

McKownville Improvement Association Planning Study

March 11, 2002

Draft written by Martha Haraus, Don Reeb and Doug Smith

INTRODUCTION

Western Avenue is the 'Main Street' of McKownville. It is also a major east-west automobile thoroughfare for the Capital region. Over the years, changes to Western Avenue have been made almost exclusively in the interest of motorists. Residents of McKownville have seen their 'Main Street' slowly, but unmistakably, changing into a highway with seeming little regard for how those changes affect the quality of life in McKownville. This report by the McKownville Improvement Association represents an attempt to bring the interests of the people who live in McKownville back in balance with needs of motorists, while respecting the need to support a safe and effective flow of automobile traffic on this State road.

The goal is to improve the Western Avenue streetscape so that it becomes a place where people take pleasure each time they pass through - whether on foot, bicycle or car. We want a Western Avenue where we can walk safely to mail a letter, visit neighbors, or go shopping, and we want the Western Avenue environment to be such that we will choose to walk rather than drive because it will be a more pleasurable experience. We want a Western Avenue that has safe crossing places, and where motorists understand that they are passing through a residential area. We believe the key to achieving these goals is to bring the McKownville stretch of Western Avenue back to the look of a residential main street, and less like the highway into which it has been evolving.

This goal is both realistic and affordable. There are many examples of major state roads passing through cities where these very objectives are attained. We need look no further than Albany to see stretches of Western Avenue - from Colonial Avenue to Allen Street, for example - that have kept a far more residential appearance and condition, and the difference is striking. We believe that McKownville can do even better

PROPOSAL

First, there is strong agreement among McKownville residents on several fundamental objectives and guiding principles:

1. Residential lawns and green strips along Western Avenue need be safeguarded. No more encroachment not even one inch anywhere in McKownville.
2. "Bicycle Lanes" should not be any more than three or four feet wide. Having wider bicycle lanes wastes valuable space that could be used as a green space buffer to insulate sidewalks from traffic. There are many sections on Western Avenue in McKownville where the "bicycle lanes" are currently as wide as, or wider than, an automobile lane. This is not only a poor use of space, it is dangerous because motorists invariably begin to use them as right hand turn lanes.
3. There should be a standard for the Western Avenue roadside in McKownville:

Draft

- a three or four foot bike lane next to the outer driving lane, separated with a painted line
- a concrete or stone curb, with effective and sufficient storm water drains
- a wide greenstrip planted with trees
- a five foot concrete sidewalk

The work recently finished by the city of Albany on Whitehall between Manning and Delaware roads provide a good model for the sidewalk standards.

4. In the 'greenstrips' mentioned above, not only should there be extensive tree planting but more retro street lights should be installed to improve the overall appearance of Western Avenue and to buffer pedestrians as much as possible from the sight and noise of traffic.

5. Pedestrians crossing Western (at each traffic light), Fuller, McKown, Schoolhouse and the Northway entrance and exit, should be given more control over traffic entering the intersections, for example, walk-lights with timers displaying the time left to cross.

6. The Town should institute an on-going program that replaces trees in the greenstrips on the streets abutting Western Avenue, above and beyond the plantings done as part of the Western Avenue streetscape improvement project.

7. Bus Shelters should be constructed along Western where people regularly wait for the bus, especially along the south side of Western.

8. Several of the specific recommendations made in this report involve the construction of raised 'safety islands' in the middle of a traffic flow. The intent of these is two-fold: 1) to provide a safe haven for pedestrians, roughly halfway across the pavement area being crossed, and 2) to improve the appearance of the area by the inclusion of plantings. These green 'islands' will reinforce to motorists that they are in, or are entering, a residential area where excessive speed is inappropriate, and where they must be alert to pedestrian traffic.

ANALYSIS

Western Avenue, as it travels through McKownville, is currently a patchwork of varying roadside conditions. In order to make meaningful and realistic proposals for improving pedestrian access, aesthetics, and safety around Western Avenue we need to start with a solid understanding of the current conditions.

