



Takoma Park City Council Meeting – June 12, 2024

Agenda Item 1

Presentation

Presentation on Laurel Avenue Traffic Study (Toole Design)

Recommended Council Action

Listen to the presentation and consider future Council priorities related to the Laurel Avenue Streeetry.

Context with Key Issues

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council authorized the closure of the northbound side of Laurel Avenue for outdoor seating, sales, and customer pick-up, converting it into a public plaza with room for community gathering and outdoor dining beginning June 2020. This temporary pedestrian plaza became known as the Laurel Avenue Streeetry. The continued closure of the northbound lane was authorized by Council on July 21, 2021 in a resolution that acknowledged both the ongoing need to allow for flexibility in addressing COVID-19 related public health concerns and its effect on businesses, as well as the Streeetry's contribution to the "vibrancy and appeal of the Old Takoma area". The resolution also directed the City Manager to work with key stakeholders, including residents, businesses, and business associations to identify and implement additional changes to the Streeetry if determined to be beneficial.

In its current condition, the partial plaza still feels like a road that's been closed off, rather than a space designed for people: the configuration of active southbound traffic adjacent to the curbless seating area presents dangers to pedestrians, especially children; the curbs and changing surface textures pose ADA accessibility challenges; and the existing layout limits the kinds of uses allowed.

As the pandemic restrictions on social distancing have ended, the Housing & Community Development Department and other partners (businesses, residents, etc.) have engaged in more informal conversations about the ultimate future of the Streeetry, additional modifications, the partial or full closure of Laurel Ave, and the potential positive and negative consequences of such changes on the community.

To begin conceptualizing the potential impact of a modified Streeetry, City staff identified the need for traffic data and modeling. In April 2023, MWCOG awarded the City a \$60,000 technical assistance grant to analyze the potential impact of a full or partial closure of Laurel Avenue.

Toole Design was selected as the contractor for this project to do the traffic analysis. The final product is a report that documents impacts on traffic flow, intersection queuing, and neighborhood cut-through traffic on the roads and intersections immediately surrounding Laurel Avenue.

Recommendations from the study focus on strategies to mitigate traffic impacts, reduce cut-through traffic, and adjust the signaling and geometry of the roadways if necessary to accommodate the project. This presentation to Council is the culmination of the grant project.

Council Priority

A Livable Community for All

Community Development for an Improved & Equitable Quality of Life

Environmental Considerations

The closure of the north-bound lane on Laurel Avenue has led to an observable increase in pedestrian and biking in the public space, which may reduce vehicle emissions. Any improvements or redevelopment that may occur as a result of closure of the southbound lane would be evaluated on their environmental impacts, including stormwater impacts, tree canopy impacts, and value toward the City's climate resilience goals.

Fiscal Considerations

There are no costs to the City for the final grant report. If the Council chooses to extend the closure of Laurel Avenue, changes that require additional budget funds would follow the City's procurement and approval processes.

Racial Equity Considerations

The authorization to expand the use of public space is not expected to have a disproportionate impact on any racial group. Residents, visitors, customers and business owners of all ages, races and backgrounds currently participate in the use of public space on Laurel Avenue.

Attachments and Links

Executive Summary of Report

Laurel Avenue Street Closure Project Page:

<https://takomaparkmd.gov/initiatives/project-directory/laurel-avenue-street-closure/>

Prior Council Resolutions:

July 28, 2021: Council authorized the continued closure of the northbound lane of Laurel Avenue, with the closure automatically renewing on January 1 of each year.

[Resolution 2021-27: Supporting Small Businesses and Advancing Public Health by Allowing the Continued Use of Public and Private Space for Outdoor Seating, Sales, and Customer Pickup \(PDF\)](#)

December 2, 2020: Council approved an extension of the closure of Laurel Avenue for outdoor seating for restaurants and cafes to September 30, 2021

[Resolution 2020-28: Supporting Small Businesses and Advancing Public Health by Allowing the Continued Use of Public and Private Space for Outdoor Seating, Sales, and Customer Pickup](#)

June 3, 2020: Council approved temporary street closures for outdoor seating for restaurants and cafes.

