

City of Keene
New Hampshire

AD HOC DOWNTOWN INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECT STEERING COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES

Tuesday, September 28, 2022

3:00 PM

**Council Chambers,
City Hall**

Members Present:

Mayor George S. Hansel, Chair
Councilor Mitchell Greenwald
Councilor Andrew Madison
Alex Faulkner
Alec Doyle
Mark Rebillard
Nathalie Houder

Staff Present:

Don Lussier, City Engineer

Members Not Present:

Councilor Randy Filiault
Brandie Wells
Cheryl Belair
Robert Patton-Spruill
Dillon Benik

1) Call to Order – Welcome

Mayor Hansel called the meeting to order at 3:00 PM and roll call ensued.

2) Minutes – August 16, 2022

A vote did not ensue.

3) Project Update

A) Project Summary/Schedule Update – Stantec

Mr. Lussier introduced project consultants from Stantec: Bob Corning, Dave McNamara, Ed Roberge, and Evan Drew. Mr. Roberge began with an overview of the agenda. They were excited to share preliminary alternatives. They continue engaging and working through utility design, meetings with downtown property owners, and reviewing existing site conditions so they understand the baseline for this project. He said they would begin by looking at the existing baseline conditions, of which there are many to understand. The Technical Review Committee met on September 14. The next all day public workshop would be on October 6 (11:00–3:00 PM, followed by an open house to talk to the project team 4:30–6:30 PM, and two presentations like this one at 12:30 & 5:30 PM, and weather permitting a pop-up

at Railroad Square from 11:30 AM–4:00 PM). Then, the consultants will return to this Committee on October 18.

Mr. Roberge revisited the goals for outreach:

- Utility infrastructure improvements
- Define/expand connections to downtown district
- Support a more sustainable built environment and transportation choices
- Strengthen image and character, including arts and history
- Expand flexible open space
- Improve multimodal transportation access
- Provide adequate parking
- Upgrade walking environment

They will align the effectiveness of the proposed alternatives with these project goals.

Mr. Corning continued stating he was excited to share the preliminary concept ideas for the downtown. This is primarily a utility replacement project, which provides exciting opportunities to improve the public realm. He said these are all high-level concept ideas to improve the streetscape based on the above goals. There are many details to work out while going through these ideas.

Mr. Corning discussed the existing conditions downtown for Main Street, Central Square, and the Gilbo/Railroad/Rail Trail corridor. He shared key takeaways:

- Although sidewalks are generous, there is limited space for separate furnishing, planting, seating, and walking zones
- Angled parking can be dangerous for users
- On a typical day, there is availability in the parking system, not always in front of the destination a person is trying to visit
- People walking across the street face long crossing distances and the “double threat” of looking for one car to go by and then having to contend with the second lane
- There is no safe way for someone on a bike to get from the Rail Trail to downtown destinations
- Circulation through downtown is confusing
- There are limited amenities for people using the bus

Mr. Corning continued that there would be a high-level parking analysis. There are currently 167 available parking spaces, including 11 accessible. They will also look at the 8 midblock crosswalks on Main Street and 20 crosswalks on side streets. The longest crosswalk on Main Street is 115’ and the average crossing length on Main Street is 69’.

Mr. Drew continued on the existing downtown conditions, specifically about traffic volume and intersection operation. A specific software outputs scores for level of service and how well an intersection operates: A–B means slight delays, C–D means some waiting and additional queueing and E–F is intolerable and results in driver behavior changing and impacts to adjacent intersections. They looked at Main Street and the project area. Because of the current right turn only conditions of Emerald Street it operates at a level B, while Eagles Court is E or F. He noted that unsignalized intersections are stricter. Still, the level of service does not necessarily weigh based on the volume. While the E or F at Eagle Court is not great it is only for 10 cars versus 200 cars on Emerald St. Cypress Street scored B,

Gilbo Avenue because of its unique moving pattern is a level of service B. Central Square is a level of service C, which according to the Highways Capacity Manual, are stable, acceptable delays. He said a signal in the downtown is different from one in the middle of nowhere. While the Highways Capacity Manual says level of service is based on delay, a critical piece to inform the alternate designs is the queues at the stop and yield lines, especially with the extent of crosswalks.