To organize the description of current conditions, and to establish a common vocabulary for our discussions and proposals, we have broken down the stretch of Western Avenue under study - from Church Road to the Albany city line - into six sections, each of which we believe has a unique set of characteristics and problem areas that need improvement. The names for the six sections (moving from west to east) are:

1. Church Road Transition Section - From Church Road up to and including, the overpass that serves as the very beginning of the Northway

Draft

Draft

2. Stuyvesant Plaza Section - from Schoolhouse Road to Fuller Road.
3. Elmwood Section - from Fuller Road to Parkwood (includes 1450)
4. Glenwood Section - from Parkwood to Norwood / McKown (includes Holiday Inn)
5. W2 (Waverly/Westlyn) Section - from Norwood / McKown to Knowles / Brookwood
6. Albany Transition Section - from Knowles / Brookwood/Arcadia/Hillcrest to SUNYA and the Albany city line.

What follows is, for each of the six sections, a description of the current road conditions, followed by specific recommendations for improvement or repair in each section.

1. Church Road Transition Section

On the north side of Western Avenue, proceeding east from the crosswalk light in front of the McKownville Methodist Church there is a bike lane, an intermittent green strip and a sidewalk. There is a painted crosswalk across the four lanes of traffic entering Western Avenue at the Northway light. The sidewalk and bike lanes continue under the Northway overpass to the east, into the Stuyvesant Plaza section.

+ Recommendations for improvement along the north side of the Church Road Transition section:

- Construct some kind of barrier or rail between the roadway and the sidewalk as it crosses over the Thruway bridge to give pedestrians a greater sense of safety.
- Where the southbound lanes of the Northway enter Western Avenue, two lanes turn right (west) and two turn left (east). In the middle of the four lanes is a triangular hashed area that could serve as a raised safety island for pedestrians when crossing this wide expanse.

On the south side of Western Avenue in the Church Road Transition section, proceeding east from Church road, there is no sidewalk at all in front of the Great Oaks offices. There is a sidewalk on the Thruway bridge, but it ends abruptly at either side. There is a bike lane heading east from Church road that continues across the Thruway bridge and under the overpass of the cloverleaf that picks up the northbound Northway traffic. But the bike path in this area takes a precarious path in-between the eastbound through traffic for Western Avenue and the rightmost lane of traffic that leads to the Northway cloverleaf.

+ Recommendations for improvement along the south side of the Church Road Transition section:

- In order to create a safer crossing of Western Avenue at Church road, a raised safety island should be built in the middle of Western Avenue, on the western side of the Church Street intersection.

Draft

Draft

- A sidewalk should be constructed from the southeast corner of Western and Church Street along the front of the Great Oaks property up to the Thurway bridge, and also on the east side of the Thruway bridge, under the Northway overpass and through to Schoolhouse Road. [* see notes in Stuyvesant Plaza section regarding an alternative to this section of sidewalk]
- The bike path along the south side in this section should be kept, but signs should be posted in the area of the Northway overpass instructing eastbound motorists planning to turn onto Schoolhouse road to yield to bicycles that may be continuing east on Western.

2. Stuyvesant Plaza Section

Along the north side of Western Avenue, the concrete sidewalk emerging from under the Northway overpass meets a crosswalk for the on-ramp to the Northway, then continues east but ends when it meets the parking lots for the businesses at 1535, 1529, & 1525 (Robert's Real Estate and University Counseling Center). A concrete sidewalk begins again after the parking lots and continues east all the way to Fuller road, with crosswalks for the exit and entrance to Stuyvesant Plaza.

+ Recommendations for improvement along the north side of the Stuyvesant Plaza section: The area in front of the businesses at 1535, 1529, & 1525, the sidewalk ends and it is unclear where or if people should be walking. When there are cars are parked, they block the path. A cooperative effort is needed between the town and the property owners to work out a better solution to the parking needs of these businesses that will allow for a continuous sidewalk in this area.

