

State and High Streets Two-Way Conversion Study

Public Meeting #1

State of Maine Room, Portland City Hall

September 8th, 2014

After a review of the project process, scope, goals, and existing condition data by Tom Errico of T.Y. Lin International and Carol Morris of Morris Communications the floor was opened to the public for questions and comments.

She began with making the point that everyone in the room is likely to have opinions on this topic before coming into the process, and asked in spite of that, that the public keep an open mind during the process. She said that the public involvement component includes three meetings of the Public Advisory Committee and Community Advisors and two public meetings. A purpose and need statement has been drafted and she asked for comments on this, along with a list of potential benefits and challenges that had been created by the Advisory Committees.

Tom then explained that the consulting team will undertake a collection of data to establish existing conditions in the study area. This effort is already well underway and some of the findings would be presented that evening. Forecasts would be created to model traffic for the larger area for both two-way and one-way possible scenarios. A limited set of alternative possibilities within those two would be created. The results would then be analyzed and recommendations arrived at through the public process. At the conclusion, a final report will be generated.

Tom noted that seven intersections and eight road segments met or exceeded MaineDOT qualifications for high crash locations. The team had not yet fully examined the types of crashes involved but he noted that some of the segments were primarily parking and sideswipe related. He also noted that these numbers included all types of crashes for all modes and that the team would be breaking them down into more detail in the future. He then reviewed existing and currently planned bicycle infrastructure and transit service in the region.

The consulting team has established baseline travel times (AM and PM peaks) for traveling between I-295 and York St. on both State and High Streets. This work also included snapshot speeds that traffic was traveling on certain segments. Traffic counts were conducted at 20 major intersections along the corridor. These counts included vehicular traffic, heavy truck traffic, and bicycle traffic making all turning movements at each intersection. Pedestrian crossing movements were also counted. Peaks were noted at 8AM and 5PM with the PM peak being the highest. High Street carried more traffic than State at all times of day.

The meeting was then opened up to questions and comments.

A resident of Peaks Island who works in town spoke about how they did not see making State and High two-way as conversion but instead a restoration back to the original form. He noted that the existing conditions data had seemed very car centric and that he did not feel that traffic flow should be a top priority. He described a friend that has lived on High Street since before the switch to one-way traffic and the change they had observed as it changed from a residential local street to a “highway”. The one-way streets were seen as a perceived barrier, if not an actual one, to pedestrian traffic moving across the peninsula. The streets were cited as a break in the urban form and the commenter asked that the study take into account some of the more qualitative quality of life aspects of the change.

Tom responded that there were pedestrian use measures involved and that qualitative aspects was part of the Purpose and Needs Statement and would be considered even if it did not have a numeric base like the data being presented that day.

A resident and cyclist noted that part of the long-term plan for the area had been for the Fore River Parkway to take some of the traffic from downtown streets like State and High. They asked if the study would be considering them.

Tom replied that it would. A traffic modeling covering all the surrounding streets was being constructed to look at diversion effects and would definitely include the Fore River Parkway.

A resident of Westbrook who works at Sacred Heart noted a concern about winter snow removal. Currently State in particular can get very narrow in the winter and the effects of that for a two-way street could possibly be more disruptive. They also noted a concern about lost parking.

Tom answered that snow removal was a concern that they were working with city staff to address. He noted that there may be a minimal loss of parking due to turn pockets but how much as of yet was not known. The end product would include a specific number of spots lost or gained.

A Portland-based architect who has long been concerned with pedestrian issues in the city noted that studies have shown that if people can park once and walk to their various destinations it lowers demand for parking overall. They also felt that a two-way conversion could open the way to removing the street segments cutting into the north east corner of Deering Oaks Park, which would be a desirable outcome. He noted that by offering more routing options it could actually decrease traffic on any given road and lower congestion. A resident of York Street near State Street spoke to the fact that they were uncertain why a change was being looked at. They were not against it, just not sure what the end goals were. It is a big project and shouldn't be done without a good reason.

Carol Morris pointed out that the Purpose and Needs Statement, as well as lists of potential benefits and challenges brought up by the public advisory committee, outlined the perceived

reasons or benefit that people perceive could come from a conversion. It is posted for the public comment session and she invited the resident to review them at that time.

