

9/4/2021

The Equality Street: Battle for a Champlain Parkway “RIGHTway,” North Street Burlington, and Beyond

The Pine Street Coalition battle in the South End for a Champlain RIGHTway moves to a new level as the City Council may well shortly approve building the Railroad Enterprise Project (REP) before any current pending Parkway is built—this would assure the King Maple neighborhood gets immediate relief from current levels of unsafety, traffic, pollution and congestion instead of an additional onslaught of traffic from the City’s current obsolete, unsafe Champlain Parkway design.

The REP was always wanted by the City as the Parkway route through to Main Street (Alternative 1 in the 2009 environmental document) instead of through Pine. REP extends from Kilburn St/Curtis Lumber on Pine Street to Battery Street so the Parkway route effectively bypasses King Maple neighborhood. King Maple has the lowest median income in Burlington, over 80% low and moderate income population and highest Vermont concentration of persons with black and brown skin.

Pine Street and Two Principal Allies, a Major Victory—FHWA Funds Railroad Enterprise Project for \$20 million and Likely Moves to the Front Burner

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) promised to walk away from the now \$100 million project unless the Parkway cut King Maple in two and increased Pine Street traffic there 22-37% through King Maple to Main Street. The Parkway current design through King Maple degrades pedestrian safety and delay with two traffic signals replacing all-way-stops at Maple and King thereby raising speeds and pedestrian injury rates by 20% (all-way stop or a roundabout equal in their superiority). Mayor Kiss and City Council rather than losing all funding accepted the current route under the duress in 2009 in spite of long time community opposition. The grassroots group Pine Street Coalition began in 2015 and following the leadership of the Burlington Walk Bike Council and undertaking community outreach, adopted a set of Parkway re-design guidelines, little changed to this day. The basics: (1) full sidewalk and separate bike-way along the entire route (none now, not an inch); (2) retaining connectivity between Pine Street and Queen City Park Road Kmart Plaza versus the current design dead ending Pine short of the Parkway; (3) use of engineering “best practices” including safest-for-all modes and climate change prevention champion roundabout (the one and only FHWA pedestrian safety “proven countermeasure” intersection); (4) cutting 1.5 miles of expensive excess lanes miles of roadway; (5) preservation and protection of Englesby Brook, the City’s largest stream entering Lake Champlain which the Parkway would stuff into a long pipe; and (6) accepting the Parkway as an ordinary City street and dropping full controlled access restraint at Pine/I 189 intersection.

The Pine Street Coalition re-design guidelines and challenge documents issued in April 2018 clearly led to a change of heart by FHWA which suddenly offered the City the REP it rejected in 2009, and later even sweetened the offer with a better financial deal for the City after Pine Street Coalition went to US District Court on D-Day, June 6, 2019. Thanks to Pine Street’s long time partner (they were there before Pine Street) Fortieth Burlington, LLC owner of Innovation Center on Lakeside Avenue and joined by the second Vermont Racial Justice Alliance (VRJA) in summer 2019 during the now ending Environmental Justice two-year-plus outreach—a direct

result of the Pine Street lawsuit—REP has now moved from a \$20 million initial reluctant offer by FHWA toward front burner status.

One cannot overstate the importance of the Environmental Justice process for the education it brought to all in detailing the blatant transportation racism and injustice not only in King Maple now acknowledged, but also the special core role the safest pedestrian design plays in avoiding disproportionate negative impact of roadway projects on communities of color and low income. That core safest pedestrian design when twinned with the best accommodation of bicycles is the very definition of an “equality street” in all senses of descriptive—from transportation equity for all modes to racial equity for communities of color with their far higher dependence on the walking mode.

Next Challenge—Achieving Champlain RIGHTway “Equality Streets”

Very simply, an equality street is first and foremost a busy street with sidewalks and roundabout intersections which also contain either on-street cycle track (protected bikes lanes) and/or a separate safe two-way bikeway. There now is not a single inch of “equality street” along the existing Champlain Parkway and Rail Enterprise Project design! Quite the contrary the current Parkway and REP design are clearly racially and transportation unjust and discrimination by the inferior treatment of those who walk and bike versus those who travel by motor vehicle.

Burlington actually established a landmark “equality” street model in the North Avenue Corridor Plan (2014) which contains three basics—sidewalks and roundabouts at key intersections, and end-to-end cycle track. It was the Parkway Environmental Justice process and leadership of VRJA, its director Mark Hughes and their staff, that led over the last two years which led to the expanded and deepened definition of an equality street. Expanded in the sense of applying directly to the lexicon of racist transportation practice where a community of color or low-income neighborhoods are present or affected. Deepened in clearly defining sidewalks and either all-way-stop or roundabout intersections as the minimum standard of pedestrian design of busy streets. It is the Parkway converting of two all-way-stop intersections with many pedestrians to traffic signals which set up the real life conflict which has arisen in the Parkway Environmental Justice process. The Parkway environmental document of 2009 and previous public process ended two years before the Vermont Complete Streets Law (2011) enactment which calls for consideration of safe accommodation of pedestrian and bicycle modes in road projects. Even a cursory examination of that law along with Burlington practice and plans shows the use of a shared use path treatment in the Parkway and REP fails the Vermont legal standard and is inconsistent by mixing two modes to the detriment of both as well as in an unsafe manner.

