

**State and High Streets Two-Way Conversion Feasibility Study
Public Advisory Committee/Community Advisors Meeting Report
Portland Public Library
June 3, 2015**

In attendance:

PAC Members: David Marshall, Kevin Donoghue, Steve Landry, Ian Jacob, Anne Pringle, Ron Spinella, Michael Connolly, William Barry, Carl Eppich, Lauren Wayne, Rosanne Graef

CA Members: Chris O’Neil, Damon Yakovleff, Ben Shambaugh, Chris Cantwell, Bill Bray

City Staff: Mike Bobinsky, Alex Jaegerman, Christine Grimando, Bruce Hyman

Consulting Staff: Tom Errico, TY Lin: Carol Morris, Scott Hastings; Morris Communications

Meeting started at 6 pm

Carol Morris opened the meeting and reviewed the agenda and the process for the evening. She noted that this was the last meeting, and the Advisory Committee would be asked to vote at the end as to whether to recommend moving to the next step. She said that in this study, it was particularly challenging for the committee because there were clearly pros and cons on both sides – making the change back to two-way or leaving things the way they are now. Their role was to set a clear direction for the City Council.

Tom Errico then provided a brief history of the corridor. It had been designated as a state route in 1955 before being converted to one-way streets in 1972. In 1999, PACTS conducted a study of traffic around Deering Oaks Park that began to look into the idea of restoring the roads to two-way traffic. The 2005 Portland Peninsula Transportation Study also included a chapter on the potential for restoring two-way traffic. This directly led to the current effort via a 2012 preliminary study.

Tom then reviewed the Purpose and Need statement to remind the committees what the study outcomes were trying to achieve.

Tom presented additional data that had been collected in response to questions brought up by the committees. The city conducted an additional speed study in the spring of 2015 to augment the original study done by the consulting team in the summer of 2014. The data from this study confirmed the earlier one, with average, peak, and 85th percentile speeds being very similar to the findings of the original study. The consulting team took a closer look at off-peak hours in response to concerns raised by the committees and the public. They found that a small percentage of vehicles were traveling above 35mph and that the 85th percentile speed was above the posted speed limit for the entire corridor. The team also collected speed data from Washington Ave. between Cumberland and Oxford Sts. This data was used to evaluate the

potential effects on speed in a similar road that is now two-way. They found similar speeds to those currently seen on State and High, possibly indicating a minimal decrease in speeds under a two-way scenario. Tom cautioned though that their case study research had seen lower traffic speeds post-conversion in almost all cases.

The team also took a closer look at the intersections that would not be signalized under the two-way scenario, taking spot counts for am and pm peaks to augment the previous traffic counts. The model showed that these intersections would still work under a two-way scenario, though there may be some acceptable loss of service.

The team also undertook a detailed look at truck deliveries throughout the corridor. They found most businesses already took deliveries from side streets and so would see minimal impact from a change in traffic flow on State and High. The State Theatre was the primary concern. They currently block traffic on High Street when trucks are maneuvering to access the loading dock there. Tom felt that this is already a complicated process and so would not be made much worse by a change in traffic flow. He added that making the roads two way would provide an easier detour to traffic unable to use the road during such events.

A representative of the State Theatre agreed that it was not impossible, but added that there would be increased costs for them as they would need additional staff to block traffic in both directions.

Winter snow removal had been a big question at previous meetings and the consulting team worked with city staff to determine what impacts a change would have. Currently snow is often left on the streets as one-way traffic is more forgiving of a narrowing of the road. In a two-way scenario, it would have to be completely cleared after every storm. This would add an estimated \$72,000-\$91,000 a year to the city's ~\$1.2 million annual snow-removal budget.

Tom went on to present the most recent cost estimate. The entire project was projected to cost around \$3.2 million, with signal upgrade making up \$2 million of that cost. Tom noted that the signals in the corridor were old and would need upgrading soon anyway so much of this cost would be required even if the road were to stay in a one way configuration. This makes the actual cost of conversion \$1.2 million.

There was some discussion over when State and High would be repaved for regular maintenance and it was determined that they were not in MaineDOT's long range plan for paving.

Tom went on to conduct a quick review of the previous findings.

Traffic volumes are not expected to change significantly. They would distribute about evenly over the two roads.

