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The battle at 49th & Main: Should stoplights be removed?

By Katherine Knott | Aug. 1, 2016

Francie Hall, legally blind, has had some close calls walking across intersections around town.

That's one reason she's opposed to a plan to switch out the stoplights at the busy Plaza area intersection at 49th and Main streets and replace them with stop signs. She doesn't feel as safe at four-way stops — unlike the stoplights, they don't have audible signals that tell her when it's safe to walk.

The switch and other changes to the intersection are being pushed by a development company as part of a \$25 million renovation of the historic Board of Trade building adjacent to the intersection.

In direct disagreement with those opposed to removing the stoplights, the developer and others say the stop signs together with the other changes to traffic flow will actually make the intersection safer.

But the revamping of the intersection has blown up into a six-month tussle involving South Plaza Neighborhood Association — Hall is a board member — City Hall and the developer, Mariner LLC.

The opposition has delayed Board of Trade project. Overall it's an example of how city bureaucracy can get hung up when stakeholders in a neighborhood can't get on the same page.

"Main Street is being dramatically changed in ways that the neighbors do not approve," said Keith Spare, president of the South Plaza Neighborhood Association.

The city is still deciding whether to remove the stoplights, but the other changes proposed by Mariner, a national real estate management firm, are moving forward.

They include reducing the four-lane Main street to three lanes and adding 13 angled parking spots along the west side of Main street.

Those so-called traffic-calming measures, along with the four-way stop signs, are designed to slow down vehicles. The slower the cars, the thinking is, the safer the streets.

"A four-way stop is generally better than a traffic light," said Eric Bunch of BikeWalkKC, an advocate for pedestrian safety.

Sean Demory, a spokesman for the city Public Works Department, said that "nothing is more restrictive than a four-way stop. There's less room to maneuver."

It's also more convenient because drivers don't have to wait at a red light when no cars are around.

The final plan also includes the installation of detectable directional tactile strips and corner ramps that meet specifications of the Americans with Disabilities Act. A four-way flashing warning will hang above the intersection.

Councilwoman Jolie Justus said the issue has been keeping her up at night, along with the city's homicide rate. She said she's had hours and hours of talks with Spare and others.

Safety concerns and a desire to protect the neighborhood lie at the heart of Spare's opposition. He said the plan was crafted without careful thought from neighborhood.

"When you don't involve the neighbors, you don't understand the issues," Spare said. "We weren't communicated with in the planning phase."

In 2012, the Public Works Department began evaluating stoplights around the city to see if they were actually — or as the department says, "warranted." Some stoplights are antiquated and require upgrades.

But that effort drew an outcry from neighbors living near stoplights slated for removal. The City Council intervened and the department now consults the neighbors beforehand.

How we got here

Mariner bought the former Board of Trade building in 2014. The company has invested \$25 million to convert it to office space and add 4,450 square feet of retail to the lower level.

"Our goal from the onset was to create a unique sense of place for this iconic Kansas City building," said Brian Douglas, a senior associate with Mariner. "...As such, our vision was to create a true showpiece...supporting mixed-use applications and sponsoring pedestrian-friendly environments."

Mariner submitted a streetscape plan to the city that changed the lanes and added angled parking. There's street parking around the building and a parking garage to the west, but there wasn't any in front of the building.

Douglas said the angled parking was "critical to activating the retail."

Mariner had engineers conduct a traffic study in November 2015. That study concluded that the stoplights were unwarranted.

Demory, the public works spokesman, said unwarranted "doesn't necessarily mean that the signal removal is imminent, but it does mean that the signal isn't needed and the intersection can be better served with alternate traffic control mechanisms."

Once lights are deemed unwarranted, the next step is a public meeting and gathering feedback from neighbors.

The opposition

Justus said that after a two-hour public meeting in February attended by 60 people, "it was clear we had a lot more work to do."

"People were really fired up," she said.

Douglas said he didn't expect the stoplights to be an issue.

But for Spare, who has lived in the neighborhood for 25 years, removing them would be illogical and "fricking insane."

"It would put a bull's-eye on the backs on blind people," he said.

Sheila Styron works with The Whole Person, a local nonprofit that helps people with disabilities. She is blind and advocates for others who are, too.

"This isn't a pedestrian-friendly thing to do," Styron said.

She said an audible cue provided by a stoplight was needed or people with low vision "don't know when it's our turn to cross the street."

The automated pedestrian signal at the 49th and Main stoplights is a voice that yells, "Walk!" when the light changes.

While those in favor of removing the lights emphasize that the traffic calming measures will improve safety, Spare wonders just how much safer the intersection can get. There was one accident there in 2015, according to city data.

Spare is also worried about the vitality of his neighborhood. He's seen a resurgence in the South Plaza neighborhood as businesses moved in and residential developments popped up.

He said a change in the intersection could discourage traffic and potentially hurt the businesses.

"We want traffic to move freely through the neighborhood," Spare said. A four-way stop would hinder that movement, he said.

Spare is also concerned about buses. The Main Max bus route runs through the intersection.

The Kansas City Area Transportation Authority didn't see the streetscape plan before the city's Planning and Development Department approved it in June. Demory at public works said traffic engineers ran simulations and deemed that the lane changes wouldn't affect the bus route.

Cindy Baker, spokeswoman for ATA, said the authority prefers angled parking not be placed adjacent to a single lane, but "we believe the dimensions proposed are adequate for safe operations given the slow speeds in this location."

Spare said he interpreted the ATA response as "we can make it work."

The lanes will be reduced to 11 feet, the lowest standard for lanes along bus routes.

All in favor

Despite the neighbors' resistance, the stoplights are most likely going away. City officials by and large agree that a four-way stop is safer and better for the neighborhood.

Justus said she didn't know much about stoplights at the start of the year — the notion that a four-way stop would be safer seemed counterintuitive. Her opinion changed during her research.

"I've spent dozens and dozens of hours trying to make an informed decision," she said. "I was not willing to make a decision that quickly when there's compelling arguments on both sides."

Now she's in favor of removing the stoplights. In the end, what appealed to her were the traffic-calming measures and ADA accommodations.

"We are going to be slowing traffic in that intersection," said Justus who prefers walking and taking the bus to get around town.

"It's substantial public infrastructure that's going to be for the benefit of the neighbors," Justus said.

Mariner is footing the bill to redo the whole intersection, not just its side of the street. The city's responsible for removing the stoplights.

Until the city approves the overall plan, Mariner can't finish the streetscape improvements, which Douglas said are crucial for the Board of Trade redevelopment.

Where do we go from here?

The stoplight removal process typically takes two to three months. All agree the process didn't work right for this intersection.

"Reflection on this issue starts now," Justus said. "Anytime we can learn to be more proactive, it's better for everyone."

Justus said the city should work to communicate better and make the process less of a frustration.

Spare emphasized that neighbors at first felt left out. "Mariner has done the minimum," he said. "They have not gotten the neighborhood to buy in."

Spare said South Plaza isn't "against development, but development has to enhance the neighborhood. Every developer that included us in the beginning has discovered opportunities."