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ITEM # ~~28~~

Staff Report
SOUTH DUFF ACCESS STUDY UPDATE
June 10, 2014

BACKGROUND:

This project began after the City Council referred a letter from Chuck Winkleblack dated June 11, 2013 regarding access management on South Duff Avenue from South 5th Street to approximately Squaw Creek. The letter asked City Council to direct staff to conduct a study of the corridor and to evaluate the consolidation of several access drives along both the east and west sides of the street into a single signalized intersection.

Since that time, City staff has held several meetings with numerous property and business owners along the affected portions of South Duff Avenue. At these meetings, staff presented alternatives and gathered feedback on the proposed improvements. The report was then presented to City Council at the December 10, 2013 meeting. A summary of the findings is as follows:

- 1) A proposed new traffic signal installation, as shown on the attached map, was found to meet Federal warrants as specified in Chapter 4 of the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD). Therefore, the installation of a new traffic signal is justified.
- 2) The crash rates along this corridor were 148% (all crash types) and 155% (just injury crashes) as compared to similar arterials in Iowa. Most of these crashes were found to be broadside and angle accidents caused by left turns and crossing movements. The appropriate mitigation technique to reduce this crash rate was found to be a raised median.
- 3) The estimated project cost of a new traffic signal and raised median along South Duff Avenue (as shown on the attached map) from S. 5th Street to the Squaw Creek Bridge is \$325,000. It was anticipated that 55% of the funds would come from an Iowa DOT U-STEP grant, leaving the remaining \$150,000 to be funded from local private and public sources.

The discussion at the December 10th meeting focused on how the proposed project could improve traffic flow and safety along South Duff Avenue as a response to increased congestion caused by recent and future redevelopment. **Most of the property owners who were present at the Council meeting as well as at previous meetings with staff emphasized that a raised median will have a negative impact on their businesses and property values. However, Iowa DOT staff has indicated**

that they will not authorize the installation of a new traffic signal without a raised median to address safety concerns.

After receiving this report and public input, and realizing that a median would be required in order to promote safe and efficient traffic flow, the City Council asked whether alternate means of access to the properties along South Duff could be accomplished by securing easements in the rear parking lot areas of properties on both sides of South Duff. **City Council directed staff to meet with the affected property owners to determine their willingness to provide cross-access easements. Additionally, staff was directed to determine the willingness of property owners to participate in the local match for the project if it moved forward.**

Following the December 10 City Council meeting, staff contacted all of the property owners that would be affected by the raised median. All of the property owners except Chuck Winkleblack (representing Hunziker) and the area Manager of Wal-Mart were opposed to any project containing a raised median.

In terms of granting access easements, there appear to be four categories of response. First, Wal-Mart is willing to grant an unconditional access easement across their property. A second group appears to be willing to grant access easements, but desires to negotiate terms with their neighboring properties that would cover items such as maintenance and/or damages to their property. A third group of property owners with undeveloped properties, not knowing how their land will be used, feel unable to commit to access easements at this time. A fourth group is so opposed to the project that they are unwilling to consider access easements.

The conceptual design of the project is being provided as an attachment to this report. As shown, the new signalized intersection is only feasible in this section of South Duff Avenue connecting into the Wal-Mart parking lot. For budgeting and planning purposes, the raised median is being shown as starting at South 5th Street and continuing south to the bridge. However, it is important to note that the DOT's "non-negotiable" section of raised median is between the two traffic signals.

If directed by the City Council to pursue these traffic improvements, staff will work with DOT representatives and adjacent property owners to determine the actual extent to which a raised median needs to be built south of the new signal. The possibility for modification to the attached conceptual plan is due to site topography issues that may not be able to be overcome and prevent cross-access through the existing sites. There is also the issue of larger delivery vehicles entering these sites and requiring increased turning radii. A raised median on South Duff might impair this movement.

City staff recently updated Iowa DOT staff on the progress of the project and confirmed two outstanding issues: 1) the City is still eligible to receive the U-STEP funding; and, 2) the Iowa DOT will not approve a new traffic signal without a

raised median. It should also be noted that since this item was last before the City Council, Mr. Bundy collected approximately 100 signatures on a petition against both the median and the traffic signal installation.

OPTIONS:

1. Direct staff to move forward with the project creating a new signalized intersection between South 5th Street and the Squaw Creek Bridge with a raised median. This direction will require staff to:
 - a. Prepare funding agreements for Wal-Mart and Hunziker for one-third of the local match of the project cost.
 - b. Prepare a U-STEP grant to be submitted to the Iowa DOT.
 - c. Solicit for engineering proposals for design.

Under this option, staff will work with property owners along the corridor in an attempt to secure connecting cross access easements behind all of the businesses.

This type of effort would be appropriate, since increasing traffic congestion might ultimately mandate similar improvements in the future which could be even harder to implement after additional properties are redeveloped.

