

September 15, 2023

To Northampton City Councilors (and bcc's):

With the Gazette having provided more than my fair share of print lately, this appeal is directed to you personally and collectively.

Let me first express pride and gratitude regarding Taste of Northampton last Saturday. The organizers, food purveyors, and musicians all deserve our congratulations. As my wife and I perched on the low wall in front of First Churches, we observed the flow of people ambling from one booth to the next, many with children, dogs, or older relatives with walkers. “Noho meets Hamp” with all ages, ethnicities, and lifestyles mingling easily—that energy (not a computer-designed future) is what makes downtown Northampton vibrant.

But that vibe is fragile, as the many vacant storefronts along Main Street and vicinity are vivid reminders. The lifeblood of any downtown is People, and a small city like Northampton depends on attracting not only nearby residents but regular visitors from across the Valley, the Hilltowns and beyond. If Main Street is actually torn apart in coming years, that could be the death knell for downtown Northampton. We would have Damon Road mayhem on Main Street for years and most of us will avoid going there if at all possible.

Main Street today is eclectic, colorful, kitschy, and yes sometimes annoying—but not unduly dangerous, contrary to the planners’ talking points. Traffic lanes need to be better defined with painted lanes and pedestrian crosswalks need to be shortened as at Smith College up the street.

Many people today fear that our downtown is being replanned by MassDOT and Toole Design in Boston which have no stake in the success or failure of the project. The real stakeholders—the people of Northampton— have been offered focus groups by the Planning and Sustainability Department and Toole Design in past years. But no public hearing with a recorded transcript has been held by the City Council or Planning Board. The only hearing on this overly-complex project was the online MassDOT “25% hearing” last April 26 — which no city councilors apparently attended.

To fill the void in public input, some of us have expressed our views in the Gazette and more than 1700 people have signed our online petition to halt “Picture Main Street” activities: <https://www.change.org/p/save-northampton-ma-main-street-keep-main-street-accessible-for-all>

Last December, you voted at the request of Mayor Sciarra to appropriate \$1 million from “free cash” to extend the city’s contract with Toole Design in Boston. That money was drawn from the city’s share of federal American Rescue Plan funds intended by Congress to:

“ . . . expand access to COVID-19 vaccines and testing, provide economic relief that has kept millions of children out of poverty, prevent evictions and foreclosures, and help small businesses keep their doors open.”

(“Fact Sheet: The Impact of the American Rescue Plan Act after One Year” <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0645> (March 9, 2022).

It is difficult to see how those Congressional goals were served by more than doubling the city's consulting contract with Toole Design—from \$1,092,000 as of 8/24/21 to \$2,388,300 by 3/2/23, an increase of \$1,296,300 or 119% under Mayor Sciarra and Planning Director Misch. And what is Toole doing with this money?)

Otherwise, there is little indication of recent City Council involvement in the largest and most controversial public works project in the history of downtown Northampton. The fact that MassDOT is leading the project does not excuse our local elective body from playing a thoughtful and proactive role in the planning process.

A major issue for your attention is the need to test the concept proposed by MassDOT with a trial run extending over various seasons and traffic conditions. As you will recall, an earlier trial in August, 2020 was soon reversed by Mayor Narkewicz in the face of outrage from the business community. At the 4/26 MassDOT virtual hearing, the project planners claimed (without basis) that they have resolved the problems encountered in that test. Let them prove it by doing another trial. This is too important to simply impose a permanent reconstruction of Main Street without further evidence of whether it will work or not.

Related to that is a serious concern by and on behalf of disabled residents. The bike-centered plan proposed by the state and city would reduce total parking spaces on Main Street and also introduce two bike lanes whose users may endanger pedestrians in crosswalks, whether or not disabled. Furthermore, with the proliferation of ebikes and other motor-assisted mobility devices, the "bike lanes" may be more hazardous to pedestrians than motor vehicles which must yield at crosswalks. (Also see attached article on intervention by the Chicopee City Council to reverse another MassDOT bike project in their downtown.)

A growing number of your constituents favor either substantial modification or cancellation of Picture Main Street to avoid disastrous effects of a multi-year construction process on the entire community. Main Street will be more dangerous and daunting to visitors with the proposed "bicycle speedway" than it is presently.

We urge the Council to assume a more proactive role, beginning with a joint City Council/Planning Board public hearing on the project this fall. Otherwise it may find itself facing ever-rising demands for termination of the project as out of touch with local needs and potentially devastating to our treasured Downtown.

Respectfully,

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