Economic Effects of the Potential I-35 Conversion in Downtown Duluth
Research Team

Bureau of Business and Economic Research

Labovitz School of Business and Economics

University of Minnesota Duluth

Driven to Discover
Methodology

• Stakeholder engagement
• Case studies
• Literature review
Study Area

Source: Jordan van der Hagen
Survey & Stakeholder Interviews

• Level of support for redesign

• Reasons for support, reservations, or concerns

• Which groups might be positively or negatively impacted

• Economic development priorities for the area

• Impacts to stakeholders
Survey & Stakeholder Interviews

- Virtual interviews (30 responses)
- Qualtrics online questionnaire (109 responses)
- Mix of multiple choice and open-ended questions
- Sidewalk Days tabling (350+ responses)
“In your opinion, which of the following should community leaders prioritize for the downtown waterfront area?”
Community Priorities

- Public safety
- Parks/trails
- Shopping/dining
- Connection to waterfront
- Office/work
- Tourism/recreation
- Housing

- Yellow bars represent Sidewalk Days Respondents
- Red bars represent Survey/Interview Participants

ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF I-35 CONVERSION
Peer Cities – Case Studies

1. Riverfront Parkway (Chattanooga, Tennessee)

2. Park East Freeway (Milwaukee, Wisconsin)

3. I-195 Expressway (Providence, Rhode Island)

4. Inner Loop Expressway (Rochester, New York)

5. Robert Moses Parkway (Niagara Falls, New York)

Riverfront Parkway – Chattanooga, Tennessee (2001-2005)
Sources: FHWA, Alliance Realty

Sources: Congress for the New Urbanism
Peer Cities Findings

- Rightsizing led to economic development investments
- Investments take many years to materialize
- Results reflect city’s strategies/priorities
Literature Review

- Condition Met Locally
- Condition Partially Met Locally
- Condition Not Met Locally

- Damage and Deterioration
- Obsolescence
- Neighborhood Connectivity
- Economic Development/Revitalization
- Local Community Demand
- Power Structure Support
- Window of Opportunity
- Financial Viability
- Strong Advocate for Teardown
- Business Support
- Academic Association Support

ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF I-35 CONVERSION
Economic Development and Revitalization

Most common reason for supporting a redesign.

“Continue to grow the vibrancy, walkability, and connection the waterfront has with the downtown core. The waterfront is such a major tourism and activity-rich environment; it would greatly be improved with this connection for tourists and residents.”
Neighborhood Connectivity

“I-35 divides two of our most crucial business corridors. Having a freeway that divides the two economic engines allows for little cohesion and reduces business activity since there is less access for pedestrians and tourists. This redesign would be crucial for the economic development of Duluth.”
Local Community Demand

Based on what you know currently, how supportive are you of a major transportation redesign for the I-35 corridor through Duluth's downtown waterfront? (n=126)

- Very supportive 48%
- Moderately supportive 12%
- Supportive with reservations 29%
- Not supportive 11%
Strong Advocate for Teardown

- The Duluth Waterfront Collective (DWC) serves as a strong advocate for the teardown option.

- The group’s membership includes planners, activists, and citizens.
Power Structure/Academic Support

- There is not currently an entity in power that is advocating for the project.
- No academic associations have taken a stance in favor of the project.
Local business entities have not taken a strong stance in favor or a redesign, but most business representatives surveyed were supportive or very supportive.
Damage and Deterioration

- MnDOT sees no need to replace the downtown segment.
- The Fifth Avenue West bridge needs replacing in 10-20 years.

Source: Dan Williamson / Duluth News Tribune
Averaged 30,000 vehicles a day in 2021, down from peak of 49,000

Traffic congestion during high-traffic events

1996: I-35 Opens
36,100 AADT

1998: Peak Traffic
49,000 AADT

2021: Lowest Traffic
29,512 AADT
Window of Opportunity/Financial Viability

The Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program could provide a funding opportunity. The program requires a minimum non-federal match of 20%.
Contact

John Bennett, Educator
Department of Community Development
University of Minnesota Extension
jbennett@umn.edu

Monica Haynes, Director
Bureau of Business and Economic Research
University of Minnesota Duluth
mrhaynes@d.umn.edu

Economic Effects of the Potential I-35 Conversion in Downtown Duluth Full Report and Executive Summary