

A Critique of the Current Plans to Reconfigure West Federal Street in Downtown Youngstown

Overview of Project

Federal Street has been the main commercial road going through downtown Youngstown since its incorporation. From the mid 1970s until early 2000s, components of Federal Street were closed to vehicular traffic and reconfigured into Federal Plaza. Within the past few years, the road has been reopened. With the incorporation of diagonal parking spaces, more cars are available to park on the street than in previous years.

The Department of Public Works is moving forward with plans to alter the remaining parts of Federal Street in a similar fashion. But the current layout of Federal Street west of Phelps Street is fundamentally different in design compared to the rest of the road. At the moment, there are medians running the length of the street, with mature trees located along the central medians and throughout the brickwork adjacent to the sidewalks. If completed as designed, both the medians and the mature trees will be removed to accommodate additional diagonal parking.

As of the first week of August, these plans for the reconfiguration of West Federal Street have not been released to the public for consideration or comment. However, the existing timeline for the construction includes sending the project out to bid by August 15.

Summary of This Report

We contend there are two fundamental components of the West Federal Street redesign that need to be addressed and corrected: the final street design, and the planning process used by the project's leadership.

Considerations are listed, from both design and economic perspectives, as to why existing plans may be harmful to the city in the future. These plans are inconsistent with current leading thoughts on city planning and design.

The current timeline for the project contains about a week between its unveiling to the public and the commencement of the bidding process. It is hoped that city leaders will listen to and incorporate public input before a final decision to begin construction is made.

Our Main Concern

In writing this document our main concern is the future of the downtown and our city, both in the short run and the long term, and whether the proposed changes would prohibit the development of businesses and the attraction of individuals to the downtown area.

The next few pages detail the problems with the new plans as proposed by the Department of Public Works and championed by the Office of Economic Development. It is very important to note that our main concern is with the design as proposed, not the individuals who proposed it.

How this Redesign Process Neglected Public Discourse

In a recent Vindicator article published on August 4 about this debate, the Public Works Deputy Director is quoted as saying, “the opportunities for public input were in 2005.”

This statement about the role of the public in the planning process is exactly the type of opinion that may impede progress and alienate citizens. The development of the downtown is a *continual* process. Plans need to be reexamined with the passing of time, especially for a downtown that has changed dramatically since 2005. Even until the first week of August, any requests to see the current plans at the Department of Public Works in City Hall have been met with resistance, including statements that the plans are not available for public viewing.

The time to unveil the final design plans to the public is not a week before the project goes to bid.

Review of the Physical Design Concerns for West Federal

The opposition to the current plans does not “stem from outdated information” from the original plan released over two years ago. Even the most recent plans deserve critique and consideration. The arguments for editing the most current design are organized into the following sections:

- I. The new plans will remove the existing mature trees and the benefits they provide
- II. The new plans will increase the number of parking spaces only by a small number
- III. The new plans will remove the central flowerbeds
- IV. The new plans will have similar weak design components as East Federal
- V. The new plans will replace concrete with asphalt
- VI. New construction comes at a critical time of current growth

I. The new plans will remove the existing mature trees and the benefits they provide

At the present, mature trees fill the median down the length of the West Federal Street and with less frequency, mature trees run along the sidewalks in front of the buildings. The trees are visually appealing and provide shade in this area. If these trees were to be removed for new paving and parking construction, the street would lose its one connection to nature. If any trees would be replaced along the sidewalks, they would definitely be younger and smaller. We would have to wait twenty to thirty years to see the maturity and growth that exists today.



Looking at the parts of the Federal Street already reconfigured in this “modernized” fashion, it’s not anticipated that the new trees will live to maturity, or grow to a decent size. Because the space for growth around the newer trees is so small, with smaller gratings and concrete so close to the newer plantings, the trees have little room to develop.

Pictured below is a recent photo of a section of Federal Street already reconfigured with concrete and diagonal parking. First, observe the tree to the right. It’s summer, yet there are no leaves on its branches. A small tree was originally placed there, and without attention is now dead. Now look to the left, the tree there has already been removed and a large and unsightly orange barrel is propped in its place. Is this the image of a vibrant city with a downtown that attracts people?



Besides the benefits in appearance, research mixing the fields of city planning and forestry is showing that mature trees affect the economic fortunes of commercial business areas. In her work on the impact of tree growth in cities both large and small, Dr. Kathleen Wolf of the University of Washington published research showing that consumer spending on shopping and entertainment activities is significantly higher in areas with trees than without. Additionally, the size and maturity of tree cover on different roads was found to make an impact on the responses of consumers.

II. The new plans will increase the number of parking spaces only by a small number

While recent articles in the press have placed the number of net parking stalls gained at 24, this number does not take into account all of the current stalls that exist. The fact is that, aside from the 38 metered parking stalls, there exist 22 un-metered stalls (there are 9 2-hour zones and 13 30-minute loading/unloading zones) that are delineated only by signage. These spaces are metered until 5pm each weekday, at which time they turn into full-time parking stalls. Taking these into account, the current number of parking stalls in the study area is 60.

