

Statement Regarding ReImagine Washtenaw

May 29, 2015

The Washtenaw Bicycling and Walking Coalition (WBWC) believes that Washtenaw Avenue between Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti has problems that require creative solutions. The ReImagine Washtenaw project is a promising effort to address these problems. The problems have built up over time as a result of uncoordinated incremental decisions that, when added together, have had undesirable effects, such as:

- Traffic congestion, especially during peak periods
- Unsightly commercial strips
- A hostile environment for pedestrians, bicyclists, and wheelchair users, as evidenced by discontinuous sidewalks, absence of bicycle facilities, and difficulty of crossing the road
- Inadequate transit facilities despite the heavy transit use on the corridor
- Confusing and crash-prone turning movements

The Corridor Improvement Study proposes to address these problems with the following tools:

- A median to create a boulevard that reduces turning conflicts and allows “Michigan lefts” in some places, which can improve traffic flow by allowing more green time on lights on Washtenaw
- Narrower traffic lanes to reduce the temptation to speed and to save space
- Consolidated driveways to improve safety
- Improved bus stops and other improvements for transit
- Amenities for pedestrians and wheelchair users, such as crosswalks and continuous sidewalks
- Buffered bike lanes within a wider right-of-way, which become acceptable to cyclists with the design elements that reduce the current chaotic vehicle movements
- Locating buildings closer to the sidewalk to improve aesthetics and walkability
- Improved options for people to bicycle, walk, and take transit

These improvements have the potential to make the area a more desirable place to shop, work, live, operate a business, and invest.

The Parsons Brinkerhoff firm modeled the projected traffic for 2020 and 2040 with and without the proposed improvements. Using WATS forecasts, they assumed peak-hour traffic increases for 2020 of 2% a.m. and 3% p.m. and for 2040 of 12% a.m. and 6% p.m. Our reading of their results is that the delays and “level of service” were comparable with and without the changes -- slightly better in some cases and slightly worse in others. In other words, the changes maintain comparable traffic flow, even assuming there is no shift to increased use of transit, biking, and walking. To the extent that there is a shift, traffic flow would improve.

Our recommendation

We support the Planning Commission recommendation that City Council pass a resolution endorsing the ReImagine Washtenaw Corridor Improvement Study, as the other jurisdictions along the corridor have done. We believe that there are legitimate questions that will need to be addressed, and we anticipate an ongoing dialog as redevelopment opportunities arise. The ReImagine Washtenaw vision provides a framework for coordinated decisions that can improve a major corridor. Endorsement of that vision is a needed step to enable cooperative action.

WBWC, with its coalition partners, represents the interests of thousands of bicyclists and walkers throughout Washtenaw County.