

MINUTES OF PUBLIC FORUM ON US 2/MAIN STREET INTERSECTION

Plainfield Town Hall Opera House

May 29, 2014

Selectboard members present: Alice Merrill (Chair), David Strong, Bram Towbin

Guests: Ken Robie and Jesse Devlin (VTrans); Steve Gladczuk (CVRPC)

Members of the public: Edward Hutchinson, Eric Blaisdell, Roderick Leach, George Cushing, Will Colgan, Sandy Ross, Jan Waterman, Andy Robinson, Becky Buchanan, Ricka McNaughton, Anthony Pollina, Denise Boucher, Kathy Perry, Alexandra Thayer, Naomi Flanders, Tim Phillips, Rose Paul, Sarah Albert, Josh Pitts, Dawn Fancher, Rich Phillips, Jeremy Matt, Peter Youngbaer, Lee Light, Brenda Lindemann, Peter Young, Karl Bissex, Cathy Chodorkoff, Fred Woogmaster, Julie Krause, Betsy Ziegler, Joey Klein, J. Stocking, Laura Brill, Christine Farren, Peter Cressy, Mike Peabody, Bob Atchinson.

Alice called the meeting to order at 7:03 pm.

Alice announced that there were two related items on the agenda this evening: the status of plans for the improvement of the US 2/Main Street intersection and a proposal for the Town to submit an application for funds for a pedestrian improvement project.

Alice said that, like all select board meetings, this one would begin with a period of public comment. She then introduced the panelists who were present: Ken Robie and Jesse Devlin from VTrans and Steve Gladczuk from Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission.

Bram Towbin said that he had been contacted by several people who said they would like to attend but were unable to do so. He read the following email he had received from Don Grabowski:

I formerly lived in Plainfield Village on Mill Street. I currently work at The Health Center. I find the intersection of Main Street Plainfield and US Route 2 one of the most harrowing around for both motorists and pedestrians. I find the traffic on 2 through all of Plainfield to move too fast and there is very little enforcement. Although we are talking about Main and 2, I would also encourage conversation about Pedestrians crossing 2 throughout the village. It is a HUGE problem, especially for children. Route 2 is treated by many as a sort of highway. I sometimes have to wait for 20 or so cars to pass by the Post Office crosswalk on my way to the bus. I have had the same experience at the 2 and Main crossing. I think Plainfield would benefit from being a more pedestrian and bike friendly village. Motorists have taken over along Route 2.

Problems:

- *Traffic on Route 2 travels very fast through that intersection.*
- *Traffic very often does not stop nor slow down for the crosswalk there (at the Post Office as well).*
- *It is hard to see up Route 2 to the left from Main Street.*
- *The rail on Route 2 blocks a clear view of Main Street to the right.*
- *When it is rainy and in the winter, cars often spin their wheels entering Route 2. This is especially problematic when a car comes around the curve going east and has to decelerate quickly.*
- *A lot of folks with stick shifts have trouble rolling backwards there. I've seen many stalls.*

My idea for a somewhat (in my opinion) simple solution. Treat it as simple intersection with a stoplight by using 3 stoplights.

- *A stoplight on the Main Street bridge for the folks on Main Street entering US 2. The momentum gained going up the hill would reduce the spinouts when trying to start from a full stop at the top of the hill.*
- *A stoplight by the Opera House to allow Main Street traffic to enter 2 and to also control Harvey Hill.*
- *A stoplight down by the coffee shop on 2 to allow Main Street traffic to enter 2.*
- *Crosswalks at all 3 lights with crossing buttons.*

Sandy Ross said she has driven through the intersection many times over the years and described her concerns. When you approach Route 2 from Main Street, you can't see anything to the right without turning your whole body in your seat and peering back over your shoulder. When you look to the left, oncoming traffic is hidden by a slight rise and dip so, by the time you see a car coming, it is almost upon you. She noted that the new guardrail blocks the sight line to the right almost completely.