The proposed plan shows approximately 63 stalls plus 9 stalls available strictly for handicapped use, or a total of 72 stalls. It follows that the net gain of parking in this study area is approximately 12 stalls, not 24 as previously mentioned.

Additionally, there exists awkwardness in the combination of diagonal stalls mixed with parallel stalls that is contrary to the “ease of use” argument that the Department of Public Works claims is one of the driving forces behind this plan.

Rather, we propose to reexamine the current parking situation in the study area to increase parking efficiency. One way to accommodate additional stalls may be to reduce the frequency of bus stops when the station lies only two blocks away. These spaces can each create three new stalls without having detrimental impacts on the importance of public transportation.

III. The new plans will remove the central flowerbeds

The existing flowerbeds contained within the medians are very colorful, and a source of pride for many of the residents of the region. The most recent plans call for the elimination of these flowerbeds, to be replaced with a strip of stamped concrete running down the middle of the street. The only exception to this change will be the creation of two smaller flowerbeds, which bookend the three city blocks where the redevelopment is proposed to occur.

In recent years, volunteers participating in the annual Streetscape event have planted flowers within the medians. The reason behind this event is the beautification of the downtown, and removing the flowerbeds will reduce the overall beauty of the street. Below is a picture from the most recent Streetscape in 2007. Will the removal of the flowerbeds appear that their deeds are unappreciated?



IV. The new plans will have similar weak design components as East Federal

The recent opening of Federal Plaza has been met with moderate success as traffic has been able to pass freely down Federal Street. There are, however, many issues with the current plaza that should be addressed and corrected before continuing on with Phase III of the plan. These issues include, but are not limited to, the overabundance of uncomfortable street furniture, an inappropriate selection of tree species for an urban environment, and an overwhelming amount of concrete at intersections. These add up to create an environment that does not entirely meet the needs of the end users of the space. In this respect, the previous plans could have been improved upon and it is poor planning to continue on with mediocrity.

At first glance, the proposed plan appears to address some of the above mentioned concerns, however, upon further review, the design components are merely “decoration” and do not truly improve upon the East Federal renovations. No benefit is awarded to pedestrians by the stamped concrete stripe down the center. Trees awkwardly jut out into the open parking rather than create areas that are ideal for sitting and lunching. Overabundant benches create an illusion of emptiness. Uncomfortable benches guarantee it. The picture below shows an existing anemic bench positioned between two trees that are struggling to grow.



Next is a photograph from downtown Warren, showing the existing benches along the sidewalk. They are stylish, and the proper backing, which increases the comfort of the occupant, makes this a preferred option. Midway along the benches is a third arm dividing it into a space too small for vagrants to lie across. This is an example of a well thought out approach to street improvements where form and function meet.



The image on the next page shows the existing redesign in front of Silver's Vogue Shop. What's not vogue however, is the expanse of concrete that appears here. Outside city planners who we have hosted in the city continually comment on the excessive amount of concrete in the redesigned areas. The addition of brick or some other material may have made this space a little more welcoming.



The existing sidewalks are very nice, a mix of mature trees, concrete, and patterned brick. The next pictures illustrate the current look of the sidewalk.



V. The new plans will replace concrete with asphalt

While there is much debate over which material is more appropriate, there is one important point to note: the existing street is concrete and, after 17 years, shows minimal signs of wear. In areas with heavy loads and high volume, such as the WRTA station, concrete is a more appropriate surface as it resists deformation and will not create ruts. Further, if not maintained religiously, asphalt has many undesirable side effects, not the least of which are potholes.

While the cost of repairing and replacing concrete is significantly higher than that of asphalt, the need for those repairs is far less frequent and therefore the Life Cycle Cost is comparable. Because concrete is currently in place, it makes little sense to replace it before its useful life is over. Another benefit of concrete, because of its lighter color, is its ability to help reduce the Urban Heat Island Effect, or the tendency of cities to be many degrees hotter than their surrounding communities.

VI. New construction comes at a critical time of current growth

The effect of construction on local small businesses that are just now beginning to see a steady crowd of loyal patrons may be harmful. During a construction period of approximately six months, the disruption to the traffic and walkability downtown might make it very difficult for businesses to attract business.

The ultimate goal should be the attraction of citizens to the downtown, not the deterrence. While public perception is currently changing, this construction may give many the reason they need to avoid coming downtown.

Conclusion

While the authors of this paper are not opposed to progress and change, we are opposed to actions which take “one step forward and two steps back” for the future long-term health of our downtown. It is our hope that the comments in this paper and the opinions of the other community leaders that are skeptical of the latest version of the redesign continues a discussion about the importance of public opinion in the future of the city.

This document, in its most recent version, is available for download at:

<http://www.archive.org/details/YtownWestFederal>

An online petition where individual opinions can be submitted is available at:

<http://www.petitiononline.com/wfed07>

The statements in this paper are that of the authors only, and do not reflect the position of any single organization, although many individuals share the opinions provided.

Comments are welcomed at WestFederal@gmail.com. Thank you for the time for reading this document.

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