



REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION

Metropolitan Planning • Public Transportation & Operations • Engineering & Construction

Metropolitan Planning Organization of Washoe County, Nevada

March 12, 2019

Mayor Schieve and Members of the Reno City Council
City of Reno
1 East First Street
Reno, NV 89501

Dear Mayor Schieve and Members of the Reno City Council,

The Regional Transportation Commission of Washoe County (RTC) would like to take this opportunity to address the concerns and requests expressed regarding the Virginia Street project at the Reno City Council meeting on February 27, 2019. This letter provides responses to concerns about RTC's commitment to community outreach; the request to redesign Virginia Street to accommodate a southbound one-way traffic flow with angled parking; the continued requests to eliminate the raised center medians to allow left-turn access to private driveways and additional side streets; the request for artistic benches and bike racks; and the request for electric outlets near tree wells (for purposes of lighting trees).

RTC's Commitment to Community Outreach

The RTC is committed to a community-based transportation planning process. We strive to be transparent throughout project development and provide the most accurate and up-to-date information available. The community engagement process for the Virginia Street project has been extensive. Attached is a summary of the project development timeline to date. A brief overview of key milestones is summarized below:

- Design workshops were held in 2015. Nine design options were developed based on community input. The RTC provided explanations at subsequent public meetings for design change suggestions that could or could not be incorporated. The RTC gathered additional community input on the design options through community meetings, a survey of area businesses and a survey of the general public. The survey results and community feedback were presented to the Reno City Council on October 7, 2015, and Reno City Council recommended the preferred design based on this information. The preferred design includes wide sidewalks, on-street parking, a center median, and shared travel lanes. The RTC initiated and completed final design based on the Reno City Council's recommended action. The preferred design that the Reno City Council recommended and the RTC Board of Commissioners approved is the final design that is ready for construction.

- Community Working Group and public meetings were held in 2017, in addition to public surveys, to gather input on lighting, landscaping, sidewalk color and texture, and seating. Based on this feedback, additional lighting options were incorporated in the design. The criteria established for street lights includes the ability to hold decorative banners as well as electrical outlets on street light poles for decorative lighting. The concrete seat walls proposed through this process were not favored by many members of the public, so the RTC committed to working with the City of Reno to develop alternative seating options and not install seat walls. This information was presented to the Reno City Council on September 12, 2017. At that meeting, the Reno City Council unanimously adopted the recommendations on street lights, landscaping (street trees, including expressive direction not to use cobblestones), sidewalk color and texture. The Reno City Council also requested that the RTC continue to work with the Reno Arts and Culture Commission. Since the September 12 meeting, RTC staff has worked with City of Reno staff, including the Urban Forester, as well as the Reno Arts and Culture Commission.
- The RTC also sought public input and incorporated public comments where feasible during the environmental review process. A public comment period was held about the Project's Environmental Assessment from June 6 through July 6, 2017, and a public hearing was held on June 22, 2017. As a result of input received during this public comment period, the RTC made modifications to the design, including the addition of another left turn. Additional details regarding analysis of the center median are discussed later in this letter.

The RTC is disappointed by assertions that we failed to listen to the public despite our extensive outreach process and the incorporation of public comments (including those from business owners) into the design. The RTC has participated in more than 50 meetings (including public meetings and one-on-one with business owners and elected officials) and made at least eight presentations to the Reno City Council regarding the project. The major features of the final design include wide sidewalks, on-street parking, bulb outs at all crosswalks, street trees, street lights with electrical outlets, left turns at St. Lawrence Avenue, Stewart Street, and Cheney Street, as well as reinforced foundations at the Mary Street roundabout and adjacent sidewalks for future public art installation. These features are just some of the examples of how the RTC listened to the public and incorporated feedback.

Request to Redesign Virginia Street to Accommodate Southbound One-Way Traffic Flow

The RTC has invested more than \$12.5 million in taxpayer dollars in the project to date. This includes \$6.5 million to develop a design configuration that reflects the input received from the public and the Reno City Council and \$6 million for right-of-way acquisition and construction of utility relocation and storm drain improvements. Funding sources expended to date include \$5 million in federal Congestion Mitigation Air Quality (CMAQ) funds and \$7.5 million in local fuel tax. The RTC's outreach effort and design process has taken more than four years.

