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Committee votes to study two-way traffic in downtown Fairbanks

by Molly Rettig / mrettig@newsminer.com

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A boat passes by the Barnette Street bridge construction on the Chena River on Wednesday, June 16, 2010. The Fairbanks urban planning committee unanimously agreed on Wednesday to contract an environmental study of converting from one-way to two-way traffic on Cushman and Barnette streets and bridges. In the same motion, members decided not to combine two-way traffic with one-way bridges, keeping with a recommendation by the city technical committee. The bridges are still slated to be one-way. Sam Harrel/News-Miner

FAIRBANKS — The city's urban planning committee gave downtown business owners reason to hope for two-way traffic in the future at a policy meeting Wednesday.

The committee unanimously voted for an environmental study of two-way traffic on Cushman and Barnette streets and on the bridges at their northern ends.

The vote, however, did not change or delay the current plan to have one-way traffic on the streets and bridges.

The environmental study would build on existing research. A consulting firm recently recommended two-way streets and two-way bridges for downtown.

"The focus of the environmental process is to come up with a decision of what to do. It collects factual information and analysis so (the policy committee) can make good decisions. Right now, it would not be appropriate for them to make that decision because they don't have all the facts," said Janet Brown, pre-construction engineer at the state Department of Transportation.

The study likely will reinforce the case for two-way traffic, said Mike Schmetzer, public works director for the city, who stood in for Mayor Terry Strle at the meeting.

The Fairbanks Metropolitan Area Transportation System policy committee spent about two hours debating the funding, logistics and timeline of a two-way conversion

and how it would jibe with long-term plans. An hour of public comment revealed strong support for a new traffic pattern, with 15 people advocating for two-way routes and six opposing.

"I decided to invest in downtown even though many people told me I'd be better off in the UAF area," said Sheri Oleson, owner of the fashion store Chartreuse.

Two-way streets would foster more foot traffic, slow down cars and help the town fill its potential, she said.

Others argued two-way traffic would cause accidents, congestion and obstacles.

"We have three narrow lanes as it is. They're going to become narrower. Where do we put that snow?" said Fairbanks City Councilman Jerry Cleworth.

Others had a different focus, like Chris Miller, an engineer who served on the planning commission for six years.

"Let's think about something other than the cars. Let's think about the businesses, the exposure, the pedestrians," he said.

A major question was how a conversion would mesh with the Illinois Street project, which

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includes construction of the Barnette Street bridge and upgrade of Illinois Street. The work, funded by the Department of Transportation, is in progress.

Depending on the environmental assessment (which can take two to five years) and the scope of Schmetzer's plan, it could be at least five years before traffic flows both ways, Brown said.

The assessment can't be conducted until the Illinois Street project is done, a point expected in fall 2012.

Even then, the roads and bridges could be converted to two-way traffic. "Whether Barnette's two-way or one-way, the configuration of the Illinois Street project is flexible enough to handle it," said committee chairman Steve Titus. "So the project can continue to move forward."

Schmetzer also indicated that a two-way future is still a possibility.

"I don't think it makes the next phase any less likely. ... It might push it into the future a little bit," Schmetzer said.

Business owners seemed to share this long-term view.

"We're late, but we're not too late to change a plan that started 25 years ago," said Tim Cerny, owner of the Bridgewater Hotel. "Those who don't make an effort to revitalize their downtown lose their downtown."

Contact staff writer Molly Rettig at 459-7590.

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« [88888](#) wrote on Thursday, Jun 17 at 09:43 PM »

Actually, there are many interesting shops and stores in downtown Fairbanks, along with quite a few great restaurants. One big problem is access. Another is parking. These are among the issues being addressed by Vision Fairbanks, as well as more greenery, trees, and landscaping. I think that, given time, we will like the end product.

By the way, there will be a street fair in a few days for the Summer solstice. If you can get to it, and if you can find a place to park.

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« [Oh_My_oh_my](#) wrote on Thursday, Jun 17 at 03:21 PM »

LMAO

I have to laugh because complaining wont work...