[Resolution 2020-13: Supporting Small Businesses and Advancing Public Health by Allowing the Use of Public and Private Space for Outdoor Seating, Sales, and Customer Pickup.](#)

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City of Takoma Park is considering permanently closing the southbound lane of Laurel Avenue between Carroll Avenue and Eastern Avenue to vehicle traffic. The goal is to convert the space into a public plaza, building on the popular outdoor dining area (streetery) and the Takoma Park Farmers Market, which have been in operation on the northbound lane of Laurel Avenue and the adjacent parking lot respectively since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

To assess the feasibility of this change and inform decision making, the City contracted with Toole Design Group to conduct a traffic study to analyze the potential impacts of the proposed closure on traffic patterns and operations, both on Laurel Avenue itself and the surrounding street network. The study aimed to answer the question of how this would impact traffic patterns on adjacent streets and neighborhoods.

Toole Design collected comprehensive traffic volume, speed, and turning movement data at ten intersections and three street segments over seven days in October 2023 to establish a detailed baseline of existing conditions. Toole Design supplemented this data with signal timing and nearby development information from the District Department of Transportation (DDOT) and Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) and origin-destination insights from Replica, a Big Data traffic model. Traffic modeling was performed using Synchro, with detour routes informed by stakeholder input, commercial mapping applications (e.g., Google Maps), and engineering judgement.

KEY FINDINGS

- Traffic volumes peak during the weekday AM and PM rush hours, with the AM peak hour experiencing the highest traffic on southbound Laurel Avenue at approximately 210 vehicles per hour.
- Currently, most vehicles (80%) using southbound Laurel Avenue are passing through the area, starting their trips in areas past Takoma Junction and heading primarily to destinations in Washington, D.C. More than half (58%) use southbound Laurel Avenue to reach the Metrorail underpass at Aspen Street NW.
- Traffic modelling indicates that with the closure of southbound Laurel Avenue, most traffic would reroute to Willow Street and Maple Avenue/Street to reach the Aspen Street underpass or continue straight on Carroll onto Cedar Street. Some traffic would reroute through the Westmoreland neighborhood – using Pine, Westmoreland, and Walnut Avenues – to reach destinations along Eastern Avenue.
- The closure would have the greatest impact during the weekday AM peak hour. The analysis projects an increase of around 175 vehicles per hour (14% overall increase) on Willow/Maple/Cedar Streets during the AM peak and an additional 30 vehicles per hour (20% overall increase) on Westmoreland neighborhood streets. Impact on individual streets vary from the overall increase and are shown in the figure on next page.
- Projected vehicle volume changes on neighborhood streets in the AM peak are comparable to the changes experienced in the PM peak when northbound Laurel Avenue was closed for the streetery, but in the reverse direction.
- With the rerouting, most study area intersections would continue to operate at an acceptable Level of Service (LOS) D or better. The intersection of Carroll Avenue with Willow Street and Eastern Avenue would operate at LOS F during the AM peak due to increased left turns, which may increase conflicts with pedestrians in the crosswalk. Targeted measures at key intersections can help mitigate these conflicts and impacts on the level of service.

TAKOMA PARK LAUREL AVENUE TRAFFIC STUDY



Based on the analysis, Toole Design finds that the City of Takoma Park could implement the closure of the southbound lane of Laurel Avenue with moderate and manageable impacts to traffic operations on the surrounding street network. Some targeted traffic mitigation measures should be considered in conjunction with the closure:

- Optimize signal timing and phasing at Carroll and Laurel Avenue to give more green time to eastbound traffic and at Carroll and Willow Street/Eastern Avenue to accommodate new turning patterns. These adjustments would improve the overall intersection LOS to be the same or better than existing conditions.
- Consider restricting left turns from westbound Carroll Avenue onto Willow Street to reduce potential conflicts with pedestrians. Drivers would continue straight on Carroll or turn left at Maple Street instead. This change would raise the LOS at the Carroll/Willow/Eastern intersection to LOS D during the AM peak.
- In the longer term, the City should evaluate a roundabout at the Carroll/Willow/Eastern intersection to further streamline operations and improve safety for all users.

With these mitigation measures, the potential traffic impacts of a closure of Laurel Avenue would be limited further. The analysis shows that the City of Takoma Park can turn the southbound lane of Laurel Avenue into a larger pedestrian area without causing too much traffic on nearby streets. By carefully monitoring traffic and making the recommended adjustments, Takoma Park can balance the needs of both vehicles, pedestrians, and local residents, creating an attractive new public space in the heart of city's historic downtown.