



OHIO DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

DISTRICT 6 • 400 EAST WILLIAM STREET • DELAWARE, OHIO • 43015 • 800.372.7714

July 12, 2010

Columbus City Council
City Hall
90 West Broad Street
Columbus, OH 43215-9015

RE: I-70/71 Columbus Crossroads Project

Dear City Council Members:

Thank you for meeting with us on July 8, 2010 to discuss the status of the I-70/71 Columbus Crossroads project. The Ohio Department of Transportation is preparing to proceed with the final design and construction of the first phase of this important project, the reconstruction of the I-71/670 Interchange. Attached is a copy of the PowerPoint presentation and comments.

As part of our discussion, we provided an itemized update of how we have addressed the checklist of issues you provided on March 22, 2010. Below is a summary of the responses that we presented:

Urban Avenues

Downtown Streetscape Standards compliance. Columbus requires compliance with base-level downtown streetscape design standards. These include sidewalk width, buried or relocated overhead utility lines, traffic signal mast arms, streetlights, street trees, street furniture (litter container, bike racks, wayfinding, seating).

Response

ODOT prepared a project *Design Enhancement Manual* for the I-70/71 project to ensure consistency with planning and design details for streetscape and other features of the project. This project specific manual incorporated features from the *Downtown Streetscape Standards*, and reflects public input specific to the design of Lester Drive, Elijah Pierce Avenue, Parsons Avenue, Mound Street and Fulton Street. This manual was reviewed and agreed to by City of Columbus, Department of Public Service staff. It will be used as the planning and design are further developed for the urban avenues. The scope for the first three phases of the I-70/71 project includes street furniture, traffic signal mast arms, decorative street lighting, trash receptacles and benches, as called for in the *Downtown Streetscape Standards* and the *Design Enhancement Manual*.

Complete Streets Compliance. City council adopted Complete Streets principles in Resolution 151X-2008. The Columbus Complete Streets resolution states that “all users of all ages and abilities are able to safely move along and across a complete street” and that “all users’ includes pedestrians, bicyclists, motorized two-wheel vehicles, and transit vehicles.” The full text is available online at the City’s “Complete Streets” page.

Response

ODOT agrees that the Complete Streets approach is critical to the success of the urban avenues to be built or reconstructed as part of this project. ODOT has held several community workshops and meetings since March to seek public input on design features for Lester Drive, Parsons and Elijah Pierce Avenues, Mound and Fulton Streets, and the Downtown bridges. As outlined below, these streets incorporate more trees and green space and are being designed to accommodate all users of all ages.

All the urban avenues should include sidewalks on both sides of the street, and a tree lawn or in ground tree planters between the curb and the sidewalk. Neighborhood stakeholders and members of the project’s Advisory Committee have emphasized that planning green spaces is a priority for the urban avenues, requesting that we explore trees or planters on both sides of the sidewalk where suitable. Maintenance agreements for foliage and graffiti removal should be discussed, and alternatives explored.

Response

We have limited space in the Lester Drive, Parsons and Elijah Pierce Avenues, and Mound and Fulton Street areas. Since ODOT feels strongly about working within the footprint that was established several years ago, ODOT has reached out to the area neighborhoods, COTA and the City of Columbus for input. After several Complete Streets workshops, the public has helped shape the urban avenue designs that balance community desires with safety within the available footprint. . The resulting design includes sidewalks and trees along the developed, City side of Lester Drive, Elijah Pierce Avenue and Fulton Street. The public expressed a desire for more green space along the freeway, in lieu of sidewalks. Sidewalks will be located along both sides of Parsons Avenue and Mound Street, with tree lawns and planters where space within the corridor right-of-way is available. Detail on the trees, tree lawns and planters are shown on the maps provided at our July 8th meeting. These maps are also available for public viewing at www.buckeyetraffic.org/7071. ODOT is meeting with City staff to determine responsibilities for future maintenance of the urban avenues, bridge crossings, and public spaces.

On-street parking on both sides of the urban avenues. Many downtown retail merchants, restaurants and smaller commercial businesses have virtually no off-street customer parking, relying instead on public, on-street parking. The vitality of downtown business requires on-street parking, and parking is a crucial component of the urban avenues. We'd like to review the plans for sidewalk width and other details on each of the new avenues.

Response

The proposed plans for the urban avenues include locations for on-street parking. These locations are based on the public input we received during the four community workshops we have held since our meeting in March. Residents and business representatives told us where parking, green space, bike lanes, sidewalks and tree lawns were most important in their areas.

