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Gloucester Street improvements delayed 30 days

By GORDON JACKSON gjackson@thebrunswicknews.com
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The planned repaving and re-striping of Gloucester Street has been delayed 30 days at the request of city officials.

City commissioners asked for the extra time after expressing concerns at a meeting earlier this month about plans to narrow the road to three lanes, with the center one being for left-hand turns, and adding additional angle parking spaces.

During Wednesday's City Commission meeting, commissioners voted 4-1 to approve the paving and striping project with some recommended modifications.

The road will be repaved but remain striped four lanes from U.S. 17 to Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard to address concerns about traffic congestion at the beginning and end of the school day on Gloucester Street.

The remainder of the road will be repaved and striped three lanes to Bay Street, with added parking along portions of the route.

"These are things we are trying to address with the commission's concerns," said Regina McDuffie, city manager.

Commissioner Johnny Cason, who cast the opposing vote, asked for a public hearing to discuss the plans. He disagreed with bike lanes on a portion of Gloucester.

"We've got plenty of space for bicycles," he said. "You don't have to ride your bike on Gloucester Street. The people need those lanes down there."

Mayor Cornell Harvey said DOT officials were being generous by granting the 30-day reprieve to give city officials an opportunity to ask for changes. The contract has already been let and the contractor is ready to begin the work.

“It wasn’t on DOT,” he said. “It was us. DOT has extended an olive branch to us.”

Commissioner Vincent Williams said the plan was workable and “something we should consider.”

“It’s not the DOT’s fault,” he said. “We can’t keep kicking and dragging the ball down the street.”

Cason, however, was adamant that the city has the right to ask for a delay until the public has a chance to provide input.

“What is the problem with asking them to defer this thing?” Cason said. “Ask them not to do anything. The community needs some serious time.”

McDuffie said there is time for the public to contact her office with any serious concerns over the planned improvements on Gloucester Street.

The meeting began with a presentation by Rachael Thompson, executive director of the Glynn Environmental Coalition, regarding the Hercules/Pinova corrective action plan.

She disagreed with some parts of a presentation made to city officials at a recent meeting, saying the public has until May 10 to comment on the cleanup plan. Thompson also pointed out that some of the cleanup work has already begun.

She said the company’s “adaptive approach” to the cleanup is not effective because it does not hold anyone responsible for failure to meet deadlines.

“There’s been a lot of monitoring but not a lot of cleanup,” Thompson said. “The EPD should require Hercules to have public meetings when objectives have not been met.”

She said it’s an important time for people to respond during the public comment period.

Thompson also discussed plumes of contaminated groundwater containing the heavy metal benzene in the upper superficial aquifer. In some areas, the plumes, which are moving east 30 to 50 feet a year, contain dangerous levels of benzene.

It is moving toward a mobile home park on Terry Creek, but it's possible the plumes will continue to move due east and miss the development. There are wells at the mobile home park, but the only way EPD can monitor them is with the permission of property owners.

"They need a consistent effort to contact the owners to monitor those wells," she said.

The good news is there is a bioremediation plan to introduce microbes that will eat the benzene. Thompson said the plan has been successful in other areas.

The coalition disagrees with a plan to use a concrete cap to cover contaminated soil near a tank farm on site. Thompson said about 6,500 cubic yards of contaminated soil should be removed and brought to a landfill that handles hazardous waste.

Cason agreed, saying city officials should "take a stand here and ask them to rethink this."

Thompson asked city officials to draft a resolution with their concerns and submit it before the public comment period ends May 10.

In other business, the commission:

- Approved the Community Development Block Grant action plan that explains how the \$383,000 allocated to the city will be spent this year. The projects include housing rehab, a new roof for the senior center and the removal of blight.
- Passed a resolution supporting the second allocation of CARES Act funding for COVID-19 relief. The focus will be to help local businesses and food assistance programs.
- Voted to maintain the driveway when given the choice between keeping an asphalt driveway as a cap over lead contaminated soil at Howard Coffin Park or removing it. The park was originally wetlands that were filled in with old construction materials and soil when built nearly a century ago. The agreement protects the city from any citation from EPD officials as long as the driveway is maintained, city engineer Garrow Alberson said.
- Gave a greenlight to improvements to Howard Coffin Park. A new playground will be constructed in May and work to build two pavilions should begin in late July or early August, with the goal to have them completed by Labor Day weekend. Other improvements include resurfacing the walking track and new picnic tables.

“It will be the nicest park in the city,” Harvey said.

Gordon Jackson