

## **Rick Beeson, Park Midway Bank**

Interviewed by Peter Myers at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Minneapolis,  
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Q What are your earliest personal memories of University Avenue?

A My earliest memories of the Avenue revolve around working at my father's printing business at 520 University Avenue during the late 1960s – summer work. Working at a printing press and delivering and other assorted bindery jobs. That's the site that was cleared to make way for the Unidale Mall.

Q What do you recall about that time? What did the street feel like? What kind of activity was going on?

A The neighborhood was in a state of flux and there was a lot of tension around the neighborhood. At night, when we'd be working the evening shift, it wouldn't be unheard of to hear gunshots, gunfire. There were riots, some riots going on in the Selby-Dale, University-Dale area. There was just a general uneasiness in working in the neighborhood. It was going through great change. It was going through disinvestments and reinvestment, beginning of reinvestment at the same time and it just had, it had a lot of elements of sort of old line University Avenue businesses still operating but also vacant and boarded up buildings with lots of bad activity.

Q What were some of the more memorable businesses that you remember from the late 60s or 70s, apart from your printing business?

A There were some legacy businesses, of course. The Montgomery Wards – the landmark businesses that had buildings that would, that were as big as their brands – Brown & Bigelow, the International Harvester building, the Waldorf building, the Waldorf business down on University and Vandalia. Every half-mile there were these really significant landmark buildings. The Griggs-Midway building that would have housed the Griggs-Cooper candy and other operations. So those buildings always stood out.

Q Talk about the development of the Central Village and Unidale Mall and what you remember about the transition from the era of when your dad had the printing shop to those new developments.

A During the 1960s, urban economic development had everything to do with demolition and clearance and this goes to the activity that we saw nationally with the removal of high-rise public housing projects around the country. And in every major city, development occurred using clearance and this preceded the use of rehabilitation dollars. That didn't come until the mid-1970s under the Latimer administration when the federal government began allowing dollars to be used for renovation. So the theory was that we had blighted properties that would be best dealt with by clearing and then recreating sort of new villages in town. And that was the premise behind Central Village and that would have included what we now call Unidale Mall. That property included the business that my dad operated as well as there was a church next to that, there were some rooming houses adjacent. It was a variety of small properties that were cleared to make that happen. And then where the residential portion of Central Village occurred,

those were pretty tough properties – a lot of boarded up properties. At one point St. Paul – I remember the statistic – we had a thousand boarded up houses in the city and they were concentrated fairly heavily in Summit-University, some in Frogtown, some on the East Side but most heavily in Summit-University. So when I began working for the city in the late 70s, the use of tax-exempt financing to renovate properties began. That replaced this clearance philosophy that came down from the federal government - the feds providing a lot of money to try to get rid of blight, the theory was. And it did do some good, but it also took out a lot of housing that really could have been saved using today's technology and market, the market as we know it.

Q Say more about your work as a planner in the Latimer administration. What kinds of projects did you work on?

A I worked on a variety of projects. One was to save the Waldorf Company as it went through transition. Worked on renovation of a number of properties up and down University Avenue – both for-profit and nonprofit businesses. I worked, too, on the Riverfront project. We bought the Amhoist properties and the grain elevators, among others, and began what was the renaissance down at the River Center. One of the interesting permutations of the late 60s was the development of community councils, district councils, residential councils. This was in reaction to what was perceived as the City's heavy hand in clearing blighted properties. So communities began to organize and ask for input and control on how these projects would actually occur. So that was the very beginning of what we now call the district council system in St. Paul.

Q Talk about the places you remember – the really big legacy businesses. Say more about the importance of those anchor institutions in the commerce of the street in that era.

A The large businesses dominated the street. It's where the traffic occurred, it's where the employment happened. They were businesses that you could depend on. They were businesses that had almost uninterrupted growth. They were businesses who hired employees for a lifetime and who's next generation of employees came from the family members that were there then. So these became lifetime...these became neighborhood institutions. Today, the institutions that we have on the Avenue are heavily not-for-profit. But in those days, they were businesses that had very different cultures and character. And their character had more to do with taking care of employees. Lots of employee events would occur if you worked at a Brown & Bigelow or a Montgomery Wards. Your social life would revolve around the place that the father worked. I remember hearing stories about if the father had a drinking problem, the mother could go in and pick up the paycheck. Or if they needed a medical bill paid, some of these companies would do that. So they really took care of each other and it was...I don't want to idealize it, but those were pretty high-functioning businesses who's employees could make a living wage.

Q I'm guessing that a lot of the employees probably lived not too far off of University one way or another.

A Typically the employees in Frogtown would be heavily railroad workers or they would work at any number of the factories. University Avenue was a place where things were built. If you start at the International Court building – originally cars were manufactured there. Waldorf – cardboard boxes were built. Griggs-Cooper – candy

was made. Brown & Bigelow – calendars were made. It was a place built to manufacture and the infrastructure showed that – big streets, access to rail, proximity to workers – it was really set up as a true, heavy industrial area and operated like that.

