

## IS MAIN STREET REALLY DANGEROUS?

Guest Column by Rutherford H. Platt  
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As a fifty-year subscriber and occasional contributor, I am one of the Gazette's most loyal fans. However, I was underwhelmed by Alexander MacDougall's front page story ("Watch Out for Cars", July 22) that seems to bend over backwards to try to portray our treasured Northampton Main Street as a sort of NASCAR race track where drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists venture at the risk of being killed or injured. It is bizarre for a venerable hometown newspaper to appear to urge the public to avoid downtown Northampton as too dangerous! Even though the article purports to be broader in scale (yes, accidents can happen anywhere), two photographs of Main Street leave no doubt where it is directing its warning.

Of course, anyone closer to Northampton than Boston may suspect this is a contrived crisis. The article throws together "MassDOT accident data" for different geographic scales (state, county, city, Main Street), covering diverse types of accidents, during various time periods — flinging them at the wall hoping some of them stick. In case that is not convincing, the article quotes a UMass transportation researcher who says vaguely "The numbers may actually be worse."

Or they may actually be too high. The city's Picture Main Street website flamboyantly declares: "THERE IS AROUND ONE CRASH EACH WEEK ON MAIN STREET." A closer look at the underlying data for Main Street over the nine-year period 2011-2020 lists 22 bicycle accidents, 30 accidents involving pedestrians (with two fatalities but cause not indicated), and 24 vehicle incidents (all with limited damage or injuries, and no fatalities). For a downtown location where four numbered highways converge (Routes 5, 10, 9, and 66)—and where the city has been negligent in clearly marking vehicle lanes and installing other safety measures—that sounds surprisingly light.

The rationale for portraying Main Street as a dangerous corridor was indicated by Stephanie Upson, the MassDOT Project Manager in Boston, who stated in the state's April 26 virtual public hearing on the project that "there is significant data [on Main Street accidents] that allowed us to meet the federal criteria for the Federal funding, specifically, dedicated to safety improvements, and that is one of the sources we will be using to pay for construction" (Hearing Transcript, p. 128). (Of course, MassDOT used its own data as the basis for requesting federal funds without an independent audit checking its accuracy.)

In August, 2020, the city did a trial run of the proposed street and parking reductions which quickly attracted a petition to "restore the former parking and traffic pattern to downtown Northampton" with 1,129 signatures, including many business owners. The experiment was cancelled and dismantled within a month. But like a zombie, it has risen again.

Strangely, this most enormous public project ever to hit downtown Northampton has not been the subject of a city council or planning board public hearing. Many public information sessions were held in past years, but the public had no chance to be "on the record" with questions until the April 26 state hearing, and that did not allow any follow-up questions or requests for clarification. Clearly it is long overdue for the city to hold a legally publicized public hearing in a suitable venue where proponents and skeptics can all be heard, answered, and recorded for posterity.

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