The RTC continues to reach out to the community about the Virginia Street Project through public meetings, stakeholder meetings, social media, weekly email project updates, monthly The Road Ahead

segments, quarterly updates to the Reno City Council, and monthly updates to the RTC Board. However, the final design is complete and a construction contract is being negotiated based on that final design.

At this point, rejecting the final two-way traffic design for a one-way design would require a complete redesign of the entire Midtown segment, resulting in additional costs, substantial delays, restart of the environmental process, and possible loss of appropriated federal funds. This type of redesign would require repeating the extensive community engagement process to attempt to build a new consensus. RTC staff estimates that the new design/engineering work, community-consensus building, environmental analysis, and federal approvals would require an additional three to five years and additional costs of at least \$4 million adding to the \$12.5 million that have been expended. This does not account for additional costs resulting from construction inflation that would occur as a result of the construction start date being delayed until at least 2022.

One-way traffic flow was considered early in the planning process but eliminated for several reasons. One-way traffic increases speed and reduces safety. Angled parking on roads with high traffic volumes is also less safe than parallel parking because it requires motorists to reverse out of spaces into heavy oncoming traffic with limited visibility. A one-way traffic pattern would result in impacts to other streets as well. Based on RTC staff conversations with City of Reno staff, the current one-way operation of Virginia Street has resulted in numerous complaints about the additional traffic that is re-routing to Plumas Street. In addition, the RTC would need to reevaluate the ability of Center Street to accommodate the planned cycle track if additional northbound traffic is diverted from Virginia Street. The two-way traffic design option was selected because it is safer than the one-way option and makes traffic operations more efficient.

Request to Eliminate the Raised Center Median

Eliminating the raised median at certain locations is another recently requested change. Removing the raised median to allow left-turn access to private driveways and additional side streets would require a significant redesign and would result in added costs and substantial delays. The raised median was selected because it is safer than unrestricted left turns, preserves the wide sidewalks, parallel parking and makes traffic operations more efficient.

Indeed, the RTC received a petition in November 2016 by stakeholders to reconsider the raised center median and install a center left-turn lane. The raised median is a safety design feature that reduces crashes for vehicles and pedestrians and provides improved traffic operations. A two-way center turn lane was considered, but the additional space that would be needed would require narrowing the proposed eleven-foot wide sidewalks on each side to six feet or eliminate on-street parking. The reduced sidewalk width would eliminate space required to accommodate street trees, benches and other potential finishes. Additionally, a center left-turn lane would eliminate the need for a roundabout at the Center Street intersection; thereby, eliminating space for public art. The January 19, 2017, discussion and action by the RTC Board to not remove the median was based on safety, the need to maintain on-street parking, develop wider sidewalks, and create a vibrant place.

During the Environmental Assessment public comment period, the RTC received requests for additional left turns. The RTC conducted an analysis of the center median and left-turn movements in the Midtown district. RTC determined that an additional southbound left-turn pocket and raised center median opening for left-turn movements on to Stewart Street from Virginia Street could be added without adversely affecting traffic operations and were subsequently designed into the project. In the eight-block segment between Vassar Street and Liberty Street, left-turn opportunities are provided to support traffic circulation and business access at the Center Street/Mary Street roundabout, at West Taylor Street, at St. Lawrence Avenue, at the signalized California Avenue intersection for northbound traffic, at Stewart Street and at Cheney Street for southbound traffic.

Request for Artistic Benches and Bike Racks

There are planned project features on which the City of Reno and the public can still have input. For example, in looking at the issue of benches and bike racks, the RTC has worked with City of Reno staff to prepare a draft inter-local agreement that will be presented to the Reno City Council on March 13 and to the RTC Board of Commissioners on March 15 for approval. Through this agreement, RTC would reimburse the City of Reno up to \$120,000 for costs incurred by the City of Reno to design, manufacture and install benches that would be compatible with the unique character of Midtown. The City of Reno would select the benches and bike racks through a process to be determined and implemented by the City. Locations for benches that would not impede ADA accessibility have been identified in the final design plans. These plans, however, do not include specifications for the aesthetic look of the bench, providing an opportunity for this collaboration with the City of Reno.

