

**CITY OF CHARLOTTESVILLE, VIRGINIA
CITY COUNCIL AGENDA**



Agenda Date: February 21, 2006
Action Required: Decision whether to open Additional Crossing
Staff Contacts: James E. Tolbert, AICP, Director
Reviewed By: Gary O'Connell, City Manager
Title: **Additional Downtown Mall Crossing**

Background: The Downtown Business Association presented Council with a petition during the summer asking for 4th or 5th Street to be opened to vehicular traffic. Their request is based on a belief that:

- ◆ Sales are down on the East End of the Mall due to the closure of 7th Street and lack of exposure.
- ◆ People that are looking for a place to park pass by the Market Street garage and do not have any idea how to get to the Water Street garage and end up leaving before stopping to shop.

Council's response to the request was to ask staff to engage a Traffic Engineering Firm to evaluate the issue and study either 4th or 5th Street for potential additional crossings. They asked that attention be paid to the traffic volumes and turning movements for geometry and site distances.

This discussion started when the East End Transit Center project was first begun. The Transit Center project called for the closure of 7th Street and during the public process there was a good bit of debate on both sides of the issue. There were a number of citizens who spoke in favor of the closure and a number who were opposed to the closure without the opening of an additional street. At that time the decision was made to complete the construction project and evaluate operations for some time before addressing the issue. However, as stated above, the merchants have asked that this discussion be accelerated.

The RK&K report reviewed several scenarios for a possible crossing at either 4th or 5th Streets. The following possible scenarios were analyzed.

- ◆ 4th Street crossing southbound
- ◆ 4th Street crossing northbound
- ◆ 5th Street crossing southbound
- ◆ 5th Street crossing northbound

Each of the northbound crossing scenarios would involve reversing the flow on the current mall crossing at 2nd Street. These were rejected after an initial study for several reasons, the primary of which was that this flow would necessitate all left hand turns for traffic making the circular pattern.

RK&K also analyzed the cost of making the improvements if 4th or 5th are opened. The costs are essentially the same. We asked them to provide a detailed cost to open the street because we did not feel it satisfactory to make the change by just erecting a few signs and allowing traffic to flow. Our history with the current 2nd Street crossing has helped us understand that there need to be physical changes to the roadway so that cars appreciate that they are entering a pedestrian space and that pedestrians understand that they are entering a vehicular space. Additionally, handicap parking and loading is critical in that area as is providing a safe through-traffic movement. Certain changes need to be made including the undergrounding of utilities to give the maximum space possible in the road way.

Discussion: It was RK&K's recommendation that opening 5th Street outweighs 4th Street and that traffic should move from north to south. In analyzing all of this information and attempting to make a recommendation, the following factors should be considered in addition to the engineering concerns:

- ◆ **Connectivity:** There is much to be said for having a connection between two primary east/west streets that will allow traffic to circulate in a reasonable manner. However, this need must be balanced with the desire to create a downtown pedestrian environment. It has been stated by the merchants that made this request that the lack of an east end crossing hampers their business because potential shoppers are not able to be exposed to them or know where the mall is. They cite the 2nd Street crossing and the success of the businesses on that end as an example. However, this does not explain success in the center of the

mall where the most desirable locations appear to be. Bob Stroh from the Charlottesville Parking Center states that east bound Market Street drivers who arrive at the Market Street garage and find it full, must now journey to 10th Street and back around Water and attempt to locate a parking place. I am not sure that a crossing at either 4th or 5th Street will solve this problem, because a driver would already be past both of those when they got to the garage and found it full. Without signage on Market Street, before the cross street, that clearly indicated that the garage ahead was full, this crossing will not resolve that problem. Another statement that has been made by proponents of the crossing is that they see drivers circling the mall looking for the parking garages and the crossing should help this problem. I would suggest that rather than an additional crossing, more adequate signage on the Water Street garage to indicate that it is in fact a parking garage would be a better solution.

- ◆ Parking: When the Holsinger building started construction, there were a number of free two-hour spaces on the east end that disappeared. This was coupled with the elimination of the 15 and 30 minute spaces in front of City Hall when the East End project began construction. This eliminated the convenient, in and out parking, that many people used to access east end businesses. As Tim Slater's report shows, the parking garage usage has increased during this time period, so it is difficult to tell whether the lack of a connector has impacted the businesses or the lack of parking that is the problem.
- ◆ Pedestrian Activity: Bill Lucy of the Planning Commission did a study of the Downtown Mall several years ago, and when this issue arose, he took additional measurements of pedestrian activity. He has expressed that the pedestrian counts taken at the same time, same day of week, are over his counts from earlier years in contrast to the opinions expressed by the downtown merchants. We believe that an additional crossing of the mall will impact pedestrian safety, and if the numbers are increasing, that becomes even more of an issue. Several points to consider regarding pedestrian activity are:
 - Decreased pedestrian activity with a result of decreased sales as cited by the merchants as a reason for opening another crossing. However, evidence supplied by Mr. Lucy suggests that

the pedestrian numbers have not decreased since 7th Street was closed.

