

May 27, 2020 meeting of Sunset Heights neighborhood committee

Due to Covid-19 pandemic, this meeting was held using GoToMeeting which allowed attendees to see and hear each other along with viewing the presentation.

Committee attendees: Tim LaPira, Dana Harshberger, John Hulsey, Tamara Grant, Kira Newman

Public Works staff: Erin Yancey, Jakob zumFelde, Dastan Khaleel, Tom Hartman

All attendees introduced themselves.

Ms. Yancey provided a report of the actions that were taken as part of phase I of the Traffic Calming Plan. She said that a leading pedestrian interval was added at the S. High and Maryland Ave signal. A digital speed radar sign was installed on Maryland Ave. Stop bars were installed at all intersections in the areas of concern. A centerline was added in the curve on Dogwood Dr. The signs prohibiting trucks at the entrances to the neighborhood were adjusted to be more visible and enforceable. She reported on one change that was not able to be made, which was to change the configuration at the W. Market and High St intersection. VDOT had concerns with the proposal, and it was determined that the City would not make the proposed change.

Ms. Yancey showed the data that was collected to evaluate the impacts of the phase I actions on traffic speed and volumes in the neighborhood. The data showed that speeding concerns have not abated, with new concerns on segments that had not previously had treatments recommended. The volume data did not show dramatic increases or decreases for most roads. Mr. zumFelde indicated that the data was collected just prior to JMU's spring break and subsequent impacts associated with Covid-19. Mr. LaPira commented that he observed the counters that collected data on Dogwood Dr were placed too close to the center of the road, and with people driving in the parking area he is concerned that the counts may be much too low. Mr. zumFelde indicated that the counters do pick up vehicles within 3 feet of the counter, but that appropriate placement of the counters on wide roads is difficult. He said staff are likely to use tube counters, which cross the whole street, in situations like this in the future. Ms. Newman said that her observations indicate that traffic volumes and speeds have not decreased during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Ms. Yancey reminded the Committee that some residents along Dogwood Dr near the curve, have had concerns with the treatments proposed for phase II. Given this, and the additional locations where speeding appears to be a concern, staff are recommending re-evaluating phase II and conducting an enhanced public process. The proposed public process would include an online presentation and online survey, with a direct mailing to the neighborhood to inform them about the process. After the survey is complete, the Committee would meet again to assess the results and consider which treatments to implement. The Committee members didn't have any concerns with this approach.

Ms. Yancey then presented slides showing the alternatives that staff have come up with for the 6 segments that have been identified as concerns. She provided information about the treatments being considered, which include a choker, chicane, curb extensions, raised intersection, mini roundabout, speed table, speed cushion, buffered bicycle and pedestrian space, and digital speed radar sign.

When looking at the possibilities for Willow St, Mr. LaPira noted that the speeding concern is worst when vehicles are going downhill and that this is true on Dogwood Dr as well. Ms. Harshberger indicated that “speed has definitely increased on S. Willow in the recent past” and expressed support for treatments in the vicinity of the stream as that is the bottom of the hills. When looking at Dogwood Dr, Mr. LaPira suggested that having the speed cushion south of the park, at the bottom of the hill, makes the most sense to him. Mr. Hulseley said that he was glad that additional road segments were being considered for treatments, and that he thinks New York Ave and the other parallel roads do see speeding and cut-through traffic as well.

Ms. Yancey noted that the idea of a buffered bicycle and pedestrian space is an initial concept, which would need additional review by Public Works if determined to be a concept that is desired by the neighborhood. As proposed, it would include vertical delineators between the vehicle lane and bike/ped space. It would be on the west side of Dogwood Dr and parking would remain on the east side of Dogwood. Mr. LaPira asked about the details of the concerns on Dogwood Dr related to parking. Ms. Yancey said that residents are concerned about parking vehicles on the east side of the road because drivers speeding around the curve have hit parked vehicles there in the past. So their concern is not focused on amount of parking, but on location of parking and on vehicle speed. [Note: In additional discussion with the concerned residents taking place after this meeting, amount of parking on the street was also indicated as a concern.] Mr. Hulseley said he thought the bike/ped space would be heavily used. Ms. Newman also indicated that bike/ped space would be a good idea. Ms. Harshberger, and others, indicated that the bike/ped space would be nice, but she could understand if residents on Dogwood Dr have concerns about no longer being able to park on that side of the road or finding it more difficult to exit their driveway. Ms. Newman noted that backing out of driveways on Dogwood Dr can currently be challenging, with bicyclists and pedestrians in the road along with moving and parked vehicles, and she doesn't think the bicycle and pedestrian space would make things worse.

Ms. Yancey concluded by saying that she would be glad to have the committee members review the information in the presentation and provide feedback to staff by June 7. Staff will also reach out to the concerned residents on Dogwood Dr to determine if any of the alternatives proposed would not be appropriate to consider further. Staff will then review that feedback and proceed with the public input process discussed. Staff will keep the committee updated.