

Pursuant to due call and notice thereof, a Council Work Session of the North Mankato City Council was held in the Council Chambers on February 8, 2021. Mayor Dehen called the meeting to order at 12:00 pm. The following were present remotely through Zoom for roll call: Council Members Oachs, Norland, Steiner, Whitlock, and Mayor Dehen, City Administrator Harrenstein, Finance Director McCann, Community Development Director Fischer, and City Clerk Van Genderen. Citizen monitoring was available through a conference call.

Highway 169 Corridor Study

Community Development Director Fischer reported the study is in its beginning stages, and Angie Bersaw, Principal Transportation Planner at Bolton & Menk, the lead project manager, would provide the update.

Angie Bersaw reported the study is a joint effort with MAPO, the City of Mankato, North Mankato, Nicollet County, Blue Earth County, and MnDOT. The study area is from Lake Street to South Bend Township to improve safety, maintain high levels of local and regional traffic flow, enhance pedestrian and bicycle movements and safety, address existing and future infrastructure needs, foster economic growth, and support the local communities.

Ms. Bersaw noted the route is considered a Principal Arterial and National Highway System (NHS) Route. Specific study area considerations include the traffic of up to 32,500 vehicles per day, eight bus routes travel along the corridor, freight traffic, which accounts for 8 to 15 percent of all traffic, pedestrian and bicycle routes, and flood control levee that exists on the riverside of Highway 169. Ms. Bersaw reviewed the study schedule noting there were three phases. The first phase examines the issues, opportunities, and priorities for the corridor. The second phase identifies and evaluates alternatives, and the third phase develops recommendations and then implements the plan. The study is in the first phase and will begin the second phase soon. Each phase includes open houses and public engagement. A review of the corridor travel patterns reveals that 41% of traffic travels to Mankato, and 28% of traffic travels to North Mankato. The majority of the freight that travels through the area is destined for Blue Earth, Watonwan, Nicollet, Nobles, Scott & Cottonwood Counties.

Ms. Bersaw reviewed a section of the project labeled Northern Subarea, from Lake Street to Webster Avenue. She noted that Mankato and North Mankato emphasized Lind Street and Webster Avenue's importance for their access to businesses and commerce. The Northern Subarea has seven intersections, with 5 of those seven closely spaced. There have been 159 crashes and two severe crashes between 2015 and 2019. The Rex Macbeth River Trail runs along Highway 169, and there is a demand for safe highway crossings to access the trail from Lind Street and Webster Avenue. Ms. Bersaw noted the area has a mix of commercial/industrial businesses, which requires local access for the economic vitality of existing and future businesses.

Ms. Bersaw reviewed the section labeled Middle Subarea, which is from the Webster Avenue to around the LeHillier area. There are five closely spaced intersections, and there have been 204 crashes and one severe crash between 2015 and 2019. Freight access is essential in the industrial areas and occurs at the Riverfront Drive interchange and the veteran's Memorial Bridge interchange.

The Southern Subarea extends from Le Hillier to the 169 turnoffs. There are 16 existing intersections, with 12 of those closely spaced. Between 2015 and 2019, there have been 171 crashes with seven severe crashes. This segment operates above the normal range for fatal and severe injury crash critical index. The trails in the area include the South Route Trail and the Minneopa Trail. Pedestrian demand is high to connect across Highway 169. Freight access is vital for industrial land uses and connections to the county road network.

Ms. Bersaw reviewed the essential questions for the Study, which included how to maintain local access, where the traffic flow and safety issues are located and what can be done about them, how can future projects respect the area's many environmental assets, how should the corridor

accommodate bicyclists and pedestrians, how will the corridor's needs change in the next 20 years and how can the corridor best accommodate both local and regional markets?

Ms. Bersaw reported there had been several public engagement opportunities. She reviewed the Business Focus Groups, which met in December 2020. The main concern was maintaining local access at Webster/Lind and preventing truck traffic on residential streets. Additional problems included safety concerns for speeding and running traffic lights at Webster/Lind. Businesses also expressed a desire to improve the aesthetics of the area to support future development and growth. In January of this year, Mankato hosted an open house. Again, concerns were expressed about congestion at the Lind and Webster signals during peak periods, difficulty turning on/and off Hwy 169, and the desire to maintain business access. Concern was also expressed for the safety of those crossing Hwy 169 at the Lind and Webster avenue crossings. The engagement also included people expressing interest in the character of the area. North Mankato also had an open house in January. Ideas included maintaining direct business access on Webster Avenue, maintaining truck access, concern for traffic speeds, a request for natural noise buffers, and concerns about pedestrian/bicyclist crossings.

Ms. Bersaw reviewed the Middle Subarea public engagements, which occurred in December and January. Comments included good traffic flow on/off Belgrade ramps, but there was some congestion at Hwy 169/Belgrade Avenue ramps during evening peak periods. The South Subarea is outside the City of North Mankato's boundaries, and she quickly reviewed the comments. Ms. Bersaw did report a Virtual Open House was held for those who could not attend an open house, and they are still compiling the results of those comments.

City Administrator Harrenstein reported in 2019, the North Mankato City Council adopted a resolution that conditioned local consent on maintaining a full-access interchange at Webster Avenue. He stated the City would consider the movement of the interchange if it remains within North Mankato boundaries' confines. He noted that recently Mankato determined their studies indicated the North River Lane as the preferred intersection, resolving a 25-year discussion. The City Administrator reported that the City has not been opposed to other options but has been clear about those parameters' parameters. He stated the goal would be to establish something feasible and move the corridor along.

Council Member Whitlock commented that traffic moves quickly through the area and noted concerns about utilizing a roundabout. Mayor Dehen reported concerns about using a roundabout at the Webster Avenue intersection and mentioned a diamond interchange. Continued discussion occurred about possible interchange options. Ms. Bersaw said no decisions had been made concerning interchanges as the study is currently gathering information. The next phase will be to review options for the area.

Community Development Director Fischer noted that nearly 70% of the traffic is traveling to North Mankato or Mankato, so the need for accessibility to serve the area is essential. Mayor Dehen stated good access could provide for additional traffic, which could foster growth in the area. Council Member Whitlock reported Webster Avenue must remain open, and if the interchange is moved, it must remain within the community boundaries. Mayor Dehen commented the interchange could move, but traffic speed and accessibility are a necessity. Council Member Oachs expressed concerns about a roundabout and pedestrian traffic and noted that Webster's interchange must remain open. There is the possibility that traffic will be pushed to Belgrade Avenue, which could be difficult for the corridor to handle.

City Administrator Harrenstein indicated to Ms. Bersaw that the City of North Mankato had provided a policy document to the project managers outlining North Mankato's goals.

Council Member Norland moved, seconded by Council Member Steiner, to adjourn the meeting at 12:40 pm.

Mayor

City Clerk