

Missoula City Council Public Works Committee Minutes

February 1, 2023, 1:00 pm

Council Chambers (in person) or TEAMS (virtually)

Attend in person: City Council Chambers, 140 W Pine, Missoula MT

Members present: Stacie Anderson, Mirtha Becerra (chair), Daniel Carlino, John P. Contos, Sierra Farmer, Gwen Jones, Kristen Jordan, Mike Nugent, Jennifer Savage, Amber Sherrill, Sandra Vasecka, Heidi West

1. ADMINISTRATIVE BUSINESS

1.1 Roll Call

1.2 Approval of the Minutes

The minutes were approved as submitted.

1.2.1 PWM Committee Minutes from January 25, 2023

2. PUBLIC COMMENT

3. COMMITTEE BUSINESS

3.1 Presentation on the Higgins Avenue Corridor (Brooks to Broadway) Planning Project

Jeremy Keene presenting,

The City has been working on this project for about twenty months and has been in the downtown plans for fifteen years. The need for a decision today is due to funding and the opportunity to apply for a grant. The City is looking for Council direction on the preferred concept for Higgins. The preferred concept includes the Higgins plan, Front and Main conversions, and some trail additions. Higgins is still just a concept at this point. If the City successfully receives the grant, they still need to go through a final design process. Missoula is experiencing a lot of new growth in the downtown area, and we need to make it easier and safer for everyone to get around. This concept is also about transportation and equity, sustainability, affordability, and economic health for downtown.

Aaron Wilson presenting,

The City and consultants have conducted a lot of public outreach on this project before developing the design concept. In the preferred concept, around twenty parking spaces will be removed. Businesses were the most concerned about parking, and this concept lost the fewest parking spaces. There is parking capacity downtown that needs to be managed properly. The downtown associate is looking into how to manage these parking spots better. This design has operational analysis such as left turns, access to destinations, reduced re-circulation traffic, and reduced need for the number of right turns. The consultants did several studies, and nearly all showed a positive benefit of the 4-to-3 lane conversions. The downtown area has a lot of housing and development coming in the future. This Higgins project will be multimodal transportation that will connect it all.

Ms. Vasecka asked how the number of crashes in the Higgins Corridor compares to crashes in other corridors in Missoula. Mr. Wilson does not know the specifics, but they did compare it to national averages of similar corridors, and it is higher than average. Ms. Vasecka also asked why the economic data was compared to cities much larger than Missoula. Mr. Wilson replied that often these projects happen in larger cities, and it's hard to find an exact comparison.

Ms. Jones commented that the lanes south of the river are very narrow, which is a large part of the accidents. Mr. Wilson said the minimum requirement for a lane width is ten feet, and the lanes on Higgins are nine feet. On transit routes like Higgins, the lane width is usually eleven feet to allow for buses. The parking lanes are also narrow, and several cars have lost mirrors over the years.

Mr. Nugent asked how much the other city departments were involved in getting to this point. Mr. Wilson replied they have reached out to all the City departments to get input on this plan.

Ms. Anderson asked what the timeline would be for actual construction. Mr. Wilson estimated that construction would not start for at least two to three years. Ms. Anderson said that would give businesses some relief after covid and the bridge construction.

Ms. Savage asked what the methodology was to reach out to business owners and what the response was. Mr. Wilson said the group did door-to-door at the business twice. The goal was to reach all the business owners at some point. Through the Downtown Organization, notices were emailed and mailed out. The City also met personally with businesses such as the owners of the Florence Building. The result has been mixed results with many in favor and some opposed.

Ms. Sherrill commented that she feels people drive too fast on Higgins and wondered if the 4-to-3 conversion would reduce speeds. Mr. Wilson said it would help with speed, especially at peak hours. In addition, it eliminates the ability for cars to go around each other in the opposite lane.

Ms. Jordan has been surprised by all the feedback regarding this issue. She says most people don't understand the studies and work involved in deciding on this preferred concept.

Ms. Vasecka asked if the Council could be provided all of the comments that have been submitted because she would like to read through them.

Ms. Jones made the motion to continue with the preferred concept as outlined while at the same time continuing public outreach.

