Item 24-1448: Receive and file the College Avenue Lane Reconfiguration Status Update for Reporting Period #2 (August 2023 - July 2024)

Municipal Services Committee

Mon, Nov 11, 2024 4:30PM

Alderperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 01:07
We have no public hearings or appearances, so we will move to our first action item, number 24-1448, which is to receive and file the College Avenue lane configuration—reconfiguration, status update for reporting period number 2, August of 2023 through July of 2024. And I think Director Jungwirth has a presentation for us.

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 01:35
Thank you. So, I'm going to jump right in here. Now, as you all know the—and as it shows—the reporting period actually was through July of this year. We have had position change over, so since my coming here, I jumped back into this, and hopefully I'm picking this back up and continuing it forward from here. So luckily, we have had our traffic engineering group continuing to collect data throughout so that we have been able to kind of monitor that even in the absence of the director through the summer.

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 02:12
Some of the early project adjustments—and some of these were noted earlier on in the first period, reporting period, the six-month mark following opening of the roadway, once it was repainted. Traffic was and still continues to be closely monitored. And I'll leave it to Eric to get into more detail on that. But its flow through traffic has been monitored, how long it takes to get through the corridor, count of traffic. There's a lot more data collection that goes into it. That, again, is their department, and I'll let him speak to it later on here, but has been continuing to be monitored since the start.

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 02:55
There were some traffic signal timing adjustments to ensure that the flow of traffic was as efficient as it could be, and that just took some modification throughout—at the beginning, once it was opened up, some tweaks to kind of find the right balance and what works the best. And then lastly, there was monitoring and adaptation of loading zones to ensure that operations could be kept up through the businesses downtown.

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 03:20
So, at this point, I am going to hand it over—and starting out with the data collection—over to Eric here, our traffic engineer, to speak to some of the data that has been collected through the project.

Alderperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 03:31
Thank you.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 03:32
District Four. Thank you. So, this should look familiar to those that were here for the for the previous update. We'll just kind of walk through them one at a time, and I guess I will comment them on each one as we go, and kind of give you my two cents on the statistical significance of some being a little bit better than others, and what we might be able to infer or not infer based on the type of data that we have.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 04:04
So, the traffic count—we'll start in the upper left-hand corner. The traffic count data is really we're monitoring about, I think, it's seven intersections through the downtown before and after. And there's a lot of data about data collection. It's pretty, pretty labor intensive and fairly expensive to have all that information processed. But in the end, what we were able to come up with was a negative 1% a change to the traffic counts. Now our equipment is about plus or minus 2 or 3% so you can take that minus 1% with a grain of salt. Basically, my takeaway from this is traffic has not changed in any significant way that we can conclusively measure.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 04:55
I am going to skip the second one because that's out of my wheelhouse, and we'll come back to that I believe. Crashes. I think this is the best, most statistically significant piece of data that we have because, sort of the rule of large numbers—we're dealing in very large numbers. Lots of traffic coming through this corridor over the course of over the project and so when we when we looked at all what we expected to see out here, based on other projects that have been done throughout the country, somewhere between a 20 and 40% reduction, maybe 50. Our first report showed something in the low 40 percents. I think it's stabilizing now more around 30%. So, I do think that that's rather significant, and, in my opinion, the most telling piece of information that we have in front of us here.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 05:49
Bike counts. So, I'm going to just be perfectly up front with you guys. This—based on the way that this we were asked to do this count, it was—we measured one 24-hour period before the project in the third week of June, and we came back—I would say it's a Thursday, I believe. We came back a year later on a Thursday with similar weather, and did another 24-hour period. So, we tried to minimize the other variables as best we could. So, we showed a an increase of 33 bicycles in there. So that was—we were not doing that as a percentage, but that went from roughly 50 bikes up to, like, 70-some bikes. So, I guess it'd be 80. So just to kind of give you a sense of the increase. That's—like I said, that's one 24-hour period. If we had the ability to monitor that over a long period of time, I could have more confidence in what that number means.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 06:59
Same goes for the pedestrian count. We had to—we were limited to a 24-hour count in June, and then another 24-count hour—24-hour count in the next June. I was kind of joking with Director Jungwirth that the 11% could mean that Jimmy John's was running a special before the project and not after the project. I don't I don't have any more confidence in that minus 11 than I do in that plus 33 because it's just a snapshot in time. So, you—we can all take our own interpretations from that.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 07:35
And then police roadway closures. This is intended to represent those, I'm going to say, emergency closures when we have problems down on the Avenue on a Friday or Saturday night. We did have two of them during this time period. So that is—I guess I don't know what how to interpret that but, but it is continuing to happen. The feedback that we've gotten is that it is much more controllable and controlled with the new lane configuration then, you know—because obviously people can't pass each other and race each other and things like that.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 08:15
So, I think Director Jungwirth is going to take that one last piece, and then we can try and answer questions.

