

## DESTROYING NORTHAMPTON'S MAIN STREET TO SAVE IT

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“Picture Main Street”—if fully approved and executed over three years as proposed by state planners—will likely be a death sentence for Northampton’s ailing but treasured Main Street. One need only to look at the various local projects of the state Department of Transportation (MassDOT) currently in progress to glimpse what the future may hold for downtown Northampton: 1) the never-ending overhaul of Damon Road; 2) the four-year upheaval of Route 9 in Hadley and Amherst; 3) the rebuilding of the Route 5 and I-91 interchange. All of these involve traffic stoppages; narrowed lanes; street excavations, and storage of construction equipment and material close to the work sites.

Just how will such construction impacts be managed in downtown Northampton? Sewer and water upgrades alone would impose major burdens on drivers, pedestrians, businesses, and police. To combine infrastructure renewal with drastic redesign of traffic lanes and the addition of bike lanes and wider sidewalks all at the same time foretells a multi-year wretched mess that most of us will avoid if at all possible. The glossy computer images of the future utopia promised by Picture Main Street planners conveniently ignore at least three years of construction mayhem.

Of course Main Street needs attention. Practically speaking, we have two “downtowns” bordering Main Street — parallel rows of shops and eateries connected by some of the longest crosswalks I have seen anywhere. Between the traffic lights at South Street and King Street, the hapless pedestrian must traverse four to six lanes of vehicles, trusting that drivers will pause. (Fortunately they usually do.)

Since I moved here from Chicago in 1972, generations of city planners have come and gone (some of them former students of mine) and Main Street is always “under study.” The most conspicuous result has been painting the crosswalk in front of Thornes in rainbow colors. Although the city proved inventive about blocking off street space for restaurant expansion during and since the Covid pandemic, it has been unable to extend median safety strips or provide pedestrian signals, as used near Amherst College. No wonder the prominent Faces and Spoleto spaces have remained vacant for years.

In a past Gazette column, I lauded the city’s freedom from top-down planning: “A Humane Micropolis: Northampton Has Evolved on its Own Terms” (Sept. 6-7, 2008). Our older neighborhoods long predated the advent of zoning in the 1920s which decreed single-use

districts, minimum lot sizes, and other exclusionary devices. In the 1960s, the city was below the radar of federal and state urban renewal agencies which eviscerated larger cities like Boston, Springfield, Worcester, Hartford, and New Haven. Our only interstate highway (I-91) bypassed downtown Northampton although it claimed a swathe of Meadows farmland.

But today a new era of top-down planning, fueled by federal and state funding dictates, is shaping the future of downtown Northampton, whether we like it or not. Heretical to say, I have a particular problem with the bike lanes that seem to be appearing everywhere the state is involved. Has anyone ever seen a cyclist using the bizarre new bike lanes on Pleasant and King Streets (with the Rail Trail just a stone's throw away!)

We certainly do not need two one-way bike lanes through the heart of downtown. The Northampton Rail Trail, which barely appears on the Picture Main Street graphic, provides convenient access to and beyond downtown. Anyone visiting Main Street by bike can get there on the Rail Trail or local streets (with or without bike lanes) and then walk on a sidewalk a block or two to their destination, as I often did in good weather to my post-retirement office on Short Street.

Bike lanes along busy streets invite young and fit riders to hurtle along, often without lights in darkness and oblivious to pedestrians. In recent visits to New York and Chicago, I felt more endangered by speeding cyclists in bike lanes than by motor vehicles. And many bikes today are motor-assisted, adding to their weight and velocity.

"Picture Main Street" is still a work in progress. But will local public input have any traction with the state's engineers and planners in Boston? As required by law, a virtual public hearing was held on April 26 which I unavoidably missed. I have since tried to access the transcript of the hearing and subsequent written comments. So far they have not been posted online and must be requested from the state public records office, which I tried without success. This does not bode well for any public influence on the final project design. The flashy graphic and PR description published in the Gazette on April 27 were more a statement of "what we know is good for you" with little interest in what would actually work best in Northampton.

Even if the MassDOT plan is in fact a great "cure" for our ailing Main Street, the patient will likely die during the years of disruption required to put it in place.

The writer's book: *Reclaiming American Cities: The Struggle for People, Place, and Nature Since 1900* (UMass Press, 2014) will provide the theme for a panel session on grassroots community activism at Forbes Library, Monday June 5 at 5:30-7 p.m.