

City of Racine Highway 32 Town Hall Meeting
Thursday, November 17, 2020
6 pm to 7 pm

Attendees

- 34 community members
- 3 City of Racine staff
- 3 Payne & Frazier staff

MEETING NOTES

Agenda

- Welcome, Mayor Cory Mason
- Town Hall Meeting Logistics, Payne & Frazier Consultants
- HWY 32 Project Overview, City of Racine Public Works Commissioner John Rooney
- Comments and Q&A, Payne & Frazier Consultants
- Next Steps, Payne & Frazier Consultants

Mayor's Welcome

This project began with the City engaging in a process to reimagine what Main Street and the downtown might look like. Relocating HWY 32 to an alternate route within the City of Racine was proposed to slow traffic down and achieve additional design changes in Downtown Racine.

Objective

The purpose of this meeting is to share information on the proposed HWY 32 project, to hear the concerns and comments of the neighborhood(s) affected by the changes, chiefly Marquette Street, to listen to feedback, and to answer questions.

Project Overview

- This project was born out of the Department of City Development to address sustainability issues for Downtown Racine. After interviewing design firms, the City selected Toole Design.
- Walker Parking Consultants was enlisted to engage the public, and to create and develop a new plan for Downtown Racine. In July and August of 2019, they held Discovery Week, Design Week, and an open public meeting to accomplish this. Through interviews, walking audits, and town hall-style meetings they assembled feedback. On August 1, 2019, they presented what is essentially the basis for the downtown plan that would go to plan commission and Common Council for approval.

Main Findings of the Plan

- Create better circulation downtown by eliminating one-way streets, creating ease of finding parking and accessing merchants

- Reimagine downtown streets for more equity with vehicles, pedestrians, and cyclists; reduce to single lanes on Main Street with protected parking lanes, bumped out planters, and designated cycling lanes (between parking and sidewalks); also eliminate some traffic signals
- Parking solutions include balancing on and off-street parking, looking at parking rates and fees, and flexibility needed for future technology
- Monument Square improved to be more flexible and expandable for large events; expansion would include Fifth Street (to the north), Sixth Street (south) and Main Street (east); entire area available with no traffic
- To implement these changes Wisconsin HWY 32, a highway connection route, must be relocated off both Main Street and Sixth Street as the redesign is prohibitive to navigating tractor trailer trucks; to maintain continuity a minimum design standard has to be met, chiefly enabling tractor trailers to navigate roadways

Possible Alternative Routes

- Wisconsin Avenue reconfiguration – with proximity to State Street lift bridge, underpass, and Shoop Building – incur costs near \$1.9 million for adjustments
- Lake Avenue has pinch points at both Seventh Street and Gas Light Drive which would need to be addressed with costs around \$.5 million
- Marquette Street connects to the connecting HWY 32 at both State Street and HWY 20/Washington Avenue, and is designed today to meet the requirements of the D.O.T.; modifications of pavement markings and signage would cost around \$25K

Early Ideas for Phasing

- Adopt a plan
- Begin state truck route conversion
- Two-way conversions for both Lake and Wisconsin Avenues
- Advance Monument Square – funding and design
- Main Street – paint and road diet
- Bicycle lanes on Sixth Street east of Main
- Two-way conversions for both Sixth and Seventh Streets
- Monument Square rebuild

Comments and Q&A

Comment: I attended all the Toole group studies. There were hundreds of people involved in those studies, so it wasn't just a small group. I believe between all the focus groups and the open groups in total around 700-800, people that showed their interest and gave their opinion on this, and I am just really proud of all the work that Toole Design did, and the follow up that the City Council has done as far as getting this study done for the best reroute. So yeah I'm just really proud of the fact that it was so community oriented, a lot of people involved, great studies that were done, and thank you, John Rooney – I thought that was a great presentation as far as the facts that were involved.

Comment: Thank you. I'm a downtown merchant as well as a property owner – I own two buildings downtown on Main Street, and I also live in the City of Racine, so this is all very important to me. I'm also a millennial who wants to see the future of our town flourish and develop in a meaningful way so that everybody can enjoy our city as much as I do.

So, I'd just like to strongly advocate for the move of the HWY 32 up State Street, down Marquette, and linking back up to HWY 20. I think it's a very seamless way to do it. I've driven the route multiple times in the last few months waiting for this meeting to take place. It would appear to me, and I don't know if this is correct, the bulk of that route is commercial property, City property, vacant land – I know there is some residential there with the Marquette apartments there, but it would just seem the most logical route to get us to the end where we want to be in downtown.

So, correct me if I'm wrong, but those are just a few steps. I think this would be a great thing for our community; it would make downtown safer for people – it would make downtown safer for people to come and shop and enjoy. It would be just so everyone could come down and enjoy our wonderful downtown area.

Comment: So yeah, I want to echo both what Kelly and John just said. I'm a lifelong resident of Racine. My mom used to work at Brandt's jewelers on Monument Square way back in the day; used to come down here as a kid, and now I live down here at Gas Light Point Condominiums.