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 08:24
Thank you. So, for the parking meter revenue side, we had originally, on the last, in the last period, reported that there was an increase in revenue from 2022 to 2023 during a particular six-month period. Looking at the data again before coming here this evening, it's about the same. So really, to report a percentage is not maybe too consequential that it's going to make a significant difference one way or the other. What did come out of the conversation from that last reporting period was what is the difference and maybe to draw the correlation on app usage versus coin when the meters are being used. So that is what I did put on here, again, because that that amount was so negligible. And quite frankly, I don't know how much weight go is—would benefit from that. We'll keep monitoring it, obviously, through the duration of the project. And then if there is anything reportable to draw some conclusions from, we'll certainly produce that. But we are looking at approximately a 40/60 split in the app usage versus coin, and this is just on College Avenue. So, we were able to, at the start of the project, isolate that coin metering from the app.

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 09:46
So, do you guys have any questions for us on some on the data that has been put out here? And we'll have more to discuss from this, but.

Alderperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 09:55
See Alder Doran first.

Alderperson Chad Doran (District 15) 09:57
Just one question. I guess I think the biggest concern probably most people had when we started the project was how much time they were going to spend in traffic getting from one side to the other. Do we have an update on that as well?

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 10:08
Next two slides.

Alderperson Chad Doran (District 15) 10:09
Okay, thank you.

Alderperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 10:10
Okay. Alder Meltzer,

Alderperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 10:17
This is sort of a preemptive question, but I noticed that the slide deck wasn't attached to the agenda. Will this all be attached later?

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 10:23
Yes.

Alderperson Vered Meltzer (District 2) 10:24
Thank you.

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 10:26
That will be up—excuse me. Website updated, and the presentation linked to our Smart Streets page also.

Alderperson Vered Meltzer (District 2) 10:33
Wonderful.

Alderperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 10:36
If there are no other questions, please go on.

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 10:41
And I'm going to hand this back over.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 10:47
All right, so I think this—to me, this is this data is what tells the biggest part of the story because the, I think one of the biggest concerns that folks had going into this is, wow, what kind of congestion is this going to cause? And so, if you'll recall, when we did all the micro simulation and everything, and we came back and we made our predictions, sort of like a meteorologist does, right? It's not a perfect science. But when we came back and with the best information that we had, we said, look, we think that eastbound is going to—I'm sorry, depending on which direction you're going, you might see no increase in in travel time through the corridor, and for eastbound, in the worst case, we were looking at predicted about a two-minute increase in travel time. So westbound is the is—was predicted to be the less, lesser problematic direction, and that has proven itself out.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 11:56
So just a quick where do we get this data from? We subscribe to a service that is capturing real time Google Maps data from individual vehicles. So, we don't know who you are, but we know that this data is being measured on a per car basis. So, when you enter on one end and when you come out the other side, that's that data is collected. If you enter on one end and don't come out the other end, obviously we don't use that piece of data, but—so this we have we have very good confidence in this data.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 12:27
Eastbound was always expected to be the problem child. It's just—for a variety of reasons it's more problematic for us. So, you'll notice that the after project, we we're doing better than than—we improved the travel time from, say, 6am to 11am, and then throughout the rest of the day it's either a little bit more, just a few seconds. The worst case is over on the right side, where you can see that the there's kind of that hump in the orange there. That's about a 35 second increase. So, at its very worst, we increased the travel time by about 35 seconds, which was quite a bit better than what we had predicted. So, the story for travel time is really it's a little bit worse in the afternoon in the eastbound direction, but by and large, it's either the same or better.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 12:27
You can see, in this case, this is westbound. Blue is before the project; orange is after the project. Do you want to—the lower, the further down on the on the scale is less time that it takes you to get through the corridor. So, across the bottom is time of day. On the y axis is the travel time. So, you can see that we actually reduced the travel time through the corridor between, I don't know, 9am and 3pm and during the other times, it's pretty even. Kind of fluctuates a little bit depending on exactly when you're coming through. So westbound was almost exactly what we had predicted, and really is either even or better than it was before.

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 14:22
So—

Alderperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 14:22
That's good news.

Alderperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 14:22
I'm sorry I see Alder Siebers. So.

