PEDESTRIAN AND BICYCLE FACILITIES AND ENVIRONMENTS

Key Issues

General Pedestrian Environment

Some highlights of the pedestrian environment in McKownville are as follows:

- While the sidewalk system is not continuous for the length of Western Avenue in the Study corridor (the Albany City line to Johnston Road), most of the street has sidewalks in both directions. That said, a significant amount of the existing sidewalks do not meet the Town's standard for width (5') and/or construction type (concrete), with the majority of nonstandard sidewalks failing to meet the width standard. In addition, due to settling and/or initial construction method, a significant number of sidewalk sections in the corridor, particularly along the westbound side of Western Avenue between the City line and Fuller Road, are significantly below the level of the grass and/or street adjacent to them and thus prone to silting and ponding. In addition, both along Western Avenue and along the side streets having sidewalks, many sections are heaved, misaligned or cracked.
- Fuller Road has an asphalt sidewalk along its southbound side, generally in good condition and 5' in width. An unusual feature of the pedestrian environment on this road is the installation of a WALK/DON'T WALK pedestrian signal head and a curb ramp leading to a concrete pad on the east side of Fuller Road at Executive Park Drive, but with no sidewalk leading away from this pad.
- The existing sidewalks along area side streets (see Figure 1-1) are generally of substandard width. In addition, a number of the older sidewalks are overgrown with grass – some to the point of being virtually covered by grass – and/or heaved by tree roots.
- Street crossings, particularly across Western Avenue, are among the most challenging pedestrian issues in the Study area. In the corridor, there is considerable variation in street crossing width, time to cross, level of accommodation provided (e.g., crosswalks and WALK/DON'T WALK heads) and motorist behavior and awareness of pedestrians.
- The internal routes north of Western Avenue provide emergency and homeowner access, and remain important for internal bicycle and pedestrian circulation. While people from outside the area use them, the routes are short, not well connected, and duplicative of the sidewalks proposed for Western Avenue. Thus, maintenance of these routes is perhaps best oriented toward preserving localized use rather than encouraging broader use.
- The Thruway/Northway corridor forms a barrier to pedestrian (and bicycle) travel which tends to impose a requirement of car use for travel. In fact, there is a tendency on the part of some to consider McKownville to be east of the Northway and Westmere west of the Northway, notwithstanding the fact that the original McKown patent extended to Johnston Road. The location of the McKownville United Methodist Church on Western Avenue west of the Thruway bridge is one of many reminders of the continuation of McKownville to the west.

General Bicycle Environment

- Bicycle travel along the major roads in the Study area – Western Avenue and Fuller Road – is fairly well-accommodated from the perspective of provision of space, although traffic volumes, speeds and turning maneuvers present challenges to cyclists. Generally, it is the more skilled cyclist that will use Western Avenue or Fuller Road for regular commuting or other transportation functions, as these streets are simply not comfortable for the average cyclist. The environments on these streets (1)serve as something of a cap on the potential for getting people out of their cars in favor of cycling and (2)reduce the range of mobility options available to McKownville residents.
- Along Western Avenue and Fuller Road, intersections with right turn lanes tend to present challenges to cyclists, as they must determine where to position themselves so as to continue on their trips as they approach these intersections (particularly where they will be continuing to travel along Western Avenue through such intersections).
- On the secondary roads in the area, such as McKown, Schoolhouse, Church and Johnston Roads, there are no accommodations for cyclists. In addition, as these roads have generally evolved over time from farm-to-market-type roads to collectors and minor arterials, they can presently be characterized as narrower than desirable, somewhat winding in spots, with higher speeds and volumes than are desirable for a cycling route. At the same time, for people who would travel longer distances into Guilderland and Albany by bike, these are the most direct routes to Western Avenue from outside the Study area. As such, they present obstacles to the potential commuter or errand-running cyclist, in addition to recreational riders.
- On the local/neighborhood streets in the Study area, motor vehicle traffic volumes tend to be such that cyclists can use these streets without any accommodation such as a bike lane. However, there does appear to be a problem of motorist awareness of cyclists on some of these streets, such that BIKE ROUTE or other such signage might be helpful in raising motorist awareness of the potential to encounter cyclists as they travel along these streets.

Challenge in Establishing Facility Hierarchies

Throughout the Study effort, recurring themes in the discussions were on the need for new and/or improved facilities to build toward something of a *hierarchy*, starting from Western Avenue and Fuller Road, then to the next busiest group of streets in the area (e.g., Church, Johnston, McKown and Schoolhouse) and then on to something of a set of either local collectors or strategic connections (e.g., a connection between Patricia Lane and the Westmere School, or between Stuyvesant Plaza and Crossgates Mall). This concern will affect both the identification of travel networks and the prioritization of individual projects needed to get these networks developed.

