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January 28, 2009

DRB Memorandum #2008-15

Memo to: Bonnie Weeks, Building Commissioner
Jonathan Tucker, Planning Director
From: Christine Brestrup, Senior Planner
Subject: DRB Meeting
January 13, 2009

The Tuesday, January 13, 2009, meeting of the Design Review Board began at 7:35 p.m. in the Town Room, Town Hall. Members Janet Winston (Chair), Jonathan Salvon and Jim Wald were present, along with Senior Planner, Christine Brestrup. Also present were Jason Skeels, Town Engineer, and Peter Lillya, member of the Public Transportation and Bicycle Committee.

The Board turned to **Old Business**.

Old Business

Redesign of Intersection at Route 116 (West Street) and Pomeroy Lane (Pomeroy Village)

The Board began the meeting with a review of new information from the public and from town staff. The Board members received two emails (dated January 13, 2009) from Margo McMahon, a citizen who uses a manually-operated wheelchair and who lives in the Pomeroy Lane Cooperative residential development, near the Pomeroy Lane/Route 116 intersection. Ms. McMahon's emails included comments on crosswalk lights, curb cuts and sidewalks, auditory/visual alerts, signage, bus stop placement and turning lanes.

Mr. Skeels and Ms. Brestrup presented information on roadway widths (existing and proposed) and noted that the Town Manager is interested in the redesign of the intersection, particularly with respect to pavement widths.

Mr. Skeels stated that the pavement width (about 30 feet) on West Pomeroy Lane is not proposed to change, although a left turn lane may be needed in the future, as traffic and development within the Village Center increases. The pavement width on (east) Pomeroy Lane could remain as it is (about 30 feet wide) or be narrowed to 25 feet. The existing width allows better movement for right turns onto West Street northbound.

The Board discussed the width of West Street, north and south of the intersection. The width shown on the plans that have been presented shows 12 foot travel lanes and 11 foot turning lanes. If these were narrowed to 11 feet and 10 feet respectively, and if the bike lanes were narrowed from 5 feet to 4 feet, the new roadway width could be 42.5' curb to curb, according to Mr. Skeels. [Later communications with Mr. Skeels indicated that this width did not include the striping for the lanes and that the actual width would be 44.5 feet, once the striping is added.]

Mr. Lillya stated that 4 foot bike lanes would be adequate.

Mr. Wald stated that the traffic survey done in 2006 [by Cana McCoy of the Planning Department] had shown that the traffic flow was good, north and southbound, but that drivers swerved around cars waiting to make left turns. The traffic survey report noted that left turn lanes might make the intersection safer, by preventing swerving. Ms. Brestrup reported that she had been told that the traffic survey had been done prior to installation of the traffic lights. [Subsequent communications with Mr. Skeels indicate that the traffic lights were installed before the traffic study was done, sometime in 2004 or 2005. The traffic study was done in May 2006.]

Mr. Skeels stated that he has been examining the idea of a shared-use path, an idea preferred by Larry Shaffer. A shared-use path would be about 10 feet wide. It would allow the roadway pavement to be narrower by 10 feet. The shared-use path would be used by pedestrians and bicyclists and would take the place of bike lanes. On the west side of West Street it would take the place of the sidewalk. The addition of a shared-use path might eliminate the grass belt between the path and the road on the west side, due to limited right-of-way width.

The shared-use path would extend up to the north side of Amherst Office Park, where bike lanes would resume on either side of the road. The crosswalk that is proposed to be installed at the bus stops could be used by cyclists to cross from one side of West Street to the other. South of the intersection the shared-use path would end somewhere in the vicinity of R & P Liquors, just north of Glendale Road. There would need to be a crossing here and a sign stating "Cyclists Cross Here". Mr. Lillya noted that a sidewalk would still be needed on the east side of the road.

Mr. Skeels stated that the roadway would move to the east in the vicinity of the intersection, to accommodate the addition of a shared-use path on the west. He noted that asphalt was the preferred material for a shared-use path, not concrete. He offered to prepare a plan showing a shared-use path for the next DRB meeting.

Mr. Skeels stated that there is a wide sidewalk in front of Hampshire College which was meant to be a shared-use path. Ideally a shared-use path could continue all the way from the Pomeroy Lane intersection to Hampshire College.

Mr. Salvon stated that he liked the compromise notion of a shared path but that he had concerns about conflicts between bicyclists and pedestrians. A yellow line could be painted down the center of the path and signs could be posted stating that pedestrians should keep to the right.

Mr. Skeels stated that there were alternatives to asphalt such as colorized asphalt, an epoxy friction surface and paint, but that these options were more expensive than regular asphalt. When asked about frost heaves he noted that all pavements are subject to frost heaves, but that cracks can be patched.

Ms. Winston stated that she had recently turned left onto Pomeroy Lane, eastbound, and had noticed that there were 3 cars backed up on Pomeroy Lane, blocking the side entrance into the Hess Station. The Board discussed the merits of closing one of the entrances to the Hess Station along West Street.

Mr. Lillya noted that the PTBC has been concerned about the widths of the roads. Mr. Salvon stated that, compared to the other intersections around town, this one would not be too wide. Mr. Skeels stated that the extra width of roadway did not add measurably to the expense of the intersection work.

The Board members agreed by consensus to maintain the existing width of roadway on Pomeroy Lane (eastbound), which is about 30 feet. They discussed with Mr. Skeels the availability of money to reconstruct the intersection and the timeline for these improvements. Mr. Skeels noted that there may be some money for curb cuts, traffic signal controls and some sidewalk work (if it benefits those with mobility impairments) from the CDBG funds that will be available by the fall of 2009.