Along the south side in the Stuyvesant Plaza section, a concrete sidewalk begins at the southeast corner of Western and Schoolhouse road and continues east to Fuller road, but is only blacktop in front of the dentist office (#1484) at the Fuller Road light.

+ Recommendations for improvement along the south side of the Stuyvesant Plaza section:

- Consideration needs to be given as to how pedestrians are to get safely across the Schoolhouse Road intersection when walking along the south side of Western Avenue. [* see notes below regarding this issue]
- Work with the property owner of the dentist office to complete the stretch of sidewalk near the Fuller Road light.

* Including the on-ramp to the Northway used by westbound traffic, Western Avenue is six lanes wide at the Schoolhouse Road light. That expanse is a formidable barrier to safe crossing, and yet this is a very desirable spot for pedestrians to cross Western Avenue because it connects the Schoolhouse Road sidewalk to an east-west sidewalk along the north side of Western Avenue that leads to major shopping destinations (Crossgates Mall and Stuyvesant Plaza).

+ The engineering study for this improvement project should include a feasibility study of building a pedestrian bridge that would allow pedestrians to get safely across Western

Draft

Draft

avenue at Schoolhouse Road. The study should take into consideration that such a bridge would eliminate the need for two other potentially costly efforts - 1) construction of sidewalk on the south side of Western Avenue from Church Road to Schoolhouse Road, and 2) creating a safe westward crossing of Schoolhouse Road for pedestrians walking along the south side of Western Avenue. The combination of a bridge from the southeast corner of Schoolhouse Road to the north side of Western Avenue and an improved crossing of Western Avenue at Church Road would consolidate all pedestrian traffic needing to get from one side of the Northway overpass to the other. This would eliminate both the difficult challenge of bringing a sidewalk under the Northway overpass on the south side of Western Avenue and the need for pedestrians to cross Schoolhouse Road.

3. Elmwood Section

In the center of Western Avenue, on the east side of the Fuller road intersection, is an area currently outlined in yellow paint that is not a driving lane.

+ This area provides an opportunity to create a substantial raised center safety island to facilitate pedestrian crossing of this wide section of roadway and to improve the aesthetics of the area. This island should extend east to the end of the Burger King property, but should not prevent westbound traffic from being able to make a left hand turn into the Century Buffet.

On the north side of Western Avenue in this section there is a bike lane and a concrete sidewalk from Fuller to Elmwood, in good condition but narrow and there is no green strip between the sidewalk and the roadway. From Elmwood to Parkwood the sidewalk is blacktop and in poor condition, but there is a greenstrip in this area.

+ Recommendations for improvement along the north side of the Elmwood section: A concrete sidewalk should be constructed from Elmwood to Parkwood, following the specifications for curb, greenstrip and sidewalk noted in the general recommendations above. The current sidewalk from Fuller Road to Elmwood should be better protected from automobile traffic.

On the south side of Western Avenue in the Elmwood section there is a continuous bike lane, but the conditions of the sidewalk in this section is widely varied. There is sidewalk in front of the Burger King, but in the area in front of the Century Buffet, there is no sidewalk. Instead there is an 8 foot wide curbed strip covered with concrete and stones with three antique street light poles. This could be changed into a sidewalk and greenstrip area. Continuing east is the 1450 Picotte office building. Again there is no sidewalk but there is a seven-foot wide curbed area planted with attractive pine trees.

+ Recommendations for improvement along the south side of the Elmwood section: Sidewalk needs to be constructed in front of the 1450 Picotte office building according to the specifications for curb, greenstrip and sidewalk noted in the general recommendations above. This will result in a continuous, consistent, high quality sidewalk from

Draft

Draft

Schoolhouse Road to McKown Road on the south side of Western Avenue. The pine trees currently planted in front of the 1450 office building should be preserved where is or moved to the greenstrip between the new sidewalk and roadway to provide additional buffer from traffic.

