



The Future of South Higgins Avenue

Survey report and recommendations

Bike/Walk Alliance for Missoula

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BIKE/WALK ALLIANCE *for* MISSOULA

Overview of project: In 2007 over a six-month period seven members and supporters from the Bike/Walk Alliance for Missoula (Geraldine Carter, Kevin Dohr, Ethel MacDonald, Steve Zellmer, Jeremy Last, Bob Giordano, and Alex Gallego) canvassed businesses located along a segment of S. Higgins between S. 3rd Street and Brooks better known as the "Hip Strip." In addition we held two meetings with business owners during this period and two city council members, Bob Jaffe and Stacey Rye, attended one of these meetings.

Goal of project: The overall goal of the project was to gauge the amount of support within the business community for redesigning South Higgins Avenue. Another goal was to explore alternative ways to street-scape that encourages walking and biking, provides street and sidewalk improvements that would enhance the character of the Hip Strip and boost business revenue, and would create increased safety and utility to everyone, including safer crossings for students in the Hellgate High School area.

Results of survey: Out of the 35 businesses that were interviewed, 33 of the business owners expressed agreement that South Higgins could benefit from some changes. There was a broad consensus that the street could be redesigned to provide better safety for bicyclists, pedestrians, and motorists. For example, we heard a number of reports about people having mirrors or doors ripped off their vehicles when parallel parking along this stretch of road. It is also hazardous for customers and others to get out of their cars into the outside lane because of the speeding cars and relatively narrow lanes. Similarly, when bicyclists attempt to navigate South Higgins they are put in a perilous position due to not having a safe lane in which to travel. There were many reports of bicyclists having crashes or near-crashes along the street, resulting in injuries. The other complaints that were lodged include the tendency for cars to exceed the speed limit (for example, they often accelerate along this stretch when coming off the bridge, heading south), the difficulties in turning left and/or the traffic jams that are created by the inability to turn left during certain times in the day, and difficulties for pedestrians attempting to cross at various intersections such as 3rd and 4th and near Hellgate High School.

When approached about the possibility of converting South Higgins to a 3-lane street with a full-time center turn lane and two bicycle lanes, 19 owners stated that they are in

favor of this proposal, another 14 were in the "maybe" category (most of these were favorably inclined but would like to see the final street design plan), and two opposed the idea. These owners were concerned that decreased auto traffic volume would decrease the number of customers who would visit their stores. However, several BWAM members pointed out that the city's auto vehicle counts on segments of S. Higgins have remained flat or even declined in the last two years and yet reports from businesses indicate that, commercially, they are doing well and even flourishing.

Recommendations or future directions: There is clearly a strong consensus among businesses on the Hip Strip that S. Higgins needs to be significantly improved for the safety of motorists, walkers and bicyclists. There is clear interest in a three (auto) lane alternative with two bike lanes and improved sidewalks and streetscaping, although no consensus yet on this approach without more details on the specific street configuration.

We believe that a partnership is urgently needed between: local businesses, schools and residents in the Hip Strip area; the City of Missoula; the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT); the Missoula Downtown Association (MDA); and local biking, walking and other civic groups (such as BWAM) to create a safer and more effective S. Higgins Street.

BWAM understands that Higgins Avenue as a whole has been the subject of planning and improvement processes over the last decade. At present, the focus of the recently completed Missoula Downtown Streets Plan is to convert the northern-most segment of N. Higgins between Broadway and the XXXs to three car lanes with enhanced street-scaping, and sidewalk improvements. The original goal was to begin this project in the summer of 2007. Due to inadequate funding this project has been delayed for at least another year.

We recommend that several steps be taken immediately: (1) completion of the North Higgins project, in part as a demonstration project; (2) immediate improvements that can be taken with minimal cost to improve safety on the Hip Strip portion of S. Higgins; (3) immediate long-term planning and consensus-building on how to make significant improvements in S. Higgins, including exploration of a three (auto) lane configuration with bike lanes and enhanced sidewalks.

North Higgins: It is recommended that BWAM assist the MDA and the City of Missoula in completing this project. BWAM and others can contribute to the project by mobilizing public support, working to expedite public funding, providing technical assistance, and creating on-street bicycle parking. Once this segment of Higgins Avenue is completed, it can become a "demonstration project" to generate support for improved lane configuration and street-scaping for the remaining segments of Higgins Avenue (i.e., from Broadway to the bridge, the bridge itself, and the Hip Strip).

Also in regards to N. Higgins, including the bridge, we recommend a design competition for local designers to visualize a different future for this corridor that would better serve motorists, walkers, bicyclists, businesses, and the growing number of downtown residents.

South Higgins – Immediate Improvements: It is strongly recommended that steps be taken immediately by the city and MDT to improve safety on the Hip Strip section: “sharrow” markings in the outside lanes (such as the ones recently installed on S. 3rd) between Brooks St. and the bridge; better year-round cross-walk markings (with durable, high quality street paint) at all intersections, including crosswalks to access Hellgate High School; a slip lane between the two auto lanes on S. Higgins at Brooks (similar to the slip lane on Van Buren at E. Broadway) to provide a safe space for bicyclists; and Missoula’s first painted bike lane (similar to such lanes as are found in Portland) that would connect the slip lane and the beginning of the bike lane just south of Brooks Street.

South Higgins – Long-term Improvements: Missoula should take advantage of the discussion and awareness generated by BWAM’s survey of S. Higgins business owners to convene a process to develop a future vision for the Hip Strip. BWAM would be pleased to work with Hip Strip business owners, nearby residents, MDT, the City of Missoula, Hellgate High School and other interested parties to develop different scenarios for S. Higgins and the Higgins Bridge that would create a “complete street” and dramatically improve the safety and effectiveness of the corridor for walkers, cyclists and motorists.