Q What do you think led the businesses to disperse to the suburbs or otherwise exit University Avenue?

A One of the things that's made the Midway such a great place to work is the proximity of the neighborhood. So the attraction of living close to where you work has always been something the owners of companies have wanted. And a lot of owners have lived south of the freeway. They have businesses in the Midway. CEO's, presidents - always want to live as close to work as they can. That's always been the case and still is the case now. And in those days the employees would come from north of the freeway and the owners would come from south of the freeway – a little bit of the division of labor.

Q Talk about the origins of the Midway Chamber of Commerce and the business climate in the Midway area in the early era.

A The Midway Club, as it was known then, was formed after WWI – very robust economy, lots of investment going on, and businesses organized to improve the infrastructure of the area. They needed the lighting, they needed, of course, constant improvements to streets and access to highways, and they needed a place to represent a club to be able to organize their interests and so that grew. And during the 20s, I think membership was as high as 700 members.

Q If you think back to before 1963 when I-94 opened and you think about the life of the street in the late 50s and contrast that with what happened shortly after the freeway opened .... what do you think the impact of I-94 was on University Avenue and the surrounding neighborhoods?

A The impact of the freeway on St. Paul and the neighborhoods was significant. It's still being felt today. There's still trust issues in the Rondo community that are being dealt with as we build the central corridor today. Cities always had been defined by natural boundaries and sometimes those would be the river, railroad tracks, arterial streets. But when the freeway came in, that became the defining barrier and some residents saw that as protecting their communities. Others saw it as a segregating move. But the city has always had these barriers that either protect or exclude depending on what your perspective is.

Q I think you're right about the trust issue. Some people just think it's I-94 all over again, even though there's been a lot more public input and process than there was in the 50s....

A Well, we'll never, ever build another freeway through an urban area. That, of course, has passed. The routing of that freeway is a project all on its own.

Q I know there was a second alternate route proposed that lay further to the north. Talk about what you know about that process.

A Whether the federal highway people and the housing and urban development people conspired to put the freeway in an area that resulted in massive dislocation, I'm not sure. I don't know that I'd give the federal government that much credit, to sort of put two ideas together like that. But it doesn't appear to me that the process was well thought-out. It certainly wasn't publicized well or discussed in the same way that it would be today. The amount of time that we've spent on the central corridor, for example, that's had much less disruption than the 94...hundreds of hours of meetings, millions of dollars of planning and process involvement and engagement. I don't think there was much, if anything, during the freeway construction. That was that process. It was pretty abbreviated.

Q From what I've read it seemed like it was more or less an engineering decision. The engineers, for whatever reason, may have discovered that the current routing was either more efficient or might be safer.

A You know, 94 was built with cost considerations, as they always are. But it was engineering-led, not planning-led.

Q I think that was one of the keys. Immigration has been a key element in developing the neighborhoods, especially in the last 30 years, but even going back to the earlier history. Do you have some knowledge about the early settlers in Frogtown, and what nationalities first populated areas like Frogtown?

A University Avenue has always been a home for immigrants, starting with European immigrants, Northern European immigrants, and the influx of German and Polish immigrants to Frogtown as evidenced by the churches that were constructed there – St. Adalbert's, St. Agnes – is really significant. Watching the different waves of immigrants come through those communities about every 25 years – and it'll go on forever; this is a forever process and it's healthy. The influx of Southeast Asians onto the Avenue in the late 80s, mid-80s, helped save that commercial district. The district would not have been saved but for immigration. And now the arrival of East African immigrants up and down the Avenue, taking business locations that others won't operate a business out of. Those buildings aren't usable for everyone. They're mixed use buildings – family live upstairs, they operate the business downstairs, there might not be a lot of parking, it's only suitable for a retail type of business. And retailers are the hardest working folks around and in a lot of cases it takes an immigrant family to want to work that lifestyle.

Q That's exactly what George Latimer said in his interview months ago, was that the immigrants were willing to take risks that others weren't and they could utilize all the family members to support the business and not have a big payroll.

A And the immigrants historically have come from merchant backgrounds. So it's in the family's DNA to be a shopkeeper.

Q If you had to generally divide up the street into several chunks or neighborhoods, starting with University area where you're a regent, if you were giving somebody a tour of the University Avenue Corridor and saying this is the Prospect Park neighborhood... how would you break it down?