4. Glenwood Section

There is currently a well-defined sidewalk and greenstrip for the entire length of the north side of the Glenwood/Norwood section, but the sidewalk is blacktop and in poor condition. There are significant drainage problems in this area a well.

+ Recommendations for improvement along the north side of the Glenwood section: A concrete sidewalk should be constructed on the north side of Western Avenue in the Glenwood section following the specifications for curb, greenstrip and sidewalk noted in the general recommendations above.

There is currently a good quality concrete sidewalk along the south side of the Glenwood section in front of the Holiday Inn Express properties, but there is no curb and the greenstrip has no plantings. The Passano Paint store parking lot interferes with the sidewalk area there.

- + Recommendations for improvement along the south side of the Glenwood section:
 - The greenstrip in this section should be extended into the current "bicycle lane" and curbs installed to create a four-foot wide bicycle path and wider greenstrip.
 - A bus shelter should be constructed at the very eastern end of the Holiday Inn Express property by the Passano paint store.
 - The current sidewalk needs to be extended in front of the Passano paint store to McKown Road.

5. W2 (Waverly/Westlyn) Section

There is currently a well-defined sidewalk and greenstrip for the entire length of the north side of the W2 section all the way to Knowles Terrace but the sidewalk is blacktop and there are drainage problems in this area.

+ Recommendations for improvement along the north side of the W2 section: A concrete sidewalk should be constructed on the north side of Western Avenue in the W2 section following the specifications for curb, greenstrip and sidewalk noted in the general recommendations above.

Along the south side of Western Avenue in the W2 section there is currently no sidewalk, and the front yards of these properties extend up to the edge of the current "bicycle lane". There are 6 properties whose front lawns extend to Western Avenue in this stretch; two between McKown and Westlyn and four between Westlyn and Brookwood.

Draft

Draft

+ Recommendations for improvement along the south side of the W2 section: An effort should be made to work with these six property owners to develop a sidewalk plan for this section, either wide sidewalks without greenstrips or narrow sidewalks with greenstrips, depending on the wishes of the property owners. The wider sidewalks could include trees planted in sidewalk cut-out areas.

6. Albany Transition Section

On the north side of Western Avenue in this section from Knowles to SUNY there is not a defined sidewalk, but there is a recognizable blacktop walking path. There are drainage problems in this area. At the eastern end of this section, in front of SUNYA, there is a wide concrete sidewalk adjacent to an acceleration lane for traffic leaving SUNYA heading west.

+ Recommendations for improvement along the north side of the Albany Transition section: A concrete sidewalk should be constructed on the north side of Western Avenue in the Albany Transition section following as many of the specifications for curb, greenstrip and sidewalk noted in the general recommendations as possible. The sidewalk in this section may have abrupt turns. Its layout requires meeting with the dozen property owners.

On the south side of Western Avenue in this section there is a sidewalk that extends from Brookwood in front of the Fire Station to a point in the middle of the Across The Street Pub property. There is no sidewalk heading east from that point until the hair salon at the city line. This section includes Dunkin Donuts, the Capital Lodge, and the Best Western Hotel.

+ Recommendations for improvement along the south side of the Albany Transition section:

- Install a concrete sidewalk to replace blacktop, work with the business property owners to develop a sidewalk plan, e.g., the stone and concrete brim areas in front of the motels could become sidewalks, and install sidewalks from the motel to the city line, per stated standards

- Finally, In order to create a safer crossing of Western Avenue at SUNYA, a raised safety island should be built in the middle of Western Avenue at this point, the area to be taken from the west exit lane for the university.

CONCLUSION

If it is not possible to provide more greenstrip area, more and improved sidewalks and more trees without taking more lawn area from residences, as proposed, then we prefer that Western Avenue remain as it is.

#####

Draft