

Item 23-0286: Approve College Avenue Lane Reconfiguration Pilot Project

Municipal Services Committee

Mon, Mar 20, 2023 4:30PM

Alderson William Siebers (District 1) 30:47

All right. 23-0286 Approve College Avenue Lane reconfiguration pilot project. Do I hear a motion?

Alderson Brad Firkus (District 3) 30:58

Move to approve.

Alderson William Siebers (District 1) 31:00

Second?

Alderson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 31:01

Second.

Alderson William Siebers (District 1) 31:02

Motion has been made and second to approve. Anybody from staff want to give an update? I don't know if there's any update need to be given. Comment?

Director Danielle Block (Public Works) 31:17

Yep, I can make a few comments. The memo was tied up here, this last one, and to recap where we've been since January up until this point. I also highlighted where all the project information can be found and really encourage, if there are any remaining questions or comments, to reach out and we'll supply you with information or any sort of discussion as we work our way through this process.

Alderson William Siebers (District 1) 31:48

Okay, I'm gonna go right away to the audience. Anybody here in the audience that would like to speak to this item, reconfiguration? Sir, set—step up to the mic and state your name and address,

Mike S. (Resident) 32:03

[Mike S. XXXXX] I just—it popped into my head how they were going to handle congestion with turning two lanes into one. And I just wanted to offer that I drive around in Milwaukee a lot, and when you enter—when you merge on to 41, they have two lanes, that are entrance ramps. They use two stoplights. One goes green, one goes red, one starts a lane, one stops the other lane. They go for like 10 seconds and it keeps these things from getting congested. And I just wanted to offer that if anybody was worried about these lanes being congested going from two into one at some point on College Avenue.

Alderson William Siebers (District 1) 32:45

Okay.

Mike S. (Resident) 32:46

Thought I'd offer that.

Alderson William Siebers (District 1) 32:47

Thank you.

Mike S. (Resident) 32:48

Thank you.

Aldersperson William Siebers (District 1) 32:49

Any further questions, comments from the audience? Hi. State your name and address.

Jennifer Stephany (Appleton Downtown Incorporated) 33:04

Jennifer Stephany. I'm the executive director with Appleton Downtown Incorporated offices at 333 West College Avenue, and I live at [XXXXXX]

Jennifer Stephany (Appleton Downtown Incorporated) 33:16

Thank you for the opportunity to make some additional comments. I know you've heard from me several times on this, I believe every time we've come together. So, I thank you for having that that chance to comment. I've had lots of meetings with lots of people, lots of business owners, and of course my board of directors. The ADI board of directors would like to maintain an impartial opinion on this. Obviously, we have advocates on both sides of this.

Jennifer Stephany (Appleton Downtown Incorporated) 33:16

So, I know I'm talking on both sides of this. But believe me, that's what we continue to hear. We definitely hear both sides of this. I look forward to hearing some additional comments from the alderpersons that we haven't heard from on this yet. And I want to thank you for giving us the opportunity to comment as well. Thank you.

Jennifer Stephany (Appleton Downtown Incorporated) 33:38

It is certainly a fine balance, an adequate traffic flow, access, safety, as well as the enhanced pedestrian experience. You do not have an easy vote tonight; we understand that. The research and data as we have learned definitely supports positive economic impacts in a more walkable downtown. We've done a lot of research, we've done a lot of reading, and really across the nation across the world. It's definitely encouraging when we look at this proposal, what's been found around the globe in walkable cities.

Jennifer Stephany (Appleton Downtown Incorporated) 34:25

Downtown noise pollution and traffic speeds have definitely increased especially since 2020. We've talked a lot about that. My office is on the corner of Superior and College. I definitely see it. We hope that this proposal can reduce both. But there's definitely a lot of skepticism about how it will really reduce noise. There's a lot of modified mufflers situations that we know have been difficult to police. We're definitely encouraged that Appleton Police Department is in favor of this proposal and want to thank them for their input on all of this.

Jennifer Stephany (Appleton Downtown Incorporated) 35:07

We know that the concerns remain about congestion. And as we have heard, that congestion, as you come in to the reduced lane block is probably the most concern that we hear. Are we creating that crunch on both sides? We've seen the modeling and how this works. Obviously, we're not going to know until we're in it. And that's why we're definitely encouraged by seeing this come through as a pilot program. We would encourage you to keep that.

Jennifer Stephany (Appleton Downtown Incorporated) 35:32

We'd like to hear a little bit more about what that looks like if this were to be retracted in 2024 beyond. What does that look like? What is the process for that? We understand that there's a financial investment that we

need to be made in order to do that; how does that process go through? If you wouldn't mind making those comments when I'm when I'm finished, I'd appreciate hearing a little more on that.

