

Alderman Backes Update

Published: June 2, 2025

Summer is almost here! The spring is always inevitably the busiest time of year for educators like myself, so I apologize for the length since my last update. But there's a lot happening within the city as well, and a ton to talk about. Where to begin?

Celebrations and awards

I always enjoy the May meeting at which the South Milwaukee Police Department presents their annual awards and recognitions. There were a number of officers recognized for their actions that went above and beyond the expectations of their work, including the K-9 Rocket, and there was also a business (The Golden Lion Sports Bar) recognized for the work they do to support the SMPD and fundraise for its local initiatives.

The council chambers were packed with officers and their families, and it was really cool to hear the stories about each of the award winners.

There is also an upcoming celebration of Reggie "The Crusher" Lisowski, as Crusherfest returns once again this weekend to South Milwaukee. There's an absolutely massive lineup of wrestling names and musical acts (and, in the case of Chris Jericho, both). The Crusherfest committee has done an incredible job of putting all of this together, and I can't wait to stop by and check it out.

Proposed water rate increase

The city of South Milwaukee petitioned the Public Service Commission for an approximately 22 percent increase in water rates for the city to help cover the costs of maintenance, pipe replacement, and other projects.

The public response has been that of mostly outrage, which is essentially what was expected. And obviously, as a property owner who pays water bills myself, I'm not particularly thrilled at the idea of seeing those expenses continue to increase.

However, this continues to be the result of several different factors:

- Prices for basically every type of service increasing
- South Milwaukee's water infrastructure having seen heavy growth in the 1950s, which, as our water and wastewater superintendent informed us at the most recent council meeting, was probably the worst era in terms of quality water and wastewater infrastructure
- Decades' worth of deferred maintenance continuing to come back to haunt the city, as past decision makers decided to kick the can down the road rather than be proactive about fixing or upgrading our critical infrastructure

I hear all the complaints from property owners around town, and I sympathize with and even agree with most of them. But there's little else that can be done here; a combination of state and federal law with genuine need make this yet another unfortunate pill to swallow.

Other public works projects

There are some other recently approved projects coming up around town.

You may have already noticed some traffic calming measures that have been tried out around town with some cones and speed trailers; this is part of a study to determine what types of more permanent traffic calming measures might be most appropriate for some spots around town.

At our most recent public works and public property committee meeting, we discussed some additional potential future traffic calming options at high-traffic corridors like Drexel Boulevard, Nicholson Ave., and Chicago Ave. There are some different potential solutions in each of these areas, and nothing binding yet, but I really like the work our engineering department is doing to get creative in some of these areas and come up with solutions that will make the streets safer for drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists. These particular streets are ones we hear complaints about a lot.

Please note that the ideas in the images below are just that – ideas. There is nothing yet set in stone or even up for a vote; this is just a vision of some potential options.

SAFETY ACTION PLAN

DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS



OVERVIEW:

South Milwaukee is participating in Milwaukee County's Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) initiative, a county-wide effort to create safer, more accessible streets for all users—whether walking, biking, driving, or using transit. This local safety action plan focuses on proactive, data-driven strategies to reduce traffic-related injuries and fatalities while enhancing mobility and livability.

The South Milwaukee plan is structured around three core elements:

1. Analyzing existing conditions
2. Identifying high-priority safety needs
3. Developing actionable, context-sensitive solutions

