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Cape wants change for main roadway

By MARIA CODER, mcoder@news-press.com

Cape Coral's efforts to improve its downtown image now include plans to significantly alter Cape Coral Parkway.

A proposal to reconfigure the main road in downtown Cape Coral, and one of the primary access points to the rest of Lee County, was discussed Tuesday at City Hall.

The Community Redevelopment Agency feels strongly that rearranging traffic lanes downtown will increase flow through the city and encourage more business, as well as encourage residential development. It hopes to keep residents seeking entertainment and shopping possibilities at home and to compete with development efforts in downtown Fort Myers.

Currently, the parkway is four lanes of fast-moving traffic that becomes congested during rush hours with cars heading to and from the bridge. The stretch through downtown also offers few crossing points for pedestrians.

The new design will remove the median and place plants along the sides of the outer lanes. The design is expected to encourage strolling, window shopping and people watching.

"There's really no room for people to walk, which would be nice," said John Tsourkas, 31, of Cape Coral.

"I think it's a great idea," said Jim Fox, 66, of Cape Coral. "The city is growing in leaps and bounds ... it's nice to open up the road that way," he said.

But Joe Prata, 24, who moved to the Cape two years ago, disagreed. "I like the way it looks now. I'm from New York. You don't see palm trees in the middle of the street there," he said.

As it stands now, the downtown parkway consists of four lanes and two parking lanes, with a median that includes trees and bushes separating east and westbound traffic.

"It's like the game, Frogger," said Chet Hunt, executive director for the CRA, commenting on pedestrians trying to cross the parkway and battling fast-moving traffic.

Richard Hall, president of Hall Planning & Engineering Inc. in Tallahassee, who presented the new design, recalled watching a woman cross the street with a baby buggy. "I'll never forget this woman who had her head sticking out of the trees," he said.



CHANGE IN THE WIND: Cape Coral Parkway how it looks now and how it's expected to look if reconfigured. (Special to The News-Press/Dover, Kohl & Partners)

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Under the new proposal, the median would be pushed to the sides of the traffic lanes, allowing for four traffic lanes, a parking lane on each side and easier crossing.

Two traffic lanes would go east and two would head west, with only double lines separating them along S.E. 15th Avenue to S.E. 8th Court. Plants would line each of the outer lanes, separating parking from traffic.

The current road design forces pedestrians to walk more than 1,300 feet, at times, before reaching a crosswalk. The new plan would include crosswalks every 350-500 feet. It would also include 7 intersections, with each one having a crosswalk.

Hall said the design would keep traffic moving at 35 miles per hour, which is the current speed limit. He said that's a pace quick enough to keep cars moving, but slow enough to allow commuters a feel for downtown Cape Coral.

Traffic signals and stop signs would alternate, much like a boulevard that Hall saw while visiting Chico, Calif.

The project is expected to cost around \$1 million. Planners don't yet know how they'll pay for it. Hall said the sidewalks would remain the same, as would the drainage system. The plants along the median, if transferred in a timely manner, may be able to be saved and replanted along the sides — on the outskirts of the traffic lanes, separating the parking lane.

Hall figures approval for the road won't take too long.

"The road is under your sole jurisdiction," said Hall, explaining that since the city of Cape Coral owns the road, the Cape doesn't need approval from the Florida Department of Transportation or Lee County.

Hall predicts road construction, if approved, could be under way in a year and a half.

Plans by the CRA, which included the road, were unanimously approved on Monday but direct approval for this particular project still needs the green light from the city's transportation department. The plan also awaits new zoning rules and building code changes.

Steve Neff, transportation manager for the city of Cape Coral, said he needs more information from the CRA before his staff can make a decision. He requested a 20-year forecast for the area.

Ralph Ruocco, chairman of the planning and zoning commission for the city of Cape Coral said he likes the plan but wants to see a greater variety of businesses along the parkway.

"There are three gas stations and a tire service, those aren't pedestrian friendly," he said.

Plans also are in the works to develop an entertainment, business and housing district downtown, along with a waterfront entertainment area.

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