

Work Session

WS

Milwaukie City Council

COUNCIL WORK SESSION

City Hall Council Chambers, 10501 SE Main Street
& Zoom Video Conference (www.milwaukieoregon.gov)

AGENDA

NOVEMBER 4, 2025

Council will hold this meeting in-person and by video conference. The public may come to City Hall, join the Zoom webinar, or watch on the [city's YouTube channel](#) or Comcast Cable channel 30 in city limits. **For Zoom login** find the meeting event on the city calendar at www.milwaukieoregon.gov. **Written comments** may be delivered to City Hall or emailed to ocr@milwaukieoregon.gov.

Note: agenda item times are estimates and are subject to change.

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|---|----------|
| 1. Winter Events – Update (4:00 p.m.)
Staff: Dan Harris, Events & Volunteer Coordinator | 1 |
| 2. Safe Access for Everyone (SAFE) Fee Planning – Discussion (4:10 p.m.)
Staff: Peter Passarelli, Public Works Director, and
Jennifer Garbely, City Engineer | 3 |
| 3. Ranked Choice Voice (RCV) – Discussion (5:10 p.m.)
Presenters: Will Anderson, Council President, and
Adam Khosroabadi, City Councilor | |
| 4. Adjourn (5:30 p.m.) | |

Executive Session.

After the work session, Council will meet in executive session pursuant to Oregon Revised Statute (ORS) 192.660 (2)(o) to consider matters relating to the safety of the governing body and of public body staff and volunteers and the security of public body facilities and meeting spaces.

Meeting Accessibility Services and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Notice

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Servicios de Accesibilidad para Reuniones y Aviso de la Ley de Estadounidenses con Discapacidades (ADA)

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Executive Sessions

The City Council may meet in executive session pursuant to Oregon Revised Statute (ORS) 192.660(2); all discussions are confidential; news media representatives may attend but may not disclose any information discussed. Final decisions and actions may not be taken in executive sessions.



COUNCIL WORK SESSION

City Hall Council Chambers, 10501 SE Main Street
& Zoom Video Conference (www.milwaukieoregon.gov)

MINUTES

NOVEMBER 4, 2025

Council Present: Councilors Adam Khosroabadi, Robert Massey, Rebecca Stavenjord, and Council President Will Anderson, and Mayor Lisa Batey

Staff Present: Jennifer Garbely, City Engineer	Peter Passarelli, Public Works Director
Justin Gericke, City Attorney	
Dan Harris, Events & Volunteer Coordinator	Emma Sagor, City Manager
Adam Moore, Parks & Greenspace Development Manager	Scott Stauffer, City Recorder

Mayor Batey called the meeting to order at 4:04 p.m.

1. Winter Events – Update

Councilor Khosroabadi arrived at 4:05 p.m.

Harris reviewed plans for the 2025 Umbrella Parade and Solstice Celebration.

Councilor Stavenjord arrived at 4:09 p.m.

Harris noted that the Umbrella Parade would take place on December 6 and feature updated parade elements. **Harris** shared that the Solstice Celebration would occur on December 20 at Milwaukie Bay Park, with the Llewellyn Neighborhood District Association (NDA) providing food and activities. **Harris** stated that the city was considering vendors and food trucks to take place of the NDA in future years.

Mayor Batey asked if any other NDA was interested in stepping in to become the vendor for Solstice. **Harris** explained that other NDAs had been approached but none expressed interest.

Harris highlighted additional winter events, including Arbor Day on December 13, the Arts Committee's Bing in the New Year on December 31, and the Downtown Alliance of Milwaukie's (DAM's) Milwaukie Lights Walk, running from December 6 through March 26. **Harris** shared that Bing in the New Year received a Community Events Fund (CEF) grant through the Equity Steering Committee (ESC) for this year's event.

Harris responded to questions regarding volunteer recruitment, noting that a small but growing group of community volunteers supported the Umbrella Parade and Solstice events, helping reduce staff overtime and long-term costs. **Harris** shared that the city planned to continue expanding the volunteer program using an existing city application system and welcomed Council support in promoting volunteer opportunities.

2. Safe Access for Everyone (SAFE) Fee Planning – Discussion

Passarelli provided an overview of the SAFE program, describing its purpose, funding structure, and role in the city's transportation system. **Passarelli** noted that more than \$15 million had been invested through the program to date, supporting safety, connectivity, equity, and climate goals while leveraging other funding sources.

Garbely explained that project costs were carefully tracked and allocated, with bid items assigned to the appropriate utility and shared costs proportionally distributed based on each utility’s share of the work.

Passarelli explained that the SAFE fee was set by Council in the consolidated fee schedule. The fee was based on transportation trip generation, with flat residential rates and scaled non-residential rates, including low-income exemptions, and was periodically adjusted to reflect construction cost increases or updated trip data.

Garbely highlighted SAFE projects completed citywide over the past several years and noted positive regional recognition for Milwaukie’s delivery of bike and pedestrian improvements. **Garbely** reviewed current and upcoming projects, including King Road, Harvey Street, Spot program elements such as road signage and speed cushions, in-house design work on several corridors, and longer-term planning efforts into 2028.

Garbely explained that once design funding for Railroad Avenue was received, staff would pursue additional federal grants for construction, with required local match funding to be determined based on grant requirements and potentially supported through transportation or SAFE funds.

The group clarified the locations of recent Spot program improvements, including speed cushions and a solar-powered rectangular rapid flashing beacon (RRFB). The group discussed connecting with the youth who had participated in outreach during Spot construction to include them in a project update or celebration.

Passarelli explained that the SAFE program was facing structural funding challenges and that fee revenue no longer fully covered debt service and program overhead, which was not sustainable. **Passarelli** noted the shortfall was due to lower-than-anticipated growth assumptions and shared that staff had developed a recommended path forward.

Sagor and **Passarelli** clarified that SAFE revenue had not kept pace with growth due to exemptions, discounted multifamily rates, lower commercial growth, debt service allocations, and construction cost escalation, despite use of indexed fee adjustments.

Passarelli presented three scenarios to close the SAFE program funding gap and recommended a phased fee increase as the preferred option.

The group discussed the staff-recommended scenario two for the SAFE fee program, including how the refined approach would prioritize incremental bike and pedestrian safety improvements given limited resources, that larger sidewalk projects would generally require a different funding approach, and the need for clear public communication about program outcomes. The group also discussed alignment with the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) and budget process, opportunities for public input, handling of unspent Spot funds, and that some previously identified SAFE projects would be deferred under the recommended approach.

3. Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) – Discussion

Council President Anderson introduced a discussion on RCV, sharing conversations had with the county clerk, noting outreach to other cities, and framing the discussion as a preliminary pulse check on whether Council wished to explore placing a future ballot measure before voters, rather than a decision on a specific voting model.

The group discussed interest in RCV, potential benefits and challenges, and options for further exploration outside of a November ballot measure. Council discussed alternative

approaches such as surveys, countywide or regional conversations, and coordination with other jurisdictions, emphasizing the need for additional research, education, and capacity before considering a ballot initiative.

4. Adjourn

Mayor Batey announced that after the meeting Council would meet in executive session pursuant to Oregon Revised Statute (ORS) 192.660 (2)(o) to consider matters relating to the safety of the governing body and of public body staff and volunteers and the security of public body facilities and meeting spaces.

Mayor Batey adjourned the meeting at 5:39 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



Nicole Madigan, Deputy City Recorder

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COUNCIL STAFF REPORT

To: Mayor and City Council
Emma Sagor, City Manager

Date Written: Oct. 22, 2025

Reviewed: Jordan Imlah (as to form), Strategic Engagement Manager, and
Gabriela Santoyo Gutierrez, Equity and Inclusion Coordinator, and
Katie Gavares, Climate and Natural Resources Manager

From: Dan Harris, Events & Volunteer Coordinator

Subject: Winter Events Update

ACTION REQUESTED

Council is asked to receive an update about the city's events program and a preview of winter events.

HISTORY OF PRIOR ACTIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

November 5, 2024: Council received an annual winter events update.

ANALYSIS

The city produces a lively calendar of annual events including summer and winter celebrations. The city also coordinates with community groups to support events taking place in Milwaukie.

Winter Signature Events

Milwaukie's winter events are rapidly approaching. The Umbrella Parade will occur on Saturday, December 6 in the South Downtown Plaza. Umbrella and bike decorating participants are asked to gather in the plaza by 4:15 p.m. The Umbrella Parade kicks off at 4:30 p.m., ending at the historic city hall building for the tree lighting ceremony. The tree will be lit shortly after dark, at about 5:15 p.m. Staff are excited to share that the city has contracted out sound support in hopes of avoiding an audio malfunction like last year. Staff will ensure a back-up bull horn is available still, however.

Arbor Day, normally held in November, will be observed this year on Saturday, December 13 from 8:45 a.m. until approximately noon. Volunteer crews will gather at Water Tower Park before dispersing to plant fifty trees. These annual plantings help to expand Milwaukie's urban tree canopy, while also giving neighbors a chance to work together to make our city more livable and more resilient. The event is being produced by the city in cooperation with Friends of Trees. Those interested in volunteering or in having a tree planted on their property should visit www.friendsoftrees.org.

The Winter Solstice celebration will be held in Milwaukie Bay Park on Saturday, December 20 beginning at 4:30 p.m. The event will feature refreshments sold by Beer Store Milwaukie and the Lewelling Neighborhood District Association (NDA). The combined fleet of Willamette and Columbia River Christmas Ships will pass through Milwaukie Bay twice that evening on their way to and from Lake Oswego.

Finally, the city's Arts Committee and the Milwaukie Arts Fund put on Bing in the New Year on December 31. Although this is not a signature event, it is sponsored this year by the Milwaukie

Community Events Fund. More information on Bing in the New Year can be found at <https://binginthefirstyear.com/>.

BUDGET IMPACT

Staff members do not anticipate any new budgetary impacts for these events. The events budget has remained stable for several cycles. Inflationary pressure, however, will likely require additional funding to maintain the same production values in the future. The events and volunteer coordinator is working to develop a sponsorship program for businesses and organizations interested in helping to support the city's signature events.

CLIMATE IMPACT

These events are not expected to generate any new detrimental environmental changes. Arbor Day and its plantings are expected to expand the city's urban tree canopy. That event will also offer opportunities for community education.

EQUITY IMPACT

City events are great opportunities for building greater sense of belonging and inclusion for Milwaukie residents and beyond. All city-organized events are open to everyone and provide free admission. City staff take precautions to manage part or full closures of motor vehicle traffic to prioritize attendees' safety and include accessible parking or drop-off designated areas.

WORKLOAD IMPACT

These events are part of the normal production cycle and are not expected to generate additional workload.

COORDINATION, CONCURRENCE, OR DISSENT

None.

ATTACHMENTS

None.



Winter Events Update

WS 1. 11/4/25
Presentation

Dan Harris

They/Them

Events & Volunteer Coordinator

events@milwaukieoregon.gov

Umbrella Parade

Date: Saturday, December 6, 2025

Time: 4:30 – 6:00 PM

Location: South Downtown Plaza



Solstice Celebration

Date: Saturday, December 20, 2025

Time: 4:30 – 7:30 PM

Location: Milwaukie Bay Park Boat Ramp



Solstice Over Time



Other Winter Happenings



Arbor Day

December 13, 8:30 AM - 1 PM

Water Tower Park

www.friendsoftrees.org

Bing in the New Year

December 31, 6 - 9 PM

Farmers Market Parking Lot

www.binginthenewyear.com

Milwaukie Lights Walk

December 6 - March 26

www.downtownmilwaukie.org



Winter Events Update

Dan Harris

They/Them

Events & Volunteer Coordinator

events@milwaukieoregon.gov



COUNCIL STAFF REPORT

To: Mayor and City Council
Emma Sagor, City Manager

Reviewed: Michael Osborne, Finance Director

From: Peter Passarelli, Public Works Director, and
Jen Garbely, City Engineer

Subject: SAFE (Safe Access For Everyone) Fee Planning

Date Written: Oct. 3, 2025

ACTION REQUESTED

Council is asked to provide direction on the SAFE program and to discuss/provide direction on staff's recommendation to **not** pursue additional SAFE bonding, and instead develop a SAFE fund that provides ~\$300,000/year pay-as-you-go funding for the SAFE Spot program and new SAFE Streets Enhancements program, with accompanying Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) and programming updates.

HISTORY OF PRIOR ACTIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

2014–2016: Council initiated a bicycle and pedestrian program to address Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) transition plan requirements and sidewalk accessibility needs. On July 19, 2016, Council adopted Ordinance 2123 establishing the program (later branded SAFE) and its funding fee.

2017: Council approved indexing of the Street Surface Maintenance Program (SSMP) fee and directed staff to develop a hybrid resourcing/bonding strategy for SAFE (Ordinance 2147, April 4, 2017).

2018: Council supported an expedited nine-year delivery schedule and authorized issuance of the first SAFE bond. On March 20, 2018, Council approved \$21 million in general obligation bonds to design and construct the first phase of SAFE projects and confirmed integration with SSMP and gas tax programs.

2019–2021: Staff provided annual SAFE updates to Council on revenues, delivery, and bond financed improvements.

2022: Council discussed a second bond issuance. A November 2022 staff report outlined financing options and a proposed project list, while highlighting risks from escalating construction costs and delivery capacity. On December 6, 2022, approved a resolution authorizing up to \$25.5 million for transportation and urban renewal area (URA) projects.

2023–2024: Annual SAFE reports continued. On May 7, 2024, Council discussed additional bonding, concerns were raised regarding affordability, long-term sustainability, and staff workload capacity.

ANALYSIS

SAFE is the city's dedicated mechanism to plan, fund, and deliver small-to-moderate capital improvements that make it safer and easier to walk, bike, and roll in Milwaukie. The SAFE fee, a monthly transportation utility charge on utility bills, provides a stable, locally controlled revenue stream restricted to pedestrian, bicycle, and ADA access projects. SAFE complements—but does not replace—other transportation funding sources such as SSMP (pavement maintenance), gas tax, grants, and urban renewal. To deliver on that purpose,

SAFE focuses on the following objectives:

- **Safety & access:** close missing-link sidewalks and paths; add crossings; calm traffic where appropriate.
- **ADA compliance:** upgrade curb ramps and remove barriers in line with the city's ADA Transition Plan.
- **Connectivity:** link homes, schools, transit, parks, and job centers with safe walking and biking routes.
- **Equity:** prioritize improvements in areas with the greatest barriers and near community destinations.
- **Climate & health:** shift short trips from single-occupancy vehicles to active modes, supporting Climate Action Plan (CAP) goals.
- **Leverage:** provide the local match to compete for state/federal grants.

Typical SAFE-eligible investments

SAFE funds are used to close access gaps with sidewalk infill, multi-use paths, and neighborhood bikeways, and to deliver ADA-compliant curb ramps, accessible crossings, beacons, lighting, and other small but high-impact, localized safety fixes identified by community members (the SAFE Spot Program). The program also supports bike lanes, wayfinding, targeted traffic-calming, and intersection treatments that improve comfort and visibility for people walking and biking. Eligible costs include design, right-of-way, and construction, as well as limited supporting drainage and utility work necessary to deliver the access improvement.

SAFE does not fund routine street resurfacing or roadway reconstruction; those activities are primarily supported by the SSMP and other sources. SAFE also does not fund large auto-capacity projects whose primary purpose is to move more vehicle traffic rather than to improve pedestrian, bicycle, or ADA access.

Project development & program delivery approach.

SAFE was built from the Bicycle & Pedestrian Access Plan and Public Safety Advisory Committee's (PSAC) priority corridor work, with Council direction to elevate connectivity, ADA Transition Plan needs, and Safe Routes to School (SRTS) links. After adoption, staff integrated the SAFE corridors with SSMP paving and utility CIPs, sequencing work so sidewalk/ADA, paving, storm, water, and wastewater improvements could be integrated for efficiency. Council's direction led staff to develop a nine-year delivery plan. To resource the program, staff evaluated scenarios ranging from maximizing in-house design to fully outsourced construction, ultimately favoring a model that added engineering staff to support project design and project management while contracting out construction.

Program Execution

Since program inception, SAFE has delivered many important safety and access upgrades across Milwaukie. These include

Completed corridor projects (2019–2025): Total spend to date on SAFE \$13,194,815.45

- Kronberg Park Trail
- Sellwood/Madison (Milwaukie Elementary School area)
- Ardenwald SAFE
- South Downtown
- McBrod Avenue
- Linwood Avenue
- Lake Road
- 22nd Avenue
- River Road
- Home Avenue
- Wood Avenue
- 42nd Avenue
- 43rd Avenue / Howe Street
- Washington Street Area Improvements (Washington Street, 27th Avenue, 35th Avenue, Edison Street)
- Ardenwald North (Van Water and Roswell streets)

Current construction (Fiscal Year (FY) 2025):

- Harvey Street Improvements
- King Road Improvements
- SAFE Spot Program: ongoing small, high-impact neighborhood improvements.

