

McKownville Improvement Association

The Proposal for Western Avenue

May 4, 2002

see note on back

INTRODUCTION

Western Avenue is the 'Main Street' of McKownville, from the City line to Church Road. 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 the needs of motorists while respecting the necessity to support a safe and effective flow of automobile traffic. This report focuses on Western Avenue while later reports by the McKownville Improvement Association will focus on other McKownville planning topics possibly including Church Road, Schoolhouse Road, Fuller Road, McKown Road, walking paths, the McKown pond, and zoning.

The focus of this report is to recommend improvements in 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 for pedestrians, 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 suburban highway into which it has been evolving.

This goal is both realistic and affordable. There are many examples of major state highways 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 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 (the area between the sidewalk and the street) along Western Avenue need be safeguarded. No more encroachment not even one inch anywhere in McKownville.
2. "Bicycle Lanes" need 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 sufficiently wide for automobile traffic. This is not only a poor use of space, it is dangerous because motorists use them as right hand turn lanes, endangering pedestrians and those on bicycles. It needs to be noted that Western Avenue west of McKownville has bicycle lanes that are usually three or four feet wide and those east of McKownville are quite narrow.
3. There need be a standard for the Western Avenue roadside in McKownville:
 - a three or four foot bicycle lane next to the outer driving lane, separated with a painted line
 - a significant granite stone curb and effective and sufficient road drains for storm water
 - a wide green strip planted with grass and trees
 - a five foot concrete sidewalk

There will be exceptions to this standard but they need be viewed as exceptions that require special justification.

The work recently finished by the city of Albany on Whitehall between Manning and Delaware provide a good model for a newer sidewalk and other streetscape improvements.

4. In the green strips mentioned above, not only need there be extensive tree planting but more retro or classic streetlights need be installed. The lights and other improvements will calm the automobile traffic, improve the overall appearance of Western Avenue and buffer pedestrians from the dangers and noise of automobile traffic.

5. Pedestrians crossing Western at the present traffic lights at Church Road, the Northway entrance and exit, Schoolhouse, Fuller, McKown/Norwood and the University need be given control and visual comfort over automobile traffic. This translates into slightly raised walk areas, possibly with offsetting colored pavement to show motorists that pedestrians use this intersection, obvious walk-lights with timers displaying the time left to cross, like at Church Road, and signage to warn motorists that right turns must respect pedestrian right of way. In addition, the McKownville Fire Department controlled light at Brookwood/Knowles need be altered to allow for pedestrian controlled walk lights.

6. The Town of Guilderland need institute an on-going program that replaces trees in the green strips on the streets in McKownville in addition to the tree plantings done as part of the Western Avenue streetscape improvement project. The Town has been very responsive about taking down dead trees on the side streets. It is necessary that a program be created to replace trees. An archway of trees calms traffic.

7. Attractive bus shelters need be constructed along the east bound bus stops on Western and at the west bound bus stop near the University entrance, making sure that these do not reduce the present green space. Westbound bus shelters are not needed because persons using the westbound bus stops are exiting the bus and walk directly to their homes. Few board the westbound buses in McKownville, except at the university.

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 (a) to provide a safe haven for pedestrians, roughly halfway across the pavement area being crossed, and (b) to improve the appearance of the area by the inclusion of plantings. These green islands will remind 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 a solid understanding of the roadside conditions is necessary.

To organize the description of roadside conditions and to establish a common vocabulary for the discussions and proposals, the McKownville stretch of Western Avenue, from Church Road to the Albany City line, has been partitioned into six sections. The names for these six sections (moving from west to east) are:

1. *Church Road Transition Section*: From Church Road to Schoolhouse Road, including the overpass and the intersections that serve as the very beginning (or end) of the Northway (Fuller Road Alternate).

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 including Waverly and Westlyn

6. *Albany Transition Section* From Knowles / Brookwood including Arcadia and Hillcrest to SUNYA and the Albany city line.

What follows is, for each of the six sections, a description of current road conditions, followed by specific recommendations for streetscape improvements for each section.

1. Church Road Transition Section

Western Avenue in this area is much too wide with too many lanes, up to seven automobile and stripped lanes. The extra right hand lanes increase the hazards for pedestrians since motorists behave as if a right hand turning lane has priority over a pedestrian. The extra lanes makes the distance for pedestrian crossings excessive and therefore more dangerous. Also the extra lanes, including the stripped lanes, invite motorists to drive too rapidly. (Please note-West of Crossgates Western Avenue is generally no more than four or five lanes in Guilderland while Western Avenue in the city, east of McKownville, is usually four lanes).

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 and seven lanes. At the Northway light, there is a painted crosswalk on the northside across the four lanes of traffic entering Western Avenue. The sidewalk and bike lanes continue under the Northway overpass to the east past the entrance to the Northway and into the Stuyvesant Plaza section.

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

Where the southbound lanes of the Northway enter Western Avenue, there are two lanes to turn right (west) and two to turn left (east). In the middle of the four lanes is a triangular striped or hashed area that need become a raised safety island for pedestrians when crossing this wide east-west expanse.

