

Testimony to City of Madison Transportation Commission
by Jeffrey C. Bauer, Ph.D.; March 9, 2022

I live on Lake Mendota Drive (LMD) and walk it for an hour almost every day of the year. Besides loving LMD for its beauty and history, I am an economist with extensive expertise relevant to its future. It would take me at least 45 minutes to read diverse comments I have already submitted to the Mayor, Alder Furman, the Transportation Commission, and other City representatives. My 3 minutes here are therefore focused on economics, knowing that many neighbors will provide detailed information on other critical issues they are superbly qualified to address.

Good economic analysis includes looking at **opportunity costs**—other ways the same dollars could be spent. The City hasn't demonstrated any serious interest in considering significant alternatives. It has only modified scope of the original plan, for example, imposing sidewalks on one side of the street instead of both. We who live in the neighborhood propose alternatives that have a much greater impact on overall health and safety, such as installing modern water management systems rather than sidewalks and planting trees rather than removing them. We believe the Transportation Commission should require that a full range of alternatives be evaluated from a global perspective before approving a plan for LMD.

Economists also evaluate alternatives by comparing their respective **benefit-cost ratios** for achieving a desired outcome. If the goal is to reduce pedestrian deaths, we compare the costs of different ways to eliminate fatalities at locations where they occur. Well, the data show absolutely no pedestrian deaths on LMD. None. Ever. So why spend any money on solving a problem that doesn't exist? However, data do reveal many deaths at crosswalks elsewhere in Madison, so why does the City's plan effectively increase use of crosswalks on LMD? Finally, data show that speed kills—yet the plan recognizes that many drivers will speed up when sidewalks are installed. You don't need a Ph.D. in economics to compare the high cost of installing sidewalks with the low cost of designing a roadway that pedestrians and automobiles can safely share—as they have ever since LMD was created.

There's also a **free-rider problem**. The City doesn't have to take full cost into account because it is forcing LMD-adjacent property owners to pay half the cost of sidewalks. However, the City's estimate of a \$10,000 per lot assessment will be far below the final homeowner obligation when rampant inflation in construction costs is ultimately taken into account. But wait, there's more. Add homeowners' sidewalk maintenance costs of hundreds of dollars per year and factor in the inflation-induced decline in spending power for the many of us on fixed incomes, and you've got all the ingredients of a taxpayer rebellion when the LMD tax bill hits the mailbox.

The only official who has directly and courteously responded to my extended comments on these points is Jim Wolfe. The lack of professional engagement from anyone else reinforces my belief that the City is not addressing economic problems that will cause the project to become a colossal waste of money that does more harm than good. I therefore ask the Transportation Commission to put the project on hold long enough to directly involve Spring Harbor residents in a comprehensive planning process. Please, take action to slow this project down and make sure it is done right.