

New Albany residents applaud two-way streets

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NEW ALBANY - Plans to turn some one-way streets in downtown New Albany to two-way roads were mostly met with approval Monday as many residents said "it's about time" plans came to fruition.

HWC Engineering, the firm tasked with creating plans for the project, presented three options for the city to consider at a public hearing at New Albany High School, 1020 Vincennes St. The project aims to make downtown more accessible for businesses in the area, reduce excessive speeding on Market, Spring and Elm streets, make the streets accessible for trucks and avoid toll-dodging on Spring Street once the Ohio River Bridges Project finishes and tolling starts on all bridges besides the Sherman Minton Bridge.

Jim Rice, partner at HWC on the project, said three road conversion options are being considered by the city's Board of Public Works: keeping Spring and Elm streets one way and converting Market, Pearl and Bank streets to two-way streets; converting Spring, Elm, Market, Pearl and Bank to two-way streets; and leaving downtown with the one-way streets it has currently.

"This is part of the discussion to enhance the wonderful things happening downtown," said Rice, who had worked in New Albany. "There is a wonderful renaissance going on in downtown New Albany."

Under the plan, the city would be responsible for repaving roads, upgrading traffic signals and remarking pavement for two-way traffic. The plan calls for 11-foot lanes and a bike lane on Spring Street.

Many residents at the public hearing supported converting Spring, Elm, Market, Pearl and Bank to two-way streets. Greg Roberts, president of the East Spring Street Neighborhood Association, said the two-way street conversion would keep from drivers using the roads as cut-throughs.

"Our neighborhood has changed," he said. "Our downtown is a neighborhood, and that's what people have to remember. We want you to go ahead with this plan. This will turn our cut-throughs back to a neighborhood."

Irv Stumler, a resident of Adams Street, said he feels the plan does little to address concerns to enforce the speed limit on downtown roads. He said the Board of Public Works, which includes three members all appointed by the Mayor Jeff Gahan, is doing what the mayor wants.

"I think he (the mayor) is making the wrong decision," he said.

Paul Lincks, senior project manager at HWC Engineering, said if the project moves forward, it would begin in March 2017 and finish by the fall of that year. The project would include single-lane closures but not close the

full streets, he said.

Lincks said after repaving, crosswalks and traffic signals to accommodate two-way thoroughfare would be installed at existing stops. He said streets being converted to two-way would not open all at once.

Rice said that the advantage of the two-way street conversion will naturally calm traffic on streets, such as Spring Street, where residents complained about excessive speeding and expressed concern for pedestrian safety.

Joe Autry, a new resident on East Spring Street, said his family can't walk the street without fearing for their lives.

"When I first moved in, I wanted to put boulders in my yard so people didn't crash into my home," he said. "Any way you can make family life better that will make a difference in the evolution of the city."

John Rosenbarger, New Albany Public Works Projects supervisor, said the project is projected to cost around \$2.8 million with the federal government paying for 80 percent of the project. He said the city would pay around \$500,000 out of its own pocket.

Talks about converting some of the city's one-way streets to two-way thoroughfares have been happening for around eight to 10 years. Rosenbarger said a 2007 study looked at whether a two-way street proposal would be feasible for the city. The idea was eventually dropped due to lack of interest and funds, he said.

In 2015, the city commissioned Jeff Speck, planner and author of "Walkable City," to conduct a walkability study, which found converting one-way streets into two-way streets is the best way to slow down traffic and avoid accidents.

For over a year, HWC Engineering has reviewed Speck's plans, and last week, presented its plans for two-way streets downtown to the city's Board of Public Works. Rosenbarger said the two-way street plan not only will help traffic downtown but also be better for local businesses.

"They could get better access and less confusing routes to attract customers," Rosenbarger said. "We also didn't want Spring Street to have vastly more traffic volume associated with people trying to get on the highway." The Courier-Journal reported in February that a 2013 study projected that when the three bridges start collecting tolls, the Interstate-64 Sherman Minton Bridge will see an almost 15 percent increase in daily traffic.

In 2012, the Sherman Minton Bridge saw about 78,000 drivers daily. The study predicts that by 2030, it will see almost 30,000 more cars than its daily capacity of 90,000.

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