Key to understanding the equality street definition, particularly the need for a pedestrian sidewalk treatment, is recognizing that neighborhoods of low income and communities of color are in fact disproportionately dependent on safe walking facilities because they are significantly pedestrian and transit dependent. In Burlington’s King Maple and Old North End neighborhoods fully 30% of residents lack access to a car. Burlington Public Works Commissioner and UVM professor Pablo Bose is not only a researcher in this regard, he is also active in assisting New Americans and others lacking a car obtain necessary transportation services. Further, the pedestrian mode has always been pretty much ignored in transportation by government. For example there have been incentives and tax breaks for solo commuter drivers to give up their annual \$2,000 parking garage spaces and \$600 surface parking lot space, incentives for van group participants, incentives for taking transit to work and incentives to bicyclists—but never any formal incentive to the sizable walk-to-work set who cost the employer the least and do so in a healthy way! In a word, the pedestrian mode is the apartheid transportation mode, the right-turn-on red allowed today which kills about 30 pedestrians being the most obvious outrage of transportation discrimination not to mention the 50% increase in pedestrian deaths

since 2010 (two such deaths in Burlington). In the larger picture of discrimination, people of color die at 50-90% higher rates per population than white-non-hispanic (Native Americans 2 to 3 times the lower rate). We must assure the highest level of quality and safe pedestrian facilities in our urban neighborhoods, particularly where there are numbers of low income and persons of color—something totally lacking in the current Parkway and REP. With tabulations showing a bicycle or pedestrian injury weekly in Burlington (plus two car occupant injuries) and a bicycle or pedestrian death every five years, safety on our streets is major concern.

Parkway/Railyard Enterprise and the Controlled Access Versus a Complete, Equality Street Standard

The Parkway and Railyard Enterprise Project are a vestige of 80 year old ring-road around Burlington concept with the circle closed from I 189 by the Parkway through the South End, through the waterfront and Old North End to the VT 127 Beltline which dates from the 1980s—finally the completed circle via the Circumferential Highway from Colchester through Essex to VT 289 and interchange with I 89. The Circumferential Highway was effectively canceled by Governor Shumlin in 2011 and the waterfront/Old North End section of the ring road was discarded decades before.

Pine Street Coalition has assumed from the start the “controlled access” of the interstate is relaxed, ending at the I 189/Pine Street/Queen City Park Rd/RIGHTway interchange intersection. From that intersection pedestrian and bicycle facilities as well as additional intersections (like one at the City Market South End parking access, for example) could be installed as the RIGHTway onward becomes an ordinary busy street following the Vermont Complete Streets Law (2011) which calls for safe accommodation of pedestrians and bicyclists, a step now better described as employing the “equality street” model contained in the City’s North Avenue Corridor Plan or the Pine Street/VRJA/Fortieth Burlington, Champlain RIGHTway design guidelines necessitated by the presence of a community of color and a number of safety considerations, pedestrian safety paramount.

The “Shared Use” Pedestrian/Bicycle Facility—Second Class, Racial and Low Income Discriminatory Accommodation for Bicyclists and Especially Pedestrians

The current design of the Parkway and REP both utilize a shared use either nothing or a shared use path (REP) exclusively thereby mixing high speed bicycles and e-bikes with on foot children, families, and those who move either temporarily or permanently by cane and walker. In a rural setting this might be satisfactory but in a busy metropolitan center like the South End of Burlington with practically unlimited space for a sidewalk and separate 2-way bike lane through out the REP and Parkway use of a shared use path considering the community of color is nothing but straight, blatant racial discrimination and injustice! It can be expected the REP/Parkway which connects at either end with the Burlington Bikepath (a recreation path) will bring a large number of visitors and City residents making a “circle” tour—Bikepath and South End “Bikeway”—as Pine Street supporters envision thereby aiding the South End economy. Further the longer term promise of a full service bikeway from the north tip of ONE south to Queen City Park Road is moved ahead with the “South End Bikeway.” South End residents during public meetings on the REP expressed the importance of their using the REP to access the Bikepath—now with only two South End at grade connections—one via Austin Drive/Oakledge Park and the other at Harrison Street opposite Sears Lane. Note the “new” Parkway roadway sections with right-of-way acquired decades ago (including Road to Nowhere) are about 100 feet in width to accommodate the early planned four lane divided highway, now to be two lanes requiring less than half the 100 foot width. Spending \$100 million where there is more than sufficient right-of-way and getting not a single inch of sidewalk or separate bikeway is pathological and discriminating street design!

North Street and Beyond

Burlington has a major task before it addressing the 20—all but one signalized—intersections on the State high crash list, 18% of the 111 statewide and averaging 1.5 injuries a year. The 19 signalized intersections (not all were tabulated in the statewide report) represent over one in four of Burlington's traffic signals which total about 75. Not surprisingly many of the high crash signalized intersections are in the Old North End, including four of the six on North Street between North Avenue and North Union. North Street with its many commercial businesses is truly a "community street" and it can easily and cheaply be converted from perhaps the least safe Vermont community street to the most safe using the knowledge developed in the South End RIGHTwayt and the North Avenue Corridor Plan endeavors. The inexpensive mini roundabout first suggested in the AARP Vermont Pine Street Workshop (2014) is particularly adapted to the narrow right of way along North Street. So, the many lessons learned during the past several years can be applied to problem streets and intersections throughout Burlington.

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