Level of service would remain about the same, with some losses and some gains. Congress St. intersections and the intersection of Spring and High would all see a loss in level of service while York at High would see a gain.

Overall the corridor would see a loss of about 31 on-street parking spots. This could be offset by a gain of as many as 20 spots on State Street through Deering Oaks. There are currently 327 on-street parking spaces on State and High Streets together.

The team has reviewed the plan with the Bicycle Coalition of Maine (BCM) and found them favorable to it. BCM did suggest improved signage and pavement markings along the corridor.

A modeling of pedestrian conditions found minimal change in level of service but the consulting team felt that model used was not fully able to fully evaluate the relatively low traffic volumes.

There was some discussion over the safest pedestrian situation and whether a protected phase would remove car/pedestrian accidents.

Tom reviewed an example of the geometry change diagrams that were provided for each intersection. He noted that some intersections did assume encroachment from trucks making turns but that in these instances truck volumes were low enough that it would not be a significant issue. The team had shown the plan to Deb Andrews, City of Portland, and she had seen no issues with the changes in terms of historic preservation standards.

Carol took the floor and reviewed some of the feedback they received at the two public workshops. They had been well attended, primarily by residents of the immediate area, and opinions were mixed on whether to convert the streets or not. Loss of parking was the biggest stumbling block for people, followed by congestion and snow removal. A more comfortable residential neighborhood, including safer walking conditions, was the biggest attraction.

Carol then asked for questions from the committees.

A committee member asked what the next steps were.

Tom explained that the study findings would go to the City Transportation, Sustainability and Energy Committee and then the City Council. If they approved it, a design phase would happen to layout the pavement markings, signs, signals, and geometries. With this done, once funding is found, construction could begin.

A question was asked if there would be much diversion to the Fore River Parkway. Tom replied that their models did not show a significant diversion.

A question was asked about how the double issue of the State Theatre and the Westin Hotel was being handled.

A representative of the State Theatre stated that they and the Westin had recently worked out a system with the city to improve operations on that stretch of road. This would have to be reworked if the roads were converted.

A question was asked about whether the traffic volume assumptions took into account the potential for people to move to other transportation modes as those modes improved under a two-way scenario.

Tom responded that the models did not include any mode shift assumptions.

A committee member asked if there was room for wider climbing lanes to accommodate bikes. Tom replied that the team had looked at this a few times and found that there just wasn't room for that. In talking with BCM they agreed that it was a shared lane situation and that clear signage and markings would have to be provided.

A committee member said that the space constraints were based on the turn lanes, which were designed for the predicted traffic volumes and wondered if initially some of the turns could be left out until they were truly needed.

Tom replied that it was a fair point that projects can be done incrementally to build to future growth but that in this case current traffic volumes would require turn lanes in a two-way scenario. This was reinforced by the representative from MaineDOT. The project was not assuming very larger growth in traffic volumes so there is not a lot of room to be gained.

There was some discussion on this point.

A committee member noted that the number of pedestrian crashes going down was not the only safety metric. Lowering speeds would in turn lower the severity of any crashes. They also felt the change would have additional stimulus benefits both in terms of pedestrian use and economic activity. The current situation is not inviting and has a cooling effect on the corridor. The quality of life improvements stemming from this change would be significant.

A committee member asked if it was necessary to hold a vote that day. They felt that there was more information that was needed to make an informed decision. Further they said that they had asked for this information and had not been given it.

Carol replied that a member of the team had specifically talked to them about their information requests and all the information that it was possible to provide had been provided.

Tom added that the committee member's comments had directly led to portions of the updated data that Tom had presented earlier. The team had gone through all of the information requests with city staff and determined what data collection could feasibly be done based on scope and funding. They may not have personally responded but the comments directly influenced the work that was done.

A committee member stated that they felt the annual snow removal cost was significant. Upfront numbers for construction were one thing but the city was having trouble coming up with funds for the annual budget as it was.

Another committee member noted that annual cost may be notable but it was a small portion of the total snow removal budget, which was in turn a small portion of the total budget. They felt that extra snow removal was already warranted on the corridor in light of last year's winter and in that case some of the money would be spent anyway. They also noted that with the assumption that the traffic signals would need to be done anyway, the remaining \$1.2 million was a small portion of the city's total annual budget.

