

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.

Attachment: Conceptual Project Layout