Alderperson William Siebers (District 1) 14:35
We thought, we thought that that traffic might increase on Washington or Franklin and Lawrence, and obviously that hasn't happened.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 14:56
Stand by and I'll give you an actual number. So, the one place that we were able to—where we had the enough pre-project data to be able to make that correlation, was on Appleton Street. So, we did count eastbound and westbound traffic on Appleton Street, which we expected to be the main—sorry, Franklin.

Alderperson William Siebers (District 1) 15:27
Okay, Franklin.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 15:28
In my head, I was saying Franklin. At the Appleton and Franklin intersection, we were measuring Franklin Street traffic. We always expected Franklin to be probably the most logical bypass. We did see an increase of about 12% on Franklin Street. Now, of course, there could be other factors at play here—right?—in terms of different businesses that are open that—different things that were going on before or after.

Alderperson William Siebers (District 1) 16:04
12% increase—

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 16:05
Yeah.

Alderperson William Siebers (District 1) 16:06
—after the project?

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 16:07
Correct.

Alderperson William Siebers (District 1) 16:08
Okay.

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 16:14
Anything else? So, gauging some feedback that we've received from residents, from individuals that have sent emails, phone calls, what have you, generally speaking, it's been positively received. We've been very thrilled at that result. I think it just has taken some time for people to get used to the change. But overall, people have felt safer getting in and out of their vehicles when they park. There's a buffer with the bike lane. You know, I've seen—I saw a mom just recently with a little baby, and I was like, oh my goodness, she's out, but she was in the bike lane, and just getting in and out of that vehicle and having that bit of buffer from the vehicular traffic has been noticeably well received.

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 17:02
A few things, if there have been any comments, have been on merging and transition points, particularly the merge heading eastbound. We have not had anybody—any reportable accidents in that area. I think it's just a training thing, just getting the users of the corridor to kind of know when to merge, how early to merge. But there have not been any accidents noted with that area. Knock on wood.

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 17:34
I basically already had said it here that people have felt safer with that buffer zone between parking lane and traffic lane. The businesses have stated that they've appreciated it. We have heard from some people that they did not want it initially and have received it well as they've experienced it and traveled the corridor. Also, the police staff stated that their traffic stops are easier and safer for them, and again, with those complete shutdowns, are able to close that much easier than they were previously.

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 18:11
So just to kind of do a recap here, phase one—this this was reiterated on the six-month report that had been provided. Project introductions and education occurred summer through fall of 2023. Outreach and conversations continued through winter and spring of this past—well this year, I suppose. We're still in '24. And then there were intended to be some farmers market appearances this summer, but in the absence of the director, those did not transpire, which I think is fine. I think based on what we've seen, we haven't really needed to do as much of that.

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 18:50
So, with that said, I did reach out to our consultant who helped with our marketing and such, and what we kind of discussed was utilizing those funds that were planned at that part of the contract this summer, this fall—we're going to shift and utilize that, those remaining dollars to do a project wrap up. Our conversations kind of centered around doing a showcase, as I'll call it—so a video showing the downtown, showing the bikes traveling it. We talked about doing it on Small Business Saturday so then we can show our bustling, busy downtown, get some bicyclists traveling through there, and then we will obviously pull that together, do some interviews, get some stakeholder feedback, and then present that as our final wrap up of the project at our third reporting period, which isn't—based on the original time frame, was supposed to be February, and we'll get into that a bit more here on our last slide, but that's another piece that we kind of wanted feedback from you on how far, how much longer do we want to go with this because we will need a final vote on whether or not we keep it as intended or as we changed I should say.

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 20:07
So, I kind of highlighted some of this already. Changes have been well received. We will continue to engage with stakeholders for feedback. We're planning on meeting with ADI and some of their groups, bicyclist groups. Our consultant is doing some of those contacts already, so that we'll have additional feedback for the final end of the project. Put question marks here because, again, we wanted to gauge your interest on how long do we want to collect data for. It's pricey to continue collecting this data. It's a lot of staff time. Do we want to do it through June? Do we want to end in February? So, I'll let Eric maybe give a little more feedback on what that data could look like, whether—wherever we decide to stop with it. But that's one thing that we would probably ask for some opinion on. And again from that, and we'll include this data on our final project wrap up, and then include that showcase piece with the video to show how things have changed. And then ultimately it will be final project, consideration for hope hopeful approval.

Alderperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 21:12
Any questions? Comments? Alder Firkus.