The third westbound lane from the Northway exit to Crossgates need be shortened (until a little west of Church Road). Elimination of a portion of the extra lane from the Northway exit would create the space to widen the sidewalk, erect a protective barrier for pedestrians crossing the Thruway Bridge, and permit a wider green strip with trees for the strip west of the bridge. Pedestrians crossing the Northway heading west would see that there is greater safety ahead.

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 only on the Thruway Bridge. 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 need be built in the middle of Western Avenue, on the western side of the Church Street intersection. This may require the elimination of the right hand turn lane from just west of Chapman to Church Road.

A sidewalk need be constructed from the southeast corner of Western and Church Street along the front of the Great Oaks property up onto the Thruway Bridge and on the east side of the Thruway Bridge and under the Northway overpass and through to Schoolhouse Road.

The bike path along the south side in this section need be kept, but signs need 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. The separate lane for the motorists heading for the overpass onto the Northway need be reduced in length thereby creating more safety space for a barrier, a green strip and pedestrian safety along the southside of Western.

The surface of the overpass bridge need be made more attractive, e.g., a stone like surface.

A pedestrian controlled walk light is needed for pedestrians crossing Schoolhouse (north and south)

The walk light for those crossing Western at the Schoolhouse intersection needs to be lengthened to give pedestrians more time to cross.

The knee height metal barrier separating the overpass traffic from the Schoolhouse Road traffic on Schoolhouse Road stops just before Western Avenue. Pedestrians crossing north and south at Schoolhouse do use this cement and metal barricade for a pedestrian safety island. Safety requires that the island be enlarged and the uncontrolled southbound traffic from Western onto the overpass be controlled by a walk light and traffic light, along with the other traffic entering or exiting from Schoolhouse Road. The small safety island in Western Avenue, separating the traffic entering the Northway from that proceeding west and passing under the overpass, need be enlarged quite a bit.

With walk lights--better timed in the one direction and a new one in the other direction--a new traffic signal controlling traffic onto the overpass and into Schoolhouse Road, two enlarged safety islands, and colored pavement marking the pedestrian walk areas, pedestrians could cross much more safely in both directions.

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.

* Recommendations for improvement along the north side of the Stuyvesant Plaza section:

Walking east the sidewalk ends in front of the businesses at 1535, 1529, & 1525 and it is unclear where people can walk. There is a curb but cars are parked where a sidewalk would be. The Town of Guilderland owns the next

building. It was the pumping station for the McKownville Water District when McKownville had its own water district and is used presently by the Guilderland Chamber of Commerce and it has a green strip and a sidewalk. Discussions with the three businesses at 1525, 1529 and 1535 need sort out how a green strip with trees and a sidewalk area can be provided and joined with the existing sidewalks and green strips.

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:

Work with the property owner of the dentist office to complete the stretch of green strip and concrete sidewalk near the Fuller Road light.

Added signage is needed. For motorists exiting Burger King, they need be informed that motorists turning right or left from Fuller onto Western have the right of way. Or, alternatively, motorists turning right or left from Fuller need be informed that motorists exiting Burger King have a traffic controlled light and that Fuller Road motorists need treat the intersection as if it was a four-way highway intersection. Motorists not familiar with the intersection presume that the private (Burger King) driveway does not have a traffic light and therefore Burger King exiting traffic has no more right of access than vehicles exiting any private driveway. This is a very dangerous intersection. Moreover, pedestrians are crowded by the vehicles turning right and left and the present walk lights need give pedestrians more time to cross.

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 another safety island to facilitate pedestrian crossing of this wide section of roadway and to improve the aesthetics of the area. This island need extend east to the end of the Burger King property. It would not prevent left turns into Elmwood, the Century Buffet or the Burger King (though left turns from the Century Buffet need be eliminated regardless of the creation of the pedestrian safety island).

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, often flooded during rain storms, and a very narrow green strip.

* Recommendations for improvement along the north side of the Elmwood section:

In addition to the suggestions above, the area from Elmwood to Parkwood need be improved following the specifications for curb, green strip and sidewalk noted in the general recommendations above.

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 varies. There is sidewalk in front of Burger King, but not in front of the Century Buffet. Instead there is an 8-foot wide curbed strip covered with concrete and stones with antique street light poles. This need be changed into a sidewalk, widened and a green strip area added. Continuing east is the 1450 Picotte office building. Again there is no sidewalk but there is a seven-foot wide curbed area planted with evergreen trees. The bench here for bus patrons need be upgraded to an attractive bus shelter.

* Recommendations for improvement along the south side of the Elmwood section:

In addition to those just mentioned, a sidewalk needs to be constructed in front of the 1450 Picotte office building according to the specifications for curb, green strip and sidewalk noted in the general recommendations above. This will result in a continuous, consistent, high quality sidewalk from Church Road to McKown Road on the south side of Western Avenue. The pine trees currently planted in front of the 1450 office building need be preserved or moved to the green strip between the new sidewalk and roadway to provide an additional buffer from traffic. Walk lights need be installed at the Parkwood intersection. Presently there is only a pedestrian controlled traffic light at this intersection.

