

Item 25-0173: Approve College Avenue Lane Reconfiguration

Common Council

Wed, Mar 05, 2025 7:00PM

Mayor Jake Woodford 12:35

Moving along to public participation. Common Council sets aside time at each meeting for public participation limited to a total of 30 minutes per meeting unless extended by the Council. We ask that anyone signed up to speak on an item that appears on the agenda limit your comments to only items that appear on the agenda and no longer than five minutes, and we'll help you keep track of the time. With that, we have one member of the public who signed up to speak, and that is Christopher Nellis. Christopher, welcome. And again, please state your name and address for the record.

Christopher Nellis (OB's Brau Haus) 13:15

My name is Christopher Nellis, 523 West College Avenue and 525 West College Avenue. I do have material to hand out. It's going to be about a five-to-eight-minute speech regarding the lane reconfiguration change.

Mayor Jake Woodford 13:39

You have five minutes under the council rules.

Christopher Nellis (OB's Brau Haus) 13:41

Perfect. I'll make it as fast as possible. Does anyone want to copy? Or maybe the alderpeople?

Mayor Jake Woodford 13:48

If you'd like, we can take—we'll take a copy and add it to the record.

Mayor Jake Woodford 13:52

I got about four minutes.

Christopher Nellis (OB's Brau Haus) 14:24

Thank you. Council members, my name is Christopher Nellis, and I'm the owner of Old Bavarian Brau Haus or OB's Brau Haus. For a little bit of history, we've been downtown Appleton for a total of 25 years serving German cuisines to our guests. I'm very happy and lucky to be a part of the downtown district. The beauty and diversity of downtown is heavily reliant and influenced by the small business owners and their employees. People depend on these businesses downtown for jobs providing financial security for their families and children, to go shopping, or to go for a walk and congregate and the list could go on.

Christopher Nellis (OB's Brau Haus) 14:55

I'm before you today to express my concerns and the concerns of a few other fellow business owners about the road diet or smart streets. But I can only speak for myself. Before I begin, I would just like to say that downtown Appleton is primarily a commercial district but does happen to have some residential condos or apartments. Smart streets was primarily introduced to us to add bike lanes to College Avenue and to have a better lane configuration to improve the flow of traffic and safety. Program's website points out the importance of these streets to enable transportation, commerce, and social interactions. It also touts within the first pages of the website to enhance the outdoor experience, support local businesses, and bolster a welcoming downtown. It further explains that for safety there will be an expected reduction in vehicle accidents, improved pedestrian cross crossing, smoother traffic flow, and improve visibility turning. Along with the aforementioned, it also

explains about the bike lanes, dedicated to cyclists, scooters, and other wheeled vehicles, along with mentioning growth by creating a livable, pleasant neighborhood environment with slower speeds, allowing people to see what downtown has to offer and the attraction of bicycle and pedestrian groups to spend money in shops and restaurants.

Christopher Nellis (OB's Brau Haus) 15:57

There were multiple studies or metrics public—published on the Smart Streets website during the periods of July 2023 through January of 2024, August 2023 through July 2024, and finally, August 2023 and December 2024. These were pretty vague and also extremely brief on the reporting on bicycle count and pedestrian count. For both of these counts, according to the website, on the first two reporting periods, pedestrians and bicycles, they were only counted for a 24 period out of a one-year window, for a total of 48 hours from July 2023 to July 2024, for a total of 33 bicycles, or 1.37 bikes an hour. Adjusted for peak hour usage, assuming all bikes use the lanes from 8am to 8pm that is 2.75 bikes an hour. This time frame is only half a percentage of the total hours in a year, or two days out of 365. The study itself even suggests, with an asterisk on certain metrics, that there's a low confidence due to small data sets. This is not, or does not seem like an adequate amount of time to accurately propose a median usage of bicycle lane for cyclists throughout a calendar year. Mentioning a calendar year, it goes to say that these bicycle lanes can really only be used to 7, 8—7 to 8 months out of the year, and typically only during fair weather.

Christopher Nellis (OB's Brau Haus) 16:41

This year and a half trial program was made to make bicycling downtown safer and more accessible and to bolster more bicycle business downtown. While this seems to be the case safety-wise for bicyclists, it also appears that these bike lanes are seldom used. I would have thought to have seen a noticeable difference in bicycle traffic over this time span, but there just not has been. Cyclists are still using the sidewalks, motorized bikes that go 20 to 30 miles an hour are in the bike lanes, which is a mass—massive safety issue for anyone leaving their vehicle. And there's been zero increase in bicycle business for my business with these changes.