Current Design & grant pursuits

Monroe Greenway:

- Stanley Improvements: URA/county funding
- Harrison Street: pursuing external grant funding
- Railroad Avenue multi-use pathway
- Additional in-design corridors: Waverly South/26th Avenue

SAFE Fee Structure

As previously mentioned, the SAFE fee is a transportation utility fee. Council sets the rate during the adoption of the biennium consolidated fee schedule through a resolution. The monthly rate that appears on city utility bills, and is restricted to pedestrian, bicycle, and ADA access projects.

Fee base

- **Residential:** each dwelling unit is assessed the standard monthly SAFE charge which is currently \$7.11.
- **Non-residential:** assessed by customer type using a trip-based equivalency (e.g., Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE) trip rates or local factors) that translate different land uses into “equivalent residential units” (ERUs) or a similar weighting, then multiplied by the base rate.
- **Exemptions/adjustments:** certain accounts (e.g., public rights-of-way, some tax-exempt parcels) may be excluded by ordinance; vacant or inactive accounts typically do not pay.

Indexing & updates.

- The SAFE fee is adjusted during the biennial consolidated fee schedule update using the five-year average Seattle Construction Cost Index (CCI), with new rates taking effect July 1. Council may also adjust during fee reviews to maintain purchasing power and program alignment. In addition, The city also makes adjustment to **non-residential factors** during technical updates such as land-use reclassifications.

This fee structure currently generates approximately \$1.3 million annually.

Financial Performance

The SAFE Fund is not structurally balanced. Current fee revenues do not fully cover required General Fund transfers and existing debt service; the gap is being backfilled with one-time fund balance, which is not sustainable and leaves no predictable pay-as-you-go capacity for small access/safety projects or local grant match.

This shortfall is driven by four factors: (1) household and non-residential growth lagged original assumptions; (2) collection performance fell during COVID and the recovery; (3) debt service from the 2018 SAFE bond and the SAFE-related share of the 2022 transportation financing now consumes a larger portion of annual revenue than anticipated; and (4) construction costs rose faster than CPI, eroding purchasing power despite use of the five-year average Seattle CCI in fee updates.

Recommendation

Given this structural shortfall, the immediate task is twofold. First, restore structural balance so current revenues reliably cover required transfers and debt service; and second, re-establish a predictable pay-as-you-go capacity sized for the city's delivery bandwidth. To that end, staff evaluated several SAFE fee trajectories that phase adjustments through the biennial consolidated fee schedule.

In recent discussions on the SAFE program, Council provided direction to staff to incorporate a CIP project that supports placemaking and programmatic improvements across the city's neighborhood greenways. As the Transportation System Plan (TSP) process has progressed, the city has moved away from the nomenclature of "greenways" to instead utilizes the functional classification term "bikeways." In the scenarios below, staff have included references to a "SAFE Streets Enhancement Program," which is a placeholder title for this CIP project that will support programmatic improvements and placemaking efforts across the city's bikeway network (improvements that benefit cyclists and pedestrians who use these routes). Staff also have shown in the scenarios how the already existing SPOT Program could remain funded and to what degree.

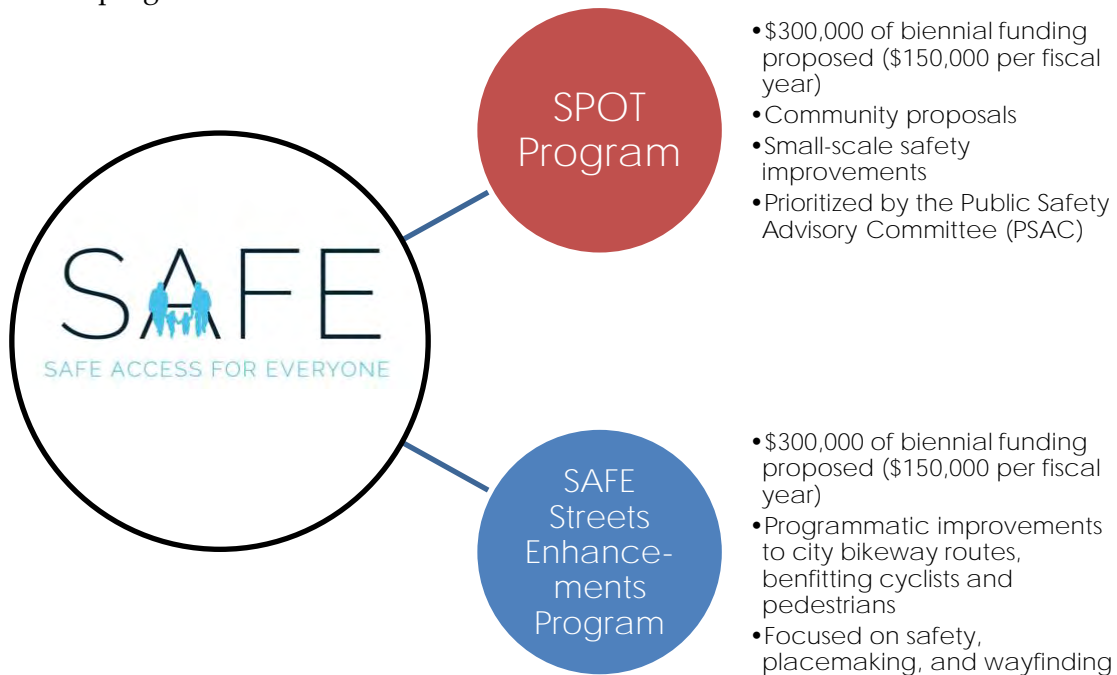
City staff evaluated three paths.

Scenario 1 (Cost Coverage Only) sets the rate to \$7.47/month in FY26–27 (+5.03%, current 5-year CCI) and **\$7.85/month in FY27–28** (+5.03%). At this pace, revenues are projected to cover obligations by 2029 and provide about \$300,000/year for the SAFE Spot Program and the new SAFE Streets Enhancements Program for one biennium *only*, relying on existing fund reserves to bridge near-term capacity.

Scenario 2 (Modest Pay-Go — Staff Recommended) sets the rate to \$8.05/month in FY26–27 (+13.25%) and \$8.54/month in FY27–28 (+6.00%), yielding a sustained ≈\$300,000/year (≈\$600,000/biennium) in predictable pay-as-you-go funding for SAFE Spot and the new SAFE Streets Enhancements Program.

Scenario 3 (Expanded, Financed Program) raises the rate to ~\$11–\$13/month targeting \$750,000–\$1,000,000/year for new larger-scale capital projects as well as the SPOT and SAFE Streets programs, but it presents affordability concerns and project-deliverability risks given staffing and market capacity.

Because issuing new bonded debt would add fixed costs and deepen the structural gap, staff recommend no new bonding at this time and advancing Scenario 2 (Modest Pay-Go). Under this approach, the SAFE fee would be adjusted through the biennial consolidated fee schedule to first restore structural balance (fully cover transfers and debt service) and then provide about \$300,000 per year in predictable pay-as-you-go funding for the SAFE Spot and new SAFE Streets Enhancements programs (see graphic below for a visual explanation of these two programs). Staff would also conduct annual revenue/expense true-ups and continue pursuing grants so the program can be recalibrated as conditions evolve.



Adopting the recommended pay-as-you-go approach means several larger corridor projects will be deferred to a future cycle or advanced only as grant opportunities arise. The following projects move to deferred status: **Logus Road, Ardenwald South, International Way, Oatfield Road, Park Avenue, Sparrow Street, King Road (40th- 42nd avenues), Shell Lane, and Lloyd Street**. These remain Council priorities; deferral aligns commitments with sustainable revenue and staffing capacity.

Deferring these projects does not mean stepping away from them. Near-term, staff will address site-specific safety needs through the SAFE Spot Program and launch the new SAFE Streets Enhancements Program to deliver small, high-impact bike access and safety improvements. Staff are actively repackaging the Logus Road corridor to a smaller, deliverable scope focused on Logus Road itself (rather than the broader area package). In parallel, staff are evaluating other transportation funding sources, such as SSMP/gas tax, eligible Transportation system

development charges (SDCs), so that a pared-back Logus Road project can advance without relying solely on SAFE. In parallel, the deferred corridors will be packaged for state and federal grant competitions; if external funds are awarded, staff will return to Council with delivery options. The deferrals will be reflected in the CIP and coordinated with SSMP paving and utility work to capture efficiencies when windows open.

BUDGET IMPACT

Smaller projects funded through SAFE Spot and SAFE Streets Enhancements programs align with existing public works and engineering staff capacity and can be designed and delivered more predictably than large bond-financed packages. This approach reduces the risk of overextending staff resources and keeps delivery aligned with available capacity, while preserving flexibility to pursue grants for larger opportunities when appropriate.

CLIMATE IMPACT

SAFE projects directly support the city's CAP by expanding active transportation infrastructure and encouraging walking, biking, and rolling. This reduces vehicle miles traveled and greenhouse gas emissions. Smaller-scale projects such as SAFE Spot improvements and SAFE Streets enhancements have a lower embedded carbon footprint than large capital projects yet still deliver visible climate benefits. Staff will continue incorporating sustainable practices (e.g., low-carbon concrete, warm-mix asphalt, pervious surfaces, and tree canopy preservation/expansion).

EQUITY IMPACT

The SAFE program delivers equitable improvements across the city, with emphasis near schools, transit, and historically underserved neighborhoods. They focus on filling gaps in the pedestrian and bicycle network, improving ADA accessibility, and reducing barriers for people with disabilities or other mobility challenges. By targeting smaller-scale projects, SAFE funding can be distributed more broadly and more frequently, ensuring that benefits are experienced across multiple neighborhoods.

WORKLOAD IMPACT

Smaller projects funded through SAFE Spot and Streets Enhancements align with existing public works and engineering staff capacity and can be designed and delivered more predictably than large bond-financed packages. This approach reduces the risk of overextending staff resources and keeps delivery aligned with available capacity, while preserving flexibility to pursue grants for larger opportunities when appropriate.

COORDINATION, CONCURRENCE, OR DISSENT

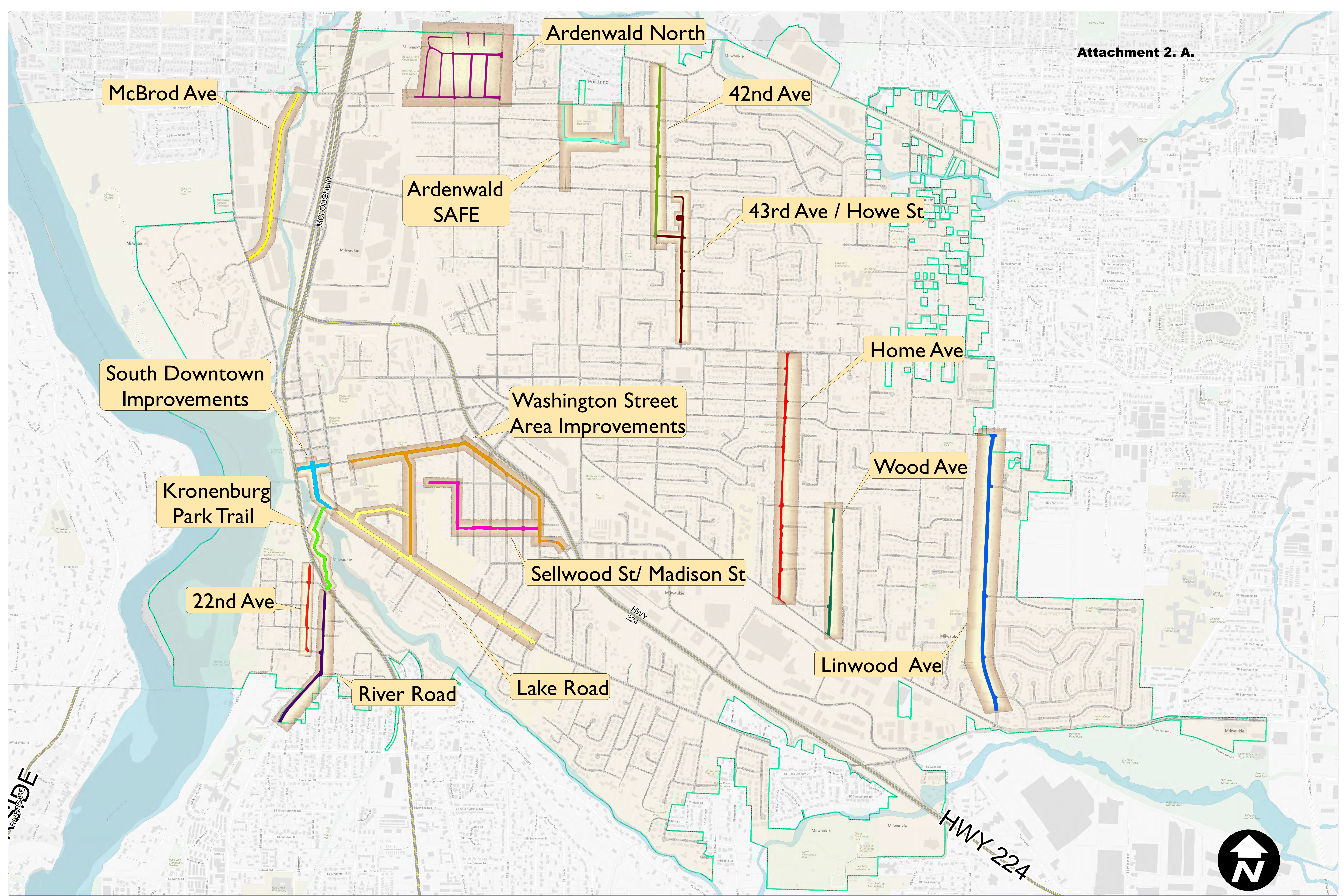
Not applicable.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Concur with staff's recommendation to forego additional SAFE bonding at this time and direct staff to return with a SAFE fee-adjustment resolution establishing approximately \$300,000 per year (\$600,000 per biennium) in pay-as-you-go funding for SAFE Spot and SAFE Streets Enhancements.

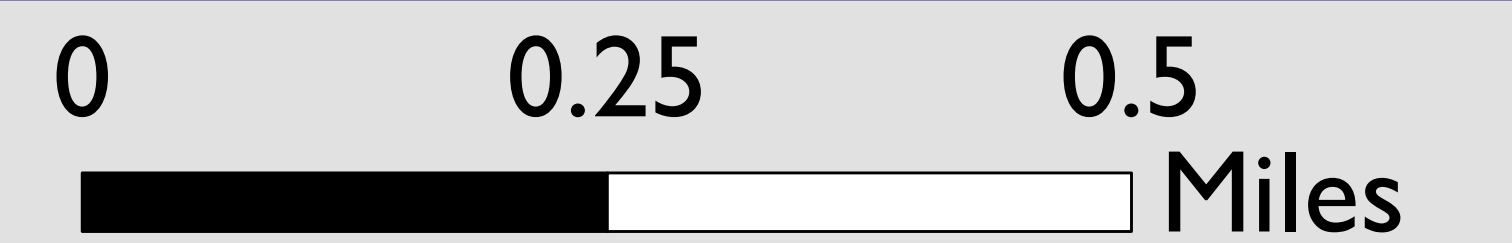
ALTERNATIVES
Not applicable.