Mr. Salvon stated that he would prefer to wait to take a vote on the final roadway configuration until more information was available and more discussion had occurred. There was discussion about the need for a new traffic study. Mr. Skeels noted that the Level of Service for West Street, north and southbound was LOS "A". He said that a new traffic study might be desirable.

Mr. Skeels pointed out some minor changes to the plans since the last meeting, including adding proposed streetlights, approximately 70 to 80 feet apart. He stated that the streetlights would be similar to those in the downtown area. The plans also include some proposed trees, although he warned that tall trees would not be appropriate under the overhead wires. He noted that the new plans show the crosswalks closer to the intersection, in response to comments by the PTBC. Mr. Skeels also noted that the bus stop on Pomeroy Lane, eastbound, would be moved farther to the east. He pointed out that level landing strips would be installed at the bus stops for wheelchair users.

Mr. Lillya reiterated that the PTBC believes that it isn't critical to have a bus shelter at the southbound bus stop, but it is important at the northbound stop. Ms. Brestrup offered to invite Glenn Barrington of UMass Transit, to share the viewpoint of the bus drivers and the transit system with the Board.

Ms. Winston asked about the sidewalk that was proposed to cross the Gates and Johnson parking lot and whether it would be accessible in snow. Mr. Skeels stated that this part of the parking lot is cleared regularly. He also noted that this is a slow-speed parking lot and relatively safe for pedestrians.

Mr. Lillya stated that the surface of the crosswalks, if they are constructed like the ones in the downtown area may not be visible. They will need reflective material so that they can be easily seen by drivers.

Mr. Skeels stated that the splitter islands that are proposed to be located 1,000 feet north and south of the intersection will slow the traffic as it enters the Village Center area. The splitter islands will have sloped granite curbing with granite block surfacing. They need to be mountable for safety and for emergency vehicles. Mr. Skeels stated that even if the crosswalks are constructed of brick, concrete and granite they can have reflective striping along the edges. This striping can be an epoxy-based paint, which is very durable and highly reflective. It has been used (without the reflective beads) at the intersection of East Pleasant Street and Strong Street, and though it has yellowed, it is very durable and can be cleaned and restored to its former brightness.

Mr. Skeels stated that there may be some "green" money available from state or federal sources for a shared-use path. He noted that there is a bike path shown on the plans for Atkins Corner and there are plans for a bike path through the Notch, although its exact location has not yet been determined.

Design Review Board Handbook – final version

Ms. Brestrup reported that the revised Design Review Board Handbook had been distributed to Planning Board members at a recent meeting and that one of the Planning Board members had suggested some changes to the text. The DRB discussed the suggested change and determined that part of the text on page 6 should be moved to page 11, but that the remainder of the text should stay on page 6. The change will be made at the time of the next printing of the Handbook. A contact number for a state-wide Relay Calling system for hearing-impaired people will also be added to the contacts list on page 22.

The Board turned to New Business.

New Business

Signs and/or sitting area for Town Common, showcasing Amherst Farmers' Market

Ms. Brestrup explained that the Town Manager, Larry Shaffer, had submitted a series of designs on behalf of the organizers of the Farmers' Market, for proposed signs to be installed on the Town Common.

The Board had questions about where these signs are proposed to be installed. The southwest corner, across from Hastings, was one location that was discussed, because it has become a semi-formal gathering place for people who are participating in activities on the Common. Ms. Brestrup mentioned that the WTCU fountain had been mentioned as a possible place for a seating area.

Mr. Salvon stated that he doesn't mind the idea of a sign or a seating area, but has questions about where it would go, how it would work and he would like to hear from the originators of the idea about what they want to achieve. Ms. Winston noted that the proposed signs don't seem to leave space for changes in scheduled town events.

Mr. Wald stated that the Historical Commission should have an opportunity to comment on this proposal. He asked why one organization should be featured while others are not, noting that many organizations regularly use the Common. He noted that the Common is a historic piece of land that originated as part of a 600 foot wide historical highway. He stated that the Historical Commission would be very cautious about any structures or features proposed to be added to the Common. He noted that a sign calling attention to the Common itself might be a good idea. It also might be good to think of this sign as part of a larger plan for signs in the Downtown area. The Historical Commission has been discussing signs for the West Cemetery. Mr. Wald expressed concern about a scenario of proliferating signs for different entities on the Common. He stated that all of those with proposed signs and markers should consult with one another and with town boards and committees and come up with an overall plan for signs in the downtown area.

Mr. Salvon stated that it will be important to see how the signs and/or seating areas will sit in the landscape. Ms. Winston stated that a sign at the southwest corner of the Common, near Route 9, might be a good idea, to inform people about the Common. Such a sign might incorporate information about when the Common was founded. Many people from out of town are not familiar with town commons.

The Board members would like to hear more about the sign proposal from those who are promoting it. They will refrain from making a judgment about the proposal until they have heard more.

Future Meetings

The Board discussed a future meeting schedule. The Board members decided to take up this topic again at their next meeting, but for the near future they established the following schedule:

- Wednesday, January 28th
- Tuesday, February 10th
- Tuesday, February 24th.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 9:00 p.m.

Cc: Anita Licis, DRB member
Janet Winston, DRB member
Kathryn Grandonico, DRB member
Jonathan Salvon, DRB member
Aaron Hayden, Select Board
Jeffrey Bagg, Senior Planner
Nate Malloy, Associate Planner

Peter Lillya, Public Transportation Committee
Jane Ashby, Public Transportation Committee
Rob Crowner, Public Works Committee
Larry Shaffer, Town Manager
Jason Skeels, Town Engineer
Guilford Mooring, Superintendent of Public Works
Roy Rosenblatt, Director of Community Development