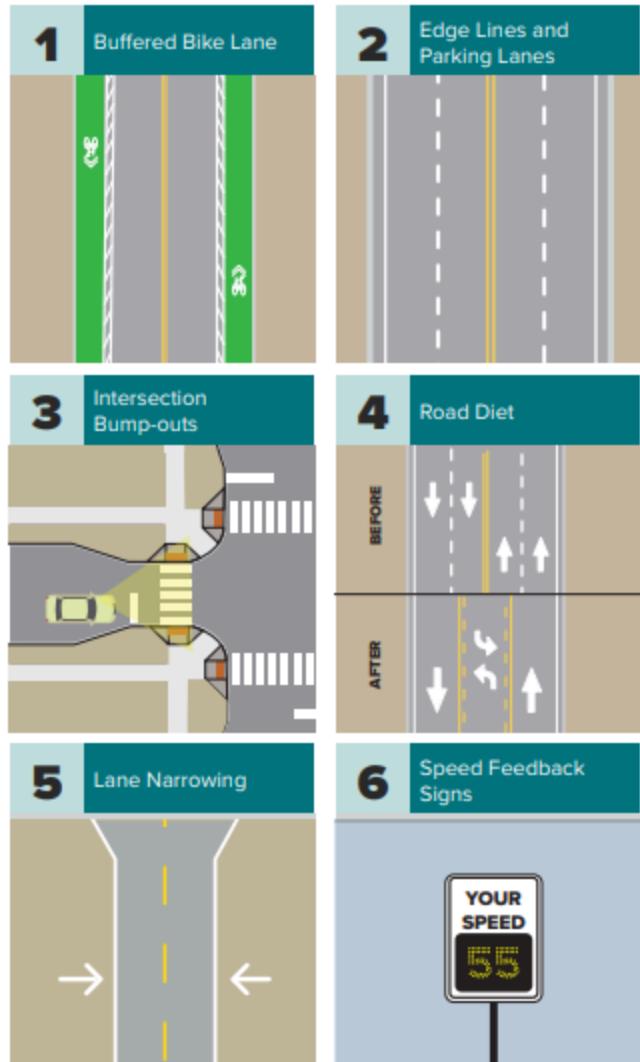
As part of this process, preliminary concepts have been developed for traffic calming improvements along three key corridors:

1. Drexel Boulevard
2. Pennsylvania Avenue
3. Chicago Avenue

These concepts draw from a toolkit of proven countermeasures outlined in the broader Milwaukee County plan—such as road diets, buffered bike lanes, and enhanced crosswalks—which are commonly used to slow vehicle speeds and improve safety for all road users.

To explore the potential improvements being considered for these corridors, please refer to the back page for a list of draft traffic calming concepts tailored to each location.

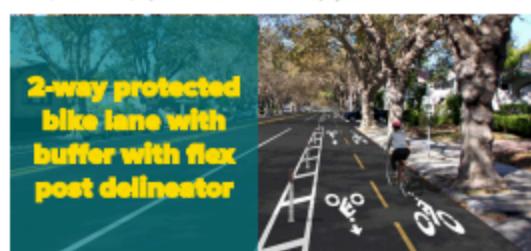
TRAFFIC CALMING COUNTERMEASURES:



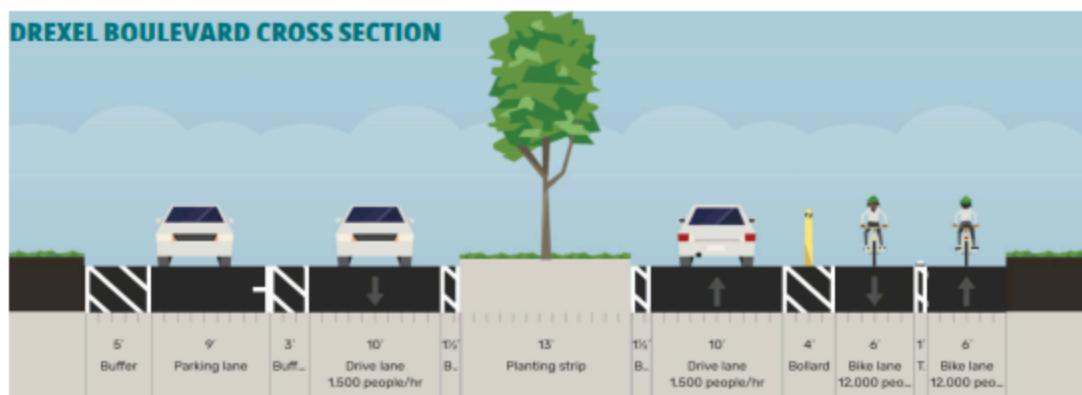
<p>Pennsylvania Ave (Rawson Ave - College Ave)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lane width adjustment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Preferred lane width (10') ▪ Max lane width (11') • Road diet (reduce lanes) • Remove right turn lane (Rawson and Nicholson)
<p>Drexel Ave (Pennsylvania Ave - STH 32)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curb extension at high traffic intersections • Daylighting (Restrict parking near intersections) • Install 2-way protected bike lane on north side • Enhance on-street parking on south side
<p>STH 32/ Chicago Ave (Columbia - Forest Hill)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lane width adjustment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 2 - 10' Travel lanes (1 each direction) ▪ 1 - 12' Two-way turn lane • Crosshatching near curb