ATTACHMENTS
1. Project Maps



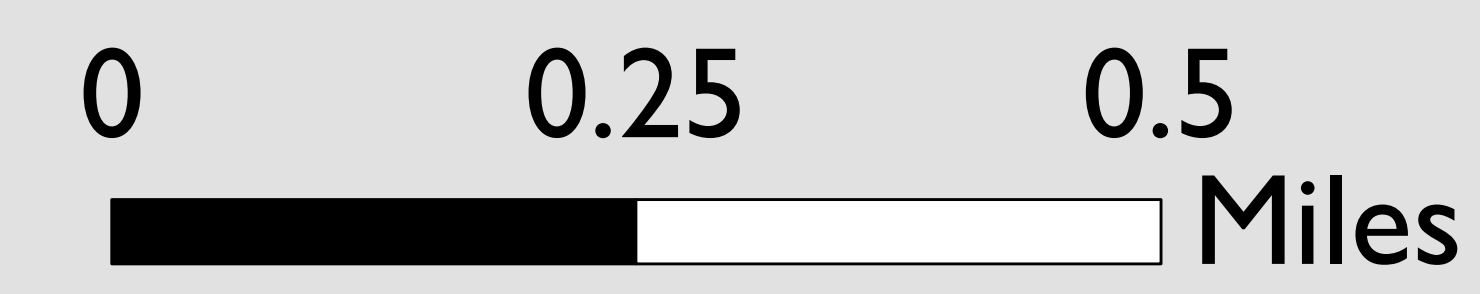
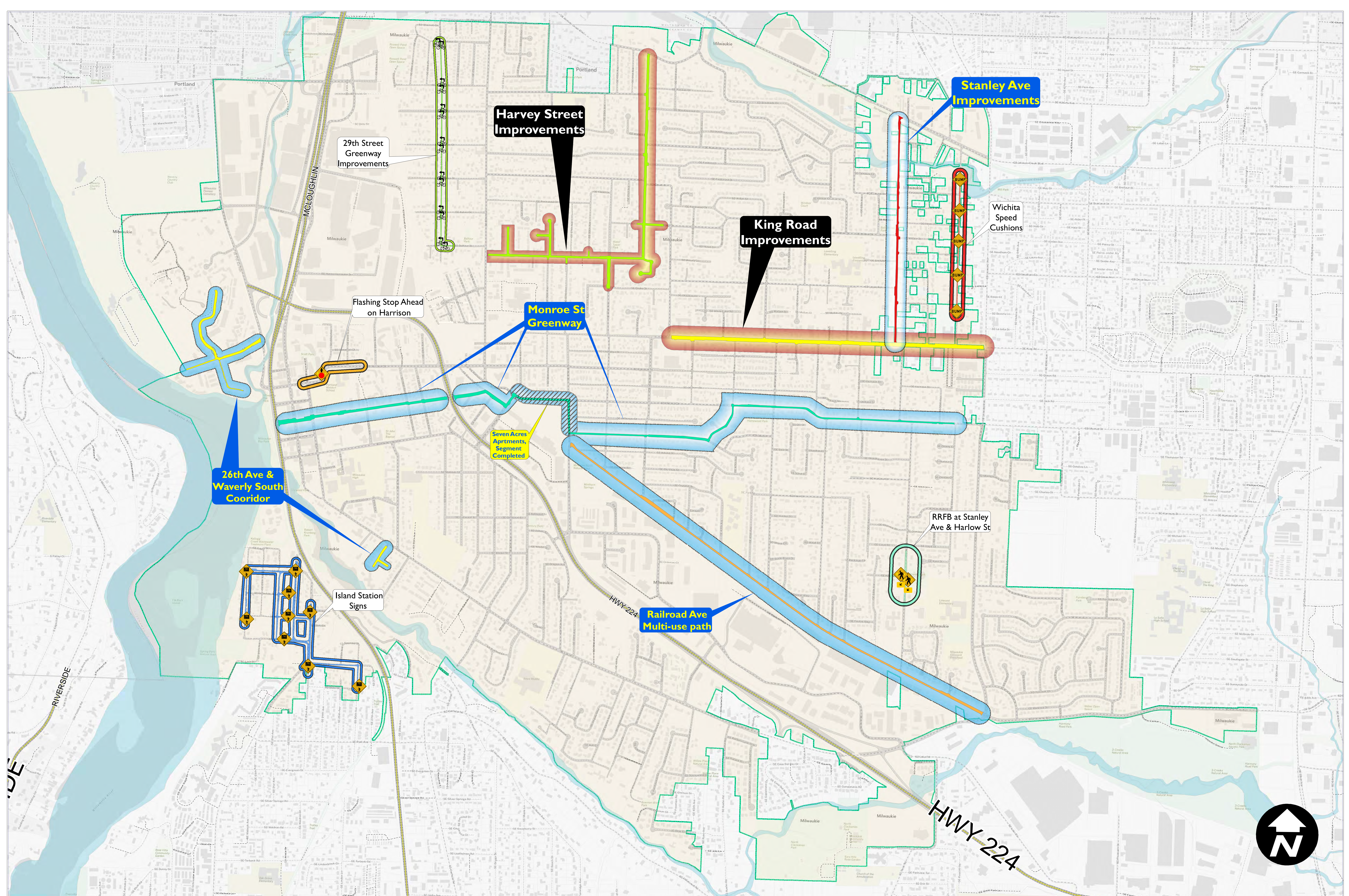
Completed SAFE Projects: (2019 – 2025)

- 22nd Ave
- 42nd Ave
- 43rd Ave / Howe St
- Ardenwald North
- Ardenwald SAFE
- Home Ave
- Kronenburg Park Trail
- Lake Road
- Linwood Ave
- McBrod Ave
- River Road
- Sellwood St/ Madison St
- South Downtown Improvements
- Washington Street Area Improvements
- Wood Ave




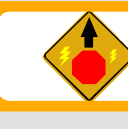



Milwaukee SAFE Projects


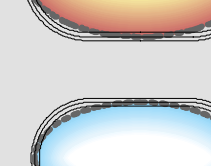




SAFE Spot Program

-  SPOT: 29th Street Greenway: Bike Path
-  SPOT: Wichita Speed Cushions
-  SPOT: Stanley RRFB: Pedestrian Crossing
-  SPOT: Harrison Flasher: Stop Ahead
-  SPOT: Island Station Signs: Bike & Pedestrian Crossing

CIP SAFE Programs Under Construction & In Design

-  SAFE Projects Under Construction
-  SAFE Projects In Design

Milwaukee SAFE Projects





CITY OF MILWAUKIE

Safe Access For Everyone
(SAFE)

Program Fee Analysis

Nov 4, 2025





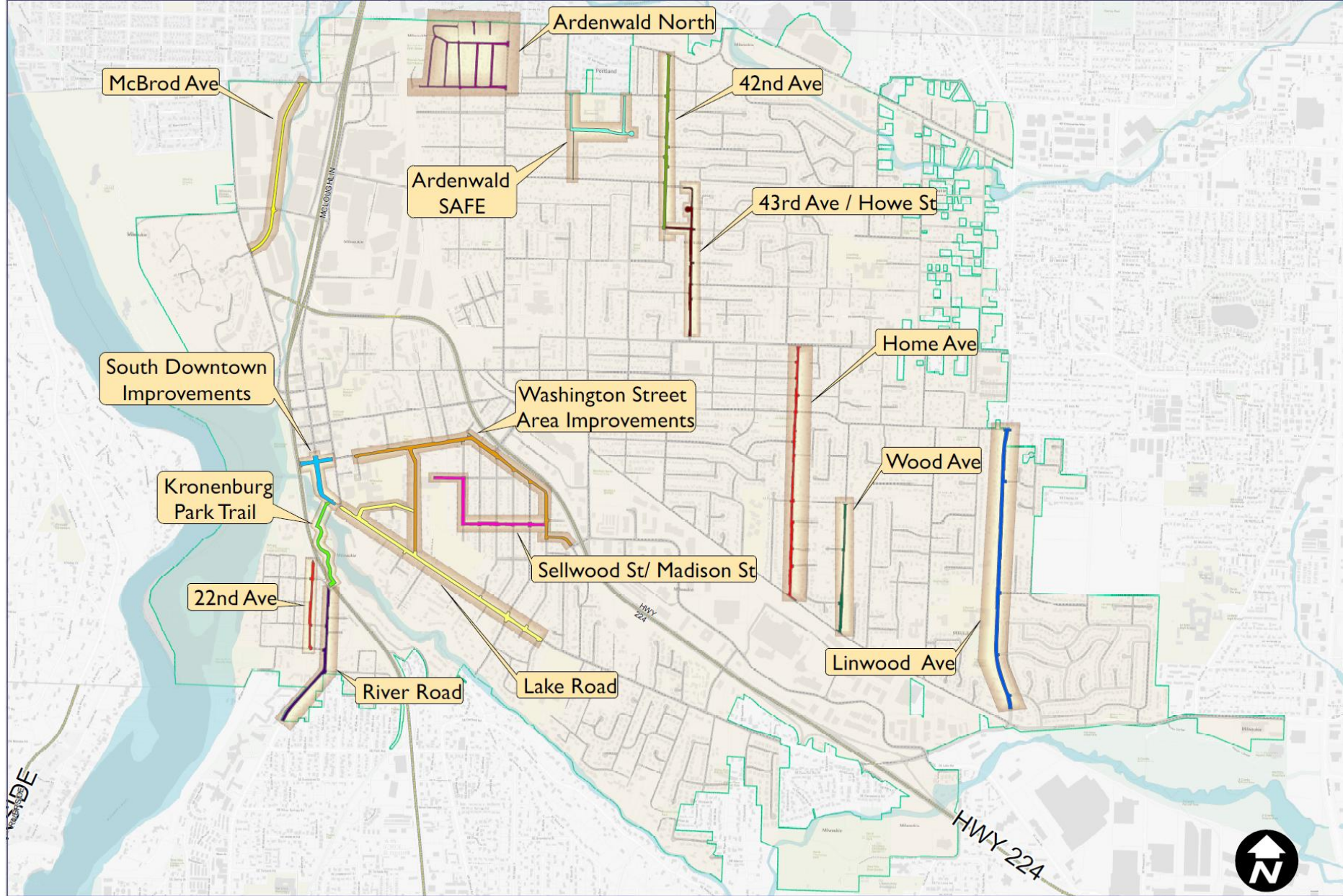
What is SAFE?

- City's dedicated program to plan, fund, and deliver small-to-moderate walking and biking improvements
- SAFE fee: monthly transportation utility charge (restricted to pedestrian, bicycle, ADA access)
- Complements SSMP (pavement), gas tax, grants, and urban renewal
- Program objectives: safety & access, ADA compliance, connectivity, equity, climate/health, leverage other funding sources

How the SAFE Fee Is Set

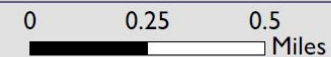
- Council sets the rate on utility bills (residential base; non-residential by land-use factor)- trip based
- Updated in the biennial consolidated fee schedule
 - 5-year average Seattle CCI
- Changes take effect July 1; technical adjustments may refresh factors/classifications





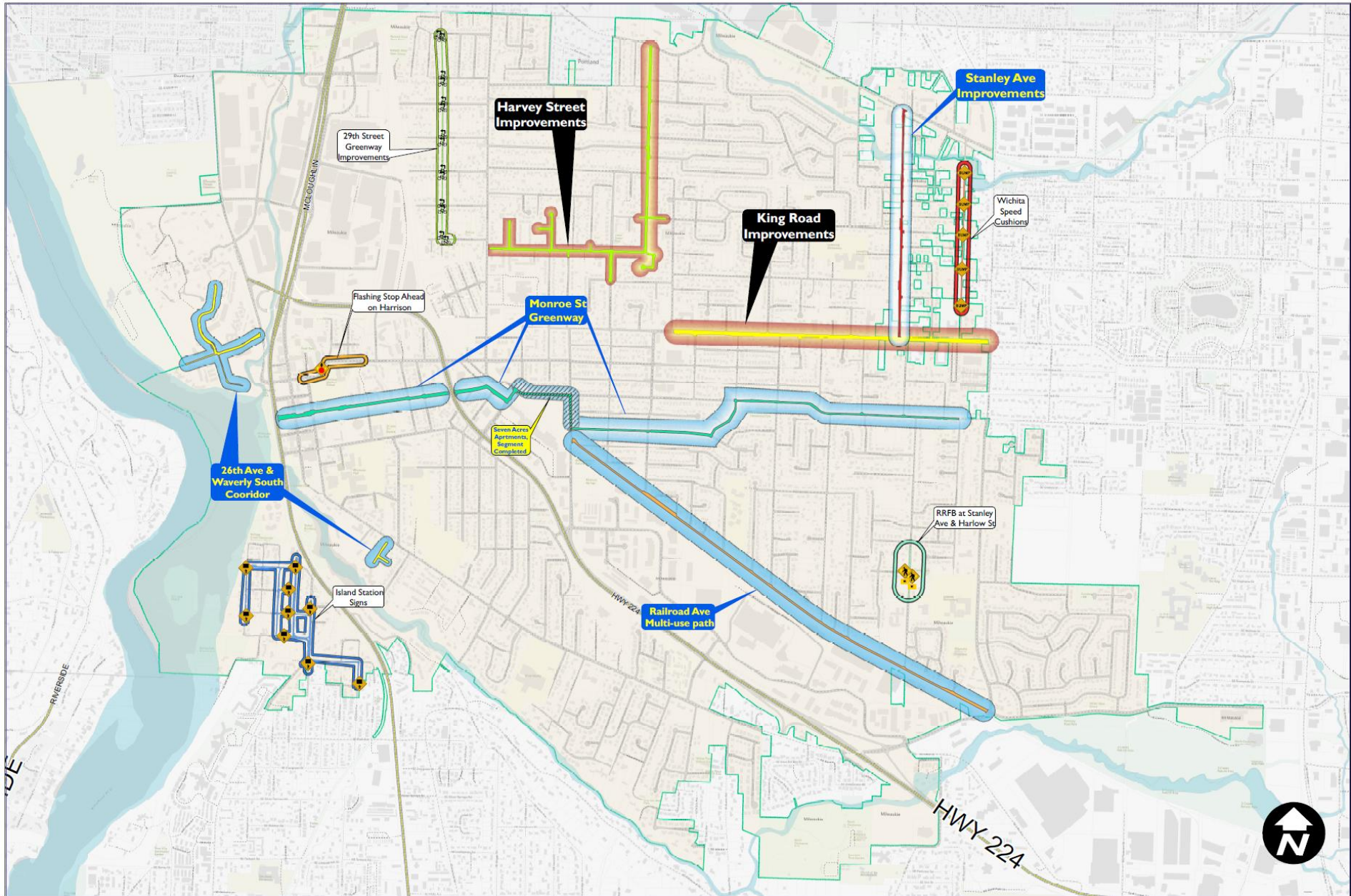
Completed SAFE Projects: (2019 – 2025)

- | | | |
|----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| ■ 22nd Ave | ■ Home Ave | ■ River Road |
| ■ 42nd Ave | ■ Kronenburg Park Trail | ■ Sellwood St/ Madison St |
| ■ 43rd Ave / Howe St | ■ Lake Road | ■ South Downtown Improvements |
| ■ Ardenwald North | ■ Linwood Ave | ■ Washington Street Area Improvements |
| ■ Ardenwald SAFE | ■ McBrod Ave | ■ Wood Ave |



Milwaukie SAFE Projects







SAFE Spot Program

-  SPOT: 29th Street Greenway: Bike Path
-  SPOT: Wichita Speed Cushions
-  SPOT: Stanley RRFB: Pedestrian Crossing
-  SPOT: Harrison Flasher: Stop Ahead
-  SPOT: Island Station Signs: Bike & Pedestrian Crossing

CIP SAFE Programs Under Construction & In Design

-  SAFE Projects Under Construction
-  SAFE Projects In Design

Milwaukie SAFE Projects



Financial Performance (Current Problem)

- SAFE Fund is not structurally balanced: current fee revenue does not fully cover transfers & debt service
 - Current Fee Projected to generate \$1.515M in FY 2026
 - Transfers and Debt Service - \$1.687M in FY 2026
 - Difference - \$172K
- Gap is backfilled with one-time fund balance
 - not sustainable
 - no pay-as-you-go capacity



Why This Occurred



Growth in billable accounts lagged original assumptions (assumed 1% growth annually)
Growth in transfers



Collection performance fell during COVID and recovery

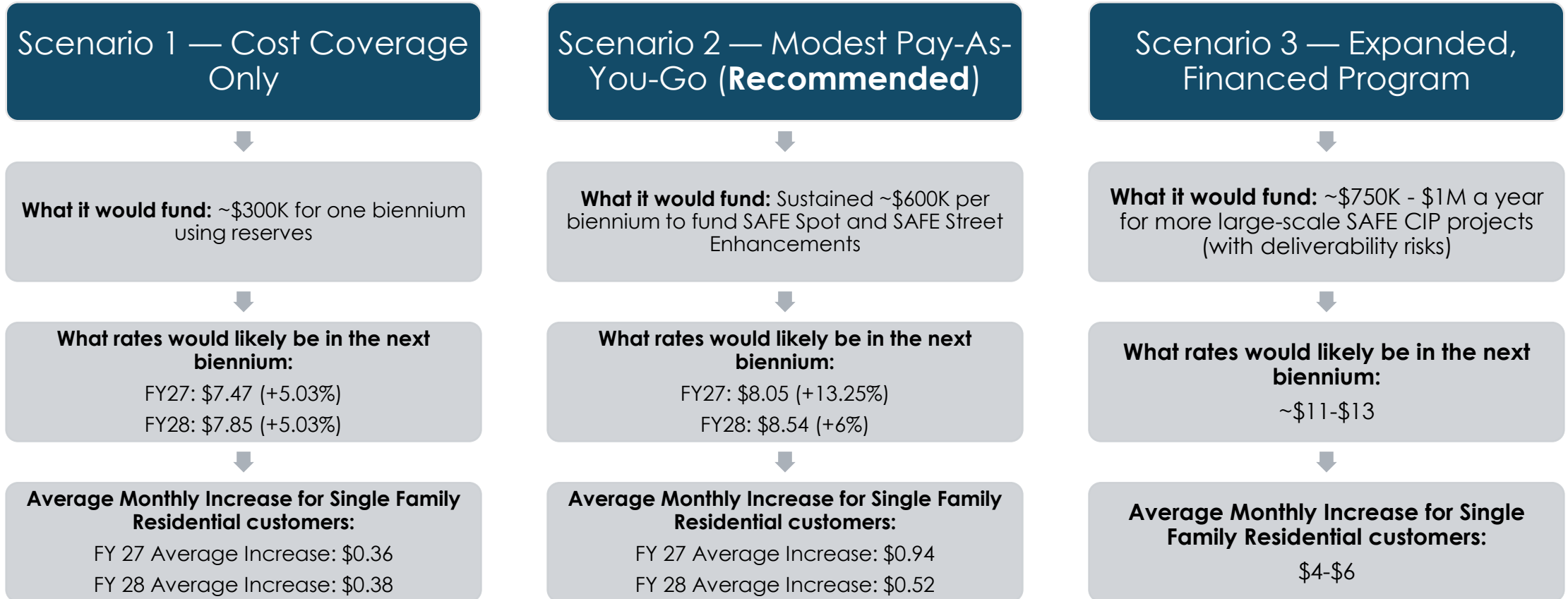


Debt service from 2018 bond + SAFE-related share of 2022 financing consumes a larger share (48.5% of Transportation Debt Service)



