

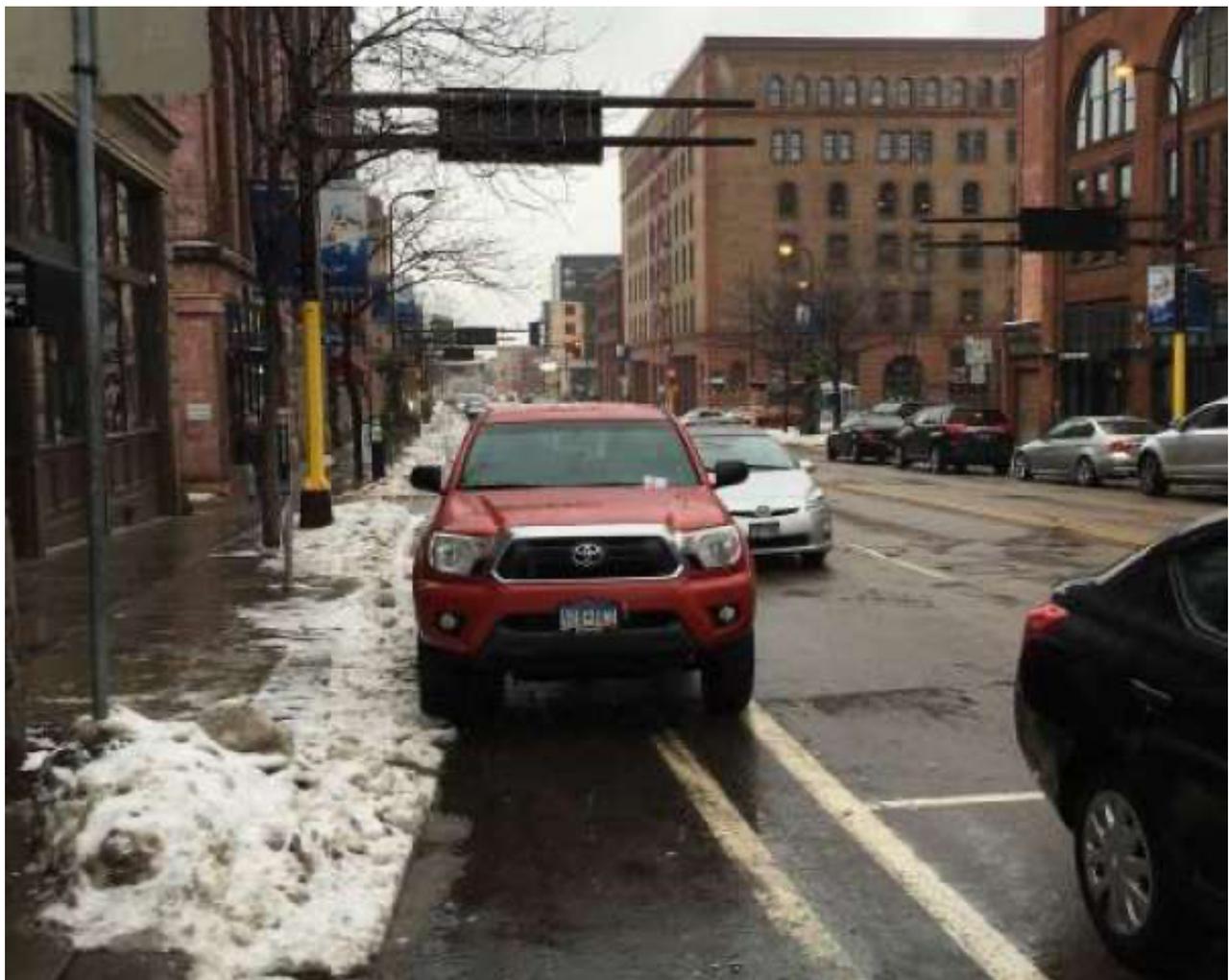
First Avenue Freeze-Out

By Dario Anselmo January 11, 2016

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We are six years into the road and bike reconfiguration experiment on 1st Avenue North. This road is the gateway to one Minneapolis's most colorful and economically important neighborhoods, the Warehouse District.

The rebirth of "First Ave" in the early 1980s marked the beginning of a social and economic phenomenon that continues today, boasting redevelopment stretching to the river and across the North Loop. Unfortunately a well-intended plan to encourage bicycle use is having a significantly negative impact on commerce and public safety.



The historic Warehouse District got its spiritual start at a place called The New French Café, a building that now sits vacant. Not too far away is The Fine Line Music Café, a place that has hosted everyone from George Clinton to President Bill Clinton. It hosted live music nightly but now is only open for special events and national touring concerts. Since the changes on 1st Avenue have occurred, there has been a nearly 40 percent retail vacancy rate along this key byway. While the recession contributed to the downturn, the failed bike lane experiment and its unintended consequences are a major culprit.

Buildings have gone into foreclosure, restaurants have folded, and new landlords are now looking at options to bring this street back to life. If you talk to some of the long time neighborhood fixtures they will tell you the street reconfiguration is what helped start this mighty fall from grace.

First Avenue is a destination. Renowned for its bars and nightlife it is also home to the Timberwolves, many Target Center events, thriving professional service firms like ad agencies and law firms. What these all have in common is a customer base that comes from across the Midwest; Fairmont, Fargo and Fridley. The so-called protected lanes are confusing, contrary and unlike any other in the state. Businesses report daily that customers are ticketed or simply drive away frustrated.

On top of these confusing lanes we are dealing with road closures. This happens on evenings in periods when there is peak traffic. When Twins and Timberwolves games let out and when bar life is ramping up, 1st Avenue and Hennepin Avenue have a tendency to get closed. This creates a huge "no-man lands" between the venues and transportation. It is in these spots that criminals prey on customers, employees, hotel guests; all innocent citizens unnecessarily trapped because of the constriction caused by the mostly empty bike lanes. It is just too hard to get in and out of the neighborhood for the good folks that used to come down here, and can become a magnet at times for the wrong ones.

At this time of year the folly of the lane configuration becomes a running joke along the Avenue. Ice and debris cover the lanes making them impassable, a veritable "freeze-out" on 1st Avenue.

The Minneapolis Downtown Council/Downtown Improvement District just completed a neighborhood evaluation process with the RHI group to help identify what is needed to make an area like the Warehouse District vibrant again in all the right ways. The configuration of 1st Avenue came up more than a few times during traffic flow and public safety discussions. The stakeholders along 1st Avenue are nearly unanimous in asking for change.

We have been asking for help for five long years. We hope the RHI report lends volume to these pleas and that our City Leaders will hear us, rather than ignore the obvious.

Dario Anselmo is an owner of commercial property on First Avenue and a long time community advocate. He owned the Fine Line Music Cafe for 20 years and is an avid biker.