Mr. Drew reviewed the key takeaways from the traffic volume and intersection operations study:

- Most traffic travels down Main Street before dispersing at Central Square
- Slightly higher demand for Court Street than Washington Street
- While traffic numbers are high in Central Square there is only moderate congestion
- There are severe delays by Eagle Court in both the morning and evening
- Side streets have moderate traffic volumes with very minimal traffic delays

He noted that pressing the cross button at Central Square initiates a pedestrian phase that lasts a minimum of 25 seconds. Thus, some downtowns would give pedestrians the ability to cross all at the same time, or there can be concurrent crossing with the traffic beside them. There are safety considerations for both options.

Next, Mr. Drew reviewed the mid-day pedestrian volumes. There are counts from 6:00 AM–7:00 PM every 10 minutes, so they were speaking about the mid-day peak hours. The key takeaways were that:

- Pedestrians prefer to cross side streets rather than Main Street
- Central Square is underutilized by pedestrians relative to the east side of the street
- Pedestrians are concentrated on the eastern side of Main Street

Business spaces could change on each side of the street, so they do not want to over alter the pedestrian access based on this data. Central Square, at the busiest time, only had six pedestrians crossing into and out of Central Square; five times that used the periphery.

Mr. Corning said a goal is to improve multimodal transportation downtown. Currently there is only a dedicated bike lane on Washington Street north of the Square, there are only share lanes on Main Street, and then there is the Cheshire Rail trail crossing through the project. He explained the plans he would demonstrate. At Gilbo Avenue looking north, for example, on Main Street one notices some bump-outs in the street, sidewalk edges, and median, which give the perception of a narrower corridor, which is something the consultants considered good about it when looking at alternatives.

- 4) **Preliminary Design Alternatives Presentation - Stantec**
 - A) **Downtown Character Areas**
 - i) *Main Street*

The consultants described Main Street as vibrant, charming, inclusive, welcoming, and multimodal. They want to minimally maintain, but hopefully improve, the character when looking at these various design options.

(1) **Main Street Design Option 1 – “Minimal”**

This option would:

- Eliminate parking in the center median
- Allow more, enhanced sidewalk zones on both sides of the street
- Allow minimum crosswalk dimensions/length
- More or less keep the existing parking

This option does well and is effective at meeting the project goals set at the beginning. Each option builds on improving progress toward those goals.

At the southern part of Dunbar to Eagle, the sidewalk distances would not change because there is limited flexibility. At Emerald/Eagle to Commercial/Cypress, 9’ of sidewalk would be gained on the west side and 8’ on the east side. Gilbo to West/Roxbury would gain 14’ feet on the west side and 10’ on the east side, as well as gained dimension in the center median, which is the location for green infrastructure to help improve drainage in the downtown.

(2) **Main Street Design Option 2**

(a) **Option 2.a.**

This option, which is similar to and builds on Option 1, proposes:

- Significant intervention to dedicated bike lanes north and south, between the parking bays and the sidewalks. This would improve multimodal access to the street. They looked at bike lanes on the street side but that is a safety issue that was withdrawn in close consultation with the Technical Review Committee.
- Angled parking on the east side of the street and parallel parking on the west side. However, these options could be mixed and matched.
- Loss of 27 parking spaces on Main Street
- Crosswalk dimensions reduced significantly
- Bike lane at street grade. A challenge is that it makes it more difficult to have bump-outs and green interventions.

This option increases progress toward the original project goals.

At Dunbar to Eagle, the sidewalks would lose 5’ on the west and east sides. Emerald/Eagle to Commercial/Cypress gains 3’ on the west and 4’ on the east. At Gilbo to West/Roxbury, the sidewalks would increase 11’ on the west side and 6’ on the east; in this block, the center median would expand.

