

Cespedes, Christopher

From: Cespedes, Christopher
Sent: Friday, March 14, 2025 12:05 PM
To: Cespedes, Christopher
Subject: FW: R-23-330

From: Tori Langland <[REDACTED]@gmail.com>
Sent: Saturday, March 1, 2025 2:06 PM
To: Taylor, Christopher (Mayor) <[REDACTED]@a2gov.org>; Disch, Lisa <[REDACTED]@a2gov.org>; Harrison, Cynthia <[REDACTED]@a2gov.org>; Mallek, Jon <[REDACTED]@a2gov.org>; Watson, Chris <[REDACTED]@a2gov.org>; Radina, Travis <[REDACTED]@a2gov.org>; Ghazi Edwin, Ayesha <[REDACTED]@a2gov.org>; Eyer, Jen <[REDACTED]@a2gov.org>; Akmon, Dharma <[REDACTED]@a2gov.org>; Briggs, Erica <[REDACTED]@a2gov.org>; Cornell, Jenn <[REDACTED]@a2gov.org>; City of Ann Arbor Transportation Commission <TransportationCommission@a2gov.org>
Cc: Roberts, Jordan <[REDACTED]@a2gov.org>; Dohoney Jr., Milton <[REDACTED]@a2gov.org>
Subject: R-23-330

Dear Mayor Taylor, Councilmembers, Transportation Commissioners, and Messrs. Dohoney and Roberts:

I write to you about a matter that will come before Council on Monday but that involves all of those who worked faithfully last year to design and pass a resolution to improve the neighborhood traffic calming program. The specific matter in question is the approval of a contract for miscellaneous utilities projects, which appears as Item #5 on the Consent Agenda. What should be a routine item (hence its placement on the consent agenda), has instead become extremely controversial. This is because it includes language and designs for narrowing the intersection of Harding and Wallingford roads, a project that has generated widespread condemnation from those of us who live near this intersection. And while it purports to leave open the possibility of some adjustments to the final design, this option is too narrow to constitute a viable solution to this problem. Meanwhile the residents of the intersection where this change is supposed to take place are overwhelmingly opposed to the design and its foundational premise of narrowing the intersection. You should know about our opposition, and, most importantly, you should know how far the project departs from the intent, meaning and language of Resolution R-23-330 which is supposed to govern projects such as this. We are concerned that not only is our neighborhood poised to be negatively affected, but also that this resolution will continue to be misused across the city if this issue is not addressed and if the resolution is not more accurately followed.

As you no doubt recall, this resolution was carefully designed to improve the neighborhood traffic calming program, both by speeding up the petition process and by offering new opportunities for traffic calming within capital projects. Introduced by Councilmember Dharma Akmon, who had spent months working on this within a subcommittee of the Transportation Commission, it was passed unanimously by the City Council in September of 2023. Councilmember Briggs spoke up in support, noting that she wanted to be better able to address residents' concerns, including being able to take advantage of capital projects "... to address concerns that have come up in that neighborhood before, instead of directing them to a program that is not going to be something that happens for maybe three years or more." Councilmember Cornell echoed this goal, saying it was important "to be able to show that we are listening and responding in a way that is not, quite frankly, really frustrating and making it seem as if the system is working *against* versus *for* our citizens..."

I believe that no one who voted for this, at either the Transportation Commission level nor the level of City Council, envisioned a program that would soon be trying to force traffic calming measures on a neighborhood that did not need or want them, and that left residents feeling like the system is working *against* its citizens, all

while traffic calming queues at other intersections where there is both need and popular demand continue to drag on. This is the opposite of what the city was trying to achieve.

How did this situation arise? This has taken place because of the failure to understand or to implement two of provisions of the resolution that you had crafted, debated and approved.

The first of these is a misinterpretation of the third resolve clause, where it says that the City Administrator must

evaluate opportunities to incorporate traffic calming elements into capital projects which significantly disturb the existing road surface, particularly those that are a part of the All Ages All Abilities network identified in the transportation plan, in a school walk zone, where a record of crashes, speeding, and/or resident complaints exists, or otherwise suggest a need for calming to enhance comfort and safety for non-motorized uses, regardless of petition status.

