

**COMMUNITY PLANNING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
STANDING COMMITTEE MEETING
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 20, 2022
MINUTES**

1. Call to Order

A. Meeting was called to order at 8:00 a.m. by Chairman Leon Davidoff.

B. Attendees: Councilor Leon Davidoff, Chair; Mayor Shari Cantor; Councilor Ben Wenograd; Councilor Mark Zydanowicz; Acting Town Manager, Rick Ledwith; Duane Martin, Director, Community Planning and Economic Development; Todd Dumais, Town Planner; Greg Sommer, Town Engineer; Tim Mikloiche, Building Inspector; Joe Blaskus, VHB Firm.

2. Business Items

A. Item 2A, North Main Street Road Diet Trial Update: Mr. Ledwith reported VHB was engaged to assist with the North Main Street Diet and Safety Study in 2020. The project included a Road Diet Study that started last summer and continues today. This involved changing the North Main Street corridor from approximately Brace Road through Bishops Corner and reducing the four-lane road to two-lanes with a center turning lane. Joe Blaskus is here to provide the CPEC with an update. We will discuss next steps, which will include another public information session on April 28 where residents will have an opportunity to provide feedback. We would like VHB to present at the Town Council meeting on May 24.

Mr. Blaskus summarized what has been done and gave a preview of what will be presented next week at the public meeting. The agenda is an update on observations they have made and some data collection ongoing since August. They have been working with Town staff and having biweekly meetings reviewing various issues that come up week to week and reviewing operations throughout the entire trial. They review comments and concerns and have addressed some concerns. Modifications have been made to the Road Diet Trial with striping changes. They made some observations of deliveries and snowplowing. They are also looking at Mountain Road and Trout Brook Drive. The study area includes three-quarters of the project. Graphics they assembled were presented. They did some education for the two-way left turn lanes. They have done extensive data collection and did traffic counts in November 2021 and looked at speeds, volumes and the queuing between intersections. They now have cameras online with a lot of good data at four locations at the Brace Road intersection, Fern and Asylum signals as well as Sims. They have also done field observations reviewing the operation of the intersections and looking for turning vehicles. There were some issues with busses and turns and also observing how is the two-way left turn lane operating. They also did additional traffic analysis. They did a drone flight in December, which is on the website.

They wanted to look at comparison of the volumes from November. They collected data in November because they wanted data before the snow fell. They did comparisons to pre-pandemic volumes for North Main Street, Trout Brook Drive and Mountain Road to compare what they had projected in terms of volumes. They expected to see more diverting of traffic from North Main Street and it did not materialize. They looked at whether side streets were being used for cut throughs and looked at the speeds and the queuing between intersections. The cameras at the south and north end signals of the intersections were useful to observe operations and concerns raised about the two-way left turn lanes and violations and did not see a lot of violations. It also allowed them to see where there were issues potentially with delivery vehicles. There were concerns at the Asylum intersection regarding trucks and busses turning and it is tight but does work. Observations also allowed them to observe how the phases of the left turn signals worked. They have been hearing concerns about Fern Street approach, left turns onto Main Street and difficulty making the turn with the change in the lanes. They observed that on the cameras and they are reviewing it. They have updated the capacity analysis. They have a traffic model for the entire corridor. There was a lot of queuing at North Main Street and Fern Street and they modified some of the timings of the signals to minimize and reduce the queuing.

One of the key aspects of the trial is the evaluation measures, whether the road diet is a success or a failure. They are using eight performance criteria to help identify the success of the Road Diet Trial. A lot of the criteria is data – the crash frequency and operations using travel models and public feedback. Emergency Services is not data but information received by providers. The rest are more observations with some data accumulated. He has detailed data results to present at the public meeting next week. They are seeing reduced crashes at all three corridors. Road diets have a good crash modification factor. The data is still coming in. They collected data through March and are going to be including April. They thought they would see more reduction in crashes and it may be a result of not seeing as much traffic volume diverting to adjacent roadways. They projected more and it is actually less. They are seeing increased travel times but it is manageable. They have seen reduced travel speeds for peak hours. Congestion has increased but is manageable with revised timings and they can continue tweaking the timings. They have minimized the diversion of traffic and the congested operations, which are manageable. They are not seeing more than two cycles of delay at some of the intersections. They have requested input from Emergency Services and they have no life-safety concerns for the most part. Public feedback has been positive. They detailed some of the public comments from the public information meeting last year. They have all email and telephone comments summarized in the database from August 13, 2021 through present day. They conducted 2 surveys and when they closed the survey a couple months ago, they had almost 2,000 respondents – all detailed on the Town website.