A member of the public noted that as far as they were concerned the slower traffic is, the better.

A resident of Park Street pointed out that the average speeds presented were measured at the AM and PM peak times, when traffic volumes are the highest. They agreed with the numbers presented but noted that in the off hours, when traffic volumes are lower, people take advantage of this and drive faster. They also commented on the rudeness of drivers toward pedestrians on the two streets. They wanted to see the walkability of the area improved to the level that one sees elsewhere on the peninsula.

Tom replied that he was looking at additional speed data now and hoped to have a better idea of off peak speeds in the future.

A South Portland resident who frequently travels to USM in Portland noted that he currently has a 10-12 minute drive and worried about it becoming closer to 30 minutes but understood it was a hard balance. He noted that this is a common discussion in cities across the county and wanted to see some case studies of areas that converted one-way roads to two-way roads.

Tom noted that the Public Advisory Committee had also asked for examples and that the consulting team was currently working on compiling some.

A Sherman Street resident offered their perspective as a pedestrian, saying that they also felt that non-peak speeds were significantly higher than the average peak speeds shown.

A resident of Deering Street agreed and also reinforced the view that there was an antagonistic attitude between some drivers and pedestrians on the two streets. They wondered if there was any data on what streets people avoided crossing due to safety issues.

Tom responded that they had data on where people did cross and were trying to dig into some of the origin, destination aspects of pedestrian trips but did not have data specifically on areas that people chose to avoid.

A 35-year resident of Deering Street confirmed that T.Y. Lin had been involved in the Casco Bay Bridge and the Veteran's Bridge projects. She noted that the bridges were an important aspect of traffic flow in the area. She then expressed the view that the project should be about returning the residential feel to State and High, which are primarily lined with residential buildings. The high traffic levels on these roads make residents of the area feel isolated. Returning to the traffic flow issue, she felt that better signage directing drivers to the Fore River Parkway would be a good start.

A resident of Portland near the Westbrook line who uses these streets to get to destinations complimented the team on the data collection efforts. They felt that State and High were two of the few streets in downtown Portland that “worked” to get people from place to another. They didn’t mind slowing traffic some to make them safer but didn’t want it to get harder to move around.

A resident of Cumberland Street near High Street returned to the issue of hostile drivers on the road, corroborating earlier stories of verbal abuse and difficulties crossing the streets. She noted that she remembered traffic flowing well, possibly even better, in the 70’s before the change to one-way streets. The the additional options resulted in people taking diverse routes to get to their destinations, spreading out traffic and lowering overall congestion.

A resident of Munjoy Hill who works in the AAA building wondered if there was an alternative to changing the roads to two way that would allow for better accommodation of all modes in the current one-way format.

Carol responded that the study would also be looking at how to improve the corridor without a change to two-way traffic. The area needs improvement and update whether it changes to two way roads or not and this study is to see if in undertaking those upgrades it is warranted to make the change to two way, or not.

A cyclist asked if the study was taking into account bike and pedestrian levels of service.

Tom replied that those measures were being collect and considered.

A member of the public asked if the model would take into account mode shifts due to improved conditions, noting that they might walk or bike more if the roads were more friendly too it.

Tom answered that they are using existing census data on commuting modes to help them understand how people get around but are not sure if they will be able to have a good enough handle on it to predict future mode shares.

A resident at Cumberland and State Streets spoke about how there were a lot of kids in the area that walk to school and are outside in the afternoons, a trend she sees increasing. She wants to see improved walking conditions for that population. Also, she added to the voices saying that off peak speeds were higher and that she felt that evening and night truck traffic were the worst offenders. She also asked if there was any data on who was using the streets and what their destinations were.

Tom responded that a license plate origin and destination study was done in 2007 that showed about 1/3 of traffic on the road was entering and one end and exiting at the other end with the other 2/3 having destinations on the peninsula.

A resident of Sherman Street who is an active walker and biker noted that State in particular was a very beautiful street but the traffic and noise made it unpleasant to walk on. They also noted that a recently installed curb bump out at Grant Street did not, in their experience, improve safety in any way.

Tom pointed out that getting two lanes of one-way traffic to stop for a pedestrian is an inherently difficult thing as the first lane may stop but then the second lane has limited visibility to see a crossing pedestrian.

