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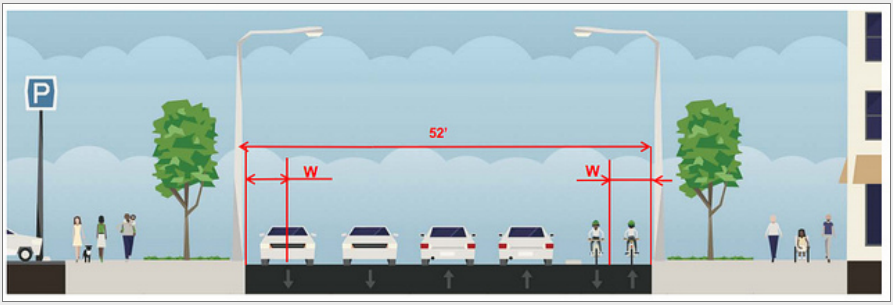
Evanston City Council Advances Key Projects From Bike Plan

by Justin Haugens

On Monday night, Evanston's City Council held a special meeting solely to address four bike infrastructure or policy measures, all of which will implement pieces of the city's recently adopted Bike Plan. The council advanced new protected bike lanes along Sheridan Road and along Dodge Avenue, in spite of considerable opposition over the latter, while deferring a vote on two connecting paths.

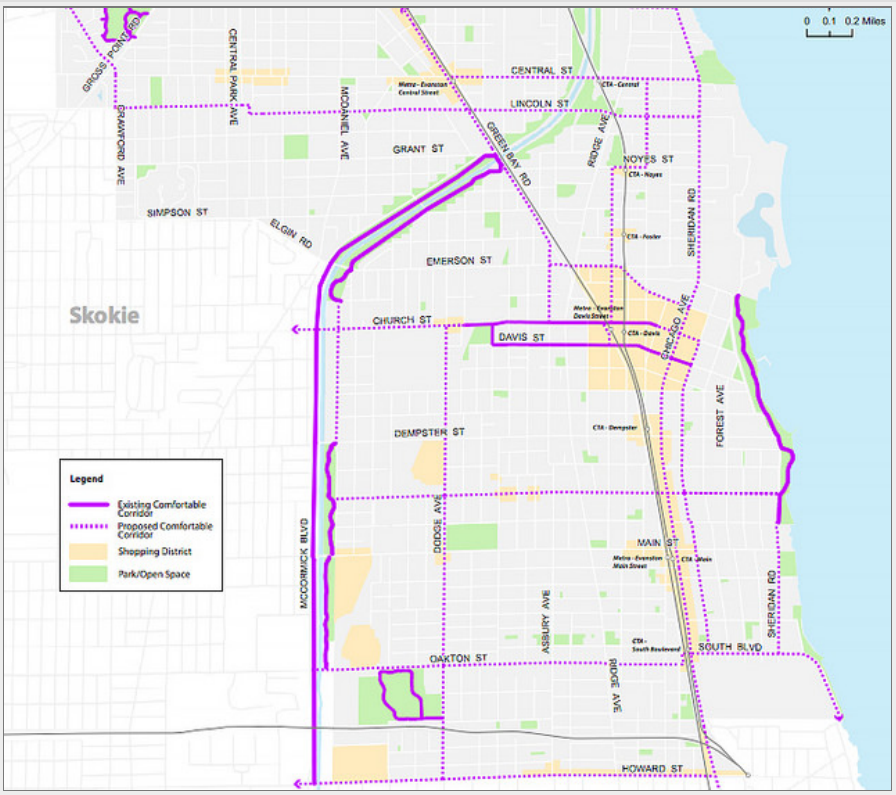


Streetmix illustration of the sidepath proposed for the east side of Sheridan Road, from Chicago to Foster. Courtesy City of Evanston.

The Sheridan Road and Chicago Avenue Improvement Project (PDF) will build a two-way protected bike lane on the east side of Sheridan Road. Although this item had already cleared the City Council, Sat Nagar, Evanston's Assistant Director of Engineering and Infrastructure, said that the city could save money by deferring resurfacing, streetscape and bike improvements until after required water main construction is complete. Deferring the improvements would push streetscape design to 2015-2016, construction on the two-way protected bylane to spring 2017, and completion to August 28, 2017. Alderman Donald Wilson motioned to proceed with the new timetable, the council approved it unanimously. Alderwoman Judy Fiske also asked the city staff to consider maintaining use of the existing roadway at Sheridan and Northwestern Place versus expanding it.

The Dodge Avenue Biking Improvements (PDF) proved to be the most contentious issue of the evening. The city staff was requesting approval to submit revised improvements along this corridor to the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning and the Illinois Department of Transportation. Dodge Avenue offers a north-south route connecting the south end of Evanston with downtown and Evanston Township High School. Currently, Dodge has aged and worn-out conventional bike lanes.

Prior to the meeting, protected bike lanes had been approved by the council, CMAP, and IDOT, but public feedback regarding parking led city staff to revise their proposal to use buffered bike lanes instead. The stretch of Dodge to be improved currently has 532 parking spaces. Protected bike lanes would remove 103 spaces, while buffered bike lanes would remove 32.



Map showing "Comfortable Corridors" across Evanston, including Sheridan and Dodge, and the connectivity gaps to be fixed by the two off-street paths.

Alderwoman Coleen Burrus inquired about implementing rumble strips along a BBL, and about the cost difference was between the PBL and BBL. No specific answer was offered regarding the rumble strips, and staff members downplayed the cost difference between bike lane types, simply mentioning the difference being the delineators.

Alderman Wilson motioned to direct city staff to proceed with the CMAP and IDOT approved protected bike lane treatment, which passed, six to three.

The final biking improvement item involved two short off-street paths near Davis and Church, at Mason Park on the southeast corner and at Evanston Township High School on the southwest corner. The Mason Park path would offer a route between Davis and Church that would avoid one-way streets. One citizen testified against the park path, as it would take away green space from the park.

The ETHS path would create a sidepath on the south side of Church, creating a link to the bike corral located on the west side of the high school campus and to points west. Alderman Wilson asked the staff to discuss with ETHS whether they would fund the path through their property. Due to the length of the meeting, and lack of details, the council requested to defer the agenda item and told the city staff to return to the October 13 meeting with enhanced maps.

Ylda Capriccioso, Evanston's Bicycle Program Coordinator (PDF), gave a presentation to cap the meeting. She began by noting recognition Evanston has received — for instance, the September 19 issue of Money magazine called Evanston a "Best Place to Walk or Bike." Capriccioso has met with different departments, and outside stakeholders like the Evanston Bicycling Club, Northwestern University and Active Transportation Alliance, to identify opportunities that could advance implementation of bike infrastructure.

Capriccioso called on the council to modify the Transportation and Parking Committee's purpose and composition, turning it into a public forum to discuss multi-modal policies. The committee could proceed with three aims: outreach and engagement, education and safety, and regulation. Over the winter, her plan is to finalize outreach, and request approval from both the committee and city council. Afterwards, the city could pursue a bike ordinance to clarify the process of requesting and implementing infrastructure treatments, resolve zoning issues, and better enforce of the rules of the road.

With two of the three biking improvement items voted in favor for, the meeting was a step forward for Evanston. Although Alderman Peter Braithwaite expressed the most concern about the protected bike lanes on Dodge, the council as a whole voted in favor of better safety and connectivity for bicyclists.

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