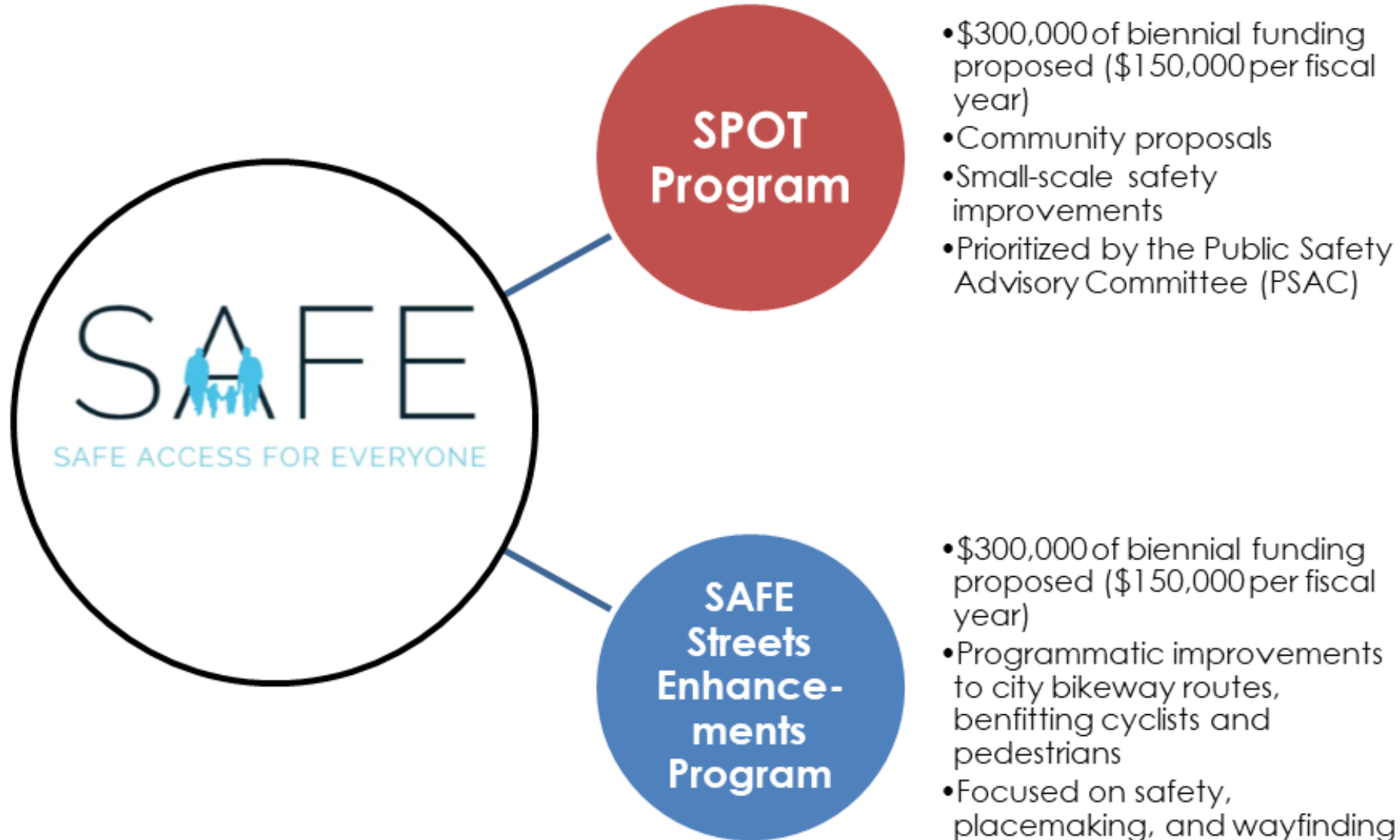
Construction costs rose faster than CPI despite 5-year Seattle CCI method

Fee Trajectories (Staff Modeling)



*Adjustments to cost allocation for SAFE Transfer - may reduce increase

Staff recommendation: A refined focus for SAFE



Staff Recommendation & Rationale



Proceed without new bonding;
adopt Scenario 2 (Modest Pay-
Go) via biennial fee schedule



Restore structural balance
(cover transfers & debt service)
+ provide ≈\$300k/yr pay-go



Launch SAFE Bike
Enhancements; continue SAFE
Spot; pursue grants

SAFE Program Fee Analysis

Thank you!

Questions?

Jennifer Garbely

City Engineer

GarbelyJ@milwaukieoregon.gov

Peter Passarelli

Public Works Director

Passarellip@milwaukieoregon.gov



COUNCIL STAFF REPORT

To: Mayor and City Council
Ann Ober, City Manager

Date Written: Nov. 4, 2022

Reviewed: Scott Stauffer (as to form), City Recorder

From: Kelly Brooks, Assistant City Manager, and
Michael Osborne, Assistant Finance Director

Subject: **Safe Access for Everyone (SAFE), Street Surface Maintenance Program (SSMP)
and Tax Increment Financing (TIF) Bonds**

ACTION REQUESTED

Council is asked to review and discuss a package of capital project investments in anticipation of a resolution vote authorizing the city to proceed with bonding on December 6, 2022.

HISTORY OF PRIOR ACTIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

[February 27, 2018](#): Council directed staff to develop a three phased financing schedule to implement an integrated SAFE, SSMP, and Transportation program

[March 20, 2018](#): Council authorized [Resolution 19-2018](#), which included a maximum principal amount of \$21,000,000, a total interest cost (TIC) of 4.5% plus 25 basis points to account for market changes between approval and issuance.

[June 7, 2022](#): The city's Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) for 2023-2027 and the Milwaukee Redevelopment Commission (MRC) budget and Five-Year Action Plan were adopted. All documents assumed a second bond issuance in fiscal year (FY) 2023 consistent with direction provided in 2018.

[September 20, 2022](#): Staff provided updates on capital projects funded with SAFE, SSMP, and transportation bonds during the regular session. MRC also discussed upcoming financing needs and capital projects that would be included in a December bond issuance.

ANALYSIS

At the conclusion of 2022, the city has substantially obligated the 2018 bonded SAFE, SSMP, and transportation funds. The MRC has also adopted five-year action plan that identified the design and construction of capital improvement projects over the course of the next three years. The following staff report, and subsequent conversation with Council on November 15, will provide information on the current terms for financing and what projects would be included or delayed depending on the city's decision.

FINANCIAL

The city's two options are to borrow from the bond market investors or from a bank itself. In 2018, the city borrowed from investors because they *usually* offer the lowest rates. The downside to investors is they lock in their rate for 10 years meaning the city cannot refinance during that time. With the last bond in 2018, the city used investors as the rate was low and the terms were longer (30 years).

If the city and MRC proceed with a bond issuance in 2022-2023, the bond advisors will likely recommend borrowing from a bank instead of investors as long as the bank rate is at or below the investor rate due to more advantageous call terms (the point at which the city could renegotiate the rate). The call terms for banks are typically 3-5 years whereas call terms for investor-based bonds are typically 10 years or longer. In addition, the cost of issuance is lower than investor-based borrowing.

Why not wait?

While interest rates are not as good as they were a couple years ago, waiting to construct projects also has a cost risk. Not only do construction and material costs increase, but phase I of SAFE and SMPP also took longer than anticipated because the city needed to scale up the project delivery capabilities. If the city puts the integrated program on pause to wait for a more favorable lending environment, staff would also need to scale down project delivery functions and work through a corresponding delay when/if the city wanted to mobilize the program again.

What should we include?

Eighty-five percent of bonded funds need to be “in place to spend” within 3 years. That means the city can only include projects that can be obligated within the next three years. Staff have taken a conservative approach to including projects while also providing some flexibility to account for higher costs that are already starting to hit projects currently in design.

PROJECT INFORMATION

Council will have an opportunity to discuss the financial risks or opportunities regarding the size of the bond with bond counsel on November 15. The following list of projects totals \$23,938,000. It does not include several smaller projects or International Way. The smaller projects were excluded due to concerns about staff capacity for in-house design. International Way was excluded because it's not clear it can be obligated within the three-year period.

In Design – The following projects are in design but need additional funding to construct.

- Ardenwald North Improvements
- Washington Street Area Improvements
- Downtown Main St. Enhancements – Dogwood Vertical Element and Wayfinding
- Milwaukie Bay Park Trolley Trail
- Tenant Improvements – Food Cart Pod Sewer Connection

Design on Hold Pending Bonding

- Harvey Street Improvements
- King Road Improvements
- Downtown Streetscape Improvements – Downtown Sidewalk
- SAFE Spot Improvements
- Logus Road, 40th & 42nd Ave.
- Monroe St. Greenway
- Street Surface Slurry Seal
- Dogwood Park
- Residential Street Surface Repair

- Signal Upgrades
- Mccloughlin Boulevard Intersection Upgrades
- Downtown Parking Strategy Implementation – Bike Parking, Metering Study and Partial Implementation
- Transit Stop Improvements

BUDGET IMPACT

The decision whether or not to bond will have impacts on the city budget in numerous ways. Issuing debt incurs finance charges and interest payments not currently paid by city ratepayers. Forgoing debt issuance will push out the timeline for capital projects thereby increasing their costs for future ratepayers.

WORKLOAD IMPACT

If Council decides not to bond, the city will need to re-examine staffing levels and transition to a structure that is needed for a lower level of project output.

CLIMATE IMPACT

Building out the city's active transportation network as an alternative to single occupancy vehicle travel is an identified strategy within Milwaukie's Community Climate Action Plan. Continuation of and expedited delivery of the SAFE program will meaningfully contribute towards a more bikeable and walkable city. It is important to note, however, that bonded funds would go towards construction projects that include materials and equipment that contribute to greenhouse gas emissions.

COORDINATION, CONCURRENCE, OR DISSENT

Staff coordinated with public works, engineering, community development, and finance in compilation of this report.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommend that Council proceed with bonding for identified projects because the financing costs are outweighed by future increases in capital construction and utilizes the city's current project delivery staff and protocols that were established through phase I.

ALTERNATIVES

Council could delay the decision to solicit more information about projects and financing option or decline to proceed with bonding all-together.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Project Spreadsheet

2022 Bonded Projects - Proposed					
Project	SSMP	SAFE	Transp.	URA	All Funds
Harvey Street Improvements	958,000	1,129,000			
Ardenwald North Improvements	342,000	765,000			
King Road Improvements	1,571,000	4,026,000			
Washington Street Area Improvements	1,588,000	1,882,000			
Waverly South		78,000			
Crosswalk Art		50,000			
SAFE spot Improvements		250,000			
26th Avenue Improvements	80,000	67,000			
International Way Improvements	514,000	1,956,000			
Logus Road, 40th & 42nd Ave	1,591,000	843,000			
Monroe Street Greenway			1,161,000	1,332,000	
Residential Street Surface Repair			1,500,000		
Signal Upgrades			300,000		
Street Surface Slurry Seal	500,000		500,000		
Downtown Main St. Enhancements				650,000	
Downtown Streetscape Improvements				500,000	
McLoughlin Boulevard Intersection Upgrades				250,000	
Parking Solutions				500,000	
Transit Stop Improvements				300,000	
Tenant Improvements		500,000		500,000	
Dogwood Park				400,000	
Trolley Trail (Milwaukie Bay Park)				600,000	
All Projects	\$ 7,144,000	\$ 11,546,000	\$ 3,461,000	\$ 5,032,000	\$ 27,183,000
Proposed	\$ 6,550,000	\$ 8,895,000	\$ 3,461,000	\$ 5,032,000	\$ 23,938,000

2023 Infrastructure Bonds

11/15/2022

Kelly Brooks, Assistant City Manager

Michael Osborne, Assistant Finance Director

John Peterson, Piper Sandler

Gulgun Ugur, Hawkins





Background

Staff Proposal

\$24,000,000 in projects

- \$6,050,000 SSMP
- \$8,895,000 SAFE
- \$3,461,000 Transportation
- \$5,032,000 URA

*Only includes projects budgeted in CIP for Fiscal Years 23, 24, and 25.



FY 23/24 Budget Assumptions

Transportation

- \$21,000,000 Transportation bond
- \$130,000 to pay for bond counsel and fees
- Increase of \$577,000 or 20% in debt service

URA

- \$6,500,000 debt issuance
- \$100,000 for bond counsel and fees

30-Year Bond



Questions – Part 1

Why only one scenario?

It was as low as I could go without pushing projects out or triggering a need for a second bond issuance within the 3-year period.

Doesn't Slurry Seal have its own line item?

Yes, but all of the projects do. The SSMP fund does not have enough money to fund all of the projects programmed without debt. Would need to decide what projects are not happening if council declines to proceed.

What is the total debt service cost, and could we fund staff instead?

FY 23/24 staffing is tied to delivering a bonded program. If we are no longer expediting the SAFE Program we have more staff than projects and insufficient resources to support our current structure.

Questions – Part 2

If we just bond for the projects identified as “in design” what would the bond amount be?

- \$11,000,000

**Would need to see what projects wouldn't happen and reassess bonding.*

PROJECT	SSMP	SAFE	TRANSP.	URA	ALL FUNDS
Ardenwald North Improvements	342,000	765,000			1,107,000
Washington Street Area Improvements	1,588,000	1,882,000			3,470,000
Monroe Street Greenway			1,161,000	1,332,000	2,493,000
Downtown Main St. Enhancements				650,000	650,000
Downtown Streetscape Improvements				500,000	500,000
McLoughlin Boulevard Intersection Upgrades				250,000	250,000
Parking Solutions				500,000	500,000
Transit Stop Improvements				300,000	300,000
Tenant Improvements				500,000	500,000
Dogwood Park				400,000	400,000
Trolley Trail (Milwaukie Bay Park)				600,000	600,000
Total	1,930,000	2,647,000	1,161,000	5,032,000	10,770,000



From: [Rep Gamba](#)
To: [OCR](#)
Subject: The Legacy of SAFE
Date: Tuesday, November 4, 2025 2:35:22 PM

This Message originated outside your organization.

Greetings Mayor Batey, Council President Anderson, and Members of the Milwaukie City Council,

I'm writing to express my strong support for the continuation and stabilization of the SAFE (Safe Access for Everyone) program. As someone who has served the people of Milwaukie in one way or another for almost two decades, I've seen firsthand how deeply this program reflects the values and priorities of our community. From clear back when we were working to pass the bond to pay for our portion of the light rail project, the conversation that people most engaged in went something like this: "I've lived here for 30 years and I still don't have sidewalks anywhere in my neighborhood."

SAFE was not a top-down initiative. It was built from years of neighborhood advocacy, committee work, and community planning to address one of Milwaukie's most consistent concerns: making it safer and easier to walk, bike, and roll throughout our city. The SAFE fee, our locally controlled funding source for pedestrian, bicycle, and ADA improvements, has delivered tangible, visible progress toward that goal. From the Linwood Multiuse Path to sidewalks on Home Ave, it's made meaningful progress toward providing every neighborhood safe routes to travel.

Now, the challenge before you is to stabilize the program's finances so that SAFE can keep fulfilling its mission without interruption. As staff have outlined, despite our work to create an enduring program the current fee revenues has been overcome by inflation. The fund's reserves are being drawn down to cover debt service and existing obligations. That is not sustainable.

City staff have evaluated several options, and I strongly encourage Council to, at minimum, pursue a path similar to Scenario 2: the Modest Pay-As-You-Go approach. This approach ensures SAFE remains financially healthy while providing about \$300,000 per year in predictable, locally controlled funding for the SAFE Spot and SAFE Streets Enhancement programs. It avoids new bonding debt, protects affordability for residents, and keeps the program focused on steady, achievable improvements. But I think a compromise that is stronger than that proposal may be possible.

SAFE has been one of Milwaukie's most community-driven successes, a model other cities have looked to emulate. Continuing that legacy means maintaining the funding needed to deliver on our commitments to safety, access, and equity.

Thank you for your leadership and your continued commitment to building a safer, more connected Milwaukie.