A resident of Deering Street spoke about their strong concerns for changes to the traffic pattern. They felt that two-way traffic would be harder and less safe for pedestrians. They did agree that visibility was a big issue for pedestrians trying to cross the street but again felt that this would be even worse in a two-way traffic scenario.

A resident of Park Street between State and High who has lived there since the late 60's spoke to the need for increased pedestrian safety, at least at intersections. She noted that they also drove on the streets and felt that while slowing traffic was good, the street still needs to function as a way to get places. They felt that there was significant pedestrian demand for a way to get between downtown and the Deering Oaks/Oakdale neighborhoods and so pedestrian improvements were definitely needed but again they couldn't be stopping traffic all of the time.

A resident of Salem Street asked where the ultimate decision would lie, with the city or with MaineDOT.

Carol responded that MaineDOT does have significant input and that they will require the corridor to remain an important vehicular connection. She said the ultimate decision is a joint one between the city and MaineDOT. MaineDOT is on the public advisory committee and will inform the process.

A resident of State Street asked if the team would consider a two-way scenario with limited left turns. They also asked if the team was considering the impacts of Mercy Hospital moving its operations from their State Street location.

Tom replied that they were open to limited left turn options if the model showed that they were needed and feasible but that they don't know at this time. As for the Mercy relocation, the team is working to make their best guesses for future land use on the corridor in order for the model to be as accurate as possible.

A Portland resident felt that corridor travel time was more important than speeds and asked if the team would be looking into the causes, times of day and other aspects of the crashes that have occurred in the corridor.

Tom agreed that travel time was just as important as vehicle speeds and noted that the team would be delving into the crash data in as much detail as was available to them to determine the contributors to each crash.

A resident of the Oakdale neighborhood noted he went through the area frequently and very much wanted to see the road segments cutting through Deering Oaks Park removed. He admitted that his primary use for State Street when driving was to cross the peninsula and get to the bridge but noted that if that route became less efficient or another route improved they would be happy to go a different way. They also noted that they would like to see improved bus service.

A resident of High Street between Pleasant and Deering Streets talked about how he saw a lot of crashes on the road. He felt that people without cars were occupying a lot of the new residential units in the area. He asked if it would be possible to test a new traffic arrangement or if any data existed from the period of time that High Street was closed for a week due to façade issues at the State Theater Building.

Tom replied that the complete closing of the street due to State Theater work probably wouldn't be an accurate data point even if they did have data from it. He then explained that a test of a two-way scenario would likely be out of the question as there would need to be new signals installed and some intersections would have to be rebuilt completely to be brought up to the standards of a two-way road. He noted that such tests are very good when they can be done, but here it is tough.

A member of the public asked if the modeling would be able to speak to changes in the vibrancy and quality of life along the corridor.

Tom answered that as qualitative measures they would likely not be part of the model but they were a big part of what the study was looking at and would certainly be part of the results.

A resident of Cumberland at High Street noted that a lot of drivers do not stop for pedestrians in the crosswalk despite state law requiring them to do so. They felt that center bollards that remind drivers of the law could be useful on the two streets.

A resident of Portland near the Casco Bay Bridge noted that the one-way streets result in York Street between State and High being its only two-block highway. They felt it was very dangerous and cited cars and bikes coming off the bridge driving too fast and running the light.

A Portland resident wondered why it was such a through-corridor given that there are other routes from South Portland to the Highway, such as Broadway. They also suggested that the city could work with the Westin Hotel to develop traffic demand management plans to try and ease the issues they have around check out/in times. They felt that there could be creative solutions to the problems at hand and that they should be explored.

At this point the formal portion of the meeting ended and the public was asked to review the boards around the room and comment on what they saw.

Below are the results of the written comments. In general, there were a higher number of votes on the benefits as opposed to on the challenges.

**Advisory Committee: Perceived Benefits
In Making State and High Streets Two-Way**

Placed in order of priority with the number of votes for each at the end of the Benefit.