Alice interjected to ask people who have had similar experiences to raise their hands. *[Everyone present in the audience raised a hand].*

Sandy continued by recommending that the "cliff" where the guardrail is located be eliminated. She reported that the situation is so bad that she often will drive north onto Route 2 from School Street and turn around in the Maple Valley Restaurant lot in order to avoid the intersection. She would like to see a more normal intersection with a "T" and a traffic light.

Denise Boucher reported she lives west of the intersection and has been driving through it every day for 12 years. Because intersection seem so dangerous, she always slows way down when she comes to the curve. She said that about 10 years ago, when she was driving north at the intersection in her van with her two young children on board (then ages 1 and 3), a woman who wanted to cross stepped out in the roadway, thinking that she was stopping her car for her. However, she hadn't seen her and the van hit the woman, who was thrown into the roadway by the impact. Her two kids, who were sitting in the back seat, began crying hysterically. She eventually got out of her car and sat with the woman until an ambulance arrived. She continues to drive the intersection and thinks about it every day. The woman she hit had a broken pelvis and other internal injuries. She went on to say that, if it had been a small child crossing the road, it would probably have been killed. It shouldn't take someone to die to fix that intersection.

Alex Thayer said that it is her understanding that this intersection is not a priority for improvement because not enough people have been hurt there. She said that it was simply good luck that there haven't been many serious accidents there. She said that VTrans would never allow an intersection to be designed like this one and added that the idea that we have to wait for someone to die before it gets fixed is irresponsible. She went on to say that it's a dangerous intersection on a good day; even more so on a foggy or slippery one. This has been a problem for way too long: we need to do something about it. She added that there should be crosswalks at other locations along Route 2, as well.

Dawn Fancher reported that she lives in the village, works at the Co-op, and co-owns a store with her husband at the intersection. She thinks Plainfield should be a walkable community. She worries about the safety of her children crossing Route 2 at that intersection, and also in front of the Library. She's

afraid for her children's grandparents, as well. Because it's so unsafe, if the children want to go to the Library, she drives them – which creates more traffic.

Lee Light has lived in the area for 42 years. She has seen many near-accidents at that intersection in that time. She is at the meeting as a representative of a newly-formed Plainfield area business association. She said that the intersection is bad for business in Plainfield; people avoid going into the lower village because of the difficulty driving in and, especially, driving out.

Ed Hutchinson grew up in the area. He said that the only way to drive north from the intersection coming from the lower village, is to take a right on School Street. In order to safely enter Route 2 from there, he needs to nose his car way out into the roadway so he can look back to the left for cars coming around the curve from the west. Even this doesn't make it easy to pull out safely.

Bram said it might be helpful to quickly review recent discussion about the intersection since it came at Town Meeting in March. He contacted Amy Gamble at VTrans and she provided him with a lengthy history of correspondence about the intersection. When the guardrail was replaced, the District 6 manager came out in responds to complaints about obstruction and it was re-configured. He is mentioning this so that people wouldn't think the state hasn't been responsive to questions from the Town: there are a long series of reasons why nothing significant has been done to improve it. He thinks now we have an opportunity to resolve these issues.

Peter Youngbaer reported he has lived in Plainfield for 45 years, beginning as a student living in the hotel in front of the intersection (which was then owned by Goddard). He and his fellow students used to sit on the porch where they witnessed countless many near-misses at all times of the day and night. He also noted that he believes a motorcyclist was killed at the intersection about 10 years ago. He has personally witnessed a number of fender-benders on Route 2, or other accidents caused by people not being able to get up the hill and backing down into others. Add snow and poor sight-lines and the intersection is ridiculous. He was in a neck brace for several months and couldn't use the intersection because he couldn't turn his head far enough to see on-coming traffic.

Rose Paul lives in the village and takes public transportation as much as possible. She reported that she recently walked across Route 2 from the north side, heading towards the lower village, to the stairway at the "island", assuming the stairs were in good shape. She also fell down the stairs because the steps are in such poor condition; the top step is almost entirely crumbled. She doesn't know who is responsible for them, but she thinks the stairs should be closed off until they are repaired.