Christopher Nellis (OB's Brau Haus) 17:13

Unfortunately, it has had the opposite effect for my restaurant, by decreasing business by an estimated 20 to 30% which in turn also means 20 to 30% less business for my staff as well. I've read the ADI business owner survey, and this also seems to be the case for other businesses, with one stating, quite literally, that they will probably have to close if the configuration is not restored to its original. It has been over a year and a half and at the rate of 2.7 bikes an hour between 8am and 8pm it would seem that having an extra mini-van or four door coupe park out front of a storefront with four people would be more beneficial for downtown business.

Mayor Jake Woodford 18:13

About 30 seconds remain.

Christopher Nellis (OB's Brau Haus) 18:15

Okay. I will just read a couple of the quotes from businesses that were overlooked in the February 24 meeting. One person that said "we had had so many people message us that they will no longer come to our location downtown due to the bike lanes." Another had said "30% lost revenue. People complaining about trying to get to their studio." Another one actually had stated that "if things don't change back, I may have to close." Another one stated "traffic gets back up; hard to turn on to College Avenue."

Christopher Nellis (OB's Brau Haus) 18:44

What I'm asking for is that this vote is reconsidered and shelved for a few months, so that there would be more time for business owners to respond. The program's gone on for a year and a half, and I don't see the harm to

postponing the changes for three months to make a more accurate assessment and to poll the local businesses. Thank you for your time.

Mayor Jake Woodford 19:06

Is there anyone else who wish to speak on an item that appears on the agenda? You might have missed a sign in sheet. Okay, hearing none, we'll close public participation.

[Cut]

Mayor Jake Woodford 23:22

We'll get started with the item from municipal services committee. All right. This is 25-0173, approve College Avenue Lane reconfiguration. We have a motion looking for a second. We have a motion and a second to approve. Open the floor for discussion. Alder Fenton.

Aldersperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 23:49

Thank you, Your Honor. If I could—the speaker referred to the loss of parking spaces as if there were a substantial number of parking spaces lost in the reconfiguration. Could I direct my question to Public Works or somebody to how many parking places were lost during the College Avenue recon—because my understanding was that there were none.

Mayor Jake Woodford 24:15

Director Jungwirth.

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 24:17

Correct. I—you are correct that the amount of stalls is negligible. And in fact, I did look back at our revenue data for College Avenue, specifically pre lane configuration to post lane configuration, and we actually have an increase in revenue of 9% on College Avenue alone. So, the use of the stalls is certainly still there.

Aldersperson Denise Fenton (District 6) 24:36

Thank you.

Mayor Jake Woodford 24:39

Alder Wolff.

Aldersperson Nate Wolff (District 12) 24:41

Thank you, Chair. Last week I posed a question on Facebook after searching for feedback on what people were thinking regards to the reconfiguration, and I had 147 responses. Of those 147 responses, seven of them were against keeping it as it is now. The other 140 wanted it to stay the same, so will be voting to keep it as is.

Aldersperson Nate Wolff (District 12) 25:15

However, a lot of respondents did bring up the entries into it, especially the Richmond path in as being a problem. They continuously brought up signage needing to be put there, or something that, you know—something to let them know that that was coming, so that there wouldn't be as many issues getting into the lanes. So, I would ask staff to look at into that and try to, you know, address the people's concerns regarding that. Other than that, people seem to really like this, and some people seem to really hate it, but it does seem like the majority of the people of Appleton want it to stay.

Mayor Jake Woodford 26:07

Alder Schultz.

Aldersperson Alex Schultz (District 9) 26:10

Thank you, Mayor. I'll be voting in favor of keeping the lane configuration. I think while our speaker brought up some valid points, particularly as it pertains to the electric bikes traveling at pretty significant high rates in the new lanes being a challenge for drivers exiting their vehicles. I think that is something we have to consider or take a look at. But that's part of why we're doing a trial period is to identify issues that might arise if we accept this as our new configuration, and we're certainly going to be open to making some modifications, particularly when it comes to intersection challenges, and this one in particular, the electric bike. So, I don't take that lightly, and I appreciate the comments that were brought forth, and certainly, I think the reports that staff has shared about the effects of, you know, duration, safety, and timing were not as, I think, as significant as we had hoped from this change, but they are something. And I think more importantly, the nature of the downtown and the sort of climate change for people being a little bit feeling a little bit safer, a little bit more at ease, and having the ability to enjoy the downtown businesses, I think, is more important than sort of the small numbers we're seeing in the changes with the effect of the lane changes. And I think those will grow over time. And certainly we have challenges that we will have to address as we—if we accept us as we move forward. So, I would encourage my colleagues to vote for this.