4. Glenwood Section

There is currently a well-defined sidewalk and green strip for the north side of the Glenwood/Norwood but the sidewalk is blacktop, in poor condition and below street level. There are significant drainage problems.

* Recommendations for improvement along the north side of the Glenwood section:

A concrete sidewalk need be constructed on the north side of Western Avenue in the Glenwood section following the specifications for curb, green strip 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 green strip has no plantings. The Passano Paint store parking lot interferes with the sidewalk area there and there are no walk lights, only pedestrian controlled traffic lights.

* Recommendations for improvement along the south side of the Glenwood section:

The green strip in this section need be extended into most of the current bicycle lane and curbs installed to leave a three or four-foot wide bicycle path. A bus shelter need be constructed near the Passano paint store.

The current sidewalk needs to be extended in front of the Passano paint store to McKown Road. The abnormally wide bicycle lane here is especially dangerous because large numbers of motorists use it to turn into McKown Road which conflicts with the many people using this intersection to cross Western at the light and wait for a CDTA bus.

In addition to an attractive bus shelter, walk lights need be installed here.

5. W2 (Waverly/Westlyn) Section

There is currently a well-defined sidewalk and green strip 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 need be constructed on the north side of Western Avenue in the W2 section following the specifications for curb, green strip 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 the properties extend not quite to the edge of the current bicycle lane. There are four residential properties in this stretch, two between McKown and Westlyn and two between Westlyn and Brookwood. There are in addition four businesses in this section, again two in each block.

* Recommendations for improvement along the south side of the W2 section:

An effort need be made to work with the property owners to develop a sidewalk plan for this section, wide sidewalks without green strips or narrow sidewalks with green strips, depending on the wishes of the property owners. The wider sidewalks could include trees planted in sidewalk cutout areas. Each property owner may prefer a different solution and therefore the sidewalk probably would not follow a simple straight line and likewise for the concrete sidewalks and green strips in front of the four businesses.

6. Albany Transition Section

On the north side of Western Avenue in this section from Knowles to SUNY there is not a straight-line sidewalk, but there is a recognizable walking area. There are drainage problems. 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 the university heading west.

* Recommendations for improvement along the north side of the Albany Transition section:

To create a pedestrian island in the middle of Western Avenue at the university entrance, the acceleration lane near SUNYA need be eliminated. Walk lights are needed also. A concrete sidewalk need be constructed on the north side of Western Avenue from Knowles to the university following as many of the specifications for curb, green strip and sidewalk noted in the general recommendations as possible. Its layout will require meetings with the owners of the properties. A sidewalk and green strip in front of the two businesses in this section will require discussions with the businesses about how best to accommodate their needs and those of pedestrians,

On the south side of Western Avenue in this section there is a sidewalk that extends from Brookwood in front of the McKownville Fire House 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 property owners to develop a sidewalk plan, e.g., the stone and concrete areas in front of the motels could become sidewalks and green strips with trees and could be extended to the city line.

There need also be pedestrian controlled walk lights at Brookwood/Knowles added onto the present fire department controlled light. At present there is no pedestrian controlled traffic light along Western for the five or six blocks heading east from McKown/Norwood to the University/city line.

The raised safety island near the university entrance need be sizable, to remind motorists that this is a residential zone.

This concludes the specific section recommendations. There are two general proposals for Western Avenue in McKownville.

The speed limit. To calm traffic and reduce accidents improve the residential appearance of Western Avenue and to make the area more attractive for pedestrians, the planting of trees, the curbs and sidewalks, the walk lights, and the pedestrian islands and elimination of lanes will help. While these changes will tend to encourage motorists to reduce their speeds, a reduced speed limit would also help. Like that in the City it should be 30 mph. The actual speed is much too high, extra police work is needed to calm the traffic in this area, and a lower speed limit would further aid the process of improving safety.

Improved appearance. The homes along Western Avenue in McKownville tend to be better maintained and attractive than some of the businesses. To improve the appearance of several of the businesses along Western is important. One or more of the businesses have too much of their parking in front of their buildings, the buildings are not attractive or are poorly maintained, customer parking tends to interfere with pedestrians, too many curb cuts exist thereby increasing the hazards of walking, too few plantings are provided, and storage of trash or location of dumpsters is in sight of passing traffic.

CONCLUSION

If it is not possible to provide more and wider green strip area, more and improved sidewalks and more trees along Western Avenue without taking more lawn area, as proposed, then we prefer that Western Avenue remain as it is.

*Members of the McKownville Improvement Association Planning Group
(The three who wrote the drafts of the report are indicated by #)*

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*This is beautifully done!
 We all should be deeply
 grateful to members of the Association
 I'm sorry I cannot attend the
 meeting as I no longer drive. I cannot walk with either.
 Thank you all!
 Virginia*

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