

Monroe Street Reconstruction Business Focus Group Notes July 18, 2016, HotelRED

Total participants: 31

Focus Group Conversation #1:

During this exercise, participants talked in small table groups in response to the question “How do you envision this reconstruction enhancing your business and other businesses along Monroe Street? What would be most helpful for the city to consider?” Participants then shared their main priorities with the whole group. Responses were as follows:

- Parking is a big issue and everyone’s first concern. It should be increased if possible.
- Accessibility during rush hour could be improved. Make it easier to turn left across traffic, easier to cross lanes during business hours.
- Get rid of post-4 pm car removal (rush hour lane). Customers get towed and we lose their business.
- Simplify parking signs. There are so many different kinds and so many different rules that it gets confusing.
- Employ common, recognizable amenities to unify the street and create a district and sense of place.
- Ensure slower vehicular traffic.
- Implement pedestrian enhancements.
- Add bike parking and other bike facilities.
- Expand sidewalks for outdoor space for businesses.
- Focus on beautification that creates a uniform space along Monroe Street.
- Implement some kind of traffic calming procedure, maybe with narrowing, to slow traffic and increase visibility for businesses.
- Work to make Monroe Street the first “green street” in Wisconsin.
- Ensure that Monroe Street is a model for multi-modal transportation.
- Improve the pedestrian experience to create more of a destination.

Participants also had the opportunity to submit written responses to this question on a worksheet. Written responses (collected from 13 participants) are summarized as follows:

- decrease traffic speed for increased pedestrian safety and business visibility (mentioned by 5 participants)
- improve ease of left hand turns, especially during rush hour (3)
- increase overall accessibility
- improve walkability
- incorporate more traffic lights
- use different color and textures on pavements in crosswalks
- ensure ease of traffic flow to Edgewood campus

- create continuity in physical look of the street (2)
- create a sense of place and keep Monroe a destination (4)
- use Crazylegs as a gateway to the area (2)
- beautify the street to help create the sense of a true pedestrian shopping district (2)
- increase curb/patio space for outdoor seating and larger sidewalks (2)
- simplify street signs
- focus on the neighborhood
- capitalize on placemaking opportunities to enhance the experience (2)
- turn Monroe into a green street, a model for green urbanism with multi-modal opportunities (2)
- retain current amount of parking (2)
- increase parking (3)
- simplify parking signs (2)
- clarify where parking is available
- open parking lanes with no AM and PM restrictions, eliminate rush-hour no parking lane (4)
- consider diagonal parking
- consider creation of a new parking lot
- consider use of Edgewood campus parking during construction
- encourage the use of the bike path (safest bike route)
- create bike boulevards on side streets

Focus Group Conversation #2:

During this exercise, participants talked in small table groups in response to the question “What are you most concerned about regarding how Monroe Street may look or function after reconstruction? What should the city avoid doing?” Participants then shared their main priorities with the whole group.

Responses were as follows:

- We would not want a bike lane. There is enough going on already and a bike trail 2 blocks away. Keep main bike traffic off Monroe Street.
- We do not want to lose any parking spots. Amount of parking available should remain the same or be increased.
- Might there be room for a row of diagonal parking and down to 3 lanes of traffic (two lanes into downtown in the morning and two lanes out in the afternoon)?
- Don’t turn Monroe into a nicer-paved super highway. We don’t want a faster version of what we have now.
- Keep the traffic flowing. It’s a commuter corridor for the bus. As the bus gets slower it adds to peoples commutes.
- No loss of parking!

Participants also had the opportunity to submit written responses to this question on a worksheet.

Written responses (collected from 13 participants) are summarized as follows:

- Avoid reducing parking (8)
- No bike lanes on Monroe Street (the bike trail is two blocks away). We need the space for parking and traffic (7)

- Avoid any increase in vehicle speed on Monroe (4)
- Very concerned about possibility of one-way traffic during construction. Needs to be outbound for most businesses
- Be respectful of the commuter corridor, with transit riders from Allied Drive and students
- Maintain bus times, connecting routes
- Avoid the status quo

Focus Group Conversation #3:

Participants were asked to write their responses to the question, “What 2-3 placemaking projects [with specific locations identified on the map to the right] are most important for the corridor? OR, what 2-3 *other* local assets would you most like to see enhanced?”