MnDOT, October 2020, <https://www.dot.state.mn.us/metro/projects/robertsstreet/>



DREXEL BOULEVARD CROSS SECTION



Vision Zero vs. Traditional Approach to Traffic Safety

Vision Zero recognizes that people will make mistakes and instead focuses on designing a transportation system that prevents those mistakes from resulting in death or serious injury. It is a proactive, system-based approach that emphasizes shared responsibility among planners, engineers, policymakers, and the public. Vision Zero shifts the goal from reducing crashes to eliminating fatalities and severe injuries altogether, using data-driven strategies, community engagement, and proven safety interventions to build safe, equitable mobility for all.

Traditional Approach	Vision Zero
Traffic deaths are INEVITABLE	Traffic deaths are PREVENTABLE
PERFECT human behavior	Integrate HUMAN FAILING in approach
Prevent COLLISIONS	Prevent FATAL AND SEVERE CRASHES
INDIVIDUAL responsibility	SYSTEMS approach
Saving lives is EXPENSIVE	Saving lives is NOT EXPENSIVE

There are also some other upcoming projects around the city. Some of the city's solar-powered radar feedback signs and school zone traffic beacons are going to be replaced, and the city approved a contract for repaving Michigan and Marquette avenues in the Lakeview neighborhood. More additional concrete work and asphalt paving projects will be coming soon.

New businesses continue to pop up

If you've driven by 13th and Milwaukee recently, you've probably been fascinated by the progress at Virtue Coffee and Valor Wine, which is inching closer to opening. I follow them on

their social media platforms and have seen some photos of their progress on the building remodel, and it's looking incredible. I can't wait for them to open up so I can see it in person!

The council recently approved some key licenses for the forthcoming cocktail lounge that will be located across the street from China Chef on Milwaukee avenue. Their plans for that space sound really exciting, and there has also been a lot of ongoing remodeling work happening in that space.

Bar 920 on Milwaukee Avenue (located next to Spirits) recently had its soft opening. I walked by this past weekend and it looked like they were already busy.

Sad news about a South Milwaukee staple

I was so sad to hear about the passing of Guy Costello, a former South Milwaukee educator and prominent advocate for public education statewide. He was also involved in the community quite heavily, including with Growing South Milwaukee.

Guy was always so kind to me for as long as I've known him, going back to childhood, and that kindness extended to everyone. He was a fixture in our community and a great example of what it means to be a force for good.

I've seen a lot of thoughts shared online in his memory that only further cement the impact he had on so many people in South Milwaukee.

He will be greatly missed.

On to summer

Summer is just about here, and there are so many things to look forward to. Thursdays at the market, summer programs at the library, walks in Grant Park, days at the playgrounds with the kids, the Heritage Days parade, etc.

As always, I'm happy to meet if you have any questions, concerns, or interest in anything happening around the city. Reach out via email and let's get together; it's just about patio weather season!

If you have any comments, questions, or concerns, email Alderman Backes at tbackes@smwi.org.