Jennifer Stephany (Appleton Downtown Incorporated) 35:54

We believe it's important to note that this is not a quick fix. And we do understand that this would take time for us to really understand the impacts here. We definitely appreciate the fact that that the modeling continues to show that it works. But again, the parking maneuvers, we continue to hear that that's a concern. We know that the algorithms have included that timing for it. We want to want to thank the DPW team for taking so much time with the business owners and with us to help us understand best how this can work.

Jennifer Stephany (Appleton Downtown Incorporated) 36:34

It's critical to maintain that access. We want people to come downtown. That is the number one goal of my organization for my board of directors: bring people to the district. But we want to be that destination. We've heard people be very concerned about the congestion of the thoroughfare of College Avenue. We struggle with that because we want to be the destination that people drive to not drive through. So again, it's that balance. We want to make sure they can get to that parking, get to the businesses, and then have that exceptional walking experience in our downtown.

Alderson William Siebers (District 1) 37:14

Before I forget the question, somebody wants to address the process? Block—Director Block?

Director Danielle Block (Public Works) 37:18

Thank you chair. The process—assuming we meet the timeline here and this is completed by late fall of 2023—that pilot project would then be evaluated in spring of 25, giving the 18 months. Just envisioning what that might look like, of course we're studying the before conditions, we'll be studying during and then after, presenting to municipal services committee that data and likely staff recommendation on the comparison and how it's going. And I would assume then a vote would need to occur to approve the project beyond a pilot.

Alderson William Siebers (District 1) 38:20

Okay. Alderson Hartzheim your mic is on already.

Alderson Sheri Hartzheim (District 13) 38:28

Thank you chair. As Ms. Stephany mentioned, this being a pilot program is an encouraging thing. And as an alderman, I think this is good. This is something that will give an opportunity to—give us an opportunity to see if it works. But in that same vein, we as aldermen have to think to ourselves that what comes with this being a pilot program doesn't give us an easy way out. Because if it doesn't work, if there are still complaints, if there are still issues, we have to be willing to say—maybe not all of us because we might not all be here in 2025. But we have to be willing to say that this can and will be reversed if that doesn't happen. So, we can't—I would like us to think very heavily about oh, this isn't our easy way out. Oh, it's a pilot, it'll be fine. We'll just push the Yes button. I think we have to think about pushing the Yes button also means we have to be willing to say later on if that if there's proof that it doesn't work, that we have to be able to retract it and pull it back. And there's cost that comes with that as well. So, we have to keep all of that in mind as alderpersons.

Alderson William Siebers (District 1) 39:29

Okay. Alderson Wolff.

Aldersperson Nate Wolff (District 12) 39:32

Thank you, chair. So, something that I've continued to hear from my constituents and from people throughout the city, and including while downtown, is the continued conversation about where the bike lane would be compared to the cars. And personally I do like the idea of having it on the opposite side of the cars mainly because when they have outside dining, it would keep cars further away. And sometimes when you're eating outside, you can still smell the cars. So, it might be nice to have that separation, as well as more people are opening their driver's side door than their passenger side door. Frequently, at least—I mean, it still happens on College Avenue. But I just think that's something we should all consider. Or we should talk about in the future.

Aldersperson William Siebers (District 1) 40:21

That was brought up. Somebody want to...? Okay, Mr. Lom.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 40:36

So just to kind of go back through what we talked about on this topic last time, for those that weren't here to hear that, what the aldersperson is referring to is something that's generally called floating parking. And, and what that does is it moves the bike lane to the curb, and moves the parking lane between the bike lane and the traffic lanes. And that's generally accepted to be a better solution than—and a safer solution for bicyclists than what's being proposed. However, it comes with a lot of baggage because if you can imagine, as a driver, if you're coming down the road, and to your right, is a line of parked cars, and behind that line of parked cars is a bicyclist that you can't really see, there comes a point when you approach an intersection where that parking has to stop, so that that bicyclist can get back out where you can see them. And in order to do that, you lose about five stalls per block per side in order to safely design that. So, we did actually sketch that up. It's been talked about internally about what it would take to do that. But the impact on parking is so significant that we felt that it likely was not something that would be supported by ADI.

Aldersperson William Siebers (District 1) 42:05

Okay. Anybody else? All right. Anybody on committee would like to say anything? Aldersperson van Zeeland.

Aldersperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 42:19

Thank you Chair. Could somebody address what options we may have if, if we do this, and we start to see issues with congestion at certain locations? What are our options besides just calling a trial and repainting again?