Scott Billadeau, co-owner of Liquid Planet and Pangea spoke to several points about why he and other business owners opposed the plan. Mr. Billadeau feels that the businesses should have been notified earlier. The main goal of this plan is safety, but he feels it's just a way to force more people to bike, walk, or take the bus downtown. There needs to be an adequate safety study done. This is only an option for a few Missoulians or people from out of town. Downtown Missoula has been fighting a negative perception of downtown for years. Many people view the hassle and cost of parking downtown and the ongoing problem of homelessness as a major problems of coming downtown. Mr. Billadeau also stated that this plan has not been going on for 15 years. He has not heard of a Higgins road diet. The comparison of Missoula to other large cities is not adequate. Downtown Missoula has construction fatigue. He added the City expanded Russell and Reserve Street and wondered why they would take away lanes on Higgins Ave.

Travis Matier, a resident of Missoula, says he spends a lot of time downtown and has found many bicyclists need to be more aware of traffic. For example, he says driving down Broadway; people walk right in front of cars near the Povarelo Center.

Jim Sayer, a resident of McLeod Ave, added that several cities all over the US have done 4-to-3-lane conversions, and they work well. This will improve traffic because it will be a consistent lane, and bicycles will also have a lane. He added this would enhance mobility for people in wheelchairs and walking with canes. Mr. Sayer says this configuration fits all the plans that Council has already adopted.

Dave Macintosh has owned a business on the hip strip for 43 years. He said the survey crew talked to him, but they could not really answer his questions. The communication could have been clearer to him as a business owner. He added the bike lanes should be one block over where there is less traffic, and it would be much safer.

Bob Giordano, owner of Free Cycles says he has been on a mission of safe transportation. The hip strip is one of the most dangerous areas of town to ride bikes, and he avoids it. He says this preferred concept will be a benefit to all modes of transportation.

Mike Steinberg, the executive director of the Roxy theater, was in support of this proposal. He commented that the Roxy often has 300 people at a time, and he is concerned about these people crossing and walking in front of the theater. He feels fortunate that he doesn't have to ride his bike past the theater on Higgins because it is so dangerous.

Eran Wickman, a resident of the South Hills of Missoula, is opposed to this preferred concept. She has created a petition to stop the redesign of the Beartracks Bridge and currently has 211 signatures. Instead, she feels we need to allow the bridge to function as it was designed, with two motor vehicle lanes in each direction.

Ms. Jones would like to see the staff continue working on this concept and connecting with the public. When she campaigned in 2015, this was a topic in her campaign, and it needed to be addressed then. She has been involved with neighborhood meetings and has had huge support. People want to feel safe when they go downtown, and the Higgins Corridor has several safety concerns. If more people walk and bike downtown, more parking spaces will open to those who choose to drive.

Mr. Carlino said one of the essential things in street design is that everyone can get around safely. This design will give all modes of travel a safe route. Vision Zero states that the City needs to choose the safest street option, and now it's time to act on that and choose this preferred concept. The city needs to stop the climate crisis and start walking and biking more.

Ms. West commented that she used to work downtown and tried to bike to that location and only did it a few times because it was terrifying. She added this redesign is much better than what is currently there. She especially likes the left-turn lanes. As a mother of a high school student, it isn't easy to drive around Hellgate High School.

Ms. Vasecka added that she is also trying to use multimodal transportation more and agrees that it is terrifying to ride down some streets. However, she says she takes the back routes with less vehicle traffic, even though it may take a bit longer. She does not feel that we should congest this area of town and should not be a priority. She has heard the frustration of the business owners at this point and would like to read through all the comments. Ms. Vasecka added that many Missoula projects get done if the staff wants them done. She is uncomfortable voting for it because of all the opposition from citizens. Ms. Sherrill commented that the staff is excellent and puts a lot of work into getting these grants. She also added that Hellgate High School is a mess, especially at lunchtime when students are crossing the streets and not paying attention.

Ms. Becerra added that the land use plans need to support safe infrastructure. She thinks

this is something other than a road diet but an equitable redistribution of our infrastructure so everyone can move along one of the main corridors in town.

Moved by: Gwen Jones

Direct staff to move forward with the preferred concept as outlined.

AYES: (10): Stacie Anderson, Mirtha Becerra, Daniel Carlino, Sierra Farmer, Gwen Jones, Kristen Jordan, Mike Nugent, Jennifer Savage, Amber Sherrill, and Heidi West

NAYS: (2): John Contos, and Sandra Vasecka

Vote results: Approved (10 to 2)

4. ADJOURNMENT