Request for Electrical Outlets and Tree Wells

The request to add new underground electrical project features is more challenging. For example, certain Reno City Council members have requested that the RTC redesign the project to include electric outlets at tree wells. The existing final design for street lighting, approved by the Reno City Council on September 13, 2017, includes electrical outlets on light poles that can accommodate holiday lighting. Only recently was the RTC asked to consider including electrical outlets at tree wells. In looking at this issue, electrical outlets at tree wells would require substantial below-ground design modifications (so as to be isolated and insulated from irrigation systems already included in the design) and possible changes to the construction schedule.

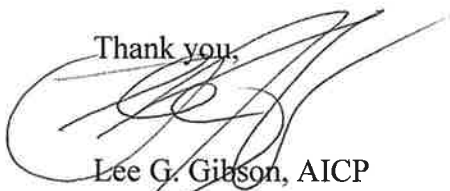
The RTC has never funded electrical outlets at tree wells because they do not provide a direct benefit to the operations and safety of vehicular, pedestrian or transit services. However, if the City of Reno desires this feature, we suggest work begin now on a change order. The RTC and the City of Reno should also prepare a funding agreement so that RTC can be compensated by the City of Reno for these expenses.

Conclusion

We understand the frustration that the Council and members of the Midtown community are feeling with the length of time and complexity of this project. We also live in this community and care about Virginia Street. We are working to expedite this process to deliver an outstanding infrastructure investment to our community.

The RTC values its relationship with the City of Reno and makes every effort to deliver great projects to enhance our community's safety, mobility, and quality of life. The RTC has completed preliminary design, secured environmental approvals, completed final design, and is moving forward with utility relocation activities and right-of-way acquisition. The project, as designed, will transform the Virginia Street corridor and help create a vibrant public space and a treasured destination in our community. After absorbing all of the financial, contractual and legal risks associated with the project, the RTC is now poised to enter into a construction contract for the next phase of the project with work scheduled to begin as early as this summer. While RTC remains sensitive to the concerns of the City of Reno and the public and open to input, RTC staff cannot recommend any requested action that would jeopardize the timely delivery of this critical transportation project.

Thank you,



Lee G. Gibson, AICP
Executive Director

Cc: John Flansberg
Sabra Newby
RTC Board of Commissioners

Virginia Street Project Development Process Timeline

2012

RTC developed community-based corridor plan for Virginia Street



2015

- Began engineering/environmental
- Developed new design options based on community input
- **Reno Council approved road design, lane configuration, on-street parking, sidewalk widths, and center median based on community input on October 7**



2017

- Extensive community outreach and survey on lighting, sidewalk color & texture, landscaping, & finishes
- **Lighting, landscaping & sidewalks approved by Reno Council on September 13**
- Completed 60% design
- Draft Environmental Assessment published



2019

- Complete 100% design
- Initiated agreement with Reno for benches and bike racks
- **Road construction planned for summer 2019**



2013

Project included in Regional Transportation Plan



2016

- Developed environmental analysis
- Completed 30% design plans
- Continued public outreach
- **Interlocal Cooperative Agreement between Reno & RTC for construction of the Project executed on May 24**



2018

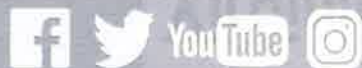
- **Federal environmental clearance issued June 15**
- Completed 90% design
- Utility relocation began September

Community-Based Planning

The RTC's Regional Transportation Plan is founded on a community outreach process designed to more fully understand the region's diverse and complex transportation needs with a people-based approach. **194 community meetings** were held in 2018, bringing local residents and business owners together to discuss important topics that could affect their neighborhoods.

Open and Transparent Communication

The RTC shares information with the community through a wide range of venues. Information is shared through direct access to project managers, digital and traditional broadcast media, including the RTC website, news releases, interviews, Facebook and Twitter, The Road Ahead with RTC (television news segment), and meeting announcements in English and Spanish language publications.



Your RTC. Our Community.

rtcwashoe.com

