

Policymaker Summary: Why Mature Trees Are Irreplaceable Public Infrastructure¹

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Mature Trees Are Critical Environmental Infrastructure

- Mature trees deliver *disproportionately large* ecological and health benefits; they are “**our largest source of green infrastructure**” (City of Saint Paul Forestry).
- They remove **20–50 lbs. of CO₂ per year**, cool neighborhoods, reduce stormwater runoff, filter pollutants, and mitigate heat-island effects.

The Proposed Summit Avenue Regional Trail (SART) Would Cause Massive Tree Loss

- The project’s raised, separated bike path requires full reconstruction of Summit Avenue and moving the curbs into the existing boulevards and mature tree root systems.
- The City has so far refused to analyze the impact of moving the bike trail and instead uses **estimates** from past projects that did not invade the boulevard and root systems to claim that “only” 14% of the trees will be lost – 221 of ~ 1,561 trees.
- The **actual risk** to Summit’s tree canopy based on arboricultural standards and the age of the canopy demonstrate that **several more hundreds of mature trees** will be lost.
- The City itself recognized this earlier and previously labeled the proposed design for SART “**NOT RECOMMENDED**” due to boulevard and canopy impacts.

Public Health Impacts Are Significant and Well-Documented

- Two to four mature trees produce the oxygen one person needs for a year.
- Peer-reviewed studies link tree canopy to:
 - Reduced cardiovascular disease
 - Lower rates of mood disorders
 - Improved sleep
 - Reduced mortality from respiratory and cardiac conditions.
- The massive loss of trees if the bike trail is constructed will increase risks to public health and long-term public-health costs.

Tree Loss Carries Major Financial Consequences

- Research shows canopy loss reduces property values: “**A 7% loss in tree canopy cover results in 7% loss in property value.**”
- Using the City’s conservative 14% canopy-loss estimate, Summit Avenue properties would lose **\$56 million** in value—about **\$100,000 per taxable property**.

¹ Go to “<https://www.savesummitavenue>” for Dr. Hough’s full report including citations that support these statements.

- Combined with expected **\$20,000 to 40,000 assessments**, property taxpayers face steep financial burdens.
- Resulting declines in taxable value could cost the City **\$350,000–\$700,000 annually** in lost revenue. Additionally, downed trees and branch removal after storms increase costs.
- The current off-street design costs **50 times more per mile** to build than an “in-street separated lanes” design and causes far greater environmental harm.

The Reconstruction Threatens a Nationally Significant Historic Corridor

- Summit Avenue’s tree canopy is a “**character defining element**” of the historic district (Bolton & Menk).
- Widespread canopy loss would permanently damage “**the best-preserved avenue of Victorian architecture in the country**,” reducing tourism and undermining Saint Paul’s destination-city goals.

State Agencies Strongly Prioritize Preserving Mature Canopy

- The Minnesota DNR emphasizes maintaining existing canopy: “**The DNR does not only want to plant new trees but also develop methods to maintain the current canopy.**”
- The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency’s climate-adaptation guidance stresses preserving and expanding tree canopy to reduce heat-island effects.
- DNR canopy data show Ramsey County gained trees but **lost canopy** from 2013 to 2023—because mature trees were removed and replaced with saplings. The proposed project repeats this mistake, and these losses are irreversible for generations to come.

The Project Undermines Regional Climate and Transportation Goals

- The Metropolitan Council calls trees “**one of the smartest long-term investments**” for livable communities.
- It is counterproductive to destroy hundreds of carbon-capturing mature trees to promote ‘carbon-free’ transportation used by a tiny fraction of residents.

Better Alternatives Exist

- Research evidence and the experience in other municipal settings demonstrate that safer and expanded bike infrastructure can be achieved without sacrificing trees.

Bottom Line for Policymakers

Mature trees are irreplaceable public assets whose loss imposes environmental, financial, public-health, and historic-preservation costs that far exceed any benefits of the proposed reconstruction. Preserving tree canopy is essential to protect Saint Paul’s long-term livability, fiscal health, climate resilience, and historic identity.