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 42:40

I think I would start by taking just a step back to make sure that everyone in the room has heard this one more time, and that is that this will increase congestion. That has been clearly shown through the modeling. And I've hopefully been clearly stated in all the meetings that we've had with stakeholders and with this group.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 43:02

So, what we anticipate is approximately a one-minute additional delay during the AM peak hour to get—if you were just running all the way through downtown to get to the other side. And approximately a three-minute delay eastbound in the PM peak hour.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 43:29

As far as options that we would have to address congestion after the fact, as it's currently proposed, we believe that we have fully optimized what we can do with the lane configuration that's being proposed, given the everything that we think is non negotiables, such as where all the traffic signals are, where we allow parking, and so forth. So, we think we will have pulled all the levers that there are to pull. I don't have any silver bullets in my back pocket that I'm holding back from the group.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 44:07

So, what will impact congestion though we think, is that for those that will experience that three minutes of extra time to get through the downtown in the afternoon, those drivers are going to do a calculation in their head and say, Is this still the best route for me at this exact moment? Or should I maybe stay at work a couple more minutes in the afternoon and leave a little bit later or leave a little bit earlier. All the things that we consciously or subconsciously do as we select a route to get from point A to B all the time. But again, that congestion that we're talking about is very limited to the times you would expect it to be in the AM and peak—AM and PM peak hour.

Aldersperson William Siebers (District 1) 44:54

Okay.

Aldersperson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 44:55

Thank you

Aldersperson William Siebers (District 1) 44:57

One more time. Aldersperson Hartzheim.

Aldersperson Sheri Hartzheim (District 13) 45:01

Thank you chair. May I ask Mr. Lom to please confirm that the one minute and three minutes that we are seeing in the, in the demos etc., is if no one changes their mind, like you mentioned. So, if we're talking about exactly the traffic that we see today in the morning in the evening, one minute and three minute, and your added question or your added statement was, some people are going to change your mind and not want to do that.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 45:27

Thank you for the opportunity to clarify, because for those that haven't been here for these meetings, there are probably three things that I would say to that. One is, as you correctly noted, are the modeling that's been done assumes that no driver that's currently using the system is going to use it differently; they will just continue to do exactly what they're doing currently.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 45:58

The other thing is, is that we're basing our traffic volumes and how they vary across the day on pre COVID traffic volumes, which is approximately 15% higher than today's traffic volumes during the peak hour. So, we're—we think we're being conservative in that regard.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 46:23

Finally, want to be clear that (and we talked about this in our presentation) that it does not account for future growth in the downtown. And one of the things that a lot of people who called me to talk to me about why they did or didn't like the project, want to talk about is residential development in the downtown. And residential development is an interesting animal when it comes to how you treat it with regard to traffic generation.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 46:58

On one hand, it seems like if you build 300 units in the downtown that you're going to add that many more trips proportionately to the system. But in reality, many of those people that are choosing to live in the downtown are likely to be moving to the downtown because it's where they do their business. And so, it's not that simple.

Oftentimes—we think that a lot of the residential development that has happened, and that would happen in the future, would be pretty traffic neutral.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 47:35

And then I guess the last aspect of this is, we did look at where—if people find the congestion to be intolerable during those brief times during the day when we're anticipating it, where might they be able to go? Can the system, does the system provide acceptable alternatives? And we looked at, in particular, Franklin Street and Lawrence Street, and found that both of them have adequate capacity to carry people through the downtown.

Alderson William Siebers (District 1) 48:14

Thank you.

Alderson William Siebers (District 1) 48:15

Okay. Alderson Doran.

Alderson Chad Doran (District 15) 48:19

Thank you. So, I'll just make a comment, you know, for some people who hadn't been paying attention in the past that this whole project really came about as a response to concerns from, you know, activity that was happening downtown: speeding, loud noise, a lot of that. And some of that has been brought up by other alders in the past in the form of various resolutions to try and address some of those issues, which for one reason or another didn't end up working out. But I think it's important to note that, you know, that this is an effort that isn't something just staff driven to say like, "Hey, let's try and change up College Avenue." It's really to address concerns that have been brought forward to us as a Council to staff over a pretty significant period of time. And I think just want to commend the staff as well for listening to those concerns, spending a number of weeks now, with us going over different options here. But also putting in what I imagine is a pretty significant amount of time trying to create this plan to begin with, to provide us with an option that that we could explore to see if we can improve some of those issues downtown.

Alderson William Siebers (District 1) 49:26

Okay. Anybody else? Motion's been made and seconded to approve this. All in favor signify by saying aye. All those opposed? Chair votes aye. Four zero.