Mark F. Gamba

State Representative

Oregon House District 41 | H-274

Office: (503) 986-1441

Mobile: (971) 404-5274

From: [Lisa Batey](#)
To: [City Council](#)
Subject: Radiolab segment on ranked choice voting
Date: Sunday, November 2, 2025 10:00:08 PM

WS 3. 11/4/25
Exhibit -
Mayor Batey

Scott: Please add to the record for Tuesday's work session.

All: [Please do not reply all]

I see we have a discussion of ranked-choice voting on Tuesday.

Coincidentally, the NPR show Radiolab this weekend reran a six-year-old segment on ranked choice voting, following its application in Ireland, and then in three different US jurisdictions. It's pretty interesting and provides a lot of food for thought – you can listen to it or read the transcript at the link below. [I recommend listening.]

They also note at the end that their next episode will be a new one on voting (not clear if about ranked choice or not).

[Tweak the Vote - Transcript](#)

Lisa M. Batey, Mayor (she/her)
City of Milwaukie
E-mail: bateyl@milwaukieoregon.gov
Message line: 503-786-7512



OCT 18, 2024

TRANSCRIPT 

Tweak the Vote

Image credits: Curt Merlo with edits by Jared Bartman



Listen



LATIF NASSER: Hey, it's Latif. Given the approaching American presidential election, we are on week two of our election run. So last week, if you'll remember, we had the story about the dramatic changes in how we cover presidential candidates in this country. Next week, we have a brand new episode about why and how we count our votes for president. But this week we have the evolving story of how we cast those votes.

LATIF: The episode I'm about to play for you, it's six years old, which I mean, if you think about the long sweep of American political history, that does not feel like a long time, and yet so much has changed. So when we released this episode, the process we're about to outline for you, like, it was pretty obscure. It was used—I don't know, in a few places, few cities, few states in the US. Now this is big time. What we're describing to you, it's on the upswing. This is literally going to help decide who the next president is going to be, which I don't know about you, that—I find that kind of inspiring. It feels like things can actually change in this country. So anyway, we will play the episode now, and then we will do a quick update on the flipside. Yeah, so without further ado, here is Tweak the Vote.

[RADIOLAB INTRO]

YASCHA MOUNK: *And not to this part, but into that. Yeah.*

ROBERT KRULWICH: I'm Robert Krulwich.

LATIF: And I'm Latif Nasser. And today on Radiolab, Robert, I am gonna make you wrestle with your most cherished ideal: American democracy.

YASCHA MOUNK: Oh, I see. Okay, great. Hang on a second I'm just struggling with the earphones. Now I have them on.

ROBERT: Okay.

LATIF: Okay, great.

LATIF: And I'm gonna start things off by introducing you to Yascha.

YASCHA MOUNK: Yascha Mounk, I'm a lecturer on government at Harvard.

LATIF: He studies politics.

YASCHA MOUNK: What else was I going to say?

LATIF: Maybe we could just start with where you grew up.

YASCHA MOUNK: Yeah, so I was born in 1982. I grew up in Germany, moved around a bunch of different places within Germany as a kid, and then went to college in England.

LATIF: Cambridge.

YASCHA MOUNK: In 2000. And I was kind of studying politics, I was a history major.

LATIF: So Yascha was studying politics, but he was studying it in the past. So he was looking at going all the way back to the cradle of democracy in ancient Greece and then how democracy came to thrive around the world. But as he was studying that he was noticing in the news he would see, in certain countries like France or Austria, there would be these parties, these far right, ultra-nationalist, anti-immigrant parties that were starting to gain some traction. And for Yascha ...

YASCHA MOUNK: I saw some of this ...

LATIF: ... this was a little bit scary.

YASCHA MOUNK: Because my family's been in the wrong place at the wrong time for about four generations.

LATIF: His great grandparents perished during the Holocaust.

YASCHA MOUNK: My grandparents just barely survived the Soviet Union. My parents grew up in Poland, and were thrown out of a country in a huge sort of anti-Semitic wave in 1968. So the idea that throughout the system that seems relatively stable, seems relatively peaceful, might suddenly turn fractious and even violent was something that I suppose I always sort of had a dim awareness of, even as a kid.

YASCHA MOUNK: So I remember being quite worried by this, and having friends who were quite worried about it. But we were worried about it as sort of this weird, bad thing that's going on. But I don't think we actually thought that these people might win.

LATIF: Jump to ...

YASCHA MOUNK: The early 2010s.

LATIF: They start winning.

[NEWS CLIP: For the first time, Marine Le Pen will have a seat in Parliament, along with seven others from her far-right party.]

LATIF: These far right parties in Austria and France, they start to gain power, and it's not just there.

YASCHA MOUNK: There are huge swaths of Europe.

[NEWS CLIP: What's happening in Italy is also happening elsewhere in Europe.]

LATIF: Similar right wing parties are rising up in Italy, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, Hungary.

[NEWS CLIP: An identity crisis for the entire European continent.]

LATIF: And it's not just Europe. You have India, Turkey, and ...

[NEWS CLIP: What started off as ...]

YASCHA MOUNK: Of course, the United States.

[NEWS CLIP: ... unlikely, impossible, is now reality.]

LATIF: Basically, there's this wave of politicians whose message was ...

YASCHA MOUNK: People aren't really listening to you.

LATIF: ... your government has failed you.

YASCHA MOUNK: Trust me. I really speak for the people. I'm gonna fix everything.

LATIF: And to Yascha, this was like a wake-up call. Not just because of immigration policy, or right and left leanings of certain politicians, but even more deeply than that.

YASCHA MOUNK: I was quite worried about the way in which these political movements perhaps pretended to have some allegiance to democratic mechanisms, but actually were enemies of it.

LATIF: Like, there was this one guy, the leader of the Austrian Freedom Party.

YASCHA MOUNK: Who glorified the Third Reich in various ways, and really harkened back to the country's fascist past in a positive way. That wasn't a far-fetched fear, I don't think. I mean, a huge number of the world's dictators have been elected democratically at some point, and then they move against democratic institutions in such a way that you can't displace them democratically anymore.

LATIF: So for Yascha, who by this point was a lecturer at Harvard, he kept seeing this in country after country after country. He saw these citizens willingly elect these wannabe dictators into power, and so he started wondering what is making these citizens do this? Do they feel like their current leaders don't get them? Are they riled up about some issue of the day like refugees or income inequality? Or is this a sign that they're upset about something even more foundational?

YASCHA MOUNK: The political system itself.

LATIF: Like, are they actually angry with democracy itself?

YASCHA MOUNK: And so I sat down with a friend and colleague to figure it out.

LATIF: And his friend, it turns out, worked on something called the World Values Survey.

YASCHA MOUNK: Which is a really ambitious attempt to try and get a public opinion around the world.

LATIF: It's basically just a bunch of social scientists who ask a whole bunch of very standard questions to a whole bunch of people all over the world. And they're like, "Okay, let's actually scrutinize what's being said in here about democracy."

YASCHA MOUNK: And when we actually looked at the numbers, we were honestly flabbergasted by what we saw.

LATIF: Okay, so there's actually three questions in particular that he got interested in.

ROBERT: Okay.

LATIF: Here, so let's start with this one.

YASCHA MOUNK: How do you feel about a strong ruler who doesn't have to bother with Parliament or elections?

ROBERT: Who doesn't have to bother with Parliament or elections?

LATIF: Correct. Yeah.

ROBERT: Okay.

LATIF: They also asked this of Americans, just instead of doesn't have to bother with Parliament, it doesn't have to bother with Congress. Anyway, so in 1995, 24 percent of all Americans endorsed that kind of strongman leader.

ROBERT: 24 percent. So one out of every four?

LATIF: Yeah, but in the last several years that number has jumped from 24 to 32 percent.

ROBERT: So now it's a third almost. That's—yeah.

LATIF: Yeah, say a strong leader who doesn't have to deal with Congress or elections is either a very good or fairly good thing.

ROBERT: Whoa, well that surprises me.

LATIF: It's kind of even more striking in Europe. So ...

YASCHA MOUNK: In Germany, one in six people used to like that idea.

LATIF: But now ...

YASCHA MOUNK: It's one in three.

ROBERT: Oh, in Germany, where they should know better.

LATIF: Yeah.

YASCHA MOUNK: In France and the United Kingdom, it was one in four 20 years ago, and now it's one in two.

ROBERT: Half.

LATIF: Half, yeah.

YASCHA MOUNK: So every second Brit and Frenchman says, "Yeah, the idea of a strong ruler who doesn't have to bother with Parliament and elections, that's pretty appealing to me."

ROBERT: It's not appealing to me. That is not appealing to me.

LATIF: Yeah.

ROBERT: Who would say that they like to not be involved in a democracy, which is about being involved?

LATIF: Okay, well if you think that's crazy, here comes question number two. Flat out, simple, straight forward ...

YASCHA MOUNK: How important is it to you to live in a democracy on a scale of one to 10?

LATIF: And ...

YASCHA MOUNK: When you look at Americans born in the 1930s, 1940s, two-thirds of them give the highest importance to living in a democracy. They say that's really essential.

ROBERT: I mean, I'd be—well, two-thirds seems a little soft to me.

LATIF: Sure.

YASCHA MOUNK: But among Americans born since 1980 it's less than one third.

LATIF: Less than one third consider it essential to live in a democracy.

ROBERT: What? Less than a third?

LATIF: Yeah.

ROBERT: So of 100 people, 100 young people, 32, 30, 25 would say, "I love democracy. That's very important." And the rest—what would the rest say?

LATIF: It's not the most important thing for them deciding where to live.

ROBERT: Okay, well then if this is good—where would you like to—what would you prefer? Would you like to be living ...

LATIF: Okay, well that's a good segue to the next question.

ROBERT: All right.

LATIF: Final question.

YASCHA MOUNK: Which was about Army rule. So do you think that Army rule is a good system of government?

ROBERT: Army rule. So we're not—this is no civilians anymore. Soldiers running the government, soldiers following orders, soldiers giving orders?

LATIF: Mm-hmm.

YASCHA MOUNK: So 20 years ago about one in 16 Americans thought that was a good system of government, and the most recent poll a couple of years ago it was one in six.

ROBERT: Uh-oh.

YASCHA MOUNK: And among young and affluent Americans it's actually gone up from six percent to thirty-five percent.

LATIF: Whoa!

YASCHA MOUNK: So it's a nearly sixfold increase.

ROBERT: In America? You have one in three young, affluent Americans saying, "Military rule is a wonderful thing." That's what you're saying?

LATIF: Yeah.

YASCHA MOUNK: Exactly.

LATIF: Yeah.

ROBERT: That's misguided, or tragic. I don't know which.

LATIF: So Yascha said something, he was like, "Look, like ..."

YASCHA MOUNK: I don't think if a colonel took over tomorrow, one-third of Americans would say, "This is wonderful." I don't think it was actually true, but it does show a deep lack of attachment to the current local system, and the sort of sense of, "You know what? I mean, let's try something new. How bad could things get? I don't think it could be much worse than what we have today."

ROBERT: Here's the thing that gets to me. Let's imagine a well-intentioned but totally authoritarian dictator who takes over, gets used to power and then, as dictators do, chooses to remain in place forever. The adventure of democracy is that it admits that nothing is ever right, we always have to fix it, and the system has built in it impermanence.

ROBERT: Every six years you elect a senator over again. Every two years you elect the congressman over again. Every four years you can have the option to switch presidents. Presidents can't serve beyond a particular point. There will be checks, there will be balances. There will be protection, but the whole thing admits that there's always change, and always the ability to change. And this survey you just read me says, "Nah, we don't believe in it anymore."

ROBERT: Well, that's dangerous to me, scary to me. I think my response is if that's the case—and I don't argue that people have these opinions, if that's the case then let's fix it. Let's not throw it out, let's repair it in some way. That's what it seems like a moment like this calls for. That's the speech.

LATIF: [laughs] Basically you're saying, let's fix it.

ROBERT: Yeah.

LATIF: Yeah, well there's a lot to fix, right?

ROBERT: Obviously.

LATIF: There's corporate money, and special interest lobbyists, and gerrymandering and minority groups who don't get a voice, and active voter suppression in a lot of places. The weirdness of the electoral college, the two-party system in general where it seems like they have nothing to do except for hate on each other. But I figured let's just focus on one thing: voting. Like, is there a way to just tweak this fundamental part of democracy? Can we change the way we vote so that people don't feel, as many people now do, that they're throwing their vote away, that their vote doesn't count, that their vote is wasted?

ROBERT: Okay, so what would you suggest?

LATIF: So what I got is a—it's kind of an alternate universe. It's a different way of doing elections that could have a profound effect on the way our democracy works. And we'll get to that right after a quick break

LATIF: Latif. Radiolab. We are back.

SIMON ADLER: *Abie can you hear me?*

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: Yes.

SIMON: *There we are.*

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *Oh, good. Okay, cool.*

LATIF: And we're gonna start off with producer Simon Adler

SIMON: Yeah, so in search of democratic inspiration, I called across the ocean to the Emerald Isle to talk to this guy.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *So my name is Abie Philbin Bowman. I currently work for ERT Radio1 on the Drive Time program.*

SIMON: Abie is a radio producer/reporter for Ireland's equivalent to the BBC, known as RTE. And he's a self-described election nerd.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *Okay, so to sort of start from the start.*

SIMON: *Please.*

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *The way I would look at this is American democracy is one of the oldest democracies in the world. It's kind of like a laptop from 1985, and at the time everybody was like, "Oh my God, this is incredible. It's so fast. It's so responsive. You're gonna get so much stuff done with this." And to be fair, you did. But you've got to keep updating your operating system, otherwise pretty soon your democracy is struggling to deal with things like Facebook news feeds and Twitter and leave itself open to being hacked by Russia. Now in Ireland, we got our democracy a little bit later—the 1920s.*

SIMON: *Okay.*

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *And at that point democracy had moved on from the 1770s, 1780s, when you guys sort of brought in your democracy. And we adopted this what was then quite modern voting system called PRSTV.*

SIMON: *PRSTV.*

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *Exactly.*

SIMON: It sounds a bit like an STD.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: It does sound quite like a sexually transmitted infection. It does, yes.

ROBERT: Oh, this seems like dead in the water from hello.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: The extended version is multi-seat PRSTV. That really sounds like an STI.

SIMON: [laughs]

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: It's not.

ROBERT: One more time. Say it again?

SIMON: Multi-seat PRSTV.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: Which stands for "Multi-seat proportional representation by single transferable vote."

LATIF: I have no idea what that means.

SIMON: Well, weird as it might sound, this is a system of voting that, unlike ours, can make every voter feel heard.

LATIF: Ooh!

SIMON: Gets you candidates who best reflect the collective interest of the people, and makes sure no one ever feels like they're throwing their vote away.

ROBERT: [whispers] I don't believe you.

SIMON: You don't have to believe me.

LATIF: No okay, I'm following. Tell us—tell us how this impossible feat, how does this even work?

SIMON: I'm walking through the lower part of Dublin Central.

SIMON: Well, let's just put this in concrete terms.

LATIF: Great.

SIMON: Okay. So 2016, there's an election for the National Parliament in the Dublin Central District.

SIMON: It's blocks of brick row houses punctuated by these brightly colored pink or purple or yellow doors.

SIMON: You can think of it like an election district. In Ireland, it's what's known as a 'constituency.'

SIMON: Couple adult stores, low-rise white public housing units.

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: It's a predominantly working-class constituency with a lot of difficulties.

SIMON: This is Maureen O'Sullivan, a long time resident of the constituency with a shock of white hair.

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: And I've always been involved with youth clubs, et cetera, doing volunteer work, and then teaching in communities in the area.

SIMON: And so back in February of 2016, this area of Dublin, along with the rest of the country, was holding their Parliamentary elections. Elections for what they call TDs.

LATIF: Wait, what are TDs?

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: Right. Okay, well TD is the Irish, the Gaelic, for Teachta Dála. Which translates into member of Parliament.

SIMON: At that time Dublin Central had three of these TD seats, three people representing them in Parliament. One of whom ...

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: I was elected in 2009.

SIMON: ... was Maureen.

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: And I am independent, not allied with any party.

SIMON: And going into that 2016 election, things were looking pretty uncertain for Maureen. First of all, there was a field of 15 candidates running for those three seats. And worse, seats one and two were expected to be snagged quite easily by these two high-profile, major party candidates.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *Yeah.*

SIMON: This again is Abie Bowman who actually covered this 2016 election.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *They are not locked down, but these are people who look like they are gonna get elected.*

SIMON: And what that means is you've got this wide open field of folks all fighting against Maureen for that third and final seat.

ROBERT: Who's our contenders?

SIMON: Well, right. So we're gonna focus in on two of them.

SIMON: *Can I just get you to introduce yourself and ...*

MARY FITZPATRICK: *Of course.*

SIMON: *... then we'll start.*

MARY FITZPATRICK: *Yeah. So I'm Mary Fitzpatrick.*

SIMON: So first we've got Mary Fitzpatrick.

