

8/9/2022

I am writing on behalf of Our Streets Minneapolis in response to a letter published by the nonprofit advocacy organization ReConnect Rondo titled, "**An open letter to Our Streets regarding the future of Rondo and the Twin Cities Boulevard Initiative.**"

First, we would like to acknowledge the hurt expressed by ReConnect Rondo leadership and others affiliated with their organization who felt marginalized by the development and launch of the Twin Cities Boulevard campaign. Let me state unequivocally that we strongly support the reconnection of the Rondo neighborhood and the formation of an African American Cultural Enterprise District to create wealth-building opportunities for Rondo's Black residents and descendants. Our support has always been outlined on the [Twin Cities Boulevard website](#) and has been reiterated in meetings with ReConnect Rondo leadership.

From the beginning of the Twin Cities Boulevard campaign, Our Streets Minneapolis has been focused on advocating for a Rethinking I-94 project that produces the best possible outcomes for highway-adjacent communities.

We stand by the information and materials we have shared, including our [position](#) that a land bridge over a rebuilt highway is inadequate for achieving our shared goals. As an organization, we believe in a transparent and public approach to our advocacy and we invite everyone to visit [our website](#) and learn more.

[MnDOT's Rethinking I-94 project](#) will determine the future of the I-94 corridor for the next half century. The result will directly impact more than 100,000 people who live within the highway's vicinity. As the community evaluates options for this project, we believe that it is critically important that every community member is fully informed about all of the potential project options, including removing I-94 and converting it into a boulevard, and their implications for their lives.

Every impacted resident, in Rondo and the rest of the project corridor, should know that **the construction of a land bridge for MnDOT's Rethinking I-94 project would result in 7.5 miles of the underlying highway being rebuilt for multiple generations.** We are sharing this information, not to undercut the critically important efforts to bring reparative justice to the Rondo community, but rather to highlight the fact that a land bridge would not go nearly far enough.

Of the two options, a highway-to-boulevard conversion is the only way to fully repair the highway's harms and achieve shared community goals. The Twin Cities Boulevard would:

- Reconnect the entire Rondo neighborhood as well as every community in the 7.5 mile project corridor
- Improve air quality and reduce disparities in asthma, cancer, life expectancy and other traffic pollution-related health issues
- Advance racial and economic justice by reclaiming highway land and prioritizing new housing and business ownership opportunities for those who the highway has disproportionately hurt. This land could be included in an African American Cultural Enterprise District to prioritize wealth building opportunities for Rondo's Black residents and descendants
- Improve access to walkable businesses, parks, and other amenities in every community in the project corridor
- Improve transportation options for the 28% of households within the project corridor who are transit-dependent
- Reduce carbon emissions and mitigate the future impacts of climate change
- Set clear benchmarks for the project workforce and the affordability of new housing and commercial space
- Implement strong anti-displacement policies to prevent gentrification

We also stand by the timeline and rollout of the Twin Cities Boulevard campaign. There are several reasons the rollout was not expressly coordinated with ReConnect Rondo. First, ReConnect Rondo declined multiple invitations to join the October 2021 [Rethinking I-94 Purpose & Need community comment letter](#) that was signed by Our Streets Minneapolis & 27 other organizations and community groups. The letter outlined core concerns about the Rethinking I-94 project documents and asked MnDOT to prioritize project options that would not reconstruct the highway. This letter and the resulting enthusiastic community response formed the basis for the Twin Cities Boulevard campaign.

Moreover, ReConnect Rondo has a close and long-standing project development and funding partnership with the Minnesota Department of Transportation. This partnership makes it difficult for ideas other than a land bridge—and the reconstruction of I-94—to advance. Such a project would leave I-94's harms in place for another 50 years. Furthermore, when we asked prior to the rollout about their position on the highway, ReConnect Rondo was reluctant to take a public stance on the future of the highway. For these reasons, it was inappropriate for us to coordinate with ReConnect Rondo ahead of the campaign launch.

Since the Twin Cities Boulevard campaign launched, we have met with ReConnect Rondo leadership twice to communicate our desire to work together to advocate for a Rethinking I-94 project that fully repairs the highway's harms in Rondo and the rest of the project corridor. During both meetings, we expressed our concern that a land bridge would leave the highway and its resulting impacts in place. We reiterated that a highway-to-boulevard conversion is fully compatible with the goals of reconnecting the Rondo neighborhood and creating an African

American Cultural Enterprise District. We encouraged their staff to include non-highway alternatives in their community engagement and offered to assist in that process.

MnDOT's Rethinking I-94 project continues to move forward and there are impending deadlines that make it urgent to organize and have this collective conversation now. This project is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reconsider the highway corridor, and we believe that every resident has the right to know that a future without the highway and its harms is possible before MnDOT makes its final decision.

We recognize that the future of the highway in Rondo must be decided by Rondo residents, particularly the Black residents and descendants who have been disproportionately impacted. Our staff and volunteers regularly door knock and collect response data in Rondo and all of the other highway-adjacent communities within the Rethinking I-94 project area. Rondo residents have shown significant interest and support for a future without the highway. The residents we have spoken to have been enthusiastic about a solution that would bring Minneapolis and St. Paul together to repair and reconnect the entire 7.5 mile project corridor. The vision for the Rethinking I-94 project must be co-created—through organizing and solidarity—by all of the 100,000 Minneapolis and Saint Paul residents who live along the project corridor and experience the highway's impacts daily, including the tens of thousands of poor and working class people, many of them BIPOC community members, who live outside of Rondo. We remain committed to continuing our grassroots organizing, seeking and responding to public support for this vision, and bringing honest, comprehensive information door-to-door to residents in Rondo and in every neighborhood along the project corridor.

We appreciate ReConnect Rondo's invitation to collaborate. We will continue to reach out to ReConnect Rondo leadership to find ways to work together to advocate for a Rethinking I-94 project that fully repairs the highway's intersectional harms in the entire project corridor.

As a next step, we extend an open invitation to ReConnect Rondo to partner on applying for the [Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program](#) grant opportunity that was recently launched by the US Department of Transportation. This grant program is a critical opportunity to give Saint Paul and Minneapolis the resources needed to evaluate how a highway-to-boulevard conversion could work on I-94 and to co-create a vision for reparative justice. As the Twin Cities Boulevard campaign moves forward, we will continue our approach to advocacy: seeking community consent via door-to-door grassroots work and being accountable to the community's response.

Sincerely,

Ashwat Narayanan
Executive Director