I think this is a win win. The reason I say that is that right now our downtown is probably one of the best downtowns in the State of Wisconsin along Lake Michigan. If you look at the marina we have, and when you can walk up to our Main Street. But the biggest drawback is the 35 mile per hour traffic so you can't relax and enjoy what these wonderful merchants have brought to us.

And it's dangerous. You know, now that I'm getting older, I have a granddaughter – I have a granddaughter and I have a grandson. It doesn't feel very comfortable walking down that main street with those kids. So we need to slow everything down, so it's a win for downtown to create this intimate atmosphere where people can walk, they can ride their bikes, they can eat outside, and we've always said – I'm the past chair of the DRC

– we’ve always said our downtown is for our entire community to come down and relax and enjoy themselves.

So this establishes that, but then I also think what’s important here is that routing that traffic down Marquette Street over to State – I think that’s going to be great for those business owners down over on State. I think that could create another uptown or off town – whatever you want to call it off of Main Street – I think that could create a new business district. I really do. So, I think it’s a win win and it’s great for our city. We have the best downtown and lakefront in the State of Wisconsin, and this will bring it to its highest possibilities.

Comment: Good evening. First of all, thank you for having this forum – I appreciate it. I’m also just like Austin – I am a business owner, I am a building owner, I am also a resident of downtown Racine, and I am also the chairperson of the Downtown Merchants Association which is an organization of 30 different businesses here in the downtown area.

I just want to, first of all, parrot and agree with what Austin said: I agree completely that this is something the downtown area needs. It is something that all the merchants that I’ve talked to very much desire to have happen. We need this for Downtown Racine so that it can become a more cohesive, organized travel destination for day-trip tourism.

I have to say this. I wish that traffic was only going 35 miles an hour down Main Street. I can’t tell you how many times – because I’m in my shop producing product, and if I can, I leave the front door open – the sound volume from the speed with which vehicles are running down Main Street is frightening. I had a customer come in today, ironically, [a] lady, late-middle aged, she was shaking. And the reason she was shaking was because somebody blew the red light and almost took her out. This is happening constantly downtown. I have been downtown almost five and a half, six years. We have traffic problems where people are speeding down Main Street – we now call it the drag way – because no one is enforcing the speeding laws.

We have requested time and time again for someone to take the lights out of timing so that rather having all the lights in a row hit green, have them literally staggered so you’ve got a green light, a red light, a green light, a red light – so that people aren’t hitting the gas trying to get through green light number five. But nobody has just flipped the switch. That’s all it would take. Just flip the switch so that we’ve got staggered lights. But instead, I have a customer who, thankfully, still came into my shop despite her experience with nearly getting taken out by somebody who blew the red light.

She was shaking, and quite honestly, as a merchant and as a business owner, it’s going to be harder now to get her to want to come back because her experience with downtown was one of “I want to go home so I can feel safe”. That’s a very hard thing for us merchants to try to have to overcome. And in this time when we’ve got struggles already with COVID – and with different difficulties that people have experienced in this last year with getting customer downtown – it is all that much harder to bring people downtown if their experience and their memory of downtown is “I almost got taken out”.

Please. Whatever is going to be done – please – start slowing down the traffic on Main Street. Again, I would be thrilled – technically the speed limit is 25 – I'd be thrilled if we got it down to 35 from what it's currently at. But I urge the City: the time is now. The time was actually years ago, but the time is now: slow down this traffic. And if it means that you have to get some police downtown to enforce the speed limit, do it. If it means you need to flip the switch to get those lights out of timing, do it. And hopefully, eventually, we can get that designation as "State Highway" shifted over to another road so that another area can have the benefit of perhaps some commercial traffic.

But it will also turn downtown into something more like a pedestrian zone to make people feel more comfortable, feel safe, and not feel like "If I'm going to go downtown, I'm taking my life in my hands." So I urge the City to do the right thing and to please do it soon because the stores downtown aren't going to be able to last too much longer if we can't start selling downtown as a place where people want to come. But thank you again for giving us this opportunity. I appreciate it. And I wish all of you the best.

Comment: I am concerned about increased traffic on State and Marquette.

Comment: I think keeping semi traffic away from Main Street as much as possible is a good idea.

Comment: I really like the idea of expanding Monument Square and having more stuff to do there. As a now two-year downtown resident, one of the reasons I came here was to have activities downtown. And so that's a good thing. And I fully understand, Scott, your comments about your customer. I haven't been that close to being taken out yet, but I assure you that I notice it every time I cross the street, and I can't walk as fast as I used to. So getting the speeding on Main Street down is a good thing.

Question: Now to be very parochial, is it at all possible that we could leave Lake Avenue as one-way so as to keep the traffic on Lake Avenue even smaller? I'm not sure how the plan works out, making that two-way, but it would be really good if Lake Avenue remained a drive line. But I really like the ideas of the whole thing.