Ricka McNaughton stressed that the guardrail needs to be modified to allow for better sight lines. She want a short-term remedy to make the intersection safer; it can't wait for a major improvement to take place.

Jeremy Matt suggested the possibility of installing mirrors so everyone could see traffic coming.

Alice thanked everyone for their comments and closed the open comment period. She then asked Steve Gladczuk to report on the 2005 DuBois and King study of the intersection the Central Vermont Regional Planning Commission paid for nine years ago. *[Steve illustrated his remarks with slides].*

Steve reported that CVRPC hired the engineering firm of DuBois and King to conduct the study. They looked at 13 alternatives. The recommended option included the following features: road level lowered

1 ½ feet; the island is removed; the intersection is signalized (four ways); a section of sidewalk would be installed. This is the current preferred fix which both the Select Board and CVRPC Transportation Advisory Committee have endorsed. Steve also reported that VTrans reviewed the study at the time and agreed that this was the best of all of the alternatives presented.

David reported that the implementation of the preferred alternative wasn't actively pursued by the Select Board at that time, due, in large part, to strong reservations expressed by the owner of the hardware store that was located there then, who was concerned about the loss of parking for his store. Dave also remarked that one of the reasons the current Select Board has been pushing hard for improvements to this intersection is to increase the accessibility of the Plainfield Town Hall Opera House; to make a better pedestrian connection between it and the lower village. The Select Board brought it back to the CVRPC and it was added to the Transportation Advisory Committee's priority list; the Select Board has also met with representatives of VTrans about reactivating this project.

George Cushing commented that a nine-year wait is a pretty long time. He challenged VTrans to identify a more dangerous location in the state. He went on to say that the people of Plainfield need to send a strong message to Montpelier that something needs to happen – tomorrow or next week – not eight or nine years down the road.

Ken Robie responded that, from VTrans' point of view, this is a very new project. He explained that crash history is one of the things that his agency looks at when developing priorities. It's not perfect, but it's the data that they have. He added that VTrans is responsible for 3200 miles of highway across the state.

Peter replied that, when he moved here 45 years ago, what was under discussion was a four-lane highway from Montpelier to St. Johnsbury. Later, there was discussion of a bypass. He recalled that a lot of the arguments in favor of these projects from VTrans' point of view were the traffic safety problems along Route 2, and at this intersection in particular. The increase in truck traffic, the size of trucks, etc. It was claimed that the bypass would relieve pressure on this dangerous intersection. So, it's not just crash data – all these projects have a long history and a lot of reasons why they occur. Therefore it's a little disingenuous to suggest that it's a new concern.

Ricka asked what's next in terms of making things move along. Is there going to be a staged plan so things can be improved soon?

Ken replied that it's difficult to predict timing. Projects compete for federal funds. High crash locations automatically have high priority. The other way to establish priority when it comes from a municipality to a Regional Planning Commission (like this project has). There are those two tracks. He noted that the Route 2/Main Street intersection is currently 6th on the CVRPC's list. He recommended that we continue to work with the CVRPC to effect where the intersection falls on their prioritization list.

Bram suggested that it might be the time for the state to consider legislation that would give weight to public petitions for traffic safety projects in terms of VTrans priorities.

Anthony Pollina (*State Senator*) replied that, while he can't make any promises about legislation, he thinks it's important to take that concern to the legislature and to get something done before there is a tragedy at that intersection.

Bram noted that the reason why the “danger factor” isn’t represented in the statistics is, ironically, because it’s so scary that everyone drives very cautiously. Through meetings like this we can help move things along.

Becky Buchanan agreed with Bram that we are extremely cautious at that intersection and she expressed apprehension that, if it’s made a little bit safer, fatalities might increase.

Alex asked what the time-line looks like on this project.

Ken replied that, if it came in today, it could range up to 10 years.

Jesse Devlin added: Even if the Governor came to us and said “You must start this today”, it would take that much time. It’s not VTrans – there’s Federal funding needed to build a project that might require permits, that might require property acquisition.