MARY FITZPATRICK: *Mm-hmm. Yeah, yeah.*

SIMON: *On the spectrum of American politics, do you know where you fall?*

MARY FITZPATRICK: *You just have two parties. [laughs]*

SIMON: She's pretty liberal, been around Irish politics for a while.

GARY GANNON: *Are you interviewing me already? Okay.*

SIMON: And second ...

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *Gary Gannon who's a young community worker.*

SIMON: ... this brash guy with red stubble on his face.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *Quite interesting, quite authentic. And he's sort of an interesting one to watch.*

SIMON: Because he's representing this brand new political party.

GARY GANNON: *A plucky upstart, I think that's what you call it in the West, I think. Yeah.*

SIMON: *Did you have a slogan or anything? Like ...*

GARY GANNON: *Oh, yes. No, we had an amazing slogan. It was very simple. And it was just the one word, "If." I stole it completely from an old fable about when the Macedonian army was marching on Sparta, and they sent Sparta a message saying that if we win we will burn Sparta to the ground, we will enslave your women and kill your children. And Sparta sent back a one word message just saying ...*

[ARCHIVE CLIP: If.]

GARY GANNON: ... *if.*

SIMON: Like I said, brash.

ROBERT: [laughs]

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *And then you've got other voices who are left wing, or environmentalist, or others.*

SIMON: So that's our field.

LATIF: All right.

SIMON: And now here's how things actually work over in Ireland.

[NEWS CLIP: Voting is underway in the Republic of Ireland as the country elects 157 new members of its Parliament.]

SIMON: So day of the election comes. As an Irish citizen, you walk into the voting booth. And it's a very, very long ballot because it has all of the candidates, all 15 of

them, their photo, their name, and then a line next to them.

LATIF: Okay.

SIMON: And this ballot is a key component of that updated Irish laptop of democracy. Because instead of just filling in the circle next to one of those 15, you say ...

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: "My number one choice is this guy, my number two choice is this lady, my number three choice is this person." And you can go all the way down the ballot giving preferences to as many different people as you like.

SIMON: You write in a number next to each candidate.

ROBERT: How about one man, one vote. Got it.

SIMON: Well, it's still one man, one vote.

ROBERT: No it can't be. [laughs]

SIMON: No it is. It is. It is. It is. At the end of the day your vote will only have counted for one person. However, in the voting process ...

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: You're not just measuring what everyone's first choice is. You might have a favorite choice, but you're not totally equal about the other three choices. And what this system allows us to do is to reflect that.

SIMON: It allows you to say how you feel about the rest of the candidates. And if your first choice doesn't make it, if he or she is way down the list and out of the running, then your vote lives on in the form of your second choice.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: So for as long as there's a viable candidate with your number on it, your vote will stay alive in the system.

ROBERT: Is this too early for me to raise a warning flag? Or should I wait for it?

SIMON: You can wave. I may ignore it, but let's see it or hear it.

ROBERT: The commitment that people make to voting is slight. Most of us are into lunch, sports, work, and then maybe on the day of a vote they have their best friend say, "You gotta vote for Sally."

LATIF: Like, they know one, they're not even gonna know seven.

ROBERT: Yeah. So the first smell of this is it would take us more time than we want, and we might walk away from this exercise because we don't feel prepared.

SIMON: You can engage with this on whatever level you'd like, Robert. If you only know one candidate's name, you can just put your one next to that person and hand in your ballot and you're done.

ROBERT: Hmm.

SIMON: Or let's say there's a candidate on there you really, really don't like ...

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: You can leave them off the ballot entirely.

SIMON: You're ranking your preferences. It's very simple.

ROBERT: Fairly good answer.

LATIF: Okay.

SIMON: So let me walk you through how this plays out.

ROBERT: Mm-hmm.

SIMON: So, polls close at 10:00pm on Friday February 26, and then ...

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: Then all hell broke loose. [laughs]

[NEWS CLIP: General election 2016 on RTE radio1 with Rachel English and Shawn O'Reilly.]

SIMON: The real action begins.

[NEWS CLIP: It's going to be a day of drama, shocks, and surprises.]

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: So what happens is we vote on the Friday, and on Saturday morning ...

SIMON: The votes actually get counted. So for Dublin Central ...

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: Dublin Central gets counted in one central location, which is the RDS.

[NEWS CLIP: Let's go first to Ireland's largest count center, the RDS.]

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: The Royal Dublin Society.

[NEWS CLIP: Sean, thank you very much and welcome indeed to the RDS where we're counting ...]

SIMON: It's this barn-like building with big, vaulted ceilings.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: Big, big hall, huge amount of noise.

GARY GANNON: Okay. Well, I didn't realize we were going to go through the whole post-traumatic trauma of the whole thing. I've kind of blacked it out. No, I'm joking. Actually, it was lovely.

MEL MACHEAVEL: The doors open at 9:00, and I arrived. A desperate throng arriving.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: This is Mel.

MEL MACHEAVEL: Mel Macheavel.

SIMON: He's a campaign worker for our endangered incumbent Maureen.

MEL MACHEAVEL: Maureen O'Sullivan.

SIMON: And on the morning of the count, as he pushed his way through these heavy wooden doors, what he would have seen was this cavernous hall filled with people milling about.

GARY GANNON: Everybody's got clipboards ...

MEL MACHEAVEL: There's people with tons of sandwiches made and ...

GARY GANNON: Tea and coffee in abundance, and everybody's really excited.

SIMON: So shortly after nine o'clock ...

GARY GANNON: All the boxes come in.

SIMON: These giant metal boxes of ballots.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *So the boxes are opened ...*

GARY GANNON: *Literally, they're lifted up and there is a cascade and a spilling of all this paper.*

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *Because it's all done by paper voting.*

LATIF: Wait, what?

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *Yeah. We tried electronic voting in this country, and we didn't like it because it was very fast, and I think we realized that the drama of an election and also the ritual of democracy gets everybody engaged and gets people watching. It's like watching a big sports game. You don't want it to be over in five minutes.*

[NEWS CLIP: They're off.]

SIMON: And so ...

[NEWS CLIP: Time now for our live update. I have to warn, as we always do, at this time on this day, we're talking tallies first of all, which obviously can skew the results.]

SIMON: Not just at the RDS, and not just for Dublin Central, but all across the country.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *Vote counters are dumping boxes of votes and going through them and putting them into stacks.*

[NEWS CLIP: First, in Kilkenny is Justin McCarthy.]

MEL MACHEAVEL: *Rough bundles.*

GARY GANNON: *In no particular order.*

[NEWS CLIP: 55 percent of the boxes have been tallied here, and they include all of ...]

SIMON: And so early on here, the counters are just trying to get a handle on how many first choice votes each candidate is getting.

[NEWS CLIP: From Calvin, Audrey Carver.]

[NEWS CLIP: One hundred percent of the boxes are open, and a final tally ...]

SIMON: And while the ballot counters are doing this official count, there's another group of people standing next to them ...

[NEWS CLIP: Up the Atlantic way in Donegal ...]

SIMON: ... doing their own unofficial calculations.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: Yes, definitely.

GARY GANNON: The tallymen.

[NEWS CLIP: 88 percent of boxes opened and tallied.]

[NEWS CLIP: Cork, North Central ...]

[NEWS CLIP: All boxes opened, all sheets tallied.]

SIMON: These tallymen, there are several of them put forward by each candidate, and ...

GARY GANNON: They're just looking over the railings waiting for you to turn that ballot.

SIMON: Brash upstart Gary Gannon again.

GARY GANNON: So they can share the name of the person that got the number one preference. They're like, "Gannon number one. Gannon." And they're just counting them up.

LATIF: And what they're counting is number one?

SIMON: Yes, they're shouting out and tallying the first choice labeled on each ballot.

GARY GANNON: So you have an understanding whether you're at the races or not.

SIMON: Which it seemed like Gary was.

[NEWS CLIP: We have a 98 percent tally, and there is a growing belief here that the third seat will be between Gary Gannon and ...]

SIMON: He was getting a lot of first preferences.

GARY GANNON: *So I walked in, I got pulled over by one of our national newspapers to do an interview.*

[NEWS CLIP: Let's bring Gary Gannon in. How are you Gary? It's too early to be saying you're over the line, but you're going well in Dublin Central.]

[NEWS CLIP: Oh, God it's far too early. I think about ...]

GARY GANNON: *All the radio researchers are coming over, grabbing me, bringing me over to speak on the radio.*

[NEWS CLIP: There's a bunch of you who have done nine percent as well, so we could be in for another dog fight there.]

[NEWS CLIP: Absolutely, yeah. I've canceled me weekend plans. I think I'll be here for a while.]

GARY GANNON: *It was genuine like a real nice sense of excitement.*

SIMON: But not for everyone.

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: *So that morning, I was at home doing different things.*

SIMON: Again, this is incumbent Maureen O'Sullivan.

SIMON: *Well, what did you do? Did you make breakfast, did you go for a walk?*

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: *I did. I had my breakfast, probably I walked the dog.*

SIMON: *What type of dog?*

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: *A white, fluffy dog.*

SIMON: *Okay, and what's his name?*

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: *His name is Bailey. So I brought him for a walk.*

SIMON: Are you listening to the radio?

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: No, no, no.

SIMON: You're totally disconnected.

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: Yeah, pretty much. I let my campaigners go over to be part of the tally.

SIMON: Campaigners ...

MEL MACHEAVEL: And it's starting to kind of look kind of like ...

SIMON: ... including Mel.

MEL MACHEAVEL: So within the first hour, from some of the tallies that we were seeing, you know, Maureen isn't picking up enough votes. I was thinking, "Oh I hope this is not gonna be an early day, where there's no need for you to hang around because nobody is in the race any longer."

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: And then I think I was driving when I got the first call from my campaigners over in the count saying, "It's not looking good."

[NEWS CLIP: Lina Paul was elected. Let's go back now to the busiest count center of them all, to Mary Wilson in the RDS.]

[NEWS CLIP: Rachel, thank you very much. A first count imminent, we believe, here in Dublin Central.]

SIMON: Meanwhile the counters take all those ballots, now officially sorted by first preference, and they pick up the stack for each candidate on the table and walk that stack back to ...

MARY FITZPATRICK: This wooden shelving unit.

SIMON: Again, Mary Fitzpatrick.

MARY FITZPATRICK: Behind the tables. About a little bit of a distance, in the center.

SIMON: This giant sort of cubby.

MARY FITZPATRICK: Pigeon holes, just like light, flimsy, wooden boxes.

SIMON: And this is the sacred shrine of Irish democracy on this day, the cubby.

MARY FITZPATRICK: Absolutely.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: Because when they've counted all of the first preference votes ...

SIMON: They place them all in their respective cubbies ...

MEL MACHEAVEL: There's a hush in that part of the arena ...

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: And the returning officer stands up on a stage with a microphone and goes ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, returning officer: The following is the result of count one.]

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: Here is the first count for the constituency of Dublin Central.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, returning officer: 68, 6 ...]

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: And they read out every candidate, how many number one votes did they get.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, returning officer: 2,021. Two-zero-two-one.]

GARY GANNON: And first off the bat ...

SIMON: At the end of the first count, first and second are pretty much locked down with the two people everybody expected to win.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: But but but ...

SIMON: But then in third place, unexpectedly is Mary Fitzpatrick.

MARY FITZPATRICK: Yeah. I mean, I was very pleased to be in third position on the first count.

SIMON: Now with our system of voting, at this point you're done. The election is over, the two front-runner candidates would have each won a seat, and then Mary Fitzpatrick would have won a seat. Gary and Maureen, they'd be out, done.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *But in Ireland, not so.*

SIMON: In Ireland they're just getting started. So back to the race. And remember, at this moment, Mary Fitzpatrick is in third, Gary is in fifth, and in seventh ...

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: *At that stage, I was listening to the radio and I knew what they were saying about Dublin Central.*

SIMON: ... is incumbent Maureen O'Sullivan.

SIMON: *And what were they saying?*

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: *Just ...*

[NEWS CLIP: It appears almost certain that Joe Costello and Maureen O'Sullivan are set to lose out.]

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: *Myself and Joe Costello, you're out. I had some ...*

SIMON: *And why? Did you like ...*

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: *Because of the numbers. I think the feeling was I was too far down that first preference to come back up.*

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *But then looking at the early results coming in from around the country ...*

SIMON: But like I said, it's not over yet.

MARY FITZPATRICK: *So the way the vote progresses is the sheriff or the presiding officer starts to eliminate candidates.*

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *The first elimination is the bottom three candidates. Those candidacies are gone and in the bin.*

SIMON: Since Gary is in fifth and Maureen's in seventh they're safe, for now. But the bottom three candidates, they're gone.

LATIF: Why three?

SIMON: Because they are so far out that mathematically they could never come back. Between the three of them they've only got, like, 150 votes.

***ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN:** So we get rid of all three of them.*

SIMON: And redistribute those ballots.

***ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN:** So if you voted for those people ...*

SIMON: They just go, "Okay, who did you vote for as your second choice?"

***ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN:** And the point is your vote is still live and is still part of this election.*

SIMON: And so those 150 votes, those 150 ballots they begin to do this sort of ballet.

***MARY FITZPATRICK:** The ballots are all in these pigeon holes. Everything is visible.*

SIMON: The vote counters walk back to that shrine, to that cubby ...

***MARY FITZPATRICK:** Yeah, yeah.*

SIMON: ... and pull the ballots from the cubby holes for those ...

***MARY FITZPATRICK:** Three candidates.*

SIMON: Then march these ballots back to the front table.

***MARY FITZPATRICK:** And sort them then into bundles of second preference on the ballot.*

SIMON: So now you've got stacks for every candidate that was listed as a second choice.

***ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN:** And we distribute them.*

SIMON: They take them back to the cubby, where they are then added to the remaining candidates' first preferences.

MARY FITZPATRICK: *And that becomes the second count.*

LATIF: Okay.

ROBERT: [sighs] Okay, so what they want is everybody who voted, to the degree that it is possible, should maybe be participating in electing somebody to the legislature.

SIMON: Exactly.

ROBERT: All right.

SIMON: So ...

ROBERT: Excuse me, what time is it now?

SIMON: We're probably middle of the afternoon at this point.

ROBERT: And when did we start?

SIMON: We started at nine in the morning.

ROBERT: Okay, point taken.

SIMON: People are having ...

ROBERT: Point taken by you.

SIMON: ... a good time.

ROBERT: No.

SIMON: No, no, no, Robert!

ROBERT: Not even. I am now watching this program for five hours. That's a long time.

SIMON: I will challenge your statement that just because a competition unfolds slowly that it is without drama or suspense.

ROBERT: All right. I'm sorry that we're making this so hard for you.

SIMON: That's fine.

ROBERT: But you are not making it easy for us.

LATIF: [laughs]

ROBERT: Anyway, back to the scene.

[NEWS CLIP: Dublin Central is reduced to three seats.]

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: So I'm looking at this going, okay, Mary Fitzpatrick ...

SIMON: Our candidate in third after the first count has ...

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: 2,500 votes. Gary Gannon ...

SIMON: Currently in fifth.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: He's only 200 votes behind her. And my instinct is he's gonna be more transfer friendly.

SIMON: He's gonna get more second choice votes than her.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: I think he could overtake her. And I start watching where the transfers are going, and I start to be proven right.

[NEWS CLIP: Gary Gannon of the Social Democrats did very well on transfers.]

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: So count two, Gary Gannon is getting 20 votes, and Mary Fitzpatrick is only getting two. Count three ...

SIMON: The whole process repeats: knock somebody out, do the ballot ballet, redistribute those transfers.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: Gary Gannon picks up 60 votes, and Mary Fitzpatrick only picks up seven. So he's gaining on her already.

GARY GANNON: They're talking about me, they're asking who is this guy, where is he come from? All of these things, and then I was getting a phone call.

SIMON: Mary's stock is falling while Gary's are rising.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *Mary's stock is staying static.*

MARY FITZPATRICK: *You know, we were struggling for transfers, that was the issue.*

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *She's not going up much, and the others are gaining on her.*

MARY FITZPATRICK: *So yeah, it's painful. It's not pleasant.*

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *And bear in mind you've still got other people picking up votes there.*

MEL MACHEAVEL: *We're seeing little pickups for Maureen.*

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *Maureen picked up 49.*

MEL MACHEAVEL: *But not a lot. We're moving ahead slowly.*

[NEWS CLIP: Okay, we have a Dublin Central count coming in.]

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *Count four ...*

SIMON: *Again, eliminate the bottom candidate, redistribute those votes. This time around, really not much changes. Then count five.*

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *The next person going out has got 800 votes. 31 of them go to Mary Fitzpatrick, but also 190 of them go to Gary Gannon.*

[NEWS CLIP: And Gary Gannon has surprised a lot of people in his ability to pick up transfers from ...]

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *And Gary Gannon has just jumped into fourth place.*

[NEWS CLIP: We've got quite a fight now in our hands. The standings as they are ...]

