

LOCAL

Our Streets paves way to better communities

Group works to make biking and walking in Mpls. safe for everyone.

By Peyton Burruss Richfield High School | AUGUST 31, 2019 — 1:00AM

Some people across Minneapolis are not able to access safe modes of transportation. Our Streets Minneapolis (<https://www.ourstreetsmpls.org/>) is a nonprofit organization that encourages accessibility to improve community building. The group wants people to see their streets as more than somewhere to drive a car.

“Cities should be for people and not just for cars,” said Ashwat Narayanan, executive director of Our Streets Minneapolis.

Our Streets Minneapolis creates a community for minority groups supporting alternative forms of transportation, including biking, walking and rolling. Their purpose is to make streets better for people. They do this by hosting volunteer groups, by seeking opinions from minority voices and by hosting events called Open Streets Minneapolis (<https://www.openstreetsmpls.org/>).

The history of transportation has hurt minority groups, Narayanan said.

“Transportation essentially has been a tool to perpetuate racism and segregation,” he said.

He said interstates built years ago destroyed certain communities and divided others.

Minority groups, including black, Latino and indigenous communities, still have not recovered from those decisions. Transportation systems affect how people can access jobs and whether they are able to walk safely on their streets. The minority communities are unable to have that access, Narayanan said. Now, Our Streets is trying to use transportation as a connector for different communities.

Our Streets wants to serve Minneapolis communities that have historically been left out and make their voices heard by the city and the state.

One of Our Streets’ initiatives is the Bicycle Connectors program, which provides financial support to other local organizations working to provide minority communities with bikes.

They also work to inform underrepresented groups about transportation plans and try to make their voices part of the decisionmaking process.

Our Streets has formed relationships with many members of the Minneapolis City Council. Past members of the Our Streets board are now members of the council, including Minneapolis City Council President Lisa Bender. These relationships ensure that people in power are hearing minority voices.

Narayanan personally reaches out to individuals in the community. He connects with them to understand their perspective and what they want from transportation systems. Building those personal relationships is a key component to the organization.

“I’d say it’s the No. 1 thing,” Narayanan said.

Our Streets hosts a seven-part community event over the course of the summer called Open Streets Minneapolis. The first 2019 event was on June 2 on Lyndale Avenue. Neighborhood streets with heavy traffic are blocked off and filled with vendors and artists of different cultures to encourage people to see their streets as more than somewhere to park their cars, Narayanan said.



COURTESY CINDY VU

Members of Our Streets' Bicycle Connectors program.

Our Streets removes the cars and replaces the open space with dancing, face painting and fun activities. It gets its funding for events from donations. Open Streets encourages walking and biking through neighborhoods and rethinking the way people view streets.

There are many ways to be involved with transportation in communities, but it's most important to understand how the decisionmaking process works and to reach out to local officials. It is also important to stand in during City Council meetings and voice what change should be made.

Our Streets always looks for more volunteers. They have volunteer groups called the Pedestrian Work Group and the Downtown Bikeways Work Group. They also ask for volunteers during Open Streets events.

The organization recognizes that change starts with people. This community focus is what makes a difference. Those interested in taking part or donating can visit its website at ourstreetsmpls.org (ourstreetsmpls.org).

In the future, Narayanan wants Minneapolis to be more equitable for other modes of transportation. He wants to shift the balance from cars to biking or walking.

“We think that the real change comes from if you can build a strong community,” Narayanan said.