Staff repeatedly interpret this clause as a requirement to implement traffic calming measures, even when there is no record of crashes, speeding, or resident complaints, and even when there is virtually no neighborhood support. They assert orally that the resolution requires them to act, and present powerpoint slides that read, "Per 2-23-330, traffic calming measures must be implemented regardless of neighborhood considerations." Other slides reproduce the text but highlight the phrases "incorporate traffic calming elements" and "regardless of petition status" and leave unhighlighted and unacknowledged the word "evaluate" and the phrase "where a record of crashes, speeding, and/or resident complaints exists."

Not only is this interpretation inconsistent with the full text, which clearly says the requirement is to *evaluate* opportunities, but it is also inconsistent with Transportation Commission discussions around this point, who carefully took into account their duties to support a holistic evaluation of the community's concerns. In the May, 2023, Transportation Commission meeting about this draft, when Commissioner Molly Kleinman and Councilmember Akmon introduced the draft for the commissioners to discuss, Kleinman made sure to clarify that "There will be resurfacing projects that don't need any additional calming [where] they've either already been calmed or they're very low traffic... So it's not a requirement that there will always be traffic calming elements...but this was our attempt to move us toward calming as much as we can as a part of regular resurfacing." Transportation Manager Raymond Hess also spelled this out specifically in his May 11, 2023, memorandum to the Transportation Commission, where he evaluated this statement and wrote "This is not problematic. Since the resolve clause directs staff to 'evaluate opportunities' for traffic calming, we believe there is sufficient flexibility to determine if something can and should be pursued as part of a capital project." He used a related logic when he recommended striking a draft resolve clause that would have required bump-outs by default on all streets with on-street parking, writing that he had "concerns with the prescriptive nature of this resolve clause," and noting that there could be locations where this was only "marginally beneficial." This clause was indeed struck and is not in the final resolution.

Similarly, in the Transportation Commission's discussion of the resolution, they spent a good amount of time debating default requirements such as the bump out, and decided against this. Councilmember Akmon, for example, used her own home as an example of a place where default intervention would be unwise. She said, "I live at the corner of two very low-traffic streets; I'm not by a school; there's no speeding issues that I've ever really heard about, and I thought, do we really, as transportation advocates, what would be the outcome to install something that perhaps doesn't do anything to promote safety of the streets, or to promote people deciding to walk over not walking, versus some of our other ambitious goals that we have for traffic calming on major streets? And I started thinking, 'Oh I think it would be overkill on my street' [and] I think there are a lot of streets like mine where it would be probably too much."

Commissioner Peter Houk similarly urged the committee to provide some parameters for when intervention was necessary or not, wisely noting that there might be places where intervention is not needed, including both situations the committee might be able to anticipate, as well as "unusual circumstances" that they could not. "I think it's okay to have an off ramp for those circumstances, some of which we haven't even thought of," he said.

But staff were not privy to these conversations, and they seem to have developed their own interpretation of this resolve clause, one that constitutes a stark departure from what the Transportation Commission intended. It is leading them to assert that they must implement traffic calming measures whether there is sufficient need or not.

To wit, the intersection in question has never once experienced a speed-related crash, and has similarly never had any injuries, deaths, reports of poor driving behavior, or complaints. It enjoys a small amount of traffic, with drivers at slow speeds (well under 25 miles per hour). This is one of the underlying sources of neighborhood concern with the plan to change the intersection.

The second major provision of the resolution that is at issue is the second resolve clause, the requirement that “the City Administrator utilize a collaborative model of public engagement.” In the case of this intersection, a collaborative model was never even attempted nor mentioned, let alone followed, and this suggests that the staff is completely unaware that this requirement exists. Its absence here has led directly to an extremely bad climate, very frustrated residents, and the very real potential for extended litigation.

The need for a collaborative model of public engagement was a critical part of the Transportation Commission discussion and of the resulting resolution. At their May, 2023, meeting, Commissioner Kleinman explained that they used as their guide the Spectrum of Public Participation designed by the International Association for Public Participation, and the committee included [links to this document](#) in the draft resolution’s backup materials. The document defines a collaborative process as one where “public officials work in partnership with members of the public to identify problems and develop solutions. At its most effective and beneficial, genuine collaborative processes and partnerships give leaders and participants equal status, and those who hold the power share some degree of control, management, or decision-making authority with participants.” The Association contrasts this with the *less* engaged models that the committee did *not* choose: such as the “involvement model,” where the city would “work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that their aspirations are consistently understood and considered,” the “consult model,” where the city would seek out public feedback that would influence their decision, and the “inform model” where the city would simply provide balanced and objective information. The collaborative model, by contrast, was supposed to be the highest possible level of public involvement without actually removing all decision making ability from city officials.