A The Avenue has always been segmented, but it's even more clearly segmented now in terms of market interest. So starting with the University of Minnesota going to Prospect Park, the campus is growing towards St. Paul block by block. Year after year it's a bigger campus. Prospect Park rests right off of 280 and is a highly stable residential community. From 280 to, let's say, Fairview is changing quickly. It has signs of becoming an urban village but with big manufacturing uses off of the Avenue. And also the introduction of not-for-profit organizations; there are hundreds of not-for-profit organizations that now have their businesses – trade associations, social service agencies – those businesses want to be mid-point between Minneapolis and St. Paul, they want to be close to the Capitol perhaps, they want to be off the freeway. That's been a boom to the St. Paul Midway. From Fairview to Hamline, that's what's really left of the City's big box district and it'll be mixed use there, but over time we'll see the arrival of more large retail businesses. There is no other place in the city that they want to be than on University Avenue. But the challenge everywhere on the Avenue is assembling sites, putting together the land – there's multiple owners. And then east of Hamline to the State Capitol has several personalities. The area closest to the Capitol feels like a government district with more offices and, of course, Sears there. It's kind of an anomaly, but it's a stabilizing force. And then immigrant businesses up through Dale – good ethnic, good diverse business. The clearance and the improvement on the intersection of Dale and University, led by Western Bank's leadership. Now the City's put the library in, other clearance has gone on. It's now a stable corner.

Q Huge transformation.

A The heaviest investment occurs on the intersections of University Avenue. That's where the market wants to be the most. They're the most visible locations, they have access to the communities to the north and the south and to the freeway, and that's where the stations will be for the light rail transit.

Q Speaking of nonprofits and trade associations, something else that has sprung up relatively recently is a fair number of schools of different types along University Avenue – Ron Hubbs Literacy Center, Gordon Parks HS. What do you think is driving some of these educational organizations to locate along the central corridor?

A The phenomena of charter schools along University Avenue has to do with the lack of traditional school building space and the use of industrial buildings and non-school buildings into educational uses. So today we see about ten charter schools on the Avenue. Bookending the Avenue we have St. Paul College down near the Capitol, and on the other end, of course, is the University of Minnesota, which is a city in and of itself. And not far off the Avenue is Hamline and Concordia University. So I think educational institutions are drawn to the Avenue. There's an attraction of convenience, location, proximity are all factors that schools all like.

Q How would you characterize the University's relationship with University Avenue over the decades? It's part of the campus, goes through Dinkytown and other parts of campus, but how does the University and student body relate to the Avenue?

A Historically the University's done its own planning and it's conducted its campus infrastructure work on its own. Recently that's changed and there's an alliance between the community and the University that is better dealing with how to manage the growth. The campus will continue to grow, but it needs to be done in a way that has manageable

impacts and minimizes unintended consequences. Those communities surrounding the University are changing. Some are improving, some are showing signs of stress and the University can have a role in improving that. Overall, the beautification of the campus on the University has helped Prospect Park, has helped the neighborhoods. It's helped; it's complimented the other investments going into the west University Avenue area. Westgate used to be an old trucking site. There were a dozen trucking sites throughout University Avenue that served the large industries and served the railroads. Those have been disappearing. That was next to KSTP – was a large industrial trucking area that was redeveloped by the city, the Port Authority back in the 80s. So redevelopment along University Avenue is like hand-to-hand combat – it's block-by-block, building-by-building - each one is difficult and most of it takes some involvement of the public sector.

Q From the point of view of the University student population, how do you imagine that the completion of the central corridor will enhance students' ability to go place? How do you think it will impact their lives?

A It'll make them more mobile. The University of Minnesota is the largest user of transit in the Twin Cities. It's also one of the largest campuses in the U.S. and it bisects the central corridor line, obviously, so it has great implications. It'll make students and people get to campus easier for special events as well as for daily activity both for workers, staff and students. The development of off-campus housing has been done somewhat in anticipation of the central corridor, so the housing's been built on 280, has been done with an eye toward that project being done. There will be more housing around the University. That'll continue to grow. Alums want to be closer to the University, adults want to move toward the University. They don't want to be too close to students, but they want to be close to campus. So all that will create an ongoing demand for housing on the Avenue. People want to be in proximity to the University, people want to be close to what's going to be an increased number of restaurants and services there, they want to be close to some shopping, they want to be close to the freeway. So housing will be the story for the area Fairview to 280. That will just continue to grow on the Avenue. Doesn't mean manufacturing's going to disappear. Doesn't mean business is going to disappear. But that will occur off the Avenue. Commerce will continue but it will be primarily off the Avenue. It will be more offices on the Avenue, industrial uses converting to business on the Avenue – that's the high priced real estate, on the Avenue and on the intersections.

Q One thing you told me when we talked a long time ago – and I heard this also from James Oberstar – FTA officials have concluded that the central corridor was perhaps the best location for a new light rail system of any major city in the country. Tell me about what you have heard from FTA and why they have felt it worthwhile to invest so much federal dollars?

A An official of the Federal Transit Authority told me this is the best light rail opportunity in the U.S. And that has to do with the uninterrupted 11-mile route, the wide right of way that covers the Avenue, the proximity to neighborhoods – low and moderate-income people included – the presence of the U of M and the connection of two downtowns. It's where the first light rail project should have occurred. If we could recreate the world, that would have been the first segment of light rail. It's where there's going to be the most spin-off. It'll dwarf what's happened on Hiawatha in terms of economic development.

Q Anything else?

A University Avenue's best days are still to come. It's had a great history, but this is where the market wants to be. This is where people want to be. So it bodes, it really bodes well for the Avenue. We love the Avenue.