 246 & Jefferson, at the intersection, and at school driveways are frustrating.
- Incomplete or non-existent infrastructure inhibits walking; including the lack of a continuous sidewalk along Division to the high school.
- The multiuse path between the schools crosses Jefferson in a fundamentally incomplete, unsafe, and unpleasant way.

Positive steps so far, but more are needed

The City of Northfield, the Northfield School District, and other stakeholders including MnDOT, have taken positive steps including the off-road path between the high school and middle school plus more recent changes lowering the speed limit on 246 and crosswalk improvements at Arbor Street. But everyone acknowledges these changes have not yet created safe, pleasant streets; nor will the preliminary recommendations from SEH be sufficient to ensure this occurs. As the City heard at the open house in December, this is true of both details of the preliminary recommendation and the overall approach.

For example, the proposed new crosswalk in front of the high school was so inadequate and so poorly positioned that no parent in attendance said he or she would let their child use it. One parent observed that he and his son had been working to improve access to these schools for years, and were always told: the fundamental problem is the intersection; wait until the intersection is addressed, and the rest will be improved as well. Current plans show only the intersection is being addressed, but without robust consideration given to helping people reach the schools and other assets beyond the intersection.

Requested next steps

We genuinely appreciate the work that has been done so far and the recommendation of the roundabout is essentially solid. However, we request the City acknowledge that the consultant's preliminary recommendations are a good start but are not enough to accomplish the City's goals for this critical area of the community and the broader region. **We ask the City to take these next steps:**

1. Establish a complete set of the community's goals.

SEH's report gives great detail about how the system will perform for vehicles, down to seconds of delay 23 years in the future, but little about performance for any other users. We get a description of the needs of a "design vehicle" that will use this intersection perhaps a handful of days a year, but no description of the thousands of people who use this intersection every day of the year, and of what their needs are. Goals might include:

- *The transportation system in this area must serve the child- and senior-oriented uses.* The user numbers above make clear that serving thousands of children, seniors, and the people who care about and care for them, reach and use this area safely and comfortably must be a priority.
- *New transportation investments must anticipate and serve expected changes in use and need.* Current users of this street network are asking for more safe, comfortable, active choices. Planning for increased walking and biking plus the Mill Towns Trail must be part of this single largest and most visible infrastructure project in Northfield's plans. Plans should also respond to the possibility of new high school at this corner.
- *Improvements should reduce vehicle traffic by making other modes of transportation safe and convenient. This would also reduce the need for future expensive expansions.* Communities across the country are successfully increasing walking and biking to schools. Northfield can do the same. Meaningful amounts of current and future traffic could be taken off the road at peak periods, improving the system for all users; SEH has no discussion of how improving this area can reduce vehicle traffic by helping kids get to school independently.

2. Retain a consultant with demonstrated expertise

Professionals with more extensive experience designing for truly Complete Streets and really Safe Routes to School are readily available. The transportation planning profession knows how to do better multimodal design that will also move vehicle traffic. Northfield needs and deserves to tap this expertise. With the right professionals, we can enjoy the benefits these other communities are enjoying today. We should hire it.

3. Make low-cost immediate improvements

Taking the time to design this this area right should not mean delaying changes that can make these routes safer now. Planning for major improvements to this intersection project should take the time to understand how it would fit into a broader plan for this area to insure the project is a success rather than creating something which will take more

resources to fix later. While the important work of planning is taking place, low-cost improvements can be made quickly.

A few possibilities (and these are only a few) include:

- Genuinely safe and comfortable crossing of 246 to the high school. This could mean at a minimum mid-block bump-outs, a mid-block island, and/or a traffic table. Some of these could be installed almost immediately with temporary infrastructure, as was successfully done at 5th and Washington.
- A complete, functional path crossing across Jefferson
- Urban district speed limit.

Taking these steps would both keep up momentum, and do so in a way that implements all of the Northfield policies that govern what we do in this area.

Conclusion

Not being able to walk or bicycle to a neighborhood school in a town with Safe Routes to School and Complete Streets policies is a fundamental transportation problem. Not being able to walk or bike to three schools, a Senior Center, the town's soccer complex, and all the community events that take place there, is a fundamental community problem. It is not worthy of Northfield or what we want to be.

The public feedback at the roll-out of the recommendations made clear that this plan does not meet the needs of this area. Nor is it even a good start. Some parts of the recommendation are sound, but some are clearly deficient. Rather than move on a flawed set of recommendations, from a consultant which seems not to be familiar with how to serve school areas, let's get the expertise we need and make sure we have a solid plan for the area.

This is the single largest and most visible infrastructure investment that the City will make for some time and it is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reconnect our community assets and neighborhoods for safety and livability.

We must take the time to do it right.

Northfield Plans and Policies. Northfield has important policies that support better connections for people as the City plans improvements to the 246/Jefferson area.

2008 Comprehensive Plan: pp. 37-38 Land Use Principles 10-12

10. Streets will create an attractive public realm and be exceptional places for

people. Many of the local streets are wide and are designed primarily to facilitate the movement of automobiles (e.g., ignore the needs of pedestrians and cyclists). The wide nature of the streets encourages a higher rate of travel for motorists, and increases the distance between building fronts, which detracts from the pedestrian experience and quaint small-town character.

