

Highway 75 – Looking down the road

Eric Moerman – Guest column – Sioux Center News, May 9, 2018

Few local subjects bring up as many emotions as the enhancement/widening of our Highway.

Why shouldn't it? It's the lifeblood of our community, our businesses want to locate along it, and it's the first thing most visitors see. It reflects Sioux Center!

Having the opportunity to serve on the city council and learn a bit more has helped me better understand there really is no "easy" answer.

What we have is a bunch of factors building momentum together for change:

- Road condition – The layer where our rubber meets the road is in rough shape (I think this is one thing we can all agree on!). A big issue lies underneath –the subgrade. Our oldest subgrade was laid in 1927, added onto in 1934 and in 1938. The condition of that foundation means everything on top degrades more quickly. We need to replace it or we will spend \$3 million to overlay the top only to have issues in a few years.
- Utilities. Our water, gas, sewer and electric utilities have some of their oldest sections underneath or adjacent to our highway. We were planning to replace them during previous Highway 75 discussions. We need to invest in this infrastructure. That means digging up major portions of the highway. This should happen at the same time as redoing the highway, or we'll be paying millions to replace it twice.
- Growth – our town continues to grow on several fronts:
 - Our population is 7,500+, up 23% from 2000.
 - Retail sales doubled in the past 10 years to \$153 million.
 - New businesses are opening, with growth along the highway.
 - We averaged 30 new homes per year the past 10 years, adding about 100 people each year.
 - 2,500 people work in our major industries representing 95 zip codes. Yes, many people commute to town.
- Congestion - With growth comes backup of highway traffic. Certain times are much worse than others. You've seen it – when traffic is thick, drivers make increasingly risky decisions.
- Pushing traffic out - With that congestion I've had many tell me they avoid the highway, especially at certain times. This pushes traffic to residential roads. That impacts safety and road condition in those neighborhoods.
- Safety – We were recently listed as the safest community in Iowa. We simply must partner with the Iowa Department of Transportation (DOT) to make our community safer as we

grow: adding improved, well-lit crosswalks; median safe zones for pedestrians; and additional stoplights (Pizza Hut corner comes to mind – this would need full DOT approval)

- It's our main street, but we don't own it – The DOT manages and maintains the highway. Pothole fixing, paving, widening, adding stop lights are all in the DOT's control and timeline.
- Speaking of time, any major improvement to the highway will take years. City leaders are working with the DOT to get on their 5-year plan. Then construction could last 1-3 years, so we could be 8-10 years away from finishing.
- The future. We will literally pave the road to the next 20+ years. We can't only think about what we need this week from our highway. We have to think what we will ask of it in 15 years and even 25.

All these factors point toward an enhanced 4-lane road, but, as I said, there is no "easy" answer. As we look at the big picture, there are some very real concerns to consider:

- Homes/Businesses – Widening the highway must gain ground from somewhere, likely front yards, business parking or sidewalks. Although there are funding mechanisms to fully compensate for land procurement, it doesn't necessarily come without inconvenience and long-term change for property owners. I don't take that lightly and want to make sure we do everything possible to alleviate problems widening may cause.
- Trees – Who doesn't love our mature tree canopy? If we widen the highway, it will come at the cost of some trees. More will be planted, and I'm confident down the road it will look great again, but there will be a change in our tree line.
- Traffic fluctuation – We've talked a lot about traffic counts, but the living reality of the highway is it varies from significant congestion to functioning fine at different times.
- Cost – Although the DOT would bear much of the cost to widen and replace the road, the city will participate as well.

Clearly, there isn't an easy decision. However, I believe making our highway an enhanced 4-lane road is the *right* decision for right now.

Here's why: the highway needs its surface and subgrade replaced now; we need to replace utilities and add safety features. If we do this while leaving our highway at 3 lanes, the future cost to expand will be that much more.

Also, Sioux Center continues to grow. I wouldn't ask my 7-year-old to keep wearing the shoes she wore when she was 5. Healthy growth does require change.

Great ideas come from good respectful discussion. Please continue to share. Honestly, dialogue has made many changes to the *original* plan. The plan today is safer, built for a longer life cycle, and more aesthetically pleasing because of your input.

Let's all keep working for a better Sioux Center.

Eric Moerman has worked at Interstates Companies since 2001, residing here with his wife Rachel (ASB), and two children: Aubren, a SCCS 1st grader, and Ryker, 1. He joined the city council in January 2016.