- The Charlottesville Pedestrian Mall has thrived as a pedestrian environment for almost thirty years. For many of those years, there was not a crossing from south to north of the Mall. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the opening of 2nd Street coincided with the emerging success of business along the Downtown Mall.
- Acknowledging the safety of the pedestrian aspects of our Mall and the atmosphere it creates for children, there are pedestrian malls that have a similar environment in Boulder and Burlington that have numerous cross streets. Both of these are very successful business environments and are the center of social life for their communities. While the evidence is not scientific, it does support the argument that another mall crossing, constructed properly, would not negatively impact that environment.

The decision as to whether to open another crossing of the Mall is a difficult one. The Charlottesville Mall has operated many years with a pedestrian environment not interrupted by cross streets except in one location. That one location has not proven to be the problem that was feared. Proponents for opening the crossing argue that there has always been an east end crossing at 7th Street and that it operated without difficulty. However, it can also be argued that the 7th Street crossing was at the end of the mall and limited primarily to access by employees of Lexis and the City Hall Annex and Belmont residents. There was nothing on the other side except the Amphitheater to draw pedestrians and families across that street. In fact when events were occurring at the Amphitheater, 7th Street was closed to traffic.

Proponents for opening another vehicular crossing cite a decline in sales and activities on the east end since 7th Street was closed. However, there is no hard evidence to suggest that those two issues have occurred. Many point to the failure of two businesses in the building at the corner of 5th and Water as evidence to this fact; however, the owner of the building would argue that poor business plans contributed much more to the failure of those businesses.

Attached to this memo is a memo dated January 3, 2006 to the Planning Commission as a supplement to the original staff report on the subject. It is provided here because it addresses questions that many asked on the night of the hearing. Also attached is a memo from Owen Peery of RK&K that answers additional questions.

Recommendation: The first decision that should be made is whether or not another crossing is warranted. Members of the Planning Commission asked that our staff make a recommendation on this matter, and there is no clear cut answer to the question. I can see no overriding reason to make this change and affect the successful environment that we have today. Reasons given do not make sense to me in light of the fact that only 4th Street or 5th Street are viable options for another opening. The primary reason cited by one of the principal advocates is to improve circulation to Downtown parking. The fact that the opening of the crossing will occur before a driver reaches that parking in most cases negates that argument.

I think that a more logical explanation for the real or perceived lack of business on the east end of the Mall and the difficulty with finding parking can be best attributed to two other factors. The first is the loss of the surface parking at the corner of 5th and Water. Many people have an aversion to parking in garages and that parking lot provided a limited number of spaces for easy access to businesses. The second factor is poor signage at the garages. Many people drive by the Water Street garage and because we have done such a good job to disguise it as a garage, do not realize that they have just driven by a parking garage with several hundred empty spaces. I believe that improved signage at the garage would greatly improve this situation. For the past several months, the City has installed nearly 30 directional signs to direct drivers from one garage to the other using the Avon Bridge and 10th Street. Access direction is improved, but the destination signage still needs work.

All that said, it was my recommendation that we do not open another crossing of the Mall at this time. We have yet to see the impacts of the Transit Center opening and with all the disruption caused by the City's East End Project, the Amphitheater, the Transit Center, and the Holsinger Project, it is difficult to get a true read on all the access issues on the east end of the Mall.

At the meeting of January 10, 2006, the Planning Commission recommended 5-2 not to open another downtown mall crossing. They determined that a new mall crossing would not be in accord with the Comprehensive Plan and was not warranted at this time. They additionally moved that:

- ◆ The proposed way finding plan be expedited to the extent possible.
- ◆ The issue be revisited in twelve months in order to see if way finding improvements have an impact. Additionally, they desire this restudy to include quantifiable information to include traffic counts, pedestrian counts, and origin and destination information.
- ◆ That the proposal put forth by David Repass to reverse the flow of the current mall crossing be studied.

However, if the Council finds that a new opening is warranted, I recommend that we follow the RK&K recommendations and that 5th Street be opened in the southbound direction with all recommended improvements to the roadway, signage, and visibility. This will include reversing the flow of the alley between 4th and 5th Street, so that it flows from southbound 5th Street to 4th Street and connects it onto Market at a signal.

Additionally, I agree with the Downtown Advisory Committee and recommend that we do not create a temporary opening of either 4th or 5th Street, but instead we immediately begin engineering, to be ready to start construction to coincide as quickly as possible with the Holsinger Project opening.

Budgetary Impact: Funds are proposed in the FY'07 CIP for this project.

Attachments: Owen Peery Memo
Staff Report
RK&K Study
Petition