Commissioner Kleinman made clear that public involvement was important to the success of the program. “There was a sense among staff that you need a pretty high level of public involvement in order to make sure that there’s not backlash after a project, and that the number one goal, as [Transportation Manager] Raymond [Hess] told us in several meetings, was to not install stuff that we later had to rip out. So that’s where this comes from. It’s still a pretty high level of public engagement.” Transportation Manager Heys agreed, discussing at length his concern with how to ensure community engagement even in the absence of the petition process. Among other things he said that “if there is a location where we think a vertical device makes sense, because there is a documented speeding program, or there’s some other issue that we’re trying to solve for, I think it would be up to us to figure out how we can get the appropriate level of buy in from that neighborhood to install that device as part of a project to ensure that it’s supported pretty broadly and that we don’t get people having us take it out.” He also addressed this model in his May 11, 2023 memorandum to the Transportation Commission, where he wrote “..staff will work with the neighborhood for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.” In other words, both in substantive discussions about the effectiveness of the program and in the resulting language of the resolution, the need to use a collaborative approach was paramount.

Unfortunately, in the process that led to the contract that will be before Council on Monday, the collaborative model was never attempted nor even mentioned by staff. The predictable result is that there is *already* a large backlash, both about our exclusion from the process, and the resulting design plan. Let me try to summarize the process for you, so that you can see both what happened and why it has led to such extreme frustration among neighbors.

The first indication that anything was being considered for our intersection came about in September, 2024, when a neighbor saw city engineers standing at the intersection, asked them what they were doing, and was told that the city was going to change the intersection. Neighbors reached out to Councilmembers Ghazi Edwin and Radina, who looked into this, and reported back that city engineers had told him that Resolution R-23-330 gave them the authority to do this.

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- Note that this kind of information-by-luck does not appear anywhere on the spectrum of
- public participation
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In response to our continued concern, two engineers and one engagement specialist held a “Virtual Information Session” on November 14, on Zoom, where the stated purpose was “to share information with the public as well as to receive any feedback or questions.” They used a powerpoint presentation in which they explained the need for the capital project (but not the intersection changes), showed an image of a redesigned and narrowed intersection, and warned of the disruption we would experience. Throughout the event, residents were muted, cameras off, and we were only allowed to write questions to be filtered by (and in some cases blocked by) the engagement specialist, who read some of these aloud at the end of the presentation. Even in these conditions, it quickly became clear that residents did not see a need for a redesigned intersection and did not find the design appropriate. Nonetheless, the hosts did not ask any questions of residents (who were not allowed to speak anyway), nor offer to involve them in any way. Instead, they showed a slide titled “Project Timeline” that listed “public engagement” as a singular event, in Fall 2024, which the Project Manager confirmed by saying “we’re doing project engagement tonight and we’re finalizing design and going to bid out the project in the winter.” Resident requests for a subsequent in-person group meeting were rejected. When pressed, the team said only that residents could write them individual emails if they chose. There was no deadline given for this.

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- This kind of information session would fall somewhere between the “inform model” and
- the “consult model,” but very far below the “collaborative model.”
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Two weeks later, the website for the project included the notation, “Nov. 27, 2024 Project Update: After careful consideration of resident feedback and further internal review, it was determined to redesign the Harding & Wallingford intersection reconfiguration.”

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- It was unclear to all of us how staff even knew what we thought, let alone how they had
- carefully considered our feedback. The short turnaround time following the first official information session, especially when no timeline for a decision had been offered, made it seem like this decision was a foregone conclusion.
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At some point after the November 14 “virtual information session,” the Project Manager came to a neighbor’s home to discuss the location of his existing sewage line and how to connect it to the new line. This neighbor is a beloved friend and community member, who also happens to be the only person in the neighborhood who thought the general idea of a reconfiguration possible, even if he agrees with the majority that the idea to narrow the intersection is misguided. He sought to help her by offering her a revised design that he thought

would be less unattractive than the one she had proposed. He took her old design, re-drew the locations of the sidewalks, and sent it to her. She did not ask him for this idea, nor did she ask anyone else if we had additional or different ideas. In fact, few of us knew of this exchange.