Many downtown streets have sandstone or granite curbs; this material has a much longer life than concrete and is therefore preferred on the new urban avenues.

Response

We researched this at your request and found it would cost an additional \$1.5 million. Because it is not an ODOT standard to provide granite curbs, this is currently unfunded.

Parsons Avenue between Broad and Town: Update on the status of potential mitigation along this historic business corridor.

Response

We have taken two approaches to work with the historic Parsons Avenue Business District. First, we have followed the ODOT and federally mandated guidelines (Section 106 of the National Environmental Policy Act) for working with historic properties. We have a memorandum of agreement on the process that we will use to develop treatment plans for any of the project's impacts on historic properties. We will continue to work with consulting parties as this project progresses. The second approach has been to meet regularly with Olde Towne East Neighborhood Association, Northeast Area Commission (NEAC) and other stakeholders in the Parsons Avenue area, and to work with the City of Columbus Department of Development on an economic development strategy for the Parsons Avenue Business District. The I-70/71 project reflects the principles established in that strategy, which has been adopted by NEAC.

The urban avenue model provides 3 or 4 key opportunities for entrance features as motorists travel into downtown. We'd like to plan these to assure that right-of-way and funding is available.

Response

Working with the City, ODOT has identified six key entrance locations from the freeway, which present gateway opportunities to Columbus. These locations are shown on slide 36 of the attached PowerPoint. Final planning and design is currently underway to make the Spring and Long Street bridges special entryways to the city. These bridges will be reconstructed as part of the I-71/670 Interchange Design Build project. As the remaining phases of the project are further developed, we will continue to coordinate with the City to plan for the remaining gateway locations to determine the appropriate treatments and potential funding sources.

Freeway Issues

ODOT representatives have said the Main Street and Mound Street exits will remain in place and we'd like to examine more closely ODOT's plans for these exits. Since both areas have been negatively impacted by the freeway, and both represent major entrances to the downtown, they merit special attention, more discussion, and potential enhancements.

Response

ODOT proposes streetscaping improvements along Mound Street and design enhancements for the Main Street Bridge over I-71. As planning and design progresses for the second and third phases of the I-70/71 Columbus Crossroads project, we will continue to coordinate with the City to identify potential funding for gateway treatments at these locations.

Under a former administration, ODOT committed that the entire I-70/71 reconstruction would include decorative fencing and patterned sidewalks to match I-670. We'd like to confirm this commitment.

Response

ODOT confirms this commitment. These features, as illustrated in the attached PowerPoint, are included in the *Design Enhancement Manual* that will be used to guide decorative fencing and sidewalk design elements along the freeway corridor in the downtown area, from Front Street to Grant Avenue and from Main Street to Spring Street.

In a letter to ODOT, Old Town East Neighborhood Association has raised concerns that the width of the east trench may negatively impact the urban avenues. We'd like to discuss this with you at our next meeting.

Response

As discussed at our meeting on July 8th, ODOT has investigated a number of alternatives to reduce the width of the I-71 freeway from what is currently proposed. These concepts include:

- reducing the number freeway lanes
- eliminating the southbound Main Street exit ramp
- eliminating the southbound Main Street exit ramp barrier

As we discussed at our meeting, these alternatives do not meet one of the project's key objectives, which is to improve safety and reduce congestion. Preserving life and property remains one of the top priorities for this project. The number of lanes on I-71 as designed, three through lanes and two lanes to allow motorists easier access to and from ramps for I-670, I-70 and I-71, are necessary to reduce congestion and prevent accidents. Fewer lanes would increase congestion, and provide motorists insufficient space to safely merge from one freeway to the other.

ODOT proposed early in this project to eliminate the Main Street exit entirely. There was strong public sentiment -- including input from Nationwide Children's Hospital and Grant Hospital as well as downtown residents -- that this access was critical. Thus it remains in the design. The ramp barrier included in the Main Street off ramp prevents a merge on I-71 south from I-670 that would require motorists to cross three lanes of traffic. Again, this would impact public's safety.