11. Places will be better connected, in part to improve the function of the street network and also to better serve neighborhoods. Streets that are disconnected limit the flow of traffic in the community by forcing traffic onto major and minor arterials, which can create traffic congestion. Encouraging an interconnected street pattern will create more travel options for residents to arrive at destinations, thereby decreasing travel time/distance, reducing congestion and improving wayfinding.

12. Opportunities will be created to walk and bike throughout the community. A large percentage of residents prefer to make trips via walking or biking for recreation or other uses, and desire to recreate on multi-use paths. Currently, there are limited opportunities for walking and cycling, which encourage more trips made via the automobile. This contributes to local congestion and potential for decreased air quality, while limiting healthy lifestyle choices for residents.

- a. The design of local streets will encourage pedestrian and bicycle movement through features such as sidewalks, bikeways, narrower street widths, and high quality planter and buffer strips to protect the pedestrian.
- b. Sidewalks, walking trails and bikeways will be connected to public parks and other destinations, including shopping and entertainment areas.
- c. Biking and other alternate forms of transportation will be provided as a viable means of transportation.

2008 Parks, Open Space & Trail Plan. Although specific guidance is not provided for this intersection, the Plan recommends adopting a Complete Streets philosophy saying (page 4.22):

- The System Plan and this section provide the basis for developing a comprehensive system of trails, sidewalks, and bikeways throughout Northfield. The underlining philosophy is to foster more extensive opportunities for pedestrian-level recreation, fitness, and commuting...With greater insights as to the importance of these facilities to fostering healthy lifestyles comes the need to improve planning and design practices to avoid missed opportunities in the future as the community develops. *To that end, the City is encouraged to adopt a "complete streets" philosophy in which new or upgraded streets are designed to enable safe access and movement for all users.*"

- “Sidewalks, shared use paths, street crossings (including over and undercrossings), pedestrian signals, signs, street furniture, transit stops and facilities, and all connecting pathways should be designed, constructed, operated and maintained so that *all pedestrians, including people with disabilities, can travel safely and independently.*”
- “The design and development of the transportation infrastructure shall improve conditions for bicycling and walking through the following additional steps: *planning projects for the long-term; addressing the need for bicyclists and pedestrians to cross corridors as well as travel along them; and designing facilities to the best currently available standards and guidelines*”

2008 Transportation Plan

§3.1.1 “Additional challenges relate to the lack of interconnected neighborhoods in some parts of the City. This is particularly evident in the area south of Jefferson Parkway. The extensive amount of cul-de-sacs results in an overreliance on Jefferson Parkway and TH246/Division Street for all trips in the area. Jefferson Parkway and Greenvale Avenue are examples of important Major Collector roadways with a current design that under serves existing traffic volumes and bicycle mobility. In addition, Jefferson Parkway from Jefferson Road to Division Street/TH 246 has as an inadequate design for school bus traffic.” (See also §5.1.2)

2009 Safe Routes to School Plan

p. 10: “It should be noted that safety at the intersection of TH 246 and Jefferson Parkway has become a significant issue for Northfield residents. Several crashes have occurred at this intersection in recent years, one of which resulted in a pedestrian fatality. TH 246 and Jefferson Parkway is an all-way stop controlled intersection with right-turn lanes on all of the approaches. The current intersection control and multiple lanes on each of the approaches increase driver confusion at the intersection and make it difficult for motorists to determine who has the right-of-way. This confusion leads to increased congestion and delays, which in turn leads to drivers being more aggressive and ignoring traffic laws. Numerous vehicles were observed making rolling stops, stopping beyond the stop bar, and ignoring pedestrians waiting to cross, which increases the safety concern for pedestrians crossing the intersection. Compounding the issue at this intersection is the morning sun that aligns with Jefferson Parkway, resulting in limited visibility.”

Appendix A also records survey responses showing a significant minority of parents who responded listed the safety of the intersection as a reason they drove their children to school.

2012 Complete Streets Policy: Its vision is “Pedestrians, bicyclists, transit, motorists, freight carriers, and emergency responders must be able to safely move along and across Northfield’s street network. The City of Northfield Complete Streets policy intends to ensure all streets within the City are planned, funded, designed, constructed, operated and maintained to safely accommodate users of all ages and abilities.

2012 Gateway Corridor Plan: identifies the 246/Dennison Boulevard as a major corridor into Northfield and recommends aesthetic changes to enhance connections and a sense of arriving in the urban area and improving pedestrian connections.

2016 Age Friendly Northfield: AARP Livability Worksheets associated with Age Friendly Communities also advocate for a Complete Streets Approach

Where the numbers come from:

Senior Center: Daily attendance of 300 is reported on the Senior Center website

School populations:

- Bridgewater Elementary: 500 students, 91 staff
- Northfield Middle School: 925 students, 100 staff
- Northfield High School: 1200 students, 135 staff