2. Reject the project and maintain access along South Duff Avenue in its current configuration.

STAFF COMMENTS:

Council should understand that redevelopment continues to occur along South Duff, and challenges with traffic conditions will undoubtedly increase as additional customers go to and come from these new businesses. Although the City does not have a standard for corridor congestion, it is evident that even the existing level of development creates significant challenges for drivers entering and exiting businesses. This also results in a less-than-desirable traffic safety situation.

Hunziker is presently moving forward with redevelopment of the former Happy Joe's/Quality Motors site. **The willingness of this developer to incorporate a traffic signal into their site design presents a unique opportunity for Council to address South Duff traffic congestion.** Hunziker and Wal-Mart have expressed a willingness to share the cost of these improvements. Under that scenario, \$175,000 of the cost for installing both a signal and a median would come from an Iowa DOT U-STEP grant, and the remaining cost would be split three ways between the City, Wal-Mart, and Hunziker (\$50,000 each). The City's portion could be funded from the Road Use Tax fund available balance.

On the other hand, implementing these traffic control and safety measures would significantly change traffic access to individual business sites along the corridor. It is understandable why those businesses desire to maintain the status quo.

The basic question before City Council is whether or not to pursue at this time the safety and congestion project described above, or to maintain the status quo in this corridor.

EXCERPT FROM JUNE 10, 2014, CITY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES:

SOUTH DUFF AVENUE TRAFFIC ACCESS STUDY: Transportation Engineer Damion Pregitzer noted that this project began after the City Council referred a letter dated June 11, 2013, from developer Chuck Winkleblack regarding access management on South Duff Avenue from South 5th Street to approximately Squaw Creek. That letter asked the City Council to direct staff to conduct a study of the South Duff Corridor and to evaluate the consolidation of several access drives along both the east and west sides of the street into a single signalized intersection. Staff then held several meetings with numerous property and business owners along the affected portion of South Duff Avenue. The report on those meetings was presented to the City Council at its December 10, 2013, meeting. Mr. Pregitzer summarized the findings of that report.

According to Mr. Pregitzer, the discussion at the December 10, 2013, meeting focused on how the proposed project could improve traffic flow and safety along South Duff Avenue as a response to increased congestion caused by recent and future redevelopment. Most of the property owners who were present at that Council meeting emphasized that a raised median would have a negative impact on their businesses and property values. Mr. Pregitzer reported that the Iowa DOT, however, has indicated that it will not authorize the installation of a new traffic signal without a raised median to address safety concerns. At the December 10, 2013, meeting, the City Council directed staff to meet with affected property owners to determine their willingness to provide cross-access easements and to determine the willingness of property owners to participate in the local match for the project if it moved forward. Staff then contacted all of the property owners who would be affected by a raised median. All of the property owners except Chuck Winkleblack and the Area Management of WalMart were opposed to any project containing a raised median.

The Council's attention was brought to the frequency of accidents along the corridor. The crash rates along the South Duff Corridor are 148% (all crash types) and 155% (just injury crashes) as compared to similar arterials in Iowa. The appropriate mitigation technique to reduce the crash rate was found to be a raised median.

Mr. Pregitzer reported that WalMart is willing to grant an unconditional access easement across its property. A second group appears to be willing to grant access easements, but desires to negotiate terms with the neighboring properties that would cover items such as maintenance and/or damages to their property. A third group of property owners with undeveloped properties feel unable to commit to access easements at this time. A fourth group is so opposed to the project that they are unwilling to consider access easements. According to Mr. Pregitzer, City staff recently updated the Iowa DOT on the progress of the project and confirmed two outstanding issues: the City is still eligible to receive the U-STEP funding, and (2) the Iowa DOT will not approve a new traffic signal without a raised median.

The estimated project cost of a new traffic signal and raised median along South Duff Avenue from South 5th Street to the Squaw Creek Bridge, according to Mr. Pregitzer, is \$325,000. Approximately 55% of the funds could come from an Iowa DOT U-STEP grant, leaving the remaining \$150,000 to be funded from local private and public resources. Chuck Winkleblack, representing Hunziker Development, and WalMart have expressed a willingness to share the cost of the improvements. Under that scenario, \$175,000 of the cost for installing both a signal and a median would come from an Iowa U-STEP grant, and the remaining cost would be split three ways among the City, WalMart, and Hunziker (\$50,000 each). The City's portion could be funded from the Road Use Tax fund

available balance. It was pointed out by Mr. Pregitzer, the willingness of the development to incorporate a traffic signal into its site design presents a unique opportunity for Council to address South Duff traffic congestion. However, implementing traffic control and safety measures would significantly change traffic access to individual business sites along the corridor. According to Mr. Pregitzer, the basic question before City Council is whether or not to pursue at this time the safety and congestion project or to maintain the status quo in the South Duff Corridor.

Mr. Pregitzer described the next steps to be taken if staff were directed to move forward. Also, the Iowa DOT Grant would have to be approved and easements secured.

Council Member Nelson pointed out that some traffic congestion would be relieved when the Grand Avenue Extension has been completed.