That said, a key challenge facing the community is that Western Avenue – potentially the major route for longer-distance, purpose-oriented travel both within McKownville and for connections between it and surrounding areas – is regarded by many people as more of an impediment that one must surmount to travel than as an actual transportation route for pedestrians and cyclists. In the course of public meeting, telephone conversation and ad hoc contact discussions, the Study

Team consistently heard from residents, students, store employees and bicycle club members that, simply put, "no one uses Western Avenue in McKownville if they can avoid it." Most of these people did however note that if one's destination was along Western Avenue, the thought process was one of finding a route that entailed traveling along or across Western Avenue for as short of a distance as possible.

Sidewalks: New Construction versus Reconstruction

It is also worth noting with particular regard to sidewalks that during the Study's public outreach efforts, there were a considerable number of comments regarding locations where sidewalks exist, but are seen as being of poor quality, substandard width, prone to flooding/puddling or otherwise inadequate for their purposes. These observations appear to be borne out by inventories conducted by the McKownville Improvement Association and field-checked by the Consultant Team.

Given an apparent need for both new sidewalk connections and rehabilitation of existing sidewalks, a key consideration became that of whether the "first order of business" was to bring *existing* facilities up to standard or on accepting these facilities for the moment and concentrating early improvement efforts on creating *new* facilities to bridge gaps in the pedestrian transportation system and extending coverage to new areas. Overarching this question is the broad aim of the Study effort to identify key steps for promoting *basic mobility*. That is, while much of the Study effort was about enabling area residents to have *choices* with regard to mode of travel, there is a more essential need to provide suitable accommodations for those people who are unable to drive because of age, infirmity or lack of vehicle availability (e.g., UAlbany students).

The general consensus of the Study Steering Committee was that the construction of the sidewalks holding the greatest promise for use should be a higher priority than the reconstruction of existing substandard sidewalks should. The qualification to this rule would be that where there are existing sidewalks which present hazards or other defects which effectively preclude their use (severely heaved or broken sections, for example), improving such sidewalks should also be a high priority. In practice, the distinction may come with regard to *funding*: new sidewalk construction will tend to be a larger effort requiring pursuit of funding through the CDTC Spot Improvement Program, the NYSDOT Transportation Enhancement Program, legislative member items or other such sources, while many spot repairs of problems such as those just mentioned could be done out of the Town's current highway maintenance or parks and recreation budgets.

Latent Demand for Sidewalks

The most common direct measures of demand for sidewalks are (1)pedestrian counts and (2)worn paths where sidewalks do not exist. While these measures provide definitive proof of pedestrian activity, it oversimplifies the matter to rely exclusively on them to provide guidance to decisions regarding sidewalk construction. In addition, no matter when a pedestrian count is

taken, it becomes a "hit or miss" issue as to whether the peak times of demand were captured during the count period.

At the Study's public workshops, several people related specific examples of places where they *would* walk if proper facilities were provided. In addition, the Team frequently heard area residents and workers state very specific areas such as Western Avenue between Church and Schoolhouse Roads presented such a *package* of obstacles that they effectively precluded consideration of what could amount to fairly lengthy walk trips.

Accordingly, as the Study Team examined the existing sidewalk system with an eye toward identifying promising locations for new sidewalk construction, it used several bases in addition to observed pedestrian activity and worn paths, including the following:

- Relative proximities of residential, office and retail developments
- System gaps (e.g., areas where two sidewalks come close but do not meet)
- Isolated "barrier" locations where a single obstacle appears to dissuade people from making walk trips
- Public comments on desirable locations at which to develop sidewalks
- Potential shortcuts that would significantly reduce walking distances (particularly staying on public property)

Recommendations

Note: Recommendations SW-1 through SW-14, along with the current conditions of Study area sidewalks, are summarized in Figure 1-1 on the following page.

SW-1: Johnston Road Sidewalk Improvements

- *Description:* Construction of new sidewalks along the northbound (east) side of Johnston Road. Two sections are indicated: Western Avenue to the Town Center driveway (~200'), and the Town Center driveway to Westmere Elementary School (~250').

  For maximum benefit, the two sections should be progressed as a set.

- *Estimated Cost:* $15,000

- *Additional Notes:* This improvement would not only enhance pedestrian and transit access to the Town Center shopping opportunities, but also provide part of an important pedestrian link between the Alton Road/Hungerford Road area and the Westmere Elementary School. As was noted during the Study effort, this would be the only neighborhood in the Study area from which children could potentially walk to and from the Westmere School without crossing a busy highway.