

**John DeWitt, Prospect Park resident**

Interviewed by Laurie Stern in Prospect Park, June 3, 2011

Q You live on River Rd so how does that relate to Prospect Park?

A There really aren't two parts of Prospect Park, I think. Some of us live on the other side of the freeway and some of us live on this side of the freeway, but we're still really one neighborhood. And the freeway goes where the railroad tracks used to go before, so it's always been a divide and it's something that we've always really pretty well bridged. Don't see that as a problem.

Q And what would the hill people say?

A Umm...they're happy to know us, too.

Q But what did you just say, what part of the neighborhood you live in?

A I live in the River Road part of the neighborhood, that's the other side of the freeway to many of the people who live up on the hill. And it used to be on the other side of the railroad tracks, which has it's own meaning.

Q How long have you lived here?

A I've been here for only 34 years now.

Q Newcomer.

A I'm a newcomer. My house is still the Smaby house and I understand when I've been here 40 years it will become my house.

Q Planning to stick around?

A I hope to.

Q So for somebody who doesn't know this neighborhood, how do you describe it?

A It's the neighborhood with curvy streets. And I think a lot of people have realized that's one of the charms of the neighborhood and one of the...if you're trying to get through the neighborhood quickly, it's a real detriment. But we really kind of like having the curvy streets because it tends to keep the traffic out. Makes it very hard to get around. You can easily get lost just trying to find a house here. And even though I've been here for 33, 34 years now I'm occasionally asked where something is and I realize I know exactly how to get there, but I can't for the life of me explain to someone how to get there without drawing a map first.

Q And you're supposed to be a transit guy.

A Yeah, exactly.

Q What does that mean?

A I'm a transit guy because I think a robust transit system is an important part of the transportation system in the Twin Cities and it's really beginning to get some attention, but it really needs to have a lot more attention.

Q How does that relate to Prospect Park?

A Well Prospect Park has always had an interesting role going back to the...the first streetcar line that we built was called the Inter-Urban line and it ran along University Avenue between downtown Minneapolis and downtown St. Paul. So that probably played an early role back in the 1890s in making Prospect Park a more accessible place to live. You could just jump on the streetcar and usually there might be a streetcar every 30 seconds at the right times of the day and just make your way down to the U of M and back. It's also been the crossroads of transportation in some ways because we are sort of the eastern limits of Minneapolis and there's been a lot of traffic through this area – University Avenue, Interstate 94. I've read that Washington Avenue and East River Parkway were once described as the best alternative route to Interstate 94, which we weren't real happy to hear about.

Q Would you say it's stayed the same a lot over the years or changed a lot over the years?

A There has been some change. I think that sort of with the easy commutes to the entire region that we've had in the past there's been more of a tendency for people working at the University to move out rather than try to stick close to home and stay in Prospect Park. So just in my own block I've seen a lot of the residences that were occupied by University staff and faculty have gone to other people.

Q Like what other people? Or is it a community of people or....

A It's always been a community of people. I think one of the most important things I ever heard was what my wife said after she'd lived here for a couple of years. She said that she'd lived in suburbs in Memphis, suburbs in Knoxville, and suburbs in the Twin Cities and she'd been happy every place she'd lived but Prospect Park was the first place she never wanted to leave. And I think that's a very critical difference because you will fight for what you want. If you live in a suburb you can be just as happy moving to another suburb. If you live in Prospect Park it may be tough to find another place that's as great to live.

Q That's a really profound way to put it and it makes a lot of sense. Is light rail going to affect the neighborhood?

A It will have effects on the neighborhood. I think they've been over-emphasized to some extent. I'm working with a planning committee right now trying to develop the area around the Prospect Park Light Rail Station. We've asked them to change the name to Prospect Park and we see some really serious development on the north side of University Avenue, but a large part of the plan is protecting the historic neighborhood district, the residential district, on the south side of University Avenue. So I don't think we'll see much change more than say a half block south of University Avenue. And a lot of the things that the neighborhood would like to have – for example we'd like to have dry cleaners, card shops, grocery stores, etc. – I think we'll be seeing those developing

across the Avenue here. And one of our real challenges is to knit both sides of University Avenue together. Right now it's a raging road of traffic and it's not a pleasant road to cross and we need to work with that somehow.

Q And how will light rail make that better or worse?

A Well hopefully it will reduce the traffic and we'll be getting some more traffic lights, which will help slow things down a little bit and we'll just see. I think we'll see a lot more pedestrian amenities coming in with the light rail line making it an easy place to walk around, a comfortable, safe place to walk around. So you really will feel comfortable walking from the historic residential area over to the new development on the other side for dinner. I would love to walk over there and have to choose between three or four different restaurants and, well, this one's a little too full tonight, this one's a little too expensive so we'll try a third one. And not do what we have to do today where everyone has to jump in their cars and drive a mile to the next restaurant.

Q Do you have a favorite or least favorite memory of University Avenue?

A My memories of the Twin Cities go back to when I was four years old and we moved here and I have to admit I have no memories of University Avenue. It just wasn't part of our regular routine. We certainly went many, many times to the U of M and back from St. Anthony Park but it was always on Como Avenue. So I can talk a lot about my memories of Como Avenue. But we very rarely got onto University Avenue. The one thing I do remember – once again another street – was we used to go to the Angus Hotel for Sunday brunch. So we'd ride the streetcar to downtown St. Paul and back going through the tunnel by the Cathedral because that was a really big deal.