

Battle over the North Park Street roundabouts in Halifax

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Published July 14, 2014 - 7:08pm

Last Updated July 15, 2014 - 8:08am

Park, cycling advocates question cost, design of work



Trees with a heritage designation have been taped at the intersection of Cunard, North Park and Agricola streets, where construction is scheduled to begin on a new roundabout. (INGRID BULMER / Staff)

Concerns are being raised about the overhaul of a pair of busy intersections in central Halifax.

Work on the \$12.9-million North Park intersection redesign project starts this week with the construction of the first of two new roundabouts, a one-lane circle at North Park and Cunard streets. A two-lane traffic circle at the intersection of North Park, Cogswell, Rainnie, Trollope and Ahern streets will be built in 2015.

Friends of Halifax Common, a community group working to preserve and expand the city park, is questioning the cost and timing of the rollout.

"I question the overall expenditure on the roundabouts," co-chair Peggy Cameron said in an interview Monday, noting that Halifax should make affordable housing and bike lanes more of a priority.

She also expressed concern with the timing of the intersection redesign, noting that it is being rolled out "in advance of other important plans that should be in place before fiddling around the edges."

But Anne Sherwood, a design engineer with the municipality, said the city moved forward with replacement of the North Park intersections because of the age of the existing infrastructure, which has reached its end of life.

She also said the project costs reflect more than just the refit of two intersections. In addition to the roundabouts, Sherwood said the city is upgrading sidewalks, lighting, active transportation trails and planting trees. She said many of these items were recommended in 1994 Halifax Common Plan.

Carolle Koziak Roberts, a landscape architect with the municipality, added that the North Park intersections redesign is more than a traffic project.

"The mobility piece was obviously important but we also looked at the urban design piece," she said.

“It’s about traffic but also creating a sense of place.

“Being right next door to very rich resources, with the (North) Common on one side and two national historic landmarks on North Park with (Halifax Armouries) and Citadel Hill, we’re able to do some general improvements for the street.”



An artist's conception of a North Park Street roundabout. (CONTRIBUTED)

Ben Wedge, co-chair of the Halifax Cycling Coalition, said the roundabouts lack features that would make the area safer for cyclists.

Although from some approaches the roundabouts feature a dedicated bike lane, he said from other directions cyclists will have to walk through the traffic circles.

“They approached this saying, ‘How can we get cars through intersections faster?’ and decided on the overall parameters for car movement,” he said. “The sidewalks and bike lanes seemed like an afterthought.”

While Wedge said cyclists won’t be worse off with the roundabouts, he said cyclist safety would be improved, either.

“We’ve got one shot to fix two of most important intersections downtown,” he said. “It’s perplexing that they haven’t better accommodated cyclists.”

The city held community engagement sessions on the North Park intersections redesign, but Wedge said they were more like information sessions with little opportunity to provide feedback or make modifications to the plan.

But Sherwood argued that pedestrians and cyclists were a top priority in the redesign project.

“We did a lot of engagement with the cycling community and they were an active part of the plan,” she said. “We were able to include a greenway trail through this area of town and make connections to existing paths.”

However, she said some potential new bike lanes could not be accommodated because of the “existing geometry” of the area.

The overhaul of the North Park intersections aims to ease traffic congestion, improve safety and update aging infrastructure.

In addition to traffic detours, residents can expect to see some trees on the North Common come down in the coming weeks as work on the first phase of the project moves ahead.

A total of 33 trees will be removed and another 30 will be transplanted.

Yet John Simmons, the municipality’s urban forester, said 124 new trees will be planted in the area as part of the project.

He said the additional trees, a mix of native and ornamental species, will mediate the loss of canopy created by the older trees being cut down.

Four of the largest trees slated to come down will be made into benches for the area.

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