Alex said that she still can’t understand why this wasn’t underway a long time ago. It’s been a dangerous intersection for decades and VTrans knows it. What are our options?

Alice recommended that the DuBois and King study be reviewed for permitting and private property issues so that we could get a realistic idea of how long it might take to implement.

Dave added that since there is already a preliminary engineering study that many other potential projects don’t have – we should be ahead of the game.

Ken noted that the preliminary analysis does give an idea of what the major hurdles might be. With that in mind, the former hardware store parcel might pose right-of-way problems that will need to be resolved.

Josh Pitts remembers hearing that a “nuclear option” for fixing the intersection might be for the Town to take over maintenance of Route 2 in the Town and wanted to know if that was correct.

Bram replied that it was, but added: When we propose that project, you’re going to be the point man” [laughter].

Karl Bissex reported that he was on the Select Board when the sidewalks were put in along Route 2 (north side) and in the village and wanted folks to know that that project took seven years to complete. Also, that Route 2 is a National highway, which makes things more complicated.

Christine Farren said that she spent 13 years driving in and out of Harvey Hill Road and never felt herself to be in danger. Instead of taking a left, she would sometimes drive straight across the road to the Town Parking Lot, turn around, and then head north. She warned that people should not walk across the street in front of the old hotel – it’s too dangerous. She likes the idea of a crosswalk further down the road, opposite the Town Hall Opera House.

Alice: We do have a study we’re going to be talking about soon that involves a crosswalk at that location.

Dave had a question for Steve about the ranking of the intersection. He noted that, when the Transportation Advisory Committee put it on its priority list for the region, there already were projects ahead of it. What did Steve think were the prospects that this project would move up the list in a relatively short time?

Steve replied that projects ahead of it are being built or are getting ready for construction. One was the Montpelier roundabout which has been completed. This summer, work is starting on another roundabout in Waterbury. Another priority intersection, up by the hospital, is scheduled to be done next year. As those projects are completed, this project gets higher up.

Dave commented that he believed the Select Board, with help from CVRPC, is doing everything it can, but that working with the legislature is something he thinks should be done, as well. Dave requested that the agenda be moved along to consider a proposal the Select Board has to improve pedestrian safety in the short-term, based on a plan that was developed last year.

Peter asked that VTrans look into steps that can be taken now to improve the safety of Route 2 and the intersection.

Alice asked Steve to make a brief presentation about the study the Town had done last year by Broadreach Planning and Design aimed at improving pedestrian access between the upper and lower village, which was funded by a VTrans Bike/Ped program grant.

Anthony Pollina excused himself, saying that he had to leave, but, before he did, he asked that those in attendance stay in touch with the legislative delegation representing Plainfield about the campaign to improve this dangerous intersection.

Steve gave a brief summary of the study, explaining that one of its goals was to provide a safe way from the lower village up to the sidewalk on the north side of Route 2. He noted that the sidewalk on the north side of the bridge over the Winooski on Main Street was on the wrong side in terms of getting safely across Route 2; that it is unsafe to cross over to the South Side of Main Street at School Street because of the way the grade is now on Route 2 (poor sight distance). After looking at various alternatives, it was decided that a separated pedestrian walkway across the Winooski on the downriver side of the bridge was the best way to proceed. This would connect to a sidewalk on the south side of the road set back from the highway (to allow for future intersection improvements) which would proceed up past the Town parking lot to a safe place to have a designated pedestrian crossing.

Alice noted that this is considered Phase A of a larger study involving sidewalk improvements on Route 2.

Steve added that this is something the Town would like to apply for a VTrans Bike/Ped grant for funding. The grant deadline is June 27th. This project would cost close to \$400,000 and there is a 10% local match.

Dave noted that the Town would have to come up with \$37,000 or so if the Select Board were to go ahead with this and it was funded. He added that it would be a 2-3 year project, so the Town would have a few years to build its local share.

Ricka asked if the state funds were from the same pool that would be used to pay for the intersection improvement.

Dave said that it was a separate funding stream from the intersection monies.