Responses (collected from 13 participants) are as follows:

- A: Leonard Street Commons (selected as a priority by 1 participant)
- B: Crazylegs Triangle (3 participants)
- C: “Green” bus stops (1)
- D: Wingra Park (1)
- E: Business district enhancements (6 participants)
- G: Sidewalk enhancements (1)
- 1800 block (1)
- Knickerbocker Place (1)



Focus Group Conversation #4:

Participants were asked to write their responses to the question, “How do you envision the city balancing pedestrian, bicycle, bus and automobile interests on the new Monroe Street? What opportunities do you see?” Responses were as follows:

- It seems the residents want to emphasize pedestrian and bikes over autos, but failing to emphasize auto and parking will hurt the very businesses that make the neighborhood such a great destination
- Employ clear and consistent parking and pedestrian signs that are unique to Monroe Street
- Rerouting bikes, expand parking and slower traffic for higher visibility
- Improve intersections to create a destination, not a speedway
- Using existing routes as they are and keeping street parking (all four lanes open)
- Look at leading models for green street design to make Monroe Street a one-of-a-kind destination

Preparing Your Business for the Monroe Street Reconstruction:

In a Q&A-style presentation, Ruth Rohlich from the City of Madison Office of Business Resources, covered some of the impacts that businesses may expect to experience as a part of the street reconstruction, as well as the resources available to assist in preparing for and succeeding during the eight-month reconstruction process. Steven Wilke, of Wilke Chiropractic & Wellness, and Teena Browder, of Cork-N-Bottle, shared their experience of street reconstruction for their businesses and gave advice for how to navigate the process. Summary of the conversation is as follows:

Ruth Rohlich on business strategies and resources:

- Booklets on navigating this process are available here tonight from the City of Madison
- You should expect losses during the construction period. National statistics note that losses could be from 30-40%.
- Start thinking now about what that means for your business, especially those businesses reliant on walk-in customers.
- Talk to your bank or credit union in advance. Get your financials in order and maybe you have access to extra funding to get through the year of construction.
- Get involved with your local business association to stay up to date.
- There will be a marketing budget available for this group to pay for signage or a social media campaign etc.
- Restaurants, coffee shops etc. that rely on water should be sure to communicate with contractors about scheduling certain work during the construction period.
- Changing business hours or closing entirely during construction is a business by business decision. Know that changing your hours might make it more difficult to retain customers during and after construction.
- Make sure you educate the neighborhood about what you need. They tend to think they are your primary customers which often isn't true. But hopefully you can rally on the neighborhood market to get them to come in more during the construction.
- Remember that your numbers will not go back up immediately after construction as traffic patterns have changed during the year.

Steven and Teena on what to expect:

- Most all of the business owners around us survived the construction period.
- We lost a lot of parking during the construction because they widened the driveways. We also lost space from the bumpouts but now [East Johnson Street] looks more like a destination than a speedway. Make sure you plan ahead of time and value every parking space you have.
- Make sure you meet regularly with the contractors to keep up with what is going to happen each week. They stop having the meetings if no one shows up, so stay committed to them.

- It is important to have someone dedicated to these contractor meetings specifically. Some associations will hire someone or get a volunteer to attend and share the information from the meeting. This person can also do the marketing/social media to promote businesses and keep them in the front of people's minds.
- Get to know the general contractors and workers personally. Keep everyone's contact information to stay involved. They can help by notifying you when certain sections of the street will be worked on, move vehicles for parking after business hours etc.
- There was some lack of coordination around the work on the water main and communicating when water would be shut off.
- We expected to lose 20-30% but lost less than 2% of sales. We have a small neighborhood market, however.
- Some customers might be scared to go to a construction zone. Communicate to your local customers that you need them this year. They will often want to show you that they will help you to overcome the process.
- After construction is over, do something impactful to let people know the business community is ready to go.

Discussion and Next Steps:

After the focus group conversations and presentation, participants shared last thoughts, questions, ideas, and plans for moving forward:

- Reconstruction on East Johnson and Williamson Street went smoothly because there were parallel corridors. City of Madison staff is concerned that because Monroe Street does not have this setup customer access to businesses here might be more difficult.
- Could the parking at the Edgewood lot be used in the evening and on weekends for the restaurants etc.? If customers know they will be able to park in a central location that might keep people going through construction.
- Not having a firm start date for the construction makes it hard to plan for our business. It would be very helpful to know as soon as possible when construction will start.
- During construction there will be one open lane of traffic. The City will start to really think about these logistics in early 2017. As of now, it looks like this lane will carry inbound traffic towards downtown. However, should there be a choice in the direction of traffic flow in this lane, the City will want to hear the opinion of business owners.
- It was really valuable to hear from business owners who have experienced this type of construction project themselves.
- Make sure to connect with the Monroe Street Merchants Association too coordinate next steps moving forward.



Meeting notes compiled by Urban Assets.
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