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- This was one instance of a possibly fruitful exchange with a resident, but it was driven
- by the resident himself. Staff did not reach out to him or to anyone else.
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The rest of us heard nothing further from the city until we received a postcard in February, 2005, informing us of an in-person meeting to be held on February 24, 2005. The postcard said “city staff will present an updated proposed design option and residents will have an opportunity to provide feedback on it.”

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- The language of “an opportunity to provide feedback” shows how the staff at this point
- relied on a “consult model” of public participation.
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Upon receipt of this postcard, I wrote to City Council expressing some of my initial concerns with this project. In this letter I quoted from some of the statements made at the Virtual Information Session. Sometime after my letter was sent, someone updated the project website with a document called “Meeting Summary Questions and Answers,” that in many places marked a departure from what was said in the meeting and from the direct quotations I had provided. The document included the curious opening statement for a “meeting summary” – “If answers below differ from the answers given in the meeting, the answers in this document take precedence.” It also included this description of the Virtual Meeting: “The main purpose of this meeting was to inform the public about the upcoming road and utility project on Harding and how it will impact the Harding/Wallingford intersection.”

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- Note that the meeting is described as following the “informational model”, though the
- rewritten “meeting minutes” acknowledges that even the information provided was not to be relied upon.
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At this second meeting the format was again one in which the project team (this time the Project Manager, a Transportation Engineer, a City Engineer, and the Public Services Administrator) and the Public Engagement Specialist offered a powerpoint presentation and asked us to keep “questions” to the end. Councilmember Radina was also kind enough to attend to support his constituents. While this meeting was held in person, it was disappointing that once again, and in the face of unanimous opposition of the 50-60 residents in attendance, not a single speaker asked us any questions about what we see, what we know, or what we believe would be best for our neighborhood and our city. Instead, we were given a survey with two design models to choose from: the original design from November 14, and a very slightly modified version, one that had been based on the ideas of the single neighbor who did not originally see a problem with narrowing the intersection. It did not reflect what anyone else in the neighborhood had wanted. And really, how could it? The engineers do not know what we want and have never tried to find out. It was only at this second, in-person meeting, when residents began to insist on being heard, that we were able to begin to brainstorm some ideas amongst ourselves and to offer them to the panelists. If any panelist took these ideas seriously, we do not know. There has been no official follow-up.

What was perhaps most distressing about this meeting was the fact that the Project Manager confirmed there that the decision to narrow the intersection had been made before September, and hence before any resident even knew that this was under consideration. We also learned at this meeting that the bid for the work had already gone out, a company selected, and the contract already added to the Consent Agenda for this coming City Council meeting. In other words, at neither public meeting was there even the possibility of using a collaborative model, let alone any effort to do so, as both problem and solution had already been defined. This admission made both meetings feel like what one resident called “engagement performance.”

There is more that I could say about what it is that residents do want to see, and how consideration of the historic nature of our neighborhood is vitally important to us, but if you have read this far then you already deserve a gold star for your patience and do not need any additional verbosity from me. The bottom line is that residents would prefer that there be no traffic calming measures imposed on our intersection given that there is no record of any safety concerns, but if the city really wants to implement something, then at the very least the staff needs to respect the requirement to collaborate with us in this pursuit.

I will end by noting that the resolution effectively removed three layers of review: it dismissed the need for 51% approval of residents; eliminated the requirement that projects receive a positive recommendation from the Transportation Commission; and removed the need for approval of public calming proposals from City Council. It *did* retain the need for Council approval of any resulting contracts, however. During the May 2023 Transportation Commission meeting, Councilmember Akmon made clear that this last step was an important one, and Commissioner Kleinman joined her, adding “yes, there will still be an opportunity for Council oversight...” I am hopeful that you will exercise that oversight authority on Monday, and not approve this contract via the consent agenda. Instead, it should be moved to the discussion portion of the meeting, and Council should insist that passage is contingent on the second resolve statement being fulfilled: the requirement that the City Administrator utilize a collaborative model of public engagement for traffic calming. I further hope that you will work with the City Administrator to ensure that both of the above-mentioned resolve clauses are fully understood and regularly followed in the future.

With real gratitude for your service,
Victoria Langland