Mayor Jake Woodford 27:46

Alder Jones.

Aldersperson Vaya Jones (District 10) 27:49

Thank you, Chair. Just a quick question. I know when we had discussed this originally, there was concerns that it was already a done deal because it would cost a lot of money to change it back. Can I ask the question of how much that cost would be if we decided to go against the current reconfiguration?

Mayor Jake Woodford 28:07

It was about \$75,000 for the for the paint contract to do this.

Aldersperson Vaya Jones (District 10) 28:12

Okay. And then we'd have to pay that if we decided to vote no on this tonight?

Mayor Jake Woodford 28:16

That's correct.

Aldersperson Vaya Jones (District 10) 28:16

Okay, I am going to vote yes on this. I have also, like Alder Wolff had done, had reached out to individuals, and to be completely honest, the majority of them had completely forgotten that there was a reconfiguration. It just fit as well. One individual did have a lot of anger, and it was very much at herself because she forgot to get in the correct lane when she needed to. That was the only negative. So, thank you.

Mayor Jake Woodford 28:44

Alder Van Zeeland.

Alderson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 28:47

Thank you, Chair. Since the reconfiguration, I personally have felt that it's easier to look for bicycles. Feels like there's more space. Is that by design, or with these electric bikes, if we did go back, would there be any benefit to going back to the prior reconfiguration as far as safety? I guess I'd ask Director Jungwirth.

Mayor Jake Woodford 29:13

Director Jungwirth.

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 29:17

As it stands with the bike lanes there, I believe there would be the ability to use those, whereas previously, there was not a designated space for the scooters that, you know, like I said, having that that those bike lanes added would give them an avenue to be able to go down designated I believe, for them.

Alderson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 29:40

If I could just follow up. So, with them on the road, going back to the old configuration, would that give more space for drivers exiting, or is—would there be no change at all?

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 29:55

Can you repeat that question?

Alderson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 29:56

Yeah, so if people are—if I understand that the prior speaker brought up bikes on the sidewalk, but I'm talking specifically electric bikes in the bike lane. I read something in here you have to look out for—you really have to watch out when you open the car door. There's concerns about bikes on the road. If we were to go back to the prior configuration, I thought that, previously, there was less space for bicyclists of any kind, including electric bikes, and people who were parking to be able to get along. I guess I'm just wondering, if we went back, is there any benefit to doing that?

Director Laura Jungwirth (Public Works) 30:39

Thank you for clarifying for me. Basically, the bicycles would have to be within the lane of vehicular traffic flow. So, the lane likely closest to the parking would be taken up, a portion of, with any bicyclists or motorized bicyclists.

Alderson Katie Van Zeeland (District 5) 30:58

Thank you.

Mayor Jake Woodford 31:01

Alder Firkus.

Alderson Brad Firkus (District 3) 31:03

Thank you, Mayor. The decision to go down this route was a pretty gutsy one, and right out the gate it did get some pretty negative feedback, because people—I think it was hard to imagine how having less lanes could accommodate the traffic that was down there and make anything better, but with the time and effort that staff, yourself, and a lot of community members have put in, we've seen what this is capable of, and it's capable of making a calmer, more people-friendly environment. And that's a big change. I mean, that's a big game to get out of this. Kind of remind me of a quote I had read probably a couple months after this pilot started, and I think it applies this, "Sometimes you have to make people happy against their will. Don't try and find consensus for everything, especially on things on mobility, because you will not convince everybody. All the projects we did

faced opposition, but in the end, most of them were accepted because they were good projects." I think after the pilot has concluded, we can say this was a good project. This was a good effort. And I just want to thank everyone that put the time in and gave feedback and made this project successful. Thank you.

Mayor Jake Woodford 32:11

Alder Alfheim.