Jeff Bundy, representing the Bundy Family, who owns the properties at the corner of South Duff and South 5th Street, told the Council that he wants to keep the configuration as it is. Mr. Bundy added that safety was not the origin of the new concept. Mayor Campbell referenced the number of accidents continuing to occur on South Duff. Mr. Bundy acknowledged the frequency of accidents, but said that he did not believe a raised median and traffic signal was the answer. He said he would like to see the number of accidents from South 5th to Lincoln Way and from Squaw Creek Bridge to S. 16th Street. Council Member Gartin asked Mr. Bundy how his property potentially would be impacted. Mr. Bundy said that there had been at least two potential tenants who had indicated that they would not be interested in the property if a median was installed on South Duff. Mr. Gartin noted that that was two potential buyers, but that didn't mean that no one was interested in that property. Mr. Bundy said that he had heard from other building owners in similar situations that their tenants did not renew their leases. Mr. Gartin noted that in this circumstance, motorists would not be asked to drive a long way out of their way; it would be a fairly short stretch of road.

Discussion ensued on the need to secure connecting cross-access easements behind all of the businesses. City Manager Schainker advised that the way it has been planned is that there would be a temporary road in the back to handle traffic for three businesses. Before any deal is finalized, however, staff would have to work with Hunziker to get an easement to allow vehicles to drive through its development. Jeff Bundy noted that to go north from the Hunziker property, an easement also would be necessary to go through Enterprise to his property. Council Member Goodman questioned whether staff could talk to Chuck Winkleblack to request that space be kept available to make the properties accessible - with or without a signal. He indicated the need to "have Enterprise and Mr. Bundy on board." In that way, a signal could be added at some point in the future. Transportation Engineer Pregitzer suggested that the City Council direct staff to work with Hunziker Development and Enterprise Car Rental to secure the space.

Council Member Goodman asked at what level the South 5th and Duff Intersection was currently operating. Transportation Engineer Pregitzer said he believed it was at least an E, but could be an F; "it is pretty bad." To add the signal would at least bring it out of the F (range for failure).

Council Member Gartin shared his opinion that the number of accidents to date does not warrant the installation of a raised median and traffic signal. He could support those improvements if staff could state that its long-term modeling would support, for safety and traffic flow reasons, that the raised median and traffic signal would be beneficial and would be done eventually. City Manager Schainker noted that modeling will occur as part of the Long-Range Transportation Plan study. Council Member Goodman said that he had come prepared to vote for Option 1, but now he does

not know if the improvement would be appreciable enough. He would rather focus on other ways, which he believes would be much more expensive. In the meantime, he would like to know what improvements at 5th and Duff could be realized if Option 1 was integrated as the solution. Transportation Engineer Pregitzer referenced the signal modeling information presented at the December 10, 2013, meeting; that showed the quantitative benefit from adding a new signal. That report also showed the cost-benefit analysis for the crash reduction. He could also provide what the actual efficiency gain was; that had been provided to the Council in another report.

Moved by Gartin, seconded by Goodman, to approve Option 2 and reject the project and maintain access along South Duff Avenue in its current configuration.

Council Member Nelson asked what opportunities would cease if that motion were to be approved. Mr. Pregitzer said that, as development/redevelopment occurs, the property owner would only be held to the current zoning development standard. Even with new arterial street connections, as the City continues to grow, the traffic would revert to what it is now. It will also be more difficult for staff to implement similar improvements.

Vote on Motion: 3-3. Voting aye: Betcher, Gartin, Goodman. Voting nay: Corrieri, Nelson, Orazem. Mayor Campbell opted not to break the tie since, ultimately, a resolution, which requires four votes to be adopted, would be necessary.

Moved by Orazem to approve Option 1 (direct staff to move forward with the project creating a new signalized intersection between South 5th Street and the Squaw Creek Bridge with a raised median) with the idea of having the planning integrate with the anticipated long-term planning occurring over the next six months for the 5th Street and Grand Avenue Extension.

City Manager Schainker pointed out that the Transportation Plan update will study the problems that are being seen at South Duff; those will be taken into account.

Council Member Corrieri stated that Option 1 recognizes that there would be improvements made to Duff Avenue and it recognizes the opportunity to receive funding from outside sources, so the City's investment would be much smaller. She also believes that a significant amount of research had already been done by staff, which indicated that appreciable improvements were needed. She saw no reason to refer it back to staff.

Motion failed for lack of a second.

Moved by Goodman for staff to provide the old Council Action Form containing the information regarding the improvement from the signal and the cost-benefit analysis of the accident average, and then place it on a future agenda.

Motion died for lack of a second.

Moved by Corrieri, seconded by Orazem, to approve Option 1 (direct staff to move forward with the project creating a new signalized intersection between South 5th Street and the Squaw Creek Bridge with a raised median) with the caveat that staff negotiate with Hunziker for access to the Enterprise property.

Vote on Motion: 4-2. Voting aye: Betcher, Corrieri, Nelson, Orazem. Voting nay: Gartin, Goodman. Motion declared carried.