They have not documented but have observed increased use of sidewalks by pedestrians and bicycles. Cut-through traffic concerns through neighborhoods has been reduced. Issues with cut-throughs through North Main and Trout Brook that have been addressed. Intersections and driveway accessibility, gaps in travel flow during peak hours are reduced. There is a platooning effect with the intersections of Sims, Asylum and Fern down to **Brayson**. In the peak hours, there

will be vehicles platooning, so it is natural to have reduced gaps in travel flow for driveways that are along the corridor but there will be safer gaps, crossing two instead of four lanes. There have been a couple complaints but it is working in terms of traffic access to the driveways. They also flew a drone in December, which can be seen on the website and there are many drone videos. It does not show a lot of the congestion but is a good tool as it goes along the entire corridor. It is useful for the general public to see. He went through pictures from the drone. Google Maps street view has been updated for Fern Street to the north but not to the south.

The next steps are we want to address any comments we receive today. There is a public meeting next Thursday and will compile all the comments received and will review and address them and then issue a draft report for presentation to the Town Council and it will include recommendations in terms of is it a success or a failure, a success if we do certain things, are there other things/improvements that should be considered. Fern Street to the South should be widened to 42 feet. The shoulder is three-feet wide and elsewhere is five feet and is a recommendation they are carrying through. They will go over recommendations in the presentation to Town Council next month.

Councilor Wenograd said the speeds being down is positive. Queuing is a different issue. He asked about the speeds and issues with the safety elements for those using those five-foot lanes.

Mr. Blaskus stated they have seen speed reduction of 10 percent or more. They also heard comments from the public that people are driving faster and some of that can be seen in the data but overall the speeds are reduced. From his observations, it is a calmer roadway during the peak hours whether walking or on a bike. He has not ridden his bike on the new lanes yet but plans on it. They thought they would see more reduction in speeds. It is manageable because they are tying it together with the roadway, the speeds, the queuing. Speeds can be managed with enforcement. They will look at [REDACTED].

Councilor Wenograd said originally there was discussion about the width of the TWLTL and whether it should be 10, 11 or 12 feet. He asked if the study showed any conclusions on the width in terms of turning width and other safety factors, whether that is the appropriate width.

Mr. Blaskus stated Emergency Services like it and they had wanted a wider two-way left turn lane. He cannot point to any data it is the best width to have. From observations, driving it and hearing from Emergency Services, they have not heard any concerns with regard to response times. It seems to be an optimal width and he does not see it changing. They still have data coming in. They have a lot of support for the width they have. Down the road, the Town is going to be doing a re-pavement of the entire roadway and a reconsideration of the width being narrower is possible. He does not recommend 10 feet. Eleven foot is possible. Twelve foot is good because it is new to the Town. Let things get settled over a period of time and the Town can evaluate that. It may be a recommendation the Town can reconsider the width. It could help saving six inches but it is a good width now. The data is not showing side-to-side crashes. It appears Emergency Services are supportive.

Councilor Zydanowicz asked where are the pre-pandemic numbers Mr. Blaskus spoke of.

Mr. Blaskus stated he has pre-pandemic numbers but he did not show them.

Councilor Zydanowicz stated during pre-pandemic times, the MetLife and Cigna traffic would back up to one-half a mile from Route 44 all the way up Mountain Road, so we are nowhere near pre-pandemic traffic because they are going to work twice a week now and that main corridor, even North Main and Mountain are the two corridors for them to exit and we have not seen that backup on Mountain Road since pre-pandemic and it was significant. Traveling down Mountain Road at that time and trying to get across town to Wolcott was a 45-minute venture at best and one had to go North Main and South Main to get there because Mountain Road was so backed up. There is no traffic at 4:00-4:30 on Mountain Road and North main now.

Mr. Blaskus stated last year they did analysis to show the Town can this work, is it feasible, so they did the travel models using pre-pandemic numbers. They have adjusted a little for the queuing. The peak hour on Mountain Road and North Main Street has shifted. It is no longer at 4:30. It is at 3:30. The work from home and the school peak is now the afternoon peak and used to be the commuter peak. The morning peak hour is no longer there. There is a midday peak hour and an earlier afternoon peak hour now.

Councilor Zydanowicz stated what shows up on a graph in numbers and what shows up on the road as actual was a disaster. He has not seen the traffic yet at 3:30. He is afraid what happens when Cigna and MetLife go back to work five days a week. The left-hand turn from North Main to Fern is maybe three cars long. He asked if that was the TWLTL piece. He stated he is referring to length of the left-hand turn and questioned instead of letting only three cars in if they could let more cars in.