(b) **Option 2.b.**

This option includes all aspects of Option 2.a., and additionally proposes:

- Bike lane at sidewalk level, providing more opportunities to include those bump outs and green interventions that break-up the large amounts of pavement in the street.

(3) **Main Street Option 3**

Option 3 largely combines Options 1 and 2, with the following proposed additions:

- One lane of traffic in each direction, with left turn pockets at strategic intersections. Minimal lane width of 18' with 16' of pavement and 2' buffer.
- Angled parking on the east side and parallel parking on the west side
- Significantly widens sidewalks and the center green space
- Reduced pavement width in vehicular areas
- Loss of 22 parking spaces
- Continued improvement to crosswalk length

The consultants think this option is the most extensive but that it has a lot of potential. Mr. Corning reviewed cross-sections and listed the proposed dimensions, with sidewalk sizes increasing from south to north. He pointed out that Bartlett Tree Services inventoried trees in the whole project area to know trees worth saving as an important part of the character of downtown. By making the center median this large, there is the opportunity to save existing trees in that buffer.

Option 3 also opens the opportunity for mini one-lane roundabouts at Emerald/Eagle/Main and Gilbo/Railroad/Main.

(4) Committee Feedback on Main Street Design Options

Councilor Greenwald talked about the pedestrian counts on the sidewalks and to his surprise that there were more pedestrian traffic captured on the east side than the west side of the street. He said it sounds like there is more retail activity on the west side, which shifts over time. He suggested another option to consider is eliminating all traffic lights and making Central Square a roundabout, eliminating cross traffic from West to Roxbury Streets. The consultants noted that they would discuss such an option when sharing the design alternatives for Central Square. Councilor Greenwald continued that he wants bikes eliminated entirely from Main Street in favor of a bike route behind the downtown buildings, which he said is safer for casual riders. Regarding eliminating the center median parking, he said that any option decreasing parking on Main Street is a hard sell from what business owners downtown tell him. He said parallel parking would not work because so many people struggle with it, and it would be bad mixed in with moving traffic. He said Option 2 looked like a 20% decrease in parking, which was not acceptable to him. As a City Councilor and downtown property owner, he speaks with many people and most say they do not want everything changed; they want nothing too radical, like Option 3.

Ms. Houser appreciated the Councilor's comments but added that she thinks bikes and cars can use the right-of-way together provided all is consistent and people follow the rules. She asked why this analysis did not extend down toward Keene State College given how much traffic on Main Street is from the College. Mayor Hansel said the scope was predicated by the utility work area under the road. The City Engineer agreed with that limitation, noting that Main Street to Davis Street was addressed during the Winchester Street roundabout project. Ms. Houser said they were excited to see how this would impact the College given how much traffic on Main Street is from the college. She asked, if Main Street were one lane on both sides, whether people would start using different through routes that would impact the surrounding streets and Main Street businesses. Mr. Roberge said that on a downtown core project like this, there might be some traffic diversions; from a traffic capacity and diversion component, there might be a slight change, but for the most part destination trips still come to the downtown core. Mr.

Drew added that unless people really see significant delays, they do not seek alternate routes; they would discuss this more in the remaining alternatives. The single lane has its own subsequent slowdowns.

Mayor Hansel asked if there were any way to put the bike lane in the center median. He sees a need today for more pedestrian space, sidewalks, and sufficient parking for cars. He does not see a lot of people today using Main Street as a through way for bikes. He could see creating a way for bikes to be on Main Street safely, including a meandering path in the center median. Mayor Hansel said it seemed in the options presented that an inordinate amount of space was dedicated to bikes compared to the need that exists. Mr. Corning said they looked at that and said people want to be on an active part of the street, so there was concern it would not be used. They can still look at it as an option. He listed some challenges. Mayor Hansel was afraid the bike lane would not get used under Option 3, while taking-up a lot of space.

