

OFFICE OF THE CITY MANAGER



KENT STREET PROJECT; UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORY, CHALLENGES AND PARKING CONSTRAINTS

Dear Friends and Neighbors,

The Kent Street Reconstruction Project is currently slated for 2023 construction. As the Project proceeds through the design phase, it is important that our residents understand the history, process and challenges as they relate to parking, safety, accessibility and meeting ADA (The Americans with Disabilities Act) requirements not only with this Project, but any downtown project.

History of Downtown Improvements and Current Condition

The City of Portland, by virtue of its longstanding income tax, is able to maintain its street and sidewalk system in a manner that many other communities our size cannot. Connectivity and walkability are staples of our community that directly enhance the quality of life for all of our residents and are key components in the City's Master Plan. The City regularly builds, improves and reconstructs its streets and sidewalks throughout the City, adhering to state and federal standards. However, when it comes to our historic downtown and our main thoroughfare (Kent Street), there are subpar conditions related to sidewalks and infrastructure that desperately need to be addressed. Past Kent Street (Downtown) Projects in 1993, 2004, and 2012, did not address these issues. City Council, understanding the significance in investing in our historic downtown, made the difficult decision to reallocate substantial monies and grant funding from East Grand River Avenue to this critical Project. While the condition, occupancy, and vibrancy of each downtown building is the responsibility of each private property owner, local governments role is to provide the infrastructure, sidewalks and streetscapes that will attract and retain private enterprise and enhance the downtown experience, not only for our residents, but also those who visit and patronize our downtown.



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UNDERSTANDING THE PRELIMINARY CONCEPTS THAT ELIMINATE DIAGONAL PARKING AND “WHY?”

A concept from our City Engineers, Fleis & VandenBrink, provides for the elimination of 23 diagonal parking spaces along Kent Street and shows replacing them with parallel parking. It is important to understand that this conceptual design was not predicated upon simple aesthetics or a desire to “be like” destination locations in Northern Michigan or larger communities. Rather, these concepts are based upon compliance with state and federal safety requirements, including ADA and universal accessibility standards. In other words, when the City complies with such standards, the sidewalks will naturally expand providing for the necessary space, and this is what causes the need to potentially eliminate the diagonal parking spaces in order maintain sufficient roadway. Naturally, the initial design concepts provided by the City Engineers would provide for the optimum safety and compliance with those standards.

DOWNTOWN SIDEWALKS AND BUILDING ENTRANCES DO NOT CURRENTLY MEET ADA STANDARDS

There are two primary components that are driving the need to potentially redesign and expand the current sidewalks: 1.) certain areas and aspects of the current sidewalks on Kent Street do not meet ADA standards and 2.) many of the building entrances also do not meet ADA standards. As such, this compounds the problem requiring significantly more space than would otherwise be needed for the sidewalk nonconformity alone. That said, the initial scope and conceptual design of this Project appropriately included bringing both the sidewalks and building entrances into compliance. Concerns about those with mobility issues are clearly well-founded, but the concerns expressed have been mostly isolated to the potential reduction in convenient parking spaces. While this is an understandable and reasonable concern, it fails to consider the full scope of the current accessibility challenges for those with disabilities.

FAILURE TO MEET STATE & FEDERAL SAFETY REQUIREMENTS MAY RESULT IN LOSS OF SIGNIFICANT GRANT DOLLARS

As a matter of financial prudence and maximizing local taxpayer dollars, the City obtains significant state and federal grants for major street projects such as Kent Street. Here, the Project is estimated to have a total cost of approximately \$2 million with state and federal grants comprising of approximately \$700k and potentially up to \$1.7 million. One of the most basic requirements to receive such funding is the compliance with the safety and accessibility standards referenced



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above. Should the City fail to meet those design standards, it would likely not be eligible to receive this critical funding and therefore, the Project would likely become nonviable or dramatically reduced in scope. While the City, through its engineers, are exploring design alternatives, it is important to recognize the complexities and challenges involved in navigating these decisions – “just keeping it the way it is” is simply, not that simple.

DESIGN ALTERNATIVES: IS THE CITY CONSIDERING ALTERNATIVE PROJECT CONCEPTS?

Yes, as a matter of proper due diligence and project management, the City and its team will heavily scrutinize various concepts and consider alternatives. This is a process, and the initial concepts were based on the noted deficiencies and the City’s commitment, through City Council, to allocate the necessary funding to effectively address downtown as a whole. With all projects, I direct our engineers to explore all options for City Council to consider. That said, we have been in discussions with MDOT to determine if deviating from the ADA building entrance component would result in a lack of eligible Project funding. Preliminarily, we have received indications that this is a possibility. If so, the City would only be required to bring our sidewalks up to ADA standards, not the building entrances. This would potentially provide for a design that would allow the City to retain diagonal parking spaces, albeit with a caveat – the current diagonal parking spaces are at a 60-degree angle and due to MDOT’s standards and accident history, they would be required to be at a 45-degree angle. To illustrate, when a driver is backing out of the current spaces, they will see (via rear view mirror) the buildings on the opposite side of the street. In contrast, with a 45-degree angle, the driver will have a better (safer) view of the street. It should also be noted that while this design concept retains diagonal parking at a 45-degree angle, there would still be a reduction of those parking spaces, although significantly less than the parallel parking concept. This alternative, of course, provides less of a benefit in regard to safety and accessibility.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND CHALLENGES INHERENT TO DOWNTOWNS

It is important that our residents, businesses and property owners recognize that the City takes this Project very seriously and does not take lightly any change to our historic downtown. The challenge, as always, is to make improvements for the betterment and in the best interest of all of our residents, not just one particular group, organization or individual. We are grateful for those who offered feedback and attended the public workshops. As we proceed through this process, a few additional noteworthy points:



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- Downtowns were originally designed, built and constructed during a time when there were no automobiles, only horse and carriages. Inherent to all downtowns, there will never be ample parking or the same conveniences that exist when we patronize businesses that own their own parking lots. Downtown businesses are well worth the walk and in many cases, the distance is less than what it would be when shopping at Meijer or other big box stores.
- Even in a scenario where the diagonal parking is retained and regardless of the ultimate design, there are never any assurances that spaces will be readily available for any particular business at any particular time. This will always be the case.
- Our downtown is fortunate to have so many municipal lots, especially for a community our size. The recent parking study confirmed common knowledge that those lots are underutilized. The City further understands that in many instances these lots have been used for long-term storage and other inappropriate uses. That said, the City will be implementing parking restrictions on the various lots that will be aimed at addressing these issues.

I hope this information has been helpful in understanding the challenges we face in restoring and revitalizing our historic downtown. Please remember, my door is always open, so never hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

S. Tutt Gorman
Portland City Manager