

Date: Thu, 18 Feb 2010 10:17:17 -0800
From: Dave Nutter <nutter.dave@mac.com>
To: bpac@icycle.org
Subject: [BPAC] proposed letter about Elm/Floral/Hector/State

BPAC members & others:

I've drafted the letter below about proposals for the Elm-Floral-Hector-State intersection. I present it to you for feedback, and if you wish, support. I think it should go to the BPW, Mayor, First Ward Councilmembers and others involved in this project (suggestions welcome). I'm concerned about BPAC being left out of the decision-making process and good ideas being left out. The drawings which Andrejs posted look less bike- and pedestrian-friendly than what we saw in December. There are ideas which deserve our support, and I think we have a lot more to offer. I hope my explanation of the benefits of the all-way-stop is clear. I'm concerned that decision-makers at all levels may be seduced by big expensive projects when simple inexpensive solutions may be best. I want to make sure there is follow through from our discussion about it with Kent, as I've been reassured before that the all-way-stop would be considered when seemingly it has not.

--Dave Nutter

Dear Mayor Peterson, BPW Members, First Ward Councilpersons, Transportation Engineer, ...:

The purpose of this letter is fourfold:

- * First, to point out the need for BPAC involvement in planning for the Elm/Floral/Hector/State intersection;
- * Second, to support inclusion of several specific features, some of which we have seen in various drawings;
- * Third, to evaluate the general plans BPAC has seen; and
- * Fourth, to request consideration of an additional alternative, an all-way-stop.

NEED FOR BPAC INVOLVEMENT

The City of Ithaca has an interest promoting pedestrian and bicycle travel as alternatives to automobiles. The Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Council (BPAC) is charged with advising how to make City projects and policies better for people on foot or bicycle. The Elm/Floral/Hector/State intersection is a vital - and currently difficult - link for pedestrians and for bikeriders between downtown and the growing neighborhoods and school on West Hill. The Bike Plan adopted by the City of Ithaca calls for bike facilities both on State and Hector Streets through this intersection, and in the long term on Elm Street and Floral Avenue as well. Therefore it is important that BPAC's input be an integral part of the planning process.

RECOMMENDED FEATURES

These features from drawings shown to BPAC in December 2009 would help make the intersection more friendly to pedestrian and bicycle travel. They would also have the effect of traffic-calming and promoting respect for the neighborhood and the urban environment.

- * a sidewalk between Elm and Hector Streets
- * raised crosswalks
- * a crosswalk across the base of Elm Street
- * a crosswalk across the base of Hector Street
- * median islands on Hector Street, Floral Avenue, and State Street. These can slow and guide motor traffic and serve as mid-crossing pedestrian refuges, allowing a crossing to be managed one conflict at a time.
- * restriping the bridge to 3 lanes with striped shoulders or bike lanes. This would separate motor traffic from sidewalks on State while furthering the Bike Plan, making a positive resolution to the question of which lane eastbound traffic from Hector will use.

BPAC also recommends these features which were not yet included in December 2009 drawings:

- * a crosswalk across State Street
- * continuing the westbound striped shoulder from the bridge as a climbing bike lane on Hector Street within the 500' project limit.

GENERAL PLAN EVALUATIONS

Among the drawings BPAC saw, two seemed more positive. Widening the end of Floral Avenue for left- and right-turn-only lanes would prevent a single vehicle waiting to make a left turn onto Hector Street from creating a blockage on both Floral Avenue and Elm Street. Similarly, a traffic circle attempts to address this backup by allowing turns from Floral Avenue onto Hector Street to be independent of sightlines and traffic on State Street. A circle would separate and simplify all interactions and, if the pedestrian crossings were designed properly, might help street crossings. But whether Floral Avenue were widened or a traffic circle were built, the large volume of traffic which comes down Hector Street to State Street every weekday morning would still cause back-ups on Floral Avenue and Elm Street. Also, both these plans would involve considerable grading, which is very expensive, possibly beyond the allotted funding.

Assistant Transportation Engineer Kent Johnson also wanted to investigate using traffic lights, and they should be considered. But traffic lights haven't served pedestrians or bike riders well in the West End and would have to be designed better. Also traffic lights promote erratic driving such as speeding through yellow lights rather than a habit of approaching the intersection sedately. Traffic lights are both expensive to install and have ongoing electrical costs. For all these reasons the City has recently removed traffic lights at several intersections where all-way-stops are equal or better for the task.

REQUEST FOR CONSIDERATION OF ALL-WAY-STOP

This raises an option deserving of equal consideration: an all-way-stop. It is simple, civilized, inexpensive, and effective. Everyone stops, everyone waits their turn, no one wastes time, yet no one is rushed. Required sight distances are reduced, and the need for expensive expansion of the intersection is eliminated. Each driver scans the whole intersection before moving, so pedestrians and bicycle users are more apt to be seen and respected. Consider all the current conflicts, and how they would be addressed:

- * With a stop on Hector Street, traffic may no longer simply roar down the hill; it must descend at a more respectful speed.
- * Traffic from State Street up Hector Street will start from zero mph instead of accelerating upward from 30mph or more, again being more neighborhood-friendly.
- * State Street traffic will wait at a stop line in easy view of drivers on Floral Avenue turning left onto Hector Street.
- * Drivers turning from State Street onto Floral Avenue will no longer rush dangerously through gaps in traffic coming down Hector Street. Drivers won't have to see up Hector Street around bends and vegetation, and their attention will be focused on people and vehicles at the intersection.
- * Because traffic will not back up unfairly on Floral Avenue, there will be better opportunities for Elm Street traffic to turn left. It will be clear when a vehicle is turning onto Floral Avenue at them from State or Hector Street because those vehicles will have stopped within view and will be proceeding more slowly.
- * Northbound traffic on Floral Avenue can be encouraged to give Elm Street traffic its turn with a "do not block intersection" sign, or this can be enforced with a stop sign at the existing crosswalk on Floral Avenue.
- * Because motor traffic will be tamed with an all-way-stop, pedestrian and bicycle travel can be better accommodated and encouraged. Crosswalks can be added at the legal but currently unmarked and unrespected crossings at the end of Floral Avenue and on the west end of the bridge.
- *The traffic volumes in this intersection should not be an issue: an all-way-stop works well, being both equitable and efficient, at the intersection of Pine Tree Road and Dryden Road, for instance.

In addition to working as well or better than the other current proposals, there are several more advantages of an all-way-stop. There will be no need for major grading and widening at the end of Floral Avenue. The turning radius of firetrucks, schoolbuses, and other large vehicles will not be impacted. There will be less expense and less energy used. And, as BPAC Chair Josh Carlsen noted, an all-way-stop could easily be tested with temporary signs.

In sum, the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Council should be included in the working group on this project so we can help ensure that the result is a fully multi-modal "complete street" intersection including the features which best accommodate pedestrians and bicycle users. And the all-way-stop option, as outlined above, should be given equal consideration with other proposals to solve the problems at the intersection of Elm Street, Floral Avenue, Hector Street

and State Street.

Sincerely,
David M. Nutter
member BPAC

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