Alice said that the Select Board would like some direction about how people feel about applying for this grant, and this project, which could cost \$35,000 - \$38,000.

Becky asked if the bike/ped project dovetails with the future intersection improvement.

Steve replied that this project was designed with the plans for the future intersection improvement in mind.

Someone asked if there is a local match for the intersection improvement.

Jesse replied that no local match would be required – it would be paid for by a combination of Federal and State funds.

Ken noted that the intersection improvement project would not provide for the pedestrian bridge (which is the biggest part of the potential Bike/Ped grant project).

Joey Klein said that he would like to see the Bike/Ped project go forward because the intersection improvement seems so far off. It would be nice to see something happen right away to get people safely across the street. He would support the 10% match.

Jeremy Matt asked how it would be funded – through an increase in taxes or through donations (like the Town Hall).

Alice replied that the Select Board would work it into the budget – we don't know if it would increase taxes or not.

Dave added that the Town would have several years to build up a reserve for it. It might be possible to apply some unexpended fund balance towards the cost, as well.

Christine thinks that the proposed crosswalk should be a little further west so sight distance would be improved.

Dave replied that the engineers used the minimum-acceptable distance. He agreed that it could be moved further west.

Dawn asked about the possibility of having flashing lights warning drivers about pedestrian crossing now?

Bram reported that he spoke to someone at VTrans about that possibility and was told that you can't put flashing lights to warn a crossing that isn't officially designated.

Steve added that you also need to have a certain level of pedestrian activity before a flashing light is permitted, and he doubted that we would have that for that crossing.

Dawn expressed her support for the proposed project.

Betsy Ziegler asked if there could be a show of hands about the proposed pedestrian bridge/sidewalk project.

Alice asked people to raise their hand if they think it's a good idea to go ahead with this grant. *[It appeared that virtually everyone present had a hand raised].*

Peter Cressy asked about the construction times for the intersection improvement and for the pedestrian bridge/sidewalk project.

Ken answered that the intersection would probably take an entire season (8 months), while the Bike/Ped project could be done relatively quickly, since it essentially involves a sidewalk and curb.

Alex asked if the Town Highway crew could fix the stairs.

Ricka wants something done fast to improve visibility.

Ken responded that, if there were a quick solution to the problem, it would have been done.

Karl wanted to know if high-tensile cables could be substituted for the guard-rails.

Ken replied that there wasn't a place to anchor the cables without blocking off one or the other roadways.

Denise pointed out that, if there had been a pedestrian crossing further up, she never would have had that accident. The proposed project will make it safer for pedestrians. In her opinion, the chief danger – in terms of health risks – involves motor vehicle collision with pedestrians. She strongly supported the building of the pedestrian bridge and sidewalk.

Christine said that mirrors were used a lot in Europe.

Ken said that it's not something that VTrans supports and that it would be the Town that would be liable in the event of an accident.

Bob Atchinson introduced himself as the Town's representative to the Transportation Advisory Committee. He stated that cable guardrails were safest but that they did require anchors.

Ken noted that, when the District looked into what to do to provide guard-rails, they looked into every possible alternative. The current rails are the best alternative.

Peter thanks the Select Board for getting rid of the telephone pole in the middle of the intersection at Creamery and Brook and asked if the pole could be removed from the "island" as a way of improving sight lines.

Bram volunteered to contact GMP about the possibility of removing it.

Ken pointed out that the pole will be an obstacle to improving the intersection and will have to be removed for that to happen. He didn't think there was an easy solution to the problem.

Christine asked if there is anything that can be done to slow traffic down around the curve.

Bram said that, because it's a Federal highway, the speed limit can't be lowered below a certain minimum.

Ken said that the speed limit of 30 MPH is appropriate for that section of highway.

Dave suggested to Christine that she finish the traffic calming banner project she's been working on for several years to help slow traffic down.

At 8:36 pm, Alice thanked everyone for coming and also thanked Steve, Ken and Jesse for participating in the forum. She then moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Bram and approved.

David Strong,
Transcriber