Mr. Blaskus stated they are evaluating that and is part of their analysis. They have been asked to look at the Fern and Asylum Street approaches for left-turn lanes and change in left turn phasing. They have also been asked to consider extending the left-turn lanes on North Main Street. They may be recommending the Town consider extending some of these turn lanes.

Councilor Zydanowicz stated Mr. Blaskus mentioned people crossing four lanes of traffic and that not happening anymore. He stated that is illegal and is also a very abrupt turn, so he questioned where the data came from that people are crossing four lanes of traffic.

Mr. Blaskus stated when people left a driveway on North Main Street before the road diet, they had to cross four lanes of traffic and with the road diet, they are crossing only two lanes.

Councilor Zydanowicz stated if one pulls out of a driveway they have to pull into the closest lane and cannot pull into the farthest lane. That is illegal.

Mr. Blaskus stated the reality is people are doing it. There are fewer lanes to cross with the road diet. It is not recommended but some people use the TWLTL as a turn lane.

Councilor Zydanowicz asked if the data for pre-pandemic is similar to now.

Mr. Blaskus stated they used the pre-pandemic volumes to determine the feasibility of implementing the road diet. They did counts in November and were expecting a diversion, meaning there was road diet on North Main Street people would avoid and go to Trout Brook Drive and then go to Mountain road. The diversion they were expecting did not materialize. The volumes have changed but not as much as expected.

Councilor Zydanowicz asked if he anticipates when traffic gets back to normal (pre-pandemic) those changes will happen.

Mr. Blaskus stated if the volumes return to pre-pandemic levels that based on previous travel models the road diet will continue to work. There may be more diverted traffic but they have proven with the travel models the road diet can sustain the pre-pandemic levels. The Road Diet Trial will work when everyone is back to work fulltime. It could be an issue if the volumes change and there are more intensive peak hours than pre-pandemic.

Councilor Zydanowicz asked with the changes made from the original engineering used to model this and the changes made to adjust it if we will continue to look at that when those numbers come back.

Mr. Blaskus confirmed they would. The Town has a sophisticated signal system and a great team at Public Works and Engineering and are on top of that. They can monitor the operations. They noticed there was queuing happening on Fern Street and they recalibrated the timings and have mitigated that long queue. It is not happening as frequently as in the past.

Mr. Ledwith introduced the Chairman of the Pedestrian and Bicycle Commission, Mr. Ed Pawlak.

Mr. Pawlak emphasized he is speaking on behalf of the Ped and Bike Commission and authorized him to speak to the subcommittee. The road diet has been on the radar of the Ped and Bike Commission for many years, back to when Beth Bye was a State Senator and secured the funding for the feasibility study for a road diet. Since the road diet has been in place, the commissioners have driven the road diet and walked and bicycled the road diet corridor to come to their impressions. The general impression is the travel corridor is a much calmer environment. What was there before, two lanes north and two lanes south with the outside lanes extending up to the curb, it felt like the Wild West. There was reckless speeding far in excess of the posted limits, numerous swerving, rapid lane changes and for folks making left turns, they had to cross two lanes of oncoming traffic, some of which was obscured by the closest lane to them and it was at the intersections most of the crashes were occurring. The result of those very unsafe

conditions, as the feasibility study documented, was an epidemic of motor vehicle crashes on that corridor. It was unsafe for motorists and pedestrians and no opportunity for bicyclists to use that corridor. It was a very unpleasant environment for residents in that area. The Main Street corridor is a major travel corridor going right through a very residential area. Those residents' quality of life was impacted by unsafe conditions.

The Road Diet Trial has been five wins. For residents and students of the American School for the Deaf, their quality has improved because it is calmer. For pedestrians who are now separated from the closest traffic by as much as five feet and traffic which is traveling slower, it feels safer. For bicyclists, they are not marked as such but are curb lanes, which almost connect West Hartford Center and Bishops Corner. They hope ultimately that connection will be made. It is a win for motorists. There are no more swerving of cars backed up at the left-turn lanes. He has been in the TWLTL in his car and it feels safer as he knows there will be a gap and he will be able to make that turn. The town of West Hartford wins. We had a major transportation corridor plagued by chronic motor vehicle crashes and it is not sustainable and impairs the quality of life in town. The road diet is a traffic-calming solution to this crash epidemic. There has been overwhelming community support. He asked if not the road diet, what is plan B. Going back to what was there before is not a desirable condition for any user or resident. This is a feasible solution. The Pedestrian and Bicycle Commission fully supports the road diet and urges Town Council to endorse it.

Mayor Cantor stated Mr. Pawlak summarized it very well. It has been a long-term project and she is pleased we are at this point and seeing the actual feedback we predicted. The lack of diversion is because people feel safer on that road. She diverted more and many of her constituents would go on Trout Brook Drive because it was safer than North Main Street. The tight feeling you had being in two lanes each direction is not there. The safety component is preventing that diversion.