Answer: The decision to go from one-way to two-way wasn't considered lightly. There was a lot of thought put into it. And let me reiterate: the two-way conversion really does two primary things. Without doing the conversion we don't get that balance in traffic ADT which I think I showed on that fourth slide. You're routing nearly 9,000, vehicles a day on Main Street, you know 2,000 or so on Lake, 2,000 or so on Wisconsin. Why? Because those motorists don't have a choice where to go. They have to select on corridor or another corridor depending on direction of travel. When you provide that flexibility, they can spread out that ADT a little bit, and that's what helps reduce the volume on Main Street.

So, if we didn't give somebody that two-way travel choice on Lake, well the volume's going to go up more than on Main Street. And it'll probably go up more on Wisconsin if you held Lake Avenue's one-way. And the reason I say that – and this goes back to a comment that was just read regarding increased traffic on Marquette Street or State

Street – that will be absolutely vetted when we go through that process. Because we can look at ADT, we can project things – it's what engineers do – but the consensus between the engineering staff here at City Hall, the ones at D.O.T. have been part and parcel to this process. D.O.T. was invited to these meetings last summer in 2019, with two of them actively participating in them.

And one thing about the ADT that's down there – most of the motorists who go through downtown, they're not transient. There are some that come visit, but a lot of them are repeat transient, if you will. They come back. So, the amount of traffic going through downtown really isn't going to change that much. If you've got 13, 14 thousand vehicles a day – we want to redistribute it more evenly and it's not going to be this great diversion of ADT over to State and to Marquette Street. What the diversion over to State and Marquette Street will be, will be that that percentage of truck traffic that you have going through the area because connecting highways are called connecting highways for a reason. They connect to every other highway that gets you off to the interstate.

So, let's say that a person who's delivering something on Washington Avenue just south of Marquette Street in a tractor trailer and their next stop is maybe Douglas Avenue. Well, they have to understand the connecting highway routes. That's why we have them. You don't want them cutting through neighborhoods, or lower functionally classified streets. So that would mean, in a reroute situation, yes, they would take the new route because they're a truck and most people that want to go through downtown that are passing through down there want to go through those three corridors.

But the truck traffic is really the ADT that gets diverted. And the ADT for truck traffic is not a huge number. So, I don't want anybody to get alarmed like a 20% traffic diversion is going to go over to Marquette and State Street. Our truck ADT is about 5% of the traffic volume. But it's an important 5% because you have to have the geometrics of the roadway to accommodate it. So, you'll get, yes, more truck traffic over there. So, I don't think there should be a concern about the additional traffic over on Marquette and State Street.

The short answer to your question is two-way traffic must exist on Lake Avenue for this plan to work. Plus, there's a whole lot of development potential along Lake Avenue that you've probably heard about or read about it. The two-way traffic on Lake Avenue is imperative to having those new developments go forward. You know if somebody is interested in building a convention center or a new housing complex or something else, that flexibility for mobility and circulation is so important to those developers. I'll leave it at that, but it's probably too long an answer.

Question: I was in downtown Beloit last week and I was struck with what they've done with their downtown. And one of the things I noticed that created an incredible sense of intimacy and critical mass was parallel parking. I don't know if that was addressed in some of your previous studies, but I see most of the parking is – what do you call it? Angular parking? Will you have angular parking as opposed to parallel parking and I wonder if you'd addressed that issue with earlier versions of your study?

Answer: To answer your question about angle parking – actually part of the Toole plan is to develop some angle parking along Wisconsin Avenue. On the back side of like where Monument Square is, to provide more parking for a lot of those businesses. Because the parking in the front of Monument Square, along Monument Square Drive, is fairly limited and you can get more vehicles in there [with angle parking]. And so that's an area of study that was adopted. Angle parking does have its pros and cons. Geometrically, yes, you can get more vehicles parked, there's no question about it – whether you're using 60, or 75 degree or 45-degree angle parking, the geometrics of angle parking are clear. The con side of that is you need more roadway width to back out of those angled parking spaces. So, for you to go and try to get these road diets, and bring roadways in to slow traffic down, you need wider driving lanes to back those vehicles out. And that's kind of the situation. They have enough room, they believe, on Wisconsin Avenue to add that without creating another issue up Wisconsin, but it doesn't fit on the "Ultimate" Main Street, and it certainly wouldn't fit on Sixth Street just because of what they're trying to accomplish on Main and the narrowness of Sixth Street already. So, there is a plan to address that. I hope that answered your question.

Comment: Yeah, and the two-hour free parking didn't hurt either.

Comment: I have lived in Racine all my life a block away from State Street and work downtown. I like the idea of making Lake, Wisconsin, Sixth and Seventh two-way. I have seen way too many wrong-way drivers.

I'm concerned about traffic on State as it can be congested after events downtown and when the bridge is up. I appreciate that this will be considered going forward. It is my hope that this can benefit our neighborhood with new businesses and beautification. Thank you for this opportunity to hear the plans.

Next Steps

- Compile the notes from this meeting and make them publicly available
- Present information from this meeting to the Common Council to approve or disapprove the proposed move of HWY 32
- If the proposal is approved, the City will start working with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (D.O.T.) to coordinate logistics and implement the plan to move HWY 32