

# Remarks from Simon Taghioff, Fair Streets St. Paul

City Council Public Hearing on Mill & Overlay Assessments

August 21st 2019

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CP Brendmoen, Members of the Council,

I'm Simon Taghioff from Fair Streets St. Paul. We speak on behalf of the countless residents affected by this specific issue.

We're here today because the City Council still thinks it's ok to charge people who live on arterial streets thousands of dollars to maintain them when their neighbors pay little to nothing. That's not fair, and it's not legal.

## **Fairness**

The value of our streets is that they are a network that lets everyone get around. They are a basic service that the city provides to its residents. The people who live on a busy arterial street do not cause the heavy wear and tear, so why should we be the ones to foot the bill?

To say it a different way: "we are not alone in using and causing wear and tear on these streets, and we should not have to bear the cost of maintaining them alone." Those aren't my words, those are Mayor Carter's, from his budget remarks last week. And you know what, he's right.

If that argument is good enough for the city, how can you turn around to us and say the exact opposite? We know you already agree with us. Why defend a policy which even the Mayor accepts is unfair?

## **Program Not Fit for Purpose**

The policy isn't just hypocritical, it's a failure. Anyone who has driven in St. Paul can see that.

At best, the Street Maintenance Program is a band-aid. Those aren't my words either. They're from your own Public Works Department.

It would cost \$46.5m annually just to maintain the city's streets at their current, crumbling level, and \$51m to bring them up to where they should be. Mayor Carter's budget allocates just \$20m.

If approved today, these Mill & Overlay assessments would raise just \$220,000 in revenue over 10 years. Against a \$29m annual shortfall. That's a drop in the bucket. It does nothing to fix our streets. All it does is leave people with bills for thousands of dollars to pay for wear and tear they didn't cause. These oppressive taxes cause significant hardship for many in our community who never bargained for them when they bought their homes.

We've asked the city repeatedly to explain the policy. The closest we have to an explanation is "Other cities do this". So what?

Ramsey County doesn't. When Lexington Parkway was resurfaced, those residents didn't get bills for thousands of dollars. It was paid for out of general taxation, like it should be. And if this is the only way, then why, exactly, aren't you planning to charge the properties along Ayd Mill Road for their \$5m bike path?

Here is a policy that is morally indefensible, that the courts have thrown out repeatedly, that the Mayor accepts is unfair, that your own Public Works Department is telling you is a failure. And all you can say in its defence is that you're not the only ones doing it?

## **Conclusion**

We all want to improve St. Paul's streets. But \$220,000 in assessments simply cannot fix a \$29m hole. Carry on like this and our streets will be undrivable in just 20 years.

We urgently need a real conversation about how to pay for our streets. There are plenty of viable alternatives, from a gas tax to tolls and user fees, usage restrictions for heavy vehicles, or even plain old property taxes.

What's not an option, morally or legally, is taxing a handful of residents to maintain a public right of way. You tell us repeatedly that we don't own the roads in front of our homes, except when the time comes to pay for them.

So please. Stop fighting your residents – listen to them instead. Work with the Mayor, the county and the state to explore the alternatives.

Withdraw these assessments for good, and let's find a fair way, together, to pay for the streets we all use.