

March 6, 2012

Summary of Student Perspectives Route 34/Downtown Crossing Redevelopment Meeting

On December 7, 2011, the Yale Graduate Student Assembly (GSA) co-sponsored a Downtown Crossing/Route 34 East project information session. Over 75 members of the Yale community (mainly graduate and professional students) attended this event, in which representatives from the City Planning Department (Karyn Gilvarg and Donna Hall) and Alderman Justin Elicker made presentations about the project.

The event served to educate the Yale community about the redevelopment project, as well as provided a forum for feedback from and to the City planners, and sparked a broader discussion about the kind of future we envision for New Haven.

The GSA is an elected body representing the 2,800 students within the Yale Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. The GSA's Transit & Security Committee organized this event.

Project Background

Based on the information provided during the event our understanding is that:

- The City of New Haven was awarded a federal TIGERII grant to redevelop the current Route 34 stub to reconnect Downtown with the Medical District and Hill neighborhoods by converting Route 34 into an urban boulevard. A primary goal is “to develop a livable, walkable community while providing local and regional connectivity.”
- In the first phase (2011-13), Route 34 westbound exits 2 and 3 will be closed to funnel traffic onto MLK Blvd at Church St. The parcel west of the College St. bridge will be graded to accommodate development. MLK Blvd east of Church St will be widened to 5 lanes to accommodate the increased traffic load, reduced to four lanes west of College and three lanes west of York. Lane widths will be reduced to 10 feet and speed limits reduced to 25 mph. Bike safety improvements include a westbound bike lane along MLK Blvd with bike boxes at each intersection. Pedestrian safety improvements include a slightly raised “table” intersection and textured crosswalks.
- The second and third phases are largely unplanned, with the final design projected to be ready in 2013 and construction completed by 2016.
- To our knowledge, there is minimal official involvement from Yale in the planning process.

Student Community Perspective

Increased safety is of primary concern: Yale graduate students have a significant interest in improved traffic safety features. Since the main Yale campus is separated from the Medical School campus by the Route 34 corridor, graduate students are among the major users

of the Route 34 crossing. Numerous travel daily across it by foot, bike, or on the Yale shuttle. The current state of Route 34 makes crossing this area very dangerous. There have been numerous accidents in this area including two fatalities in the last 4 years. The call for more safety features was clearly voiced as the discussion focused on pedestrian and bicyclist safety and not a single comment was made in favor of having better automobile access or parking.

Construction will affect students: There was general concern about how the construction phase would affect commutes to and from the Medical School campus. This is especially an issue for students who travel by bicycle on College Street because lanes will be constricted. It appeared from the City's response that such concerns had not yet been taken into account in their plans.

Students call for a progressive vision: Several people commented that the current plan lacks a vision for a truly progressive pedestrian and bicyclist safety improvements, citing examples from other cities like Portland, OR and San Francisco, CA where alternative modes of transportation are clearly given priority. The City planners countered that they are restricted by an antiquated Connecticut DOT design manual and inability to have morning traffic back onto the interstate.

Overall, students expressed a desire for New Haven to become a more pedestrian and bike friendly city. Most importantly they want to feel safer traveling on streets in New Haven and believe that this requires infrastructure favoring pedestrian and bicyclist safety. They aspire for New Haven to compete with trend-setting cities on urban vitality and progressive transit.

Given this perspective from the graduate student community, Yale University and the City could make New Haven a more vibrant urban center by:

- Ensuring that during Phase I construction accommodates pedestrian – and particularly – cycling commuters to the Medical campus
- Always implementing the highest standard of pedestrian and bicyclist safety features during all planning and construction phases
- Encouraging transparency from the City of New Haven in the planning process
- Encouraging involvement from the community in planning of later phases of the Route 34 redevelopment project

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For more information:

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City of New Haven's website on the Rt. 34 project: <http://downtowncrossingnewhaven.com/>