

Providence Journal Article

Metacom Avenue betterment discussed

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BRISTOL — If planners get their way, Metacom Avenue in the future would have fewer intersections, more sidewalks, a roundabout or two, and signs telling commuters “Bristol Welcomes Courteous Drivers.”

It may take years, but at a meeting last night, representatives of two consulting firms hired by the town sounded confident that at least some changes could be made to make the notoriously unpleasant road user-friendly.

In the near term, that could mean reducing the 45-mph speed limit on parts of the state road, better coordinating traffic signals, and using Metacom’s full width to make room for turning lanes that could reduce backups at intersections.

In the longer term, they envision taking more radical steps, such as creating alternate routes that would allow drivers to travel north and south through the neighborhoods that line either side of Metacom, concentrating development in pockets as an alternative to strip malls, and putting in at least one of those roundabouts near Roger Williams University.

They were just some of the changes presented to a small audience in Town Hall by the members of the Metacom Avenue Steering Committee, a group of town officials, residents and engineers.

The town was recently awarded a grant from the state to look at the condition of Metacom Avenue and find with ways to improve the road that, along with Hope Street, serves as one of the two primary routes through Bristol.

Even before chain stores started popping up along Metacom, it was never the scenic route through town that Hope Street is. State Rep. Raymond E. Gallison Jr., who was in the audience, observed that it’s always been known as Bristol’s back road.

Derek Bradford, a planning consultant hired by the town, described his reaction to seeing a 19th-century engraving of the road and comparing it with Metacom today.

“It was this rustic back road then,” said Bradford, of the Providence-based Bradford Associates. “It’s not really like that anymore.”

Now, Metacom is a busy road that, along one stretch, is traveled by 34,000 vehicles a day on average. Traffic often backs up during peak hours and accidents are frequent. From 2003 to 2005, 705 accidents occurred on the part of the road in Bristol. At the intersection of Gooding

Avenue and Metacom alone, there were 143 accidents in that period. (Last year, the state Department of Transportation created a new turning lane at that intersection to reduce collisions.)

“It’s what you use to get from point A to point B,” Pamela Sherrill, project manager at Pare Corp., said. “But it’s not a place you enjoy.”

The course of development along the road has also been less than ideal, taking place without much planning. Residential neighborhoods sit side-by-side with shopping plazas and manufacturing buildings.

Bradford and Sherrill presented the proposed changes at the workshop in Town Hall to solicit comments from residents. They will hold another public meeting Feb. 8 before coming up with a draft plan for the road at the end of that month. Then, the Town Council and Planning Board will look at what changes are feasible.

Any substantial improvements would take years to complete.

Meanwhile, however, Gallison said he was pushing the DOT to start making some immediate changes, including putting in more turning lanes in problem areas. The DOT is already studying ways to improve the intersections of Metacom with Tupelo Street, Annawamscutt Drive, Chestnut Street and Bay View Avenue. Gallison said there would be a greater need for another lane at Annawamscutt once the Hydraulion fire station is expanded.

Gallison cautioned townspeople not to expect the road to be widened and more travel lanes to be put in. That sort of endeavor would simply be too expensive, he said.

But “it doesn’t mean there aren’t other things we can do,” Gallison said.