Alderperson Brad Firkus (District 3) 21:17
Thank you, Chair. One of the things that's maybe been a little bit of a wrinkle in this data collection is we've had a coup—we have a couple of projects in College Avenue that have been causing some lane closures to not just the automobile traffic but also the bike lane traffic. Couple of times where projects have required some short-term closures of College Avenue outright. And on one hand, I can see this maybe being a—giving us a more robust set of scenarios to test this configuration through, but also at the same time, it is kind of eating into the amount of time we are able to capture data with kind of a baseline setting of the new configuration. So, I guess are there any thoughts on, has this been more challenging because of the projects downtown, or has this been maybe a bit of a good thing in how it's been able to give us a little bit of, like, okay, how does—what happens when we have to deviate from normal, perfect conditions into some of these other situations?

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 22:15
I'll let Eric weigh in on that one.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 22:22
Finding time—finding the right time to do a traffic count anywhere it seems these days, is a challenge. We had—as you probably are alluding to, we had in 2022 and again in 2023 half the downtown torn up for projects which was altering traffic flow. At various times, we've had bridges in the flats closed. We now have the Drew Street hill closed. And so, trying to thread the needle and find times where we can get like a representative and direct comparison type traffic count is—it seems to be nearly impossible.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 23:07
So, what—the way we tried to control variables to the extent that we could, was to do it at the same time of year. So, we did them in June, in the, you know, the pre project counts were done in June, or they were there were some, some factors that we can apply to account for that. And then we did the 12 month in June again. So—but trying to—I don't think there was probably a single day in the last three years where we could get a perfectly clean traffic count down there.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 23:45
I do think that—I guess it's for the committee and the council to decide, but I do think that regardless of what street is open or which lane is open, I'm going to come—we could spend another $5,000 and dozens and dozens of hours of staff time to come back and tell you that the traffic count is plus 1% or minus 2% and I don't know—I guess it's for the committee and the council to decide if that's worth—if the value is there for that.

Alderperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 24:17
You have a follow up?

Alderperson Brad Firkus (District 3) 24:18
Yes, with that in mind, and if we were going to continue to ask staff to collect data, we're talking about collecting data through the fall and winter, which are notoriously low points in the year for non-vehicular traffic. And I do wonder how much value we can get for the amount of time we'd be asking staff to put into it to say, hey, give us, give us November, December, January, you know. So, I I'm kind of inclined to say, hey, you know, we've got a 12 months here. This is probably as good as it's going to get. I can't—it would almost be weird to say, like, okay, well, the next six months show us something really, really off. Was that just an aberration of those six months or for the first 12 months? You know, it's like. So that's just kind of my thought on that.

Alderperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 25:10
I would tend to agree on that. I did have one question going back just a little ways, and that was—I know when we had the initial discussions about this project, we had a lot of business folks come talk to us about with concerns. Have we reached out—other than soliciting comments have we reached out to Appleton Downtown and some of the businesses to get any feedback about where they are after this?

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 25:42
Yes, I actually have a meeting this week with ADI, with our consultant, and there is another stakeholder group that we intend to bring to the table to discuss this in more depth, and intending to corporate—incorporate that into our quote, unquote, final reporting period. So yes. I mean, there have been brief conversations that have transpired to date, but we are intending to get more in depth with them soon to kind of get some final feedback.

Alderperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 26:11
Okay. And then one other thing that I thought is, is there, have we—is there a plan to present this to the bike and pedestrian advisory committee, or and kind of—you talked about getting some bike groups in, but we have one on our own city. So, I was thinking that maybe it would be a good idea to at least do this presentation to those folks.

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 26:37
Absolutely. And I think just this project in general is a really good show piece to explain what has changed, what has worked, some of the obstacles we've had to go through to get here. But yes, I would I would definitely hope that we could kind of wrap—pull this together and have this nice—show this to all those groups and present to them on our findings, certainly.

Alderperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 27:02
So, I would bring it back to committee. We've already heard Alder Firkus' views on going further with collection. I kind of agree with that. So, I'll just bring it up here. Alder Meltzer.

Alderperson Vered Meltzer (District 2) 27:13
Well, it kind of looked like—I was almost going to say Alderperson Lom—traffic engineer Lom, I feel like you had something else you wanted to say, just kind of looking at your body language.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 27:29
Thank you. I did want to just clarify. The traffic count data is what I was referring to in terms of being labor intensive and expensive to collect. The crash data is a piece of cake. We—that's an analysis that we can do quickly and with zero expense, so we can certainly continue to provide that information quite easily.

Alderperson Vered Meltzer (District 2) 27:57
I think that the crash data really is the most valuable information for our decision making and our evaluation process. So, I think that if we don't continue tracking the rest of it I'm fine with that. I do think continuing to have that crash data available and maybe doing some updates or some kind of follow up in the future to see how that number is holding up Would be valuable.

Alderperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 28:29
Anyone else? Go ahead.

