

Towson Roundabout Towson, Maryland

Setting

Towson, Maryland is a suburb of Baltimore, in Baltimore County, Maryland. Near the central part of the Towson business district, four major arterials converge at a single location. Joppa Road, York Road, Alleghany Avenue, and Dulaney Valley Road meet at a large, complex multi-leg signalized intersection.

Towson is the Baltimore County seat. A number of historically significant governmental buildings are near the downtown, including the Baltimore County Courthouse. The town is also home to a number of businesses and universities.

Problem to be Solved

The transportation problem to be solved was relieving the congestion and improving the safety of the awkward, multi-leg signalized intersection. In addition, the business community and City of Towson believed that improvements to the economic viability of the downtown businesses were needed.

The project thus became a combination of congestion relief and local economic enhancement.

Stakeholders

- City of Towson
- Baltimore County
- Maryland State Highway Administration
- Towson Business Association
- Goucher College
- Individual business owners
- Utility companies

CSD/CSS Approach

The Maryland SHA took a proactive approach involving substantial public outreach to understand all problems and issues and to develop a plan for the intersection and surrounding street system that would enjoy widespread support. The project became more than just an intersection improvement project, but instead became a downtown Towson enhancement project.

The circumstances required both a unique design solution as well as extensive community involvement.



Design Flexibility and Application of Design Criteria

Original efforts by Maryland SHA staff to solve the traffic operational problem focused on traditional solutions - removing one or more legs of the intersection to simplify operations. These solutions, however, were not well received as they would have produced substantial changes to traffic patterns and would have disadvantaged many businesses. The SHA took another look at the project. A number of alternatives were developed. Eventually, a signalized roundabout emerged as the preferred solution. At the time this alternative was proposed (mid-1990s) roundabouts were relatively new to the U.S. The SHA engaged expert consultants to help development in analysis of roundabout solutions. SHA staff were open to considering a new and "untested" design solution for this difficult location.

After the decision was made to build the roundabout, plans to incorporate major streetscape improvements to the approach streets were developed and included in the project. The purpose of the streetscape program was to enhance the downtown, and promote the Towson businesses.



Stakeholder Involvement

The many stakeholders required an intensive effort to engage and work with all groups. A task force was formed comprised of representatives of the SHA, Baltimore County, the community, and Towson Business Association. This 30- to 40-member group met monthly to keep informed, trade information, consider design issues, and deal with funding and local coordination issues. The Towson Business Association served as a conduit for individual businesses to raise questions or seek information about the project. Issues of importance ranged from policies on cost sharing of streetscaping, to on-street parking, utility coordination, maintenance of traffic, and business impacts during construction.



One of the colleges in the town has a special program for the disabled. A major concern was the accommodation of blind pedestrians in the downtown area. There is also a large population of elderly in the area, many of which walk in the downtown. Special outreach to this constituency was part of the stakeholder program.

The Maryland SHA and Task Force recognized that many citizens would be apprehensive about or not understand the new, unique design solution of the roundabout. An extensive public information and outreach campaign was developed to explain the project, and demonstrate and educate how roundabouts work (driver behavior, pedestrian accommodation). Visualizations were used to show how the streetscape and roundabout would change the downtown atmosphere for the better. A special video was produced that explained how roundabouts worked. Given the nature of many of the constituents, it was necessary to hold many group meetings at churches, retirement centers, and other venues. There were many small group meetings held throughout the area during the project.



Stakeholder involvement was also viewed as critical during actual construction of the roundabout and streetscape program, due to the tight working areas and concerns of local businesses about adverse effects during construction. The SHA assigned an onsite construction liaison, who was a day-to-day presence during construction. Problems were identified immediately and dealt with expeditiously during construction. Continual contact with stakeholders gave the business community a sense that their concerns were being addressed and everything was being done that could be to minimize adverse impacts.

Fitting the Context – A Successful Total Solution

The roundabout and streetscape project are considered a major success. Traffic flow has improved greatly. After an initial 6-month "learning curve" by drivers and pedestrians, crashes have reduced and their severity is less than before construction.

The roundabout itself and the improvements to the streets are a local source of pride. Moreover, addressing the traffic problems and improving the appearance of the downtown has been credited with re-vitalization of the local business community. A large retail building that was vacant prior to construction has since been acquired and opened by a major retailer. According to the Towson Business Association's Year 2000 Business Directory, *"The Roundabout has relieved traffic congestion in this busy area. Other improvements such as streetscaping and landscaping make Towson an even more attractive place for people to live, attend school, or take a break for a day of shopping."*



Lessons Learned

This project illustrates the importance of understanding the entire problem and looking at traffic or congestion problem as more than just a traffic engineering issue. There is a relationship between

congestion, safety, and livability. Using the intersection project as a means of enhancing an important downtown business district is being context sensitive in the true sense of the term.



Other lessons learned include the importance of an intensive and tailored public involvement program that reaches all stakeholders in ways that fit their needs. Part of this effort includes the business community. Another part included the specific messages (what are roundabouts, how do they work, what should drivers and pedestrians do) as well as the different media used for delivering the messages. Maintaining constant stakeholder contact through construction is also viewed as critical to project success.

The Maryland SHA and Baltimore County also gained important experience in dealing with practical issues such as maintenance of streetscape and landscaping. Investments in landscaping must be accompanied by a commitment from some entity to maintain the landscaping. SHA staff noted this was a lesson learned after they had completed this project; and it is one that helped shape their current policies with other communities.



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