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## St. Paul's Lowertown dealing with light rail construction headaches

by [Laura Yuen](#), Minnesota Public Radio  
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### AUDIO



[St. Paul's Lowertown dealing with light rail construction headaches \(feature audio\)](#)

St. Paul, Minn. — Major construction of the Central Corridor light-rail line connecting St. Paul to Minneapolis hasn't officially begun yet, but try telling that to members of the Lowertown community in St. Paul's downtown.

For the past year, stretches of Fourth Street have been torn up so that workers can relocate underground utilities in preparation for rail.

Business owners along the street say the roadwork has produced a painful and lingering headache.

In front of Roger Nielsen's frame shop, orange barricades and construction cones have blocked off both ends of the street. One block over, earth-movers are chewing up the road. It feels a bit desolate. There are more workers in neon vests and hardhats than pedestrians.

But the difference between Nielsen, the owner of Master Framers, and some of his counterparts on University Avenue is that he actually wants the train to come down his street.

Nielsen owns his building and rents out residential studios upstairs, and he's been an advocate of light rail for years. But he's also had to pay the price.

"That's been a nightmare," he said of the Fourth Street construction. "For the first time in the history of my building, I don't have a waiting list. I now have vacancies because people don't want to live in this mess."

Nielsen tells his customers to call before coming to the store, because road closures change week to week.

### **MET COUNCIL LATE IN HELPING BUSINESSES, OWNER SAYS**

The Metropolitan Council, which is building the line, and other groups have touted plans to help businesses in the Central Corridor. These efforts range from a 'buy local' campaign to a new loan program for small businesses. Nielsen says these programs should have been launched long ago.

"It it's a day late and a dollar short. We've been under this mess for over a year down here, and now they're just talking about it?" he says. "It seems like the whole thing is geared for University Avenue, but never mind the people who are down here in Lowertown trying to survive."

A handful of Lowertown business owners met with city and Met Council officials this week to discuss the need for better street lighting, emergency funds and parking options. City Council member Dave Thune says the city and other agencies need to respond to the concerns of Nielsen and other business owners.

"It's gotten to the point where it's crazy. When business people say we need more light, we should get more light. This isn't rocket science," Thune says. "This is just accepting the fact that Roger has been in business for years. We don't need to teach him how to do a marketing plan. We need to get light for him and find ways for people to park to get to his business."

Thune says a \$1.5 million loan program set up by the Met Council and nonprofits may not be able to accept applicants for several months, so he's assembling a city bridge fund that would allow Lowertown residents to seek relief now.

### **UTILITY RELOCATION MORE INTRUSIVE THAN TRACK LAYING**

At Lowertown Wine and Spirits, owner Gerry McInerney says his sales are down about 15 percent, and he started to offer free delivery.

McInerney says some downtown office workers have given up walking to his store. He points to the metal gates steering pedestrians across the dirt road, and says his customers would have to cross the street several times to walk a few blocks.

But McInerney said he's not even sure how light-rail planners could improve his situation.

"This is just kind of how it goes," he said. "That's why we went to free delivery. We knew we were going to take a hit. We didn't know it was necessarily going to be this big, but we knew we were going to take a hit."

Down the street, the owner of a live-music club reported that workers accidentally cut the lines to his water, gas and phone.

Central Corridor planners say utility relocation is much more intrusive than other phases of construction, such as installing track. The utilities beneath University Avenue will also have to be moved, but officials expect the disruption to be less intense because the avenue is wider, leaving more room for crews to work.

### **LESSONS LEARNED WILL HELP UNIVERSITY AVENUE**

Sean Fetterman, owner of the Fourth Street bar and nightclub Rumours and Innuendo, says the Central Corridor's outreach staff has been helpful in sending up weekly construction updates and setting up a 24-hour hot line. This week's meeting with light-rail planners was productive, he says, but nothing could have prepared him for the hassles of construction.

University Avenue businesses have called Fetterman to see how his club has been affected.

"I'm honest with them, and I tell them it has been a painful process. Will it pay off in the end? Yeah, of course it's going to pay off for all businesses in the end," he says.

The early work on Fourth Street has taught light-rail planners how to communicate more effectively with businesses, and Fetterman says it's taught businesses that progress has its price.

Steve Ledin, the co-owner of the live-music venue Station 4, said he predicts more headaches for businesses along University Avenue.

"The disruption they're going to face is going to be intense, and they have a much larger constituency than our little five businesses in Lowertown," he said.

Major construction of the line is expected to begin late summer, but the Met Council has not announced a start date.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Minnesota Public Radio has sued the Met Council over concerns about noise and vibration from Central Corridor trains. That lawsuit is still pending.

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