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *So at the places are Mary Fitzpatrick in third place ...*

SIMON: *She's just barely holding on. In fourth, hot on her heels, is Gary Gannon, and then way at the back of the pack, still in seventh, is incumbent Maureen O'Sullivan.*

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *That's the state of play at count five. Count number six.*

[NEWS CLIP: Oh, here we go. Continuing coverage, Micheal Gallighar is here. Guys, hello? We're back.]

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *This is where two big things happen.*

[NEWS CLIP: Everybody's having their own conversations, obviously.]

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *One ..*

[NEWS CLIP: Mary Lou McDonald of Sinn Fein and Dublin ...]

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *Mary Lou McDonald of Sinn Fein ...*

SIMON: One of the front runners expected to take a seat.

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *Gets over the line. And also ...*

GARY GANNON: *I'm walking around just hugging people.*

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *... Gary Gannon now jumps into third place.*

GARY GANNON: *It was invigorating.*

SIMON: Pushing Mary Fitzpatrick out of a winning spot.

MARY FITZPATRICK: *Like that, it was on the transfers, I got caught, and that's it.*

SIMON: She never recaptured it. So the woman who under our system would have won off the bat, she lost out.

MARY FITZPATRICK: *That is it, you know?*

SIMON: Still hanging on in second to last, but also disheartened, is our incumbent Maureen O'Sullivan, who's expecting to lose.

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: *And I suppose maybe seven o'clock people started to arrive.*

SIMON: She actually invited her campaign staff and volunteers back to her place for a concession party.

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: *And I said when people came in, "I don't want to know anything about the elections. I'll catch up tomorrow." Unknown to me, because I was*

busy with the tea and the drinks and the food, some of them in the house were still in contact with those over in the RDS.

[NEWS CLIP: To the Dublin Central constituency, and to our reporter Damian O'Mara. Damian, you have a development to report.]

SIMON: One of those guys still over in the RDS was Mel.

MEL MACHEAVEL: I did have a sense, looking at the numbers and saying, "Well okay, but if and then maybe there's a chance. There's a chance in this."

SIMON: Well, and was that a crazy thought to have, or a very smart thought to have?

MEL MACHEAVEL: It was just a thought to have. [laughs]

SIMON: Because despite the fact that all day the media had been saying that Maureen was out ...

[NEWS CLIP: Maureen O'Sullivan set to lose out.]

[NEWS CLIP: Outgoing TD Maureen O'Sullivan.]

[NEWS CLIP: Maureen O'Sullivan might be eliminated.]

SIMON: ... at count seven, something starts to happen.

[NEWS CLIP: Three furlongs to go.]

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: Coming around the bend, Gary Gannon looks like he's in pole position, but ...

GARY GANNON: All of the sudden we weren't reallocating people's second preferences or their third preferences. We'd got to the stage where we were reallocating people's fourth, fifth and sixth preferences.

SIMON: Because keep in mind, most people's votes are still sloshing around the system. And at this point, not only has their top choice been knocked out, but their second and third as well. So their vote is now being cast for their fourth, fifth or sixth place choice. And a lot of those, they start going to Maureen.

GARY GANNON: *She'd known people for years, been elected twice previous to that. So even people who weren't involved for number one, number two, number three, their votes were still carrying past the fours and the fives, and just mauled me on those transfers.*

ABIE PHILBIN BOWMAN: *So we go to count eight.*

[NEWS CLIP: Beginning to make a bit of ground into this straight ...]

SIMON: Maureen makes this massive jump, vaulting her ahead of two opponents into fourth place, now just a couple hundred votes behind Gary.

SIMON: *And did you have any sense this would ...*

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: *No, no, no. Because I didn't have the television on, and they decided not to tell me, not to raise my hopes.*

[NEWS CLIP: From the ninth count at the moment ...]

SIMON: So the ninth count ...

[NEWS CLIP: The situation is that ...]

SIMON: ... another candidate is axed. They redistribute her votes.

MEL MACHEAVEL: *It's coming down. It's coming down to it.*

SIMON: And when they count up those transfers ...

[NEWS CLIP: That'd mean then that Gary Gannon is likely to be elected, or what's the situation there, Micheal Gallagher?]

SIMON: Maureen gets some 300 more transfers than Gary, meaning suddenly ...

[NEWS CLIP: Gary Gannon is precisely eight votes ahead of Maureen O'Sullivan.]

GARY GANNON: *Oh my God, I did not see that coming!*

SIMON: She's within eight votes of him.

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: *Around quarter to 10.*

SIMON: But Maureen meanwhile, is still convinced she's gonna lose. She's actually heading down to the count center to concede the race.

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: *I said to myself, "I should go over and concede." So came out into the car, and as I'm driving over to concede, I was just at the traffic lights. I could picture it, and at that stage the phone call comes.*

SIMON: She looks at her phone, and it's one of her campaign staff calling.

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: *I thought, why are they ringing me just to hurry me up to get over or whatever.*

SIMON: But in fact, they were calling because ...

[NEWS CLIP: In Dublin Central, but Brian Dowling, you've been—just as I mentioned your name Brian, we're going to Dublin Central.]

[NEWS CLIP: One last time up. This is the result of the 11th count for Dublin Central. And I deem the following candidate to be elected, and they are Maureen O'Sullivan.]

SIMON: In her car, Maureen did eventually pick up.

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: *And then it was, "Where are you? You're about to be elected. You're going to be elected."*

SIMON: She put down the phone, drove to the count center, and when she arrived ...

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: *[laughs] Great applause, great hugs, great kisses. So it was just a lovely explosion of feeling, warm feelings towards me from everybody.*

[NEWS CLIP: Maureen O'Sullivan, congratulations.]

[NEWS CLIP, Maureen O'Sullivan: Thank you very much.]

[NEWS CLIP: You're a very relieved woman.]

[NEWS CLIP, Maureen O'Sullivan: I'm a stunned woman. I was at home reconciled to a new life outside of politics, and then suddenly I'm back in the frame. We had thought that we were too far behind to ...]

MAUREEN O'SULLIVAN: *So I just said, "Look, I know what Lazarus felt like." It was that kind of moment.*

SIMON: *Well, so is this the story of a multi-seat proportional representation by single transferable vote working how exactly as it's meant to, or is this sort of a perversion of the system?*

GARY GANNON: *No it absolutely is. That day worked out exactly as single transferable votes was meant to do.*

SIMON: One last time, the gracious Gary Gannon.

GARY GANNON: *Everybody got their count, everybody got their say and everybody got their vote. And don't get me wrong when I say, like, it is hard, but I mean I was 28, 29 then. There was a huge sense of, like, we'll show you. We'll be back. So single transferable vote on that day worked against me but, you know, I think it worked out perfectly.*

ROBERT: Perfectly. I mean, let me just make sure if I get this right. There's this woman, Maureen, who hardly anybody loves, she scores almost no votes as the favorite. She's just everybody's meh. You know, a fourth, fifth, sixth vote, I'll choose Maureen, and yet because the votes keep getting shuffled and shuffled and shuffled, it's Miss Meh who becomes the winner. She's chosen because a lot of people don't hate her.

LATIF: Yeah. Well so here's what it makes me think of, right? And I had this moment where I was just imagining if we had been using this at various crucial moments in our very recent history, things could have gone an entirely different way. Take the American Presidential election of 2016 between ...

ROBERT: Hillary and Trump.

LATIF: ... Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, but also Gary Johnson and Jill Stein.

ROBERT: Yeah but nobody voted for them, hardly anybody.

LATIF: Well no, but hardly anybody, that number of hardly anybody's, that's a sizeable enough number that they could have swung the election one way or the other. If you look at really key states, the deciding states, if you presume Gary Johnson's votes

were split, and if you presume all of Jill Stein's votes went to Hillary Clinton, Hillary Clinton would have won Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin and the whole kit and caboodle.

ROBERT: Whoa! That's interesting.

LATIF: Now the weird thing is you can just keep playing this game, and it'll drive you crazy. But you can keep playing it. So if you go back to the 2016 Republican primaries where Donald Trump emerged victorious, right?

ROBERT: Over 10 people or something like that, or more.

LATIF: Over 10 people, right?

ROBERT: Right.

LATIF: But there was a sizeable number of people in those primaries who were never Trumpers. If those people had ...

ROBERT: I see where you're going here.

LATIF: ... been able to block their votes together, they might have been able to rally behind a candidate who was not Donald Trump. And then rewind even further back, the 2000 election where the number of votes that Ralph Nader got in Florida were more than the difference between Bush got and Gore got.

ROBERT: No, elect a Republican, can you?

LATIF: Okay, so go back to Ross Perot, right? George H.W. Bush was running against Bill Clinton in 1992.

ROBERT: Oh, that's right.

LATIF: Ross Perot, it's very controversial whether he really was a spoiler in that election, but I mean if you ask the Bush people they say he definitely was. And so if the Perot-ers went to Bush then Bill Clinton would have just been a historical footnote. He wouldn't have been the president. It's like a huge, huge seismic difference in world history.

ROBERT: [laughs] Huh!

LATIF: So when we come back we're not gonna be looking at my own imaginative math. We're gonna look at what does rank choice actually look like if it was in the United States, because it is in the United States.

ROBERT: It's about to happen.

LATIF: Yeah.

ROBERT: When we come back.

ROBERT: Welcome back, I am Robert Krulwich.

LATIF: I'm Latif Nasser, and this is Radiolab.

ROBERT: And we're trying to fix democracy. This is how we're—in little bits and pieces.

LATIF: Yeah, so let me—let me just back up for a second, because we have been talking about this and thinking about this around the office for a little while, and at some point as we were kind of meditating on this dwindling faith in democracy, one of our fellow producers at our sister show More Perfect ...

SARAH QARI: Okay.

LATIF: ... Sarah Qari. She just took me and Simon ...

SIMON: Great.

LATIF: Great.

LATIF: ... and just dragged us into a studio.

SARAH: Okay. So, we've been having this conversation about whether our democracy is broken for a few months now and, like, every meeting that we've had I've been the one in the room being like, "Guys, our democracy's fine. Have you seen other places? This is crazy. Like, who are these people that think our democracy is broken? Like, they don't know what they're talking about."

LATIF: And do you know why? Like, where is that feeling coming from?

SARAH: Well ...

SARAH: Okay can you tell me your name?

USMA QARI: Usma.

SARAH: And who are you?

SARAH: ... probably because of this woman.

USMA QARI: I'm Usma. [laughs]

SARAH: Who are you in relation to me?

USMA QARI: Oh, I'm your mom.

SARAH: My mom, and both of my parents, actually, grew up in Pakistan.

USMA QARI: That is the big thing, 25 years of my life where I spent, and I feel that ...

SARAH: Which is a pretty young country, and it's just struggled so much to keep its democracy alive and healthy.

USMA QARI: And I saw the consequences of not getting the full democracy there in Pakistan. So then after living 25 years, the next 25 years of my life in America, I really found out the value of democracy as an individual, and as a group also. So I can differentiate now very well between those two.

SARAH: So that's kind of how I've always understood our democracy. But then Simon, I listened to your Ireland story with all of this rank choice voting stuff, and that's the first moment when I was like, "Oh, like, maybe—maybe our way of doing things is broken. Maybe we do need an update."

SIMON: Okay, why? What about it made you switch teams?

SARAH: Because it made me suddenly aware of the fact that in our system, candidates don't actually need a majority of the votes to win.

SIMON: Right.

SARAH: So you have candidates who then make that calculation where they say, "I only really have to win the votes of people who are in my base, and if my base is bigger than everybody else's base then, like, screw everyone else."

LATIF: Yeah. It seems like in a democracy, most people should vote for the person who wins, not just that the person who wins is gonna have the biggest base to ...

SARAH: Totally.

LATIF: Like, a bigger base than everybody else. Like, it should be that most people are in some way, in some preference, supporting the person who comes to power.

SARAH: Yeah, exactly. And it's funny, when I heard about rank choice voting I was like, "Oh this system is so cool because I feel like it addresses that exact problem." And so I totally got sucked into it, and I started looking around. And it turns out there are a bunch of people who think that this could be used here in the US. And not only that, it already is. And when I asked around, a number of people pointed to this moment in 2000, with the election, when Bush loses the popular election but he wins because he wins in Florida. And so people look at the results in Florida, and see that a bunch of votes that might have gone to Al Gore, they go instead to Ralph Nader, who then becomes sort of notorious as this spoiler that maybe ruined the election for Al Gore. And after 2000, at that point, you do see some cities that start to adopt rank choice voting at the local level. And so what I did is ...

LATIF: Okay I'm putting my phone on airplane mode.

SARAH: ... I grabbed Latif, and we kind of did this cross-country rank choice voting tour. And the first place we're gonna start with ...

SARAH: Hello, San Francisco?

DOMINIC FRACASSA: Yes, San Francisco is here.

SARAH: ... is San Francisco.

SARAH: Is this Dominic?

DOMINIC FRACASSA: Yes this is.

SARAH: Oh, hey Dominic. What's up?

DOMINIC FRACASSA: Hi, what's up?

SARAH: So this is Dominic Fracassa.

DOMINIC FRACASSA: Check, check, check, yeah.

SARAH: He used to do radio.

LATIF: You got the pipes for it, Dominic.

DOMINIC FRACASSA: Hey, let me know if you need any ad spots, so we can get right to it, you know?

LATIF: [laughs] Okay, cool.

SARAH: But now he's a reporter at the San Francisco Chronicle.

DOMINIC FRACASSA: I'm a city hall reporter for the Chronicle. Yeah, so the very first rank choice election in San Francisco happened in 2004. But it was actually—rank choice voting became, I guess, the city's method, or the city's system if you will, back in 2002, where there was a ballot initiative that was passed by voters that said, "Look, this is gonna be the system that we're gonna implement going forward." So the vast majority of local elected offices are chosen with rank choice contests.

SARAH: So city council ...

DOMINIC FRACASSA: The board of supervisors ...

SARAH: The school board ...

DOMINIC FRACASSA: Our, like, assessor recorder ...

SARAH: And in one very specific election ...

DOMINIC FRACASSA: The case in the mayor's race.

SARAH: ... the case in the mayor's race.

DOMINIC FRACASSA: Okay, great. I can't believe this was just a few months ago. It seems like a long time ago at this point.

SARAH: Okay, so early 2018, the San Francisco mayor's race kicked off.

DOMINIC FRACASSA: And when it really kicked into gear there were three leading candidates. You had ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, London Breed: Hi, I'm board of supervisors president London Breed.]

DOMINIC FRACASSA: ... London Breed. and you had ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Mark Leno: Hello, I'm Mark Leno.]

DOMINIC FRACASSA: ... former San Francisco supervisor Mark Leno. And you had ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Jane Kim: Hi, I'm Jane Kim.]

DOMINIC FRACASSA: ... current supervisor Jane Kim. And these aren't—these are all Democrats.

[NEWS CLIP: The field of candidates is set now. KPIX-5 Joe Vasquez is live ...]

SARAH: Okay, so out of the gate ...

[NEWS CLIP: New front runner in the San Francisco mayor's race, and it's ...]

DOMINIC FRACASSA: London Breed.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, London Breed: This campaign is a winning campaign.]

SARAH: She was the more moderate, more established candidate.

[NEWS CLIP: She's getting one heck of a bounce in the polls.]

DOMINIC FRACASSA: And she had a fairly strong lead, and a lot of wind in her sails.

[NEWS CLIP: The two-to-one lead over her two closest rivals, Mark Leno and Jane Kim.]

SARAH: And as the campaign made its way to election day ...

DOMINIC FRACASSA: Things were going pretty well.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, London Breed: We are winners, and we are ...]

SARAH: And it was almost like, sure there are three names on the ballot ...

DOMINIC FRACASSA: But ...

SARAH: At the end of the day it was more like ...

DOMINIC FRACASSA: London Breed, London Breed, and London Breed.

[NEWS CLIP: The favorite in the recent polls heading into Tuesday's election.]

SARAH: But then right before the election, something happened that you basically never see in American politics.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Jane Kim: We are proud to stand together to say that we are united in our belief that we need fundamental change here in the city and county of San Francisco.]

SARAH: In the very last few weeks before election day, the two underdogs, Jane Kim and Mark Leno, they held a press conference on the steps of city hall.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Jane Kim: Mark and I are opponents, as everyone knows.]

DOMINIC FRACASSA: They stood outside city hall, literally joined hands and said ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Jane Kim: And I'm proud to be the first set of candidates to truly take advantage of the rank choice voting system, and encourage our supporters to vote for both of us.]

[cheering]

ROBERT: Wait a second. So what she's saying is vote for me, definitely vote for me, but also vote for this guy who I'm running against.

SARAH: Yeah, exactly.

DOMINIC FRACASSA: Vote for me first, but vote for Jane second. Or vote for me first, and vote for Mark second.

SARAH: So if one of us were to come in last, like, let's say Mark comes in last, if all the people who voted for him ranked Jane as their second choice, then all of those votes would go to her, and vice versa. That way they actually have a better chance of beating the front runner.