What's the matter with city hall; is all of that noise building the bridge down town getting to them...?? I hope the noise levels heighten too just for city hall, so they can hear their choices drive them crazy. lol

Second guessing their second guess & their first guess...LOL

Sounds like Fairbanks.

As a after thought; as we was riding in the south Cushman area last weekend, we was surprised to see how many inebriates from downtown & the parks are drinking out there on the end of Cushman by the Tanana. Locking the gates up at night must be working with the wild group that used to go there in the years past, saw no real sign of that crazy car burning, random shooting & killing group anyway.

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« [ChenaSteamer](#) wrote on Thursday, Jun 17 at 01:57 PM »

What a bunch of delts. LOL, building a second bridge and don't even know whats going on with the traffic. Good grief!! Whats going on in this town? People may complain about some stupid sidewalks not in place over in the big box store area. But at least its not a huge government funded fiasco that most people think is not needed. Pork, pork, oink, oink!! What a waste of the peoples tax dollars. Lets have a BBQ!!

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« [41yrsinFbx](#) wrote on Thursday, Jun 17 at 01:10 PM »

Good one FG!

I remember the bar block days, downtown is much better and safer now.

Still miss the Tiki Cove. When it was in the basement under the Mecca, it had the coolest light covers and fantastic food. When it moved to the top of Polaris the view was neat, but it never did really take off. We lost a great Chinese restaurant; now you have to drive to N.P. for high quality Chinese food.

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« [Fairbanksgas](#) wrote on Thursday, Jun 17 at 12:12 PM »

How about a study to change the name of the committee to Fairbanks Area Regional Transportation System committee. At least then their acroynym would fit in with their ideas.

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« [Yukonjohn](#) wrote on Thursday, Jun 17 at 10:38 AM »

It is hard for me to comprehend that there are people this ignorant on our planet!! Fairbanks USED TO BE a vibrant downtown. Ever since 1983 they have steadily and surely torn down everything that tourist and locals alike came to the core area for. It is easy to tell which comments come from long time Fairbanksans and which come from "Johnny come latelys" that want to make Fairbanks like wherever it was they came from!! If they want to fix it, maybe go in and tear down that new hotel and build about 50 little bars down there and legalize historic gaming. All Vision Fairbanks is creating is a nightmare we will continue to live with for years to come.

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« [seven51](#) wrote on Thursday, Jun 17 at 10:34 AM »

lakloey-- You summed it up better than I could. But I have a suggestion for downtown business'. Why not demolish more stores and build more parking garages and parking lots? Then they could put up no parking signs, and write tickets? Oh wait they already thought of that.

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« [lakloey1](#) wrote on Thursday, Jun 17 at 10:10 AM »

I remember when downtown Fairbanks was a destination. But no more...first it was get rid of the bars in the core area then the inebriates will leave....NOT. Then we needed to get a major hotel down town...surely that will fix the problem.....NOT...So really now if we change all our previous plans and slow traffic down this will be the fix all to end all. It seems there are plenty of people who refuse to accept that Fairbanks didn't spring up around Little House on the Prairie. It started as a trading post and a mining town complete with saloons and ladies of the night. That is its nature.

The 2 way traffic will lead to more accidents and more pollution down town. I think the mistake with the Barnett Bridge is that it will be too short; it needs to start at about 10th and end at College rd.

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« [Thunderfoot](#) wrote on Thursday, Jun 17 at 09:32 AM »

I agree with most of the comments regarding the article. Those planning the

changes admit that traffic will slow down. We need convenience for quicker commutes not vice-versa.

I agree with Councilman Cleworth, the roads are already narrow. Snow removal becomes more of a challenge and since downtown Fairbanks has become rather uninteresting you want to slow traffic down to showcase that?

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« [AggressiveProgressive](#) wrote on Thursday, Jun 17 at 09:07 AM »

Fairbanksgas - Your first paragraph is right on the money. Downtown is not a destination, and if someone does want to spend more than two hours there, the parking Nazis will make zem pay!

The biggest laugh I got from this article was the name, "The Fairbanks Metropolitan Area Transportation System policy committee." LOL!