Aldersperson Kristin Alfheim (District 11) 32:13

You remembered my number. I appreciate it. When we started this conversation, I'd been speaking to Jen Stephany, and the noise and the speed and the side-by-side revving was the primary nuisance. So, our goal was to, in essence, add the bike lanes, reduce it down, which would really bring down the speeds and get rid of the side-by-side noise and the drag racing and the potential to increase bike traffic. The number one goal was not to necessarily increase bike traffic. It was to narrow the flow of the traffic, to calm it, and a byproduct was that we would then also have bike paths, which is great. So, I think it's unfair to measure our foot traffic based on how many people got off of bicycles this year. That wasn't the point. The good news is they now have a safe method to do so.

Aldersperson Kristin Alfheim (District 11) 33:07

When we first presented this, Jen and ADI shared with us, I would say it's a conservative number to say, 80% of the businesses were scared to death of it. They were scared to death. And when I talked to Jen last week, she said that in their survey, she did acknowledge that there were some people that had negative feedback and a negative reaction, but she also shared with me that 60%—60%—gave positive feedback. The same people that 85% were against doing it are now 60% positive. In fact, most of them reported an increase, or I shouldn't say that—they reported no decrease in foot traffic.

Aldersperson Kristin Alfheim (District 11) 33:51

So, I think in the end, we attempted to reduce the noise. The number one issue four years ago when I came in here was to reduce the noise. And I think that we have effectively done that. I think there is a valid conversation to have about cross traffic at the busy times where we've made it almost seamless to cross with very little increase from north—from east to west. I think those side roads at certain times of the day are feeling a crunch, and it's extending their traffic, their travel time, by multiple minutes. Again, could we blow that off? Maybe. But we should look at it, and I think that's a fair thing to talk about.

Aldersperson Kristin Alfheim (District 11) 34:34

I am very, very happy. When I survey people I talk to the staff, the people that are trying to come outside and serve us food during the day or during the evening, and the staff are the ones that appreciate crossing College Avenue is safer when they come and go from work. The staff is appreciative that they can actually hear people when they take orders. That didn't take place. We as Council tried to sit outside numerous times after our meetings, and we could not hold a conversation. That has not been the problem. We have not had that in the last year.

Aldersperson Kristin Alfheim (District 11) 35:10

So, I think this is a success story. Is it perfect? No. We'll never have perfect. We'll never stop continuing to want it to be quieter, to want it to be safer, and want it to increase traffic, but I think that we have made a bold step, and it has been successful, and we'll continue to tweak it from here. So, I'm very supportive of this. Thank you.

Mayor Jake Woodford 35:31

Alder Smith.

Alderson Martyn Smith (District 4) 35:34

Thank you, Mayor. I'd like to concur that I also received strong support from people as I talk to them about this issue, and I find it impressive just on safety alone, that with virtually the same car flow, we have such a good—such a better number as far as accidents, and then also the obvious safety of having marked bike lanes. So, I think that's a strong argument.

Alderson Martyn Smith (District 4) 36:01

But beyond that, the question of, is this good for businesses? I had a person in my district call up who's a business owner along College Avenue and was strongly against the new configuration. And then I also hearing Mr. Nellis talk about this, you know, I think that this is a serious issue. But reaching out to Jennifer Stephany, I do think that the weight of the opinion on this from business owners downtown is that this is a good move, and it's something that we should stay with. And I will go with that, even though I think that listening to the businesses and making sure we support these downtown businesses is really a priority.

Alderson Martyn Smith (District 4) 36:42

I'm encouraged about the noise, though I would just mark that we really don't have any data at all about noise, whether this has helped the noise or whether it has hurt the noise. And I would just put in a plug for the fact that we need—if we're going to talk about make decisions based on noise, and think about noise, we need to get ways to get data so we can say what is helping and what is not helping. Because basically, it's all anecdotal at this point about the noise level. So, I'm hopeful that it has helped, but we don't—we don't completely know that, and I wish we did.

Alderson Martyn Smith (District 4) 37:14

Anyways, beyond I just like to say I'm I think that this was a great job by our engineers, and I hope that we can continue to take bold steps in trying to reconfigure in ways that may be different but that will, in the long run, make life better. And I think this is an example of such a project, and I intend to vote in favor of keeping this.

Mayor Jake Woodford 37:37

Any further discussion? Hearing none, we have a motion and a second to approve. Please cast your votes. Motion passes 13 to zero. The item has been approved.