B. Item 4A, The Community Department Update: He skipped the Building Division Chart but can go back to that with Mr. Mikloiche. He highlighted some ongoing Engineering Division projects. The expanded outdoor dining **is not an** engineering project shared with others in Community Development, Fire, Public Works, etc., but they are planning on re-deploying the barriers again and trying to get them out the week of May 3. There is a gas main project on Farmington Avenue and they received confirmation they are doing well and doing what they can to complete the first stage of the project to allow us to get the barriers out before Mother's Day and are on target. He has been working with a lot of the restaurants with regard to the seating and the use of the expanded outdoor dining and the sidewalk and road parking areas.

The Trout Brook Trail Phase 5 project has resumed after winter shutdown and is going well and nearing a completion. This is the section of the Trout Brook Trail from Farmington Avenue to Fern Street. We heard from the State they are in the final review for Trout Brook Trail Phase 6, the section from Fern Street to Duffield Drive. This was a grant project. We are hoping to get a commitment to fund to be able to start construction in late spring/early summer. We still need to

go out to bid to get a contractor but are getting close. There is also tree-removal activity going on around that section of the Trout Brook Trail or Trout Brook Drive between Asylum Avenue and Fern Street. The ongoing work is to remove dead and dying trees or trees that were permitted through Wetland Permit for the Trout Brook Trail and will continue for dead or dying trees between the water course and Trout Brook Drive. Many trees are posing a public safety hazard. This was the opportunity to have a contractor remove those trees and remove the permitted trees in the way to Trout Brook Trail Phase 6.

Front Street Bridge near Fernridge Park is planned for replacement. We are in final design and hoping to be in construction later on this year. You will see activity there soon because there was a weight restriction recalculation. The weight limit was reduced because the bridge is deteriorating. We are not going to be replacing it soon enough, so we are modifying the travel way across the bridge to shift traffic to the North side of the bridge to get it away from the weakest beam in the bridge. A contractor is going to widen Fern Street and remove the area between the curb and the sidewalk on the north side of the bridge, which gains about four feet. We will keep one lane of traffic in each direction but push them to the north. You will see some barriers in the near future and will stay up until we start the bridge replacement project. We are back in a construction season with the Engineering Division, so making preparations for road reconstructions and street resurfacing. There is a list in the report with those streets listed in chronological order. Nesbit is started first. We are targeting next week to start that. Reconstruction projects typically take one to three months depending on their length and complexity, whereas the rounds of paving for which we typically have three, the first one in May, usually take upwards of a month to complete.

Mr. Mikloiche stated construction season is picking up for them also. They are still working on implementing CityView to go online. There were a couple minor setbacks. The project manager assigned to them has recently completed her contract with CityView, so we they working on updating another project manager. Dan Savelli switched from IT to be the Fire Department IT person. Although he is still being very helpful, his new commitment is hindering a little of the project. The permits entered is up the last couple months to almost 600 permits. Inspections are up to a little over 1,000. Plan reviews are up to about 1,200 for last month. It shows the staffing brought on, Rob Tavella, part-time inspector, is working 24 hours a week and making a difference. They are speeding up on entering the permits and doing the plan reviews, which is generating more inspections. Some of the bigger projects are noticing supply chain issues, so are slowing a little but they are trying to keep those going and things are going well. They hope to have CityView online in July. They are going to bring contractors to get feedback in June before going live to make sure it is as customer and contractor-friendly as possible to keep the confusion down when they go online. There is going to be a learning curve. Some contractor input will be very helpful.

Mr. Martin followed up on Mr. Mikloiche's CityView comment. We will be out in front of the launch. It is going to be a change in operation for the Building Division and the Engineering and Planning and Zoning Divisions, who all have the ability to use CityView through this upgrade. It

is going to create a little pain and anxiety but we will get through it. It will help with office efficiency. Approximately a month before we launch, we will promoting this to make people aware.

5. Future Agenda Items

Mr. Ledwith gave a brief update on the Transit-Oriented Development Ordinance, a very important piece of legislation we hoped to have before CPED prior to this meeting. There has been a delay due to some illnesses. He saw a rough draft yesterday. We are going to add two more sections to this piece of legislation and have it in front of Corporation Council by Friday this week and we would like to have it on our next Committee Agenda. We would like to have it on the agenda for May 10 Town Council Meeting where we would be able to refer to TP&Z and set for a Public Hearing on June 14.

6. Adjournment

Councilor Zydnowicz motioned to adjourn and the motion was seconded by Councilor Wenograd. The meeting was adjourned at 8:55 a.m.

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