Alderperson Brad Firkus (District 3) 28:34
Thank you, chair. I guess just one last thing, if we're—so this is an 18-month pilot. We're feeling pretty much like we've got a good grasp of where the data has been trending. 18 months is kind of our upper bound. Would we even consider saying, look, maybe we can make a decision whether or not this is been a successful endeavor or not in a shorter time frame. I don't know if—I'd be open to the idea at least. I'll put it at that.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 29:08
I just wanted to make sure I was acknowledged.

Alderperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 29:10
Yeah, you're on.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 29:10
Okay. It is worth pointing out that we implemented this on July 1 of 2023 so we are—because this kind of got delayed with everything, we're getting close to 18 months right now. I think it comes up the beginning of February.

Alderperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 29:30
That seems reasonable. I did have a question, and it—I shouldn't do this. This is kind of a personal brain—I know that we're thinking about that coming eastbound, where we have the intersection point, and there's a lot going on at that Richmond—Richmond and College Avenue intersection, and then, you know, then coming down to State Street where—and is the—and I've fallen victim to the, oh, yikes, I'm in the wrong lane. But is there anything we could do signage wise, like, that would be minimally expensive to kind of—I know we haven't had any crashes there yet, but I'd like to keep it that way.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 30:16
I can address that.

Alderperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 30:17
Yeah, and I'm—that's who I-I'm sorry I was, I was actually speaking to you.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 30:21
I will forewarn you that this is a little bit more complicated than it first seems. First of all, I would go back to what was mentioned earlier, which is, we've had about 2.6 million cars make—come, come eastbound into the intersection since the project started, and zero reportable crashes related to that. So what I like to say is it's not an actual safety problem; it's a perceived safety problem. People don't like that discomfort. They don't like being the one stuck in the left lane. They don't like the person that comes up next to them at the light and jumps the line. But in reality, two things. One, it isn't actually causing safety problems, but perhaps just as importantly, is we need some people to go straight in that lane, and I think of it akin to some freeway on ramps that you'll see where everybody comes into the on ramp, there's two lanes, and then suddenly it narrows down to one lane before you merge onto the highway. If you think about what's actually happening there, when the light turns green, the cars start to stretch out—right? There's the first car goes, and then there's a gap, and the second car goes. And so, there's these gaps that are naturally created, where, if you don't have people in that left lane moving over and filling those gaps, you're getting fewer cars through on the green light.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 30:40
And so, we could find a way to communicate that to people that they shouldn't be going straight in the left lane, or we could literally force the issue by blocking off that lane, but we'd be kind of shooting ourselves in the foot,

because what that's going to do is create a longer line of traffic trying to get through, because now we can only get 14 cars through on the green instead of 20, let's say.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 32:15
So, to directly get at your question there—we actually spent a fair amount of time looking at, how could we sign this? How could we make people feel a little bit better about this? And there's just so much going on. You're—as a traffic engineer, you're trying to manage the driver's attention—right?—and so you want to make sure that their attention is focused on the right things. And they're coming into this intersection, and we're communicating to them that there's a railroad crossing coming up and that there's a state trunk highway coming up and a traffic signal, and now a merge and all these different things, and we have to be careful about drawing their attention away from, say, the railroad crossing to some sign that tells them.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 33:00
So, we looked at, even, you know, could we do overhead signs at some cost that would be like through traffic in this lane, state street traffic in this lane, and so on. And we kind of went in a big circle and came back around to there there—there's probably an opportunity to put a sign that would say something like College Ave—you know, "College Avenue through traffic, use right lane," something simple like that, and have it back quite a ways, like west of Bennett somewhere to give people time to react to it.

Eric Lom (City Traffic Engineer) 33:36
I'll tell you, I think it will have very minimal effect on the actual behavior of drivers, but it might be able to help people answer questions when they say, "Well, what are you guys doing about that?" And, I'm sorry, one last thing is, I guess we knew, going into this project, we had pros and cons, right? I remember coming in, we had slides, pros and cons. This was on the cons list. We knew going into this that this was probably going to be the most challenging part of the project, and I think it's—while it is imperfect, I think the safety record speaks for itself.

Alderperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 34:07
Okay. Well, if there's nothing else, thank you both for the good information and I I'm thinking, like Alder Firkus said, and like you reminded us, 18 months is in February, so that's probably a complete—a soon enough break. Okay, so yes, so can—

Alderperson Vered Meltzer (District 2) 34:33
Move to receive and file.

Alderperson Brad Firkus (District 3) 34:36
Second.

Alderperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 34:36
Alright, we have a motion and a second. All those in favor, please signify by saying, aye. Aye. All right, that passes five zero.