Mr. Doyle asked if there is commitment to integrate multimodal transportation into downtown. He thinks there is and looks toward the future and therefore it is important to keep that element. He said people might disagree, but it seems like what the future should hold for a community like Keene. He posed a second question, noting that at the last meeting they discussed that the studies were only at mid-day when the Colonial is closed, whereas there are 2,000 people walking and parking over two days on evenings, likely using 100 parking spaces. He questioned when evening studies would occur.

Councilor Madison echoed Mr. Doyle, noting that the study should not be just evenings, but weekends too, when there is higher pedestrian traffic. On bike lanes, he said he is a cyclist but avoids Main Street, which has a reputation as hazardous. He was unsure whether the single lane option would resolve that or if these bike lanes disconnected from the main traffic pattern would resolve that. Councilor Madison was more inclined to agree with Councilor Greenwald on moving bikes to behind the downtown businesses. Councilor Madison wondered if there were traffic-calming options to get people to slow down a bit more when the light is green at Central Square. He asked, when looking at the traffic congestion at Eagle/Main with the E/F grade, if there is any way to make Eagle Court one way like at Railroad and Church Streets; to exit on Cypress. Mr. Roberge said they had looked at access and uses along Eagle/Cypress. They are looking at a study to make Eagle Court two ways with better flow between the street pairs. There are challenges with the Food Co-op's trucking activities that must not compete with pedestrians and narrow streets. He agreed with looking at all the directions. Railroad to Church is a good relationship and part of the considerations.

Mayor Hansel agreed with getting parking out of the medians, which are not well used. However, if one side were parallel and the other side angled parking, a business owner on the parallel side would likely not be happy, so he thinks avoiding that makes the most sense.

Councilor Greenwald recalled that all these decisions had reasons when the current downtown was constructed. They debated whether these streets under discussion are in or out and he think these are all decisions that should be reevaluated, such as whether to include the side streets. He did not think bringing big trucks onto side streets was a good idea. He drives down Water Street daily and never knows whether the car in front of him is into turning Cumberland Farms when coming down Main Street.

Mr. Lussier said there was significant discussion about parallel parking. A lot of the options were mix-and-match and angled parking on both sides is possible, it would just reduce some sidewalk space. If there were consensus to eliminate the bike lanes, that would free space for angled parking and wide sidewalks. The Mayor thought that pedestrians and parking took precedent over two dedicated bike lanes.

Mr. Roberge said that Option 2.b. widens the median from 27' to 34' with single lanes, creating a broad boulevard of plantings on the center. That median could be trimmed back also to facilitate angled parking on both sides, thereby improving the parking quantity; this is another flexible option for single lanes. These alternatives are not final and would be impacted by this conversation.

Ms. Houder noted that if one lane of traffic, people will constantly be waiting in traffic while people try to parallel park who are not comfortable with it.

Ms. Faulkner was worried that if bike lanes were incorporated between the parking and sidewalk, pedestrians of all abilities must cross that bike lane traffic to reach the sidewalk. Mr. Corning said that was a valid concern. The typical detail would be a rubble strip in between that is a tactile warning that cyclists and people need to be sharing sidewalks.

Mayor Hansel noted that he wanted to preserve as many mature trees as possible.

Mr. Rebillard said from the business perspective, they are ready for creative ideas and recognize they want Keene to be a destination with expanded flexible open space for events. When it comes to bike lanes, he said he liked the Mayor's idea. In Option 3, he said it seemed to be a considerable hurdle, and asked if it were a common practice elsewhere. Mr. Corning said that Options 2.a. and 2.b. were utilized many places and they could present examples of this new thinking on multimodal transportation and protecting bike lanes.

Councilor Greenwald reiterated moving bike lanes behind buildings as an additional project for the sake of increased sidewalk dining/merchandise space.