1. Return streets to their historic residential use and feel 12
2. Diversion of traffic to routes better equipped to handle it (Fore River Parkway) 10
3. Potential to reconnect (or better connect) the portion of Deering Oaks north of State Street back to the rest of the park. 8
4. Improved safety for all modes 7
5. Potential to lower vehicular traffic volumes by improving pedestrian experience 6
6. Making Congress Square more pedestrian-friendly 5
7. Potential to improve non-vehicular access to Deering Oaks and the Casco Bay Bridge 5
8. Improved crosswalk safety (crossing pedestrians will be visible from both lanes of traffic) 5
9. Slower traffic speeds 4
10. **ADDED AT PUBLIC WORKSHOP:** Benefits to property values/tax base 3
11. Increasing access to the view corridors up and down the roads (such as allowing traffic to approach the front of the Art Museum) 2
12. Increased potential for improved transit service 2
13. Improved wayfinding/opportunity to better direct traffic 2
14. Less circling traffic/more direct routes 2
15. Improved connectivity/increased routing options 1
16. Improved perception of the roads as safe places 1
17. Improved access to businesses and services
18. Shortened trip distances 0
19. More intuitive (eliminate the problem of unfamiliar drivers turning on to the streets in the wrong direction) 0

20. Potential for uphill bike climbing lanes (It was noted that: *This is a mixed blessing. Current one-way configuration makes it easier for cyclists to justify controlling a travel lane for safety (visibility, vantage, discourage sideswipe, avoid doors) because there is a passing lane. Bike lanes at the edges are not quite as safe generally although uphill only would not be too bad – not down!*)

Advisory Committee: Perceived Challenges In Making State and High Streets Two-Way

Placed in order of priority with the number of votes for each at the end of the Benefit.

- **ADDED AT PUBLIC WORKSHOP:** DOT Resistance to Rerouting Rte. 77 - 8
- Possible increased congestion in other areas 3
- Two-way traffic could take more space, particularly when accommodating all modes 3
- Midblock left turns would become an impediment to traffic 3
- Resistance of current users 3
- Two-way traffic could take more space, particularly when accommodating all modes 3
- Reduced parking 2
- Diversion traffic to neighborhoods 2
- The Westin Hotel main entrance is on High Street; patrons loading and unloading cars often block traffic, manageable with two lanes going the same direction but a challenge in a two way road 2
- Trucks at State Theater forced to block traffic while backing into the loading area; this is easier with one-way traffic 2
- Back up from the drawbridge could be more of an issue without two lanes to stack traffic 1
- Certain times have high demand for parking (for example church services) 1
- Potential for more complicated snow removal 1
- Increase in points where traffic modes come into conflict 3
- Potential for head-on crashes 2

- Potential increase in travel time between the highway and the South Portland side of the bridge 0

PURPOSE AND NEED STATEMENT
State and High Streets
Two-Way Conversion Study

The purpose of the State and High Streets Two-Way Conversion Study is to study the effects of re-introducing two-way traffic flow on State and High Streets. The study will evaluate whether changes in transportation infrastructure will support the existing mix of land uses and neighborhoods in the study area. Both streets need to serve automobiles, trucks, transit, pedestrians, and cyclists equitably, as well as serve both those who are traveling within the City as well as through the City.

From a safety and health perspective, new infrastructure should be designed to accommodate pedestrian and cyclist safety and increase livability. From an urban design perspective, changes should provide a positive experience, and actively connect historic neighborhoods. Changes should also serve the transportation needs of those living off the peninsula by creating convenient access to city amenities and work places. Changes should be compatible and coordinate with other related City planning projects, including the redesign of Congress Square.

Comments made a public workshop via sticky note:

“What are the problems that we are trying to solve? Whom do we need to accommodate? Then find the best solution to do that rather than starting with the two-way solution.”

“Look at the wording! The first focus is on vehicles. Language counts. People first!!”

“The traffic should be guided (signs) to Fore River. Especially all trucks not having business on the peninsula.”

“Returning a quiet residential feel to these streets should be the goal. The residents of the peninsula drive the economic success of Downtown – they (pedestrians) need safe, pleasant access to Congress Street and businesses. Peninsula should be a pleasant and desirable place to live.”

“Given the uphill and downhill grades and the challenges that intersections pose to “edge” bicycle facilities, would not recommend bike lanes on downhill portions. If two-way, perhaps bike lanes for uphill portions and centered Shared Lane markers downhill. Edge facilities pose vantage issues.”