A committee member said that the economic benefits of undertaking the conversion had been mentioned before and that they would like to see more language on that potential in the report. The case studies claimed increased economic activity. That combined with storefronts on the corridor having increased access and visibility and the benefits to quality of life, could mean significant gains for the city that could offset the costs. They felt that the study was too focused on the conflicts between cars and other modes and did not consider the wider ramifications.

A committee member asked whether MaineDOT could deny the project if the City Council approved it.

Steve Landry of MaineDOT said that it was a state road and MaineDOT would have to sign off on any changes. This was why he is on the Advisory Committee. The roads have to get vehicular traffic across the peninsula. He also questioned the assumption that the change would lead to economic benefits. There was no way to know for sure and he felt that some of the scenarios used in the case studies were very different from the situation at hand. The project would have to show a clear benefit to warrant funding. The dollar investment of \$3 million may not be a lot for a road project, but in concert with the other projects the city is working on it adds up to a lot of money.

A committee member noted that the vote today would then send the project to City Council, which would then decide whether or not to put it in the hopper with the other capital improvement projects. The council would hash out priorities as they saw fit.

Carl Eppich of PACTS agreed that this is a feasibility project. Funding and implementing would be further down the road. He noted that PACTS has money to aid in projects and had already discussed doing a peninsula-wide signal study that could help inform the next steps of this project.

Another committee member said that all of the other major arterials such as Forest and Washington are two way and wondered why these roads were under so much scrutiny.

A committee member said that he felt that this had been an informative exercise and that it will have done the city good regardless of the outcome. He felt that some of the problems and solutions that were discussed were not particularly solid and instead the study had been looking to justify them. He didn't feel that a consensus was reached on what the problems were or even if the status quo was bad. Of the pros offered in favor of the change, He felt only two were actionable; vehicular mobility and access. He did not feel the safety and economic vibrancy points were reliable. He said that in a feasibility study, it was on the study to prove that such a change was needed or warranted and he did not see a clear benefit to outweigh the potential risks.

Carol noted that from a process perspective, while he may not have perceived the original list of problems generated by the committees as problems, many people did perceive them as such, and that was also validated in the public meetings.

There was some discussion about the nature of the vote to be held. An example vote statement, which had gone out to the committee prior to the meeting, was presented.

A committee member said that he personally supported the change on the merits of the transportation improvements it would involve. Any other benefits would be welcome but unnecessary to debate as the transportation benefits were sufficient to warrant support.

Another committee member agreed and added that costs of the project were tiny compared to most infrastructure projects.

A committee member said that as things stood at the time, she was a no vote. She did not care what the cost was but did need assurance that if they were to make changes it would result in a better user experience.

Another committee member agreed, saying that additional information was needed. He saw the conversion as a dramatic change and while there was opportunity for improvement, he needed to be convinced that this would result in something better.

Another committee member felt that the project was a bit of a wash. There were some improvements but not in everything he wanted to see and there were some drawbacks as well.

There was some discussion over whether the vote should be restricted to whether the committee found the project "feasible" and not include any judgment on whether it was "advisable".

A committee member said that he lived and worked in the corridor and he saw clear and actionable benefits in terms of livability and improvements to non-vehicular transportation. He wanted to make sure that any vote taken today would further the conversation and worried that a no vote would end any further discussion. He wanted to retain the ability to address the concerns that people had raised.

There was discussion of the exact wording of the vote to be held. Ultimately the following language was decided upon:

"The committee finds that the findings of the study indicate a two-way conversion is feasible and that the changes to the transportation infrastructure will support the existing mix of land uses and neighborhoods in the area."

A committee member commented that purpose and needs statement had included language that indicated a desire to see improvements to livability and other non-transportation aspects. They felt that these aspects were not being adequately addressed.

Another committee member agreed and said that that was why there was push back occurring at this stage.

Alex Jaegerman, City of Portland's Planning Director, said that the purpose and needs statement said that they would evaluate whether a two-way conversion would be an improvement to the neighborhood. This was ultimately a qualitative statement. The study team had quantified everything they could and people seemed to have those measurements in mind as they were approaching the vote. Livability is why they were there and why the project was undertaken. The data was by nature imperfect and he charged people to vote in favor of the project if they felt that it would improve the neighborhoods it affected.

The vote was called. 7 voted in favor, 2 voted against and 2 abstained.

Carol thanked everyone for their time, interest and patience, and the meeting was closed at 8:10 pm.