Mr. Corning wondered if the Committee was comfortable with these alternatives being publicized for feedback. Mayor Hansel said it is fine to have all options on the table for public input as long as there was no appearance of steering anyone. Councilor Greenwald said it was great to publicize them theoretically, but stated that last time the community jumped on the most aggressive option, so they should put out a lot of options. The Councilor said we are not trying to steer anyone and this is an infrastructure project. Mr. Lussier said that anyone should voice if there is an alternative they do not want presented at the next public workshop.

ii) *Central Square*

The consultants described Central Square with the following words: Civic, formal, village center.

- (1) Design Options**
 - (a) Central Square Option 1**

Option 1 would include:

- A smaller circular intersection
- Increased greenspace
- Minimized road pavement
- Increased sidewalk zones on all sides
- Keeping it as is but minimizing the roadway pavement to the extent that is feasible

(b) Central Square Option 2

Option 2 would include:

- Two lanes
- Close the northern leg around the square, connecting Central Square to the church and adjacent commercial buildings to the north
- Emergency access along the front of the building perimeter sidewalks to Central Square
- More green space and safer connection from the central median to the Square
- Open to Washington and Court Streets on both sides

(c) Central Square Option 3

Option 3 includes everything in Option 2 but would have only one lane of traffic instead of two.

(d) Central Square Option 4

Option 4 includes:

- A mini roundabout
- Eliminating all signals in favor of a mini roundabout to have free flowing vehicular circulation. Roundabouts are more challenging for pedestrians to cross because there are no signals, though there could be flashing pedestrian crossings, but those slow traffic.
- Planted roundabout center island
- A green connection from Main Street to Central Square

Mr. McNamara said the key traffic takeaways for Central Square is that two lanes there are a challenge with geography and physical space, but it is conceivable to open to two lanes. Still, one lane is recommended until Main Street south of this approaching Gilbo Avenue, but there is not capacity to handle two lanes southbound to maintain sidewalks around the corners and not impact any business there.

Mayor Hansel thought it made sense.

Ms. Houser said if there are no lights, and the pedestrians have the right-of-way on Main Street, they would be constantly stopping traffic in a roundabout. Mr. McNamara thought it went both ways because when you trigger the light now, it stops all traffic for at least 25 seconds, whereas they would have shorter lengths to cross with the circles that might not require flashing lights like a multilane road would. Mr. Drew agreed stating that at this planning level, it cannot be detailed but engineering sidewalks and

pavement markings would be critical upon a recommended alternative. Sometimes waits at that light to cross are almost two minutes, and most have to use the refuge in the middle and wait again. He said the roundabout in a way is a pro and a con with frequent shorter delays or reduced stopping for yielding and stop-and-go. He asked whether Main Street should be efficient in terms of maintaining speeds or keeping the speeds low with potential crossing at lower overall delay. There are many factors.

Mr. Lussier said that if this is an option the Committee chooses then Staff and the consultants would move forward with a more detailed model with a pedestrian count to account for the delays. Mr. Drew said pedestrian counts are included now in the analysis software that allows more detail for visual statements via extensive programming. The single lane northbound on Main Street makes this work because of the volumes; with two lanes north bound the rightmost can continue on Washington Street or go right on Roxbury and the innermost lane continues onto Court and West Streets. Volumes would be split so evenly that the queues would be better than today. He has heard everyone about getting counts on weekends and during events. He thinks they have good data to move forward with these decisions.

Ms. Faulkner said she liked the idea a lot, but she also does not own a business on the street this option would take traffic from. She said those owners might be likely unhappy. She said two businesses there are already scared of this project and comfortable closing; she hoped there would be good outreach to businesses along that row. While it is a good idea for more outdoor dining, she did not think the Stage would be happy with this. She was worried something this drastic would empty Central Square. She wondered about adding some parking in the green space from Washington Street and Court Street for trucks to unload and to compensate for some of the lost parking.