Another suggestion from the community was to add structural decking over the southbound Main Street exit ramp from Town to Long Street. This has been suggested as a way to reduce the open area of I-71, provide more green space and address noise concerns. Decking does not qualify for federal noise mitigation funding. ODOT is spending \$49 million on enhancements, or 8 percent of the \$626 million budget for phases 1, 2 and 3. It would cost more than \$15 million beyond the current project budget, and add considerable maintenance expense later, to deck this portion of the freeway. When compared to the benefits of the \$49 million already being spent on enhancements for the three project phases, we believe the benefits of decking over this ramp do not justify the additional, unfunded cost.

Bridges

Structural supports to accommodate future plazas or capping: will the supports be included as part of the project's base standards in each of the 13 bridges?

Response

Retaining walls will be reinforced to support future caps or plazas within 100 feet of these downtown bridges:

- South side of Spring Street
- North and south of Long Street
- North and south of Broad Street
- North and south of Oak Street
- North and south of Town Street
- North of Main Street
- West side of Grant Avenue
- East and west of Third Street
- East and west of Fourth Street
- East and west of High Street
- East side of Front Street

In addition to relocating overhead utility lines, we want to explore adding extra conduit to accommodate future technology needs.

Response

ODOT is working with utility owners to relocate facilities as necessary for the construction of this project. As they work with us on these plans, the utilities are also planning for future needs. While funding has not been identified for the additional cost to relocate utilities underground, we are working with City staff on determining the costs to underground utilities near the Spring Street and Long Street crossings. We will continue to work with the City as planning for later phases of the project continues.

Bridge styles/dimensions/physical features. ODOT refers to three styles, the "signature" bridge, the "plaza" bridge, and the "neighborhood" bridge. When the surface features of a "neighborhood" bridge were discussed during our meeting last week (in March), ODOT staff pointed to Cincinnati's Fort Washington Way bridge decks, which are wide enough to accommodate a broad sidewalk and wide green planter bed between the sidewalk and the decorative safety fencing. We'd like to review the lane and deck widths of all three proposed bridge styles and discuss the 13 bridges in greater detail.

Response

The bridge concepts for the Spring and Long Street bridges, that were presented on July 8th, are included in the enclosed PowerPoint. These bridges will be rebuilt during the phase 1 project, the rebuilding of I-71/670. We plan to share the concepts for the remaining bridges as they are developed during phases 2 and 3. The concepts for each bridge in the project area are being developed individually, with a unique combination of lanes, bike facilities, sidewalks, planters and fencing that architecturally reflects the character of the surrounding neighborhood. A standard width or appearance for these features was not developed for each style of bridge.

Funding Issues

At our next meeting we'd like to discuss how the 2% ODOT enhancement monies will be calculated. Will the overall 2% be set aside in the total front end, or will each of the six phases be considered separately? It's unclear whether the 2% in one phase will be eligible for transfer to use in another phase if the City determines a greater need.

Response

As we discussed at our meeting on July 8, 2010, the total amount of funding committed to enhancements for the first three phases of this project is \$49 million. In total, this represents 8 percent of the total project cost, much more than ODOT has historically invested in project enhancements.

Amount of the so-called 'cap' fund and eligible items. Specifics on ODOT's "base bridge" product in this project, and a clear understanding of what is included by ODOT as part of the project bridges.

Response

As we discussed on July 8, the attached PowerPoint presents the architectural treatments proposed for the "enhanced" bridge ("base build") for the downtown bridge crossings. Funding for these treatments, which are above and beyond what are included in ODOT's standard bridge, is included in the ODOT funded project. The "enhanced" bridge includes architectural treatment to parapet walls along the edges of the bridge, decorative fencing (similar to I-670 bridges) and up to 10-foot wide sidewalks.

An additional \$26 million in funding has been made available for additional bridge enhancements through a partnership between ODOT, MORPC and the City of Columbus. These funds will be used to plan for caps, wider pedestrian areas, planters and architectural features. The concepts shown at our July 8th meeting for the Spring Street and Long Street bridges illustrated the types of features that will be funded.

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ODOT recognizes this is a once in a lifetime investment in Central Ohio. The I-70/71 Columbus Crossroads project represents one of the largest investments in transportation infrastructure in Ohio. We hope our responses reflect our commitment to provide a safe, modern freeway that reconnects vibrant urban neighborhoods, and leaves a positive legacy for generations to come.

Again thank you for meeting with us. We look forward to future meetings with you as we continue our planning for this important project.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Thomas J. Wester". The signature is written in a cursive style. To the left of the signature is a vertical line, and below the signature is a horizontal red line.

Thomas J. Wester
Deputy Director
ODOT District 6