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Dinkytown sings road construction blues

By Lori Sherrick

For people traveling through Dinkytown this spring, "getting there" hasn't been too enjoyable. Confusion and traffic jams have become a rite of passage on the East Bank as construction continues along University Avenue. Some regular commuters and business owners say the worst has just begun.

Since the beginning of Dinkytown construction on Feb. 22 of this year, motorists have been forced to adjust to new traffic patterns and to what some say are confusing detours. With a large section of University Avenue next to the East Bank closed for construction, Fifth Street is now the major westbound route leading to Interstate 35W, and Fourth Street has become the major eastbound route.

Detours have created new challenges in different places to travelers. "Every day someone tries to cut in front of me when I'm turning from 10th Avenue going south onto Fourth Street," said motorist Jon Sanclair, who must drive through the construction area to his job. He said motorists don't realize they can turn right from both lanes.

Sanclair said he has seen a few near-accidents in the past week.

"I don't know if it's because the weather is getting better, but drivers seem so impatient," he said.

Ann O'Loughlin, University coordinator of community relations, said the increase of traffic on Fifth Street, which is being used as a detour, is causing traffic jams daily. "Up until now it was fine," O'Loughlin said. She said the necessary steps were taken, such as well-placed detour signs to prevent long delays, but things have gotten worse since work began on University Avenue, partially because of the increase in construction-vehicle traffic, she said.

University senior Colleen Buscher said she fears directions to campus she gives to people will not be good enough to get someone through the detours.

"I don't know if they will make it, but I pray they get here," Buscher said. Hennepin County Public Works Department Inspector Ned Miller said detour routes have stayed the same since construction began. "On Fifth Avenue there was some clean-up going on to some manholes, so lane closings were necessary, but the planned detours are staying the same," Miller said.

However, Miller said, one morning he came into work and saw someone had tampered with the detour signs and rerouted traffic.

Freshman Dave Le, who lives in Dinkytown, said because of the detours he has a hard time giving clear directions.

"When I give friends directions to my house they get lost," Le said.

Although the detours seem to be causing some headaches and confusion, Bruce Troupe, a University Police captain, said there hasn't been an increase in accidents or traffic violations.

The construction workers have "done a pretty good job with the detours," Troupe said. Overall he said the effect of the construction has had "minimal impact."

But local businesses fear the worst is yet to come with construction woes.

Jim Packard, owner of Fast Eddie's Shoe Repair in Dinkytown, said he often gets phone calls from customers who are worried about the detours to his store. He has no worries this year because his store, which is on Fourth Street, is fully accessible to passing motorists, but Packard said next year will be a problem since Fourth Street is going to be closed in early 1997 for repairs.

"Next year will be horrible," Packard said, "because when you close the street in front of the store that's a whole other story." Packard said he is worried about what next year will be like for business.

Gurmeet Thukral, one of the owners of Kitmet Unknown, a gift store which has been open for fewer than two weeks, said it doesn't appear the construction has hurt his store's business, but thinks it could next year.

"We are all speculating on what will happen," Thukral said. He said his store, located on Fourth Street, will no longer have a steady flow of traffic, but added that he can only wait and see what next year brings.

Construction is scheduled to be complete in the fall of 1997.