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« [justKG](#) wrote on Thursday, Jun 17 at 09:06 AM »

I say just keep the roads the way they are. All changing them will do is cause more car accidents

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« [lifeisshort](#) wrote on Thursday, Jun 17 at 08:45 AM »

Pretty clear some of those writing the comments haven't been in Fairbanks more than a decade. How many remember that 2nd AVE WAS mostly BARS. JC Penny were salders was, Woolworth were the ACS building is and Safeway where the post office is. That was for years the big shopping district of Fairbanks. Time to realize this so called "downtown" was never a downtown. Fairbanks was a small little town with a borough and city popluation that was very small. Know when it will end, when the federal money ends and guess what, "downtown" will not have change one bit.

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« [childofsol](#) wrote on Thursday, Jun 17 at 08:37 AM »

A major reason that Paris, London, Rome, New York and other older cities are destination cities is that they developed before the advent of the automobile. If these cities had developed after autos, there would be far less street life, for example. Wasilla - a strip mall with a highway down the middle - is a good local example of bad (or no) planning. Big Box alley in Fairbanks is another. Downtown is somewhat of a destination stop now, but will do a lot better when the traffic is two way. Good transportation planning and zoning come first; businesses, pedestrians, fairs and markets - and consequently, safer streets - follow. And as far as inebriates, they won't just go away (maybe retreat to less visible areas), but they're part of our town too. After all, the goal is not to create another Disneyland, but to make a town that people live in rather than drive through.

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« [907DOTPUFF](#) wrote on Thursday, Jun 17 at 08:23 AM »

REALLY? AGAIN! Can we get a study out to study the people who keep asking for these darn studies . . . there must be something wrong. How is this still an issue?

The Barnette Bridge is currently being built, Illinois St should begin next summer and this study, which could last 2-5 years, won't even have results produced by the time this done.

Let's put our money to some better uses, beautification or maybe (I know this seems hair-brained) getting businesses downtown that people want to visit. HMMM.

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« [41yrsinFbx](#) wrote on Thursday, Jun 17 at 08:23 AM »

I'm with Fbksgas, study the study and then study it some more. How about less

talk and more action?

I've said it before, do it two-way, change it back to one -ay, then change it back again. We've seen this tired routine before, its just another spin to line someone's pockets.

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« [whataworld](#) wrote on Thursday, Jun 17 at 08:17 AM »

So stupid to build another bridge to connect to the real problem. Illinois street. One lane, and now with all of this extra traffic the planners say are going to coming from downtown, it could be backed up to the bridges. Do these people on Vision Fairbanks live here? I am sure they are Fairbanks Famous. Just means they don't really know what Fairbanks is. They should all be arrested for embezelment! All the money wasted for an un-needed bridge.

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« [Shokd](#) wrote on Thursday, Jun 17 at 06:55 AM »

Fairbanksgas: Excellent! :)

Conservative government at it's best: No progress, but a lot of talk... and a lot of extraneous people getting paid.

These dolts are dumping money into their own pockets ("Vision Fairbanks", the FEDC, these ridiculous "commissions" and "committees") putting the cart before the horse. Until downtown is cleaned up, no one is going there. Until downtown is cleaned up, no businesses want to operate there. Until downtown is cleaned up...

Get the drunks out of town, break up the concrete with some plants and trees, and- heaven forbid!- get some street activities going on that are of interest to the locals (i.e. weekly bizarre/ market).

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« [lifeisshort](#) wrote on Thursday, Jun 17 at 06:34 AM »

Love the TV ad showing a run of Chusman and saying downtown is a destination stop. What do we see, several banks, office buildings, government buildings, fire station, police station, bus stop and two tourist stores. Yea, downtown is really a destination and needs two way traffic, but for the life of me I can not figure out for who. Now Paris, Rome, London seem to be destination, old town Fairbanks is just a city planners idea gone wrong.

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« [Fairbanksgas](#) wrote on Thursday, Jun 17 at 06:16 AM »

Thanks for a good laugh this morning. Seriously another study to restudy the last study that two committees have already studied on a topic that not a single resident cares about since there is really no reason to go downtown anymore.

How about just connecting a road from Minnie street to box store ally instead. That way we could get to where we actually are headed a little quicker?

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