Councilor Greenwald stated a conflict of interest as a property Manager of one of the buildings along that row and he assured that a building there would be in for tax evasion if this went forward. He thinks it is a really bad idea. He wanted to consider his original suggestion to close cross traffic between West and Roxbury Streets, with the whole area as a roundabout, perhaps with a U-turn lane to compensate for the crossing closure, or a turnaround lane at Gilbo Avenue. To Councilor Greenwald, this was a non-starter, other than leaving the square as it is; they are messing with history.

Mr. Rebillard said that open spaces increase property values and the walkability of downtown, which is really important. He said this build should not just be for traffic, but also to enhance visitors' experiences downtown. She said that in its current form, the Square cannot be used in many peoples' opinions. He initially was against this idea but the more he looked at it, the more he could see how the space would be more attractive. He liked Ms. Houlder's recommendation to add some parking on the edges. He recalled that this was a historical place of meeting where people used to gather, and it has been that way ever since. This is one of the widest Main Streets in America and it is a walkable attraction to visit. When he thinks about what it costs to put on a festival in town, he said the initial costs to shut-down the streets are high, and he asked the economic value of something happening at the Square every weekend—millions of dollars. He said this needed to include some creative thought for the future.

Mr. Doyle agreed with many of Mr. Rebillard's comments and anticipated push-back from businesses like the Stage. He believed and agreed that as originally designed, the green island used to function differently and well, which it does not now. He believed there was a solution in these various options for the functionality of downtown and to have an actual usable green park space, which he said would be a game changer for the future that should be considered seriously.

Mayor Hansel said the City is missing economic opportunities right now with the way Central Square functions. He imagined the Stage as the best outdoor dining space in the City that would attract people and make up for any loss of people driving past on the current pseudo roundabout. He thinks this option should be presented to the public. The Mayor loved Ms. Faulkner's idea to have some parking at the ends of the square for events, etc.

Councilor Madison asked if there were examples of and reactions to where changing a pseudo roundabout had been done successfully elsewhere; one with a similar cross lane and traffic not passing in front of businesses. Mr. Corning and Mr. Roberge said they could research.

iii) *Gilbo Avenue/Railroad Square*

The consultants called this area: artistic, festive, flexible, and historic. The existing conditions are two-way traffic, with right turns in and out, and one way going eastbound and the bike trail crossing maintained. They are looking at this as a corridor. There have been interesting studies on parts of this area to explore.

(1) Design Options
(a) Gilbo/Railroad Option 1

Option one would:

- Maintain Gilbo Avenue as two ways
- Possible covered structure over parallel parking to support the farmers market and other events
- Limited parking on both sides of Gilbo Avenue for a multi-use zone
- Expanded plaza at Railroad Street
- Reduced parking at Rail Trail
- Enhance the Rail Trail connection

(b) Gilbo/Railroad Option 2.a.

Option 2.a. would include:

- One-way multi-use open space
- Making the whole right-of-way more of a pedestrian friendly multi-use open space
- Railroad Street would extend the plaza pavement over the street creating a shared street.

(c) Gilbo/Railroad Option 2.b.

Option 2.b. would expand on 2.a. to:

- Incorporate the shared street concept across Main Street with multi-use open space that would create a strong pedestrian corridor from Gilbo to Railroad.

Mr. Doyle reminded that Gilbo Avenue is the only access the Colonial has for trucks and busses to get to their loading dock because they cannot maneuver on Main Street, as it exists today. There was also mention of the busses at the transportation center going eastbound.

Councilor Madison wanted to keep as much parking as possible off of Main Street and onto roads like Gilbo and Railroad.

They agreed to move forward with these options to the public workshop.

5) **Outreach and Engagement Program**
A) **Engagement and Workshop #2**

Mr. Corning would look into the multi-use path in the middle median of Main Street, which pleased the Mayor. Mr. Corning would also add options for parking around Central Square.

6) **Adjournment**

There being no further business, Mayor Hansel adjourned the meeting at 4:33 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katryna Kibler, Minute Taker
October 5, 2022

Reviewed and edited by,
Kurt Blomquist, Director of Public Works/Emergency Management Director