DOMINIC FRACASSA: *London Breed. And that made a lot of sense. They were both quote-unquote "more progressive candidates," and saw each other, at least the rhetoric goes, as the person that they'd like to see as mayor if not themselves.*

LATIF: *Was that a surprise move to you as you were covering it? Did you see that coming?*

DOMINIC FRACASSA: *I didn't see it coming, no. I think that was just a surprise to a lot of people.*

[NEWS CLIP: I almost had to do a double take when I saw these new campaign posters supporting both Jane Kim and Mark Leno for mayor.]

SARAH: After that press conference ...

DOMINIC FRACASSA: *Mark Leno and Jane Kim started appearing in campaign ads together.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Jane Kim: I'm Jane Kim ...]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Mark Leno: And I'm Mark Leno ...]

SARAH: Campaigning for one another.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Jane Kim: Mark and I are opponents.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Mark Leno: But Jane and I agree ...]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Jane Kim: You should pick our next mayor.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Mark Leno: Not the billionaires.]

SARAH: And so basically, the whole campaign is like, "If you don't vote for me first then at least vote for me second."

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Mark Leno: Let's stand together.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Jane Kim: Vote for me and Mark Leno.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, Mark Leno: Vote for me and Jane Kim.]

[NEWS CLIP: KPIX-5's Joe Vasquez is with the London Breed campaign, where just moments ago Breed addressed the crowd. Joe?]

SARAH: So on election night London Breed has a pretty commanding lead as the polls are coming to a close, and basically she's trying to get up to this marker of 50 percent of the votes plus one vote. That's a majority. And if she can get to that then she wins. There's no ranked choice runoff, there's no vote swapping, and as the night goes on ...

[NEWS CLIP: She is not yet declaring victory, but this crowd is celebrating.]

SARAH: She's got, like, a double digit lead. Like, things are looking pretty good.

[NEWS CLIP: They are celebrating the person they believe could be the next mayor of San Francisco.]

DOMINIC FRACASSA: Holy smokes, she's beating Mark Leno by 10 percentage points, and she's beating Jane Kim by more than that. So we're getting to midnight. I'm completely bleary eyed, staring at my laptop, refreshing the Department of Elections website every few seconds. When 12:30 at night ...

SARAH: It happens.

[NEWS CLIP: In the early returns London Breed had a sizeable lead, but she didn't reach 50 percent.]

SARAH: She came in just shy of 50 percent.

[NEWS CLIP: So the ranked choice voting system kicked in and ...]

DOMINIC FRACASSA: And all of the sudden this entire race has changed.

SARAH: Okay, so the rankings had been London Breed number one, Mark Leno number two ...

[NEWS CLIP: Jane Kim, who was in third place, was now eliminated in that ranked choice system.]

DOMINIC FRACASSA: But when Kim got eliminated, a huge chunk of her voters, about three out of four, went to Leno, because Leno was their second choice.

[NEWS CLIP: And now ...]

[NEWS CLIP: By a razor thin margin ...]

[NEWS CLIP: Mark Leno is leading the race.]

SARAH: The Kim-Leno strategy had come to fruition.

DOMINIC FRACASSA: He's up 0.84 percent, the slimmest of leads.

[NEWS CLIP: The mayor's race is still too close to call.]

SARAH: The race would actually drag on for days.

DOMINIC FRACASSA: As more ballots got counted.

[NEWS CLIP: Tens of thousands of outstanding ballots.]

DOMINIC FRACASSA: We didn't have a mayor chosen until, I think, eight days later?

SARAH: When in a gymnasium packed with screaming supporters, out walked the new mayor of San Francisco.

DOMINIC FRACASSA: London Breed.

[ARCHIVE CLIP, London Breed: Yes, I'm your mayor.]

SARAH: Mark Leno came up just short.

DOMINIC FRACASSA: He came within 1.1 percent, or a little over 2,500 votes.

SARAH: Oh, man!

DOMINIC FRACASSA: So I mean, okay, it didn't work in that he didn't win, but you can't say that it was completely ineffective.

SARAH: *And so ultimately, what did people think of this, like, whole Mark Leno, Jane Kim, coming together?*

DOMINIC FRACASSA: *People saw the dual endorsement strategy as gaming the system. As saying, "Look, they are doing this in order to keep London Breed from winning."*

SARAH: *And that was at your paper, right? That was the editorial one?*

DOMINIC FRACASSA: *Yeah, our editorial board said as much. You know, and I think that's not just the ed board, I mean people do feel that way. That it was this strategy, especially London Breed supporters, who saw a teaming up, a piling on. And, you know, in this—I mean just to very quickly just zoom out all the way, I think people just find that weird in a country in which politics ends up being a zero-sum game, often times, in which you are relentlessly attacking your opponent. Beating them down.*

LATIF: *Blood sport, yeah.*

DOMINIC FRACASSA: *Exactly, exactly. But at the same time, that's very much—you know, there might be some people at my own newspaper that disagree with me, but I think that's very much in the spirit of what ranked choice voting invites: coalition building.*

SARAH: Now Dominic wanted to be clear that in the case of the mayor's race, this coming together of opponents ...

DOMINIC FRACASSA: *I don't want to make it sound like it was just some kind of kumbaya thing, you know, because that wasn't the case.*

SARAH: But at the very next stop on our tour, we actually found that case.

CURTIS GILBERT: *[clears throat]*

SARAH: *The kumbaya case.*

SARAH: *Hey Curtis, are you there?*

CURTIS GILBERT: *Yeah I am.*

SARAH: Which ...

SARAH: Also on the line we have Latif.

LATIF: Hi, how you doing?

CURTIS GILBERT: Hey, what's up?

SARAH: We heard about from this guy.

CURTIS GILBERT: Curtis Gilbert, and I'm a reporter at American Public Media, but I used to be a reporter at Minnesota Public Radio.

SARAH: So Curtis told us in Minneapolis they actually started using ranked choice voting in 2009.

CURTIS GILBERT: But it's gotten much more interesting since then. So in 2013, was the first time Minneapolis actually had, like, a competitive mayor's race under rank choice voting.

[NEWS CLIP: There's a record breaking number of candidates vying to succeed Minneapolis mayor R.T. Rybak who's stepping down at the end of this year.]

CURTIS GILBERT: 35 candidates signed up to run to replace him.

LATIF: Oh!

SARAH: Oh, wow.

CURTIS GILBERT: Yeah.

[NEWS CLIP: Curtis Gilbert covers Minneapolis politics. He joins me in the studio. Boy, you're going to be busy.]

[NEWS CLIP: Yeah, you betcha.]

CURTIS GILBERT: I mean there were so many—I mean 35 candidates is a lot.

SARAH: Unlike the race in San Francisco, the mayoral race in Minneapolis ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP: People say, "Aren't you the Republican?"]

SARAH: ... did have more diverse candidates.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: And I say, "Sure, I've done some work in the Republican Party, and I also stand fiercely for marriage equality. Always have."]

SARAH: There was a Republican, an independent, a bunch of Democrats.

CURTIS GILBERT: It was a wide open, free-for-all race. And it was really interesting.

SARAH: But despite all that ...

CURTIS GILBERT: They were very, very civil.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Thank you very much, it's nice to see you're not utterly infallible. I always thought you were.]

CURTIS GILBERT: Very, very gentle to each other.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: We won't be rude with each other, because it doesn't benefit us to be rude with each other.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Right.]

CURTIS GILBERT: And this is one thing that, you know, the advocates of ranked choice voting sort of look at as a positive. You know, voters are turned off by negative campaigning. And there's a theory that goes that if you're hoping to get second and third choice votes, you'll be much nicer to your opponent so you don't alienate their supporters, so maybe you get a second or third choice vote. And it did seem like there was an element of that playing out in the race.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: I will talk more about the issues because I think I've run out of time, thank you.]

SARAH: So at worst there was some light ribbing.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: They said we could finish our sentences if we've run out of time, but I think that was a run on sentence. [laughs]]

SARAH: There were polite stage logistics.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Getting out of that chair is a little challenging, so we may want to pass the microphone around.]

SARAH: And ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Thank you. Thank you, Jackie.]

SARAH: ... plenty of thank yous.

CURTIS GILBERT: I mean, the most remarkable one of all was the final debate. I was there, and it was in a church. I think it was in downtown Minneapolis, I can't remember what the church was. And at the end of the debate, the candidates, and I think there were eight of them, all kind of put their arms around each other and one of them suggested that they all sing ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP: One, two, three. (singing) Kumbaya, my Lord. Kumbaya.]

CURTIS GILBERT: ... Kumbaya.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: (singing) Kumbaya, my Lord. Kumbaya.]

LATIF: No!

SARAH: After the debate?

CURTIS GILBERT: After the debate.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: (singing) Oh, Lord, Kumbaya.]

[laughter]

[ARCHIVE CLIP, woman: That's going on Instagram. [laughs] It's the farewell tour!]

LATIF: So it's almost like a cartoon, right? Like, the Kumbaya, it's really funny, right? But it's also, I think for a lot of people right now, that feels like a relief. It feels like a relief to hear politicians not biting each other's heads off. And that's something that comes from ranked choice voting. You find consensus, you find coalition, you find commonalities instead of differences. But that also flattens everyone out. If everyone ends up running to the middle, and then you just have kind of a bland consensus where no one's saying bold things, and everybody is just kind of middle.

ROBERT: So in a way, when you make this choice, you're choosing for do this carefully.

LATIF: Right.

ROBERT: Do this carefully. I wondered about that, because I was thinking maybe don't do this carefully, maybe have a country that can be dynamic. Although right now I'm not so sure. So ...

LATIF: We're too dynamic, yeah.

ROBERT: Yeah. But that, in a deep way, that's what's being asked here.

LATIF: Yeah, what do we actually want? Like, do we want a system where, you know, you are lined up behind your alpha dog who's gonna argue for all of the things you want, and maybe you're gonna get them but maybe you're also gonna lose them all? Or do you want to be in a system where we're all sort of begrudgingly bought into our second-place person, who we can kind of get behind, but it definitely wasn't our—you know, it's not our ideal. And I think that's a question. That's like a soul-searching kind of a question. What do you want, and what do we want this country to be?

ROBERT: Right.

LATIF: And for that reason, like, I don't know how I feel about it.

ROBERT: Well, nothing's gonna be perfect. I think what's really interesting is what seems sort of mechanical and technical, it does affect the tone of your country and of history. So the world we've got is the function of how we vote now. Change the system of how we vote, you might get a very different world. How different, what different, where different, which kind of difference, scary different, good different, you don't know.

SARAH: Well, we might actually know soon, because I actually have one more stop on our cross-country ranked choice voting tour. The great state of Maine. Super politically diverse, fiercely independent, like a lot of independent voters. And in fact, in 2016 there was this coalition of independents and Democrats that managed to get this ballot initiative that would change all statewide elections to ranked choice voting.

LATIF: Statewide?

SARAH: Yeah.

LATIF: Oh.

SARAH: And ...

STEVE MISTLER: Ranked choice voting was adopted in 2016.

SARAH: According to Maine Public Radio reporter Steve Mistler, it passed.

STEVE MISTLER: It passed, however, with a major flaw.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: It was a scam. It undermines the integrity of our election process.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP: It was put forward by a group of people ...]

STEVE MISTLER: The state senate, which was under Republican control at the time, picked up on this constitutional conflict within the state constitution.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: The reality is we're not happy with it.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Like my opponent says, it's very unconstitutional.]

SARAH: The Maine constitution literally says you have to use a plurality vote.

STEVE MISTLER: The word 'plurality' is actually written in the Constitution.

SARAH: As opposed to a majority.

STEVE MISTLER: Correct. And ultimately the Maine legislature passed a law that delayed implementing ranked choice voting.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: This is one more example of where politicians are standing against the will of the people.]

SARAH: And it set off this whole fight where people rallied against the state legislature, and held another vote ...

STEVE MISTLER: In June.

SARAH: ... literally this past June.

[NEWS CLIP: People gathered at the state house this morning.]

SARAH: To get around the delay.

[NEWS CLIP: ... legislature, through what was billed as a people's veto.]

SARAH: That passed ...

STEVE MISTLER: By almost the exact same margin, if not slightly more than when it passed originally in 2016.

SARAH: At some point, the Maine Supreme Court gets involved. And really, the details of this are all kind of a mess, but what it boils down to is this: in the upcoming elections, like the midterms that are happening now, Maine will use ranked choice voting for its congressional races.

STEVE MISTLER: We have three of them this year. We have a first congressional district race. It'll be used in that contest.

SARAH: And also in Maine's second congressional district.

STEVE MISTLER: Which is a swing seat. One of a dozen or so nationally.

SARAH: AKA one of the districts that everybody is gonna be watching in the midterms. And on top of that, they're gonna use ranked choice voting for the senate.

STEVE MISTLER: The US senate campaign, it'll be used in that contest.

LATIF: Do you know, is this the first time it's gonna be used for a position in the federal government?

SARAH: Yeah, no other state has ever done it.

LATIF: Oh, wow!

SARAH: But at the same time, because of their state constitution ...

STEVE MISTLER: It's not being used in the gubernatorial race.

SARAH: So does the ballot just, like, look insane? Like, part of it is like this ranked choice voting thing, and part of it isn't? And like ...

STEVE MISTLER: They're just separate.

SARAH: Okay.

STEVE MISTLER: So there's separate ballots for the federal races, and then there's a separate one for the statewide one. So I haven't actually seen how many ballots that voters are handed.

LATIF: So this is really gonna happen now. Like this week.

SARAH: Yeah, oh yeah.

STEVE MISTLER: Two main claims of ranked choice voting are being put to the test in the very first—in its very first roll out in Maine.

[NEWS CLIP: Voters in Maine will head to the polls later this month.]

STEVE MISTLER: Whether it can work for a third party or an independent candidate, but it's also a test case about whether or not it does what it promises.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: He just told another big fib right in front of everybody in Maine.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP: First, you're lying about my rep here, and you're also ...]

STEVE MISTLER: Which is reduce scorched earth campaigns.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Dude, I don't know where you're getting this!]

[ARCHIVE CLIP: This is why we're getting nothing done.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP: When they go low, we kick them, right?]

[ARCHIVE CLIP: And Mr. Desantis lied 21 times.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP: If you voted as much as you lie.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Of course I support the senator.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Crazy.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP: The Democrats ...]

[ARCHIVE CLIP: They've gone wacko!]

[ARCHIVE CLIP: Trump supporters are just nasty and deplorable.]

[ARCHIVE CLIP: You may not understand how the house and the senate work.]

SARAH: But also I guess I just wonder if the people of Maine are gonna come out of this election feeling a little bit more like democracy is working for them?

ROBERT: Wouldn't it be interesting if in Maine, somebody who was everybody's eighth choice gets elected to Congress?

LATIF: [laughs]



happen. And while no, everyone's eighth-place choice was not elected, in the second Congressional race something interesting did happen. Jared Golden, a Democrat, was losing after the first count to the Republican incumbent Bruce Poliquin, but

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LATIF: Outside of Maine, ranked-choice is now being used in municipal elections all over the country, from Las Cruces, New Mexico, where they elect their mayor, city council and judges with it, to now New York City, which uses it in mayoral primaries and city council elections. But here's the biggest news of all: since 2022, Alaska has been using it to elect its governor, its state legislature, its representatives in the House and the Senate, and will even be using it in the presidential election this year. So keep your eyes out. By the time we replay this episode again, if you are not already, it is very possible you too will be ranking your choices.

LATIF: We'll be back next week with a brand new election episode. Until then.

ROBERT: This Radiolab was reported by Latif Nasser, Simon Adler, Suzie Lechtenberg, Sarha Qari, Tracie Hunte. Produced by Simon Adler, Matt Kielty, Sarah Qari, and Suzie

Lechtenberg. Our story on PRSTV was produced with support from RTE's Drive Time. Huge thank you to them, and to Abie for making that possible.

LATIF: Also thanks to Rob Richie at Fair Vote, Don Saari, Diana Leygerman. Thank you to Anna Luhrmann and the rest of the team at the Varieties of Democracy Institute in Sweden. As well as Carolyn Tolbert, Bobby Agee and Edward Still.

ROBERT: I'm Robert Krulwich.

LATIF: And I'm Latif Nasser, and thanks for listening. And go vote. What the hell, right?

ROBERT: Yes, yes.

LATIF: Yeah.

[LISTENER: Hi, I'm David and I'm from Baltimore, Maryland. Radiolab was created by Jad Abumrad, and is edited by Soren Wheeler. Lulu Miller and Latif Nasser are our co-hosts. Dylan Keefe is our director of sound design. Our staff includes: Simon Adler, Jeremy Bloom, Becca Bressler, W. Harry Fortuna, David Gebel, Maria Paz Gutiérrez, Sindhu Gnanasambandan, Matt Kielty, Annie McEwen, Rebecca Laks, Alex Neason, Sarah Qari, Sarah Sandbach, Arianne Wack, Pat Walters and Molly Webster. Our fact-checkers are Diane Kelly, Emily Krieger and Natalie Middleton.]

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