

## Commentary: Road money 'gift' doesn't come free

**Author(s):** John Diers    **Date:** February 19, 2017    **Section:** News

"Trojans, do not trust this horse," admonished Virgil in the Aeneid. "Whatever it is, I'm afraid of Greeks, even those bearing gifts."

Prior Lake elected officials should heed Virgil's warning. Scott County was just awarded a "gift" of \$4.9 million in federal money toward a \$6.2 million project to rebuild the County Road 21-Highway 13 interchange in downtown Prior Lake — no doubt a cause for celebration among county officials who've been relentless in their efforts to close Main Avenue at 21, cut the downtown in two and destroy Prior Lake's only historic neighborhood, all so cars and trucks can zip through town at 45 mph.

This gift isn't free. It comes with consequences. Moreover, it's a test for our new mayor and council, whose support came from business owners and residents opposed to the county's plans. Make no mistake, the county didn't apply for, and win, this funding because it doesn't intend to build. It does, and county staff will use the funding to run roughshod over objections, as it has before. It has a plan and will push the envelope to have its way.

If this seems too negative and cynical, consider the Rutgers neighborhood and the county's effort to take homes to build an access road as part of the County Road 42- Highway 13 interchange project. Residents found out when county engineering staff came knocking on doors to tell homeowners their property was going to be condemned and taken for the project. Residents fought back and for now, at least, their homes are safe — perhaps until the county decides it needs to reopen the issue and try again.

It's not altogether fair to blame county intransigence for the current situation. Prior Lake elected officials were complicit, as well. Look no further than the Arcadia Avenue extension, the road to nowhere. This multi-million-dollar mistake will undoubtedly be used as an excuse for closing Main Avenue and adopting the county's plan. I can hear the refrain. "It's been built, it's part of the downtown plan, and we can't abandon the 'investment' — unless staying the course makes it even worse. Good decision makers know the difference. Sometimes you have to take your losses and walk away from a bad deal. This is one of them.

We'll hear a lot of talk about consensus and collaboration and coming to compromise and getting to "yes." That's always a desirable outcome, but this isn't about "Kumbaya." It's about hard bargaining and negotiating an agreement with the county for the 21-13 project that is in the best interests of downtown businesses and adjoining neighborhoods — even if it means withholding municipal consent to get there. Saying "no" to the county and its plans might be a good place to start.

For openers, the concept of a four-lane, 45 mile-per-hour roadway through the downtown needs to come off the table. That's 1950s suburban sprawl think. A 30 mile-per-hour parkway with noise and truck restrictions between Franklin Trail and 154th Street is more in keeping with the interests of local businesses, the lake environment, adjoining residential neighborhoods and future commercial-residential development along 21 between Duluth and West avenues.

A traffic signal at Duluth and 21 synchronized with another signal at Main and 21 and the 21-13 intersection would further slow and breakup traffic on 21. It will keep Main Avenue open, preserve the Pleasant Street neighborhood and save taxpayer dollars if the Arcadia extension to Pleasant is abandoned. The other issue is safe, walkable pedestrian and bike access to downtown. Currently there is none, and simply closing Main at 21 is going to make it worse. There's a need for signaling, or a pedestrian grade separation on both 21 and 13. The new Grainwood development north of downtown makes it mandatory.

In one form or another, these issues have been under discussion and debate for 10 years. Traffic signals and the alternatives just discussed have been offered before and were just as quickly rejected by county engineers who stubbornly see this as a congestion problem that can only be fixed by closing Main Avenue and building a limited access highway through downtown.

They've got it wrong. This isn't a congestion problem. You can't build your way out of traffic congestion. It's about priorities and putting people and neighborhoods, and businesses, and quality of life, before cars.