

Planners say removing Shaker Boulevard is the only way to transform Shaker Square

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By [Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer](#)

CLEVELAND, Ohio – Planners are now firmly in favor of re-routing Shaker Boulevard traffic around Shaker Square so its central green space can be enlarged.

At public meetings Wednesday and Thursday, a design team gathered feedback on a plan that calls for removing the boulevard from the center of the 5.5-acre square.

After both sessions, planners were optimistic that a consensus is forming in favor of the latest concept, although it was easy to find naysayers.

“I don’t want Shaker Boulevard closed,” Tamara Chappell, who lives near the square, said during a small group discussion at Thursday’s meeting. “During the week, we need that east-west traffic.”

The proposal, which combines and refines ideas from four concepts [unveiled in February](#), was the newest step in a 10-month, \$400,000 project to re-envision the beloved but badly aging 1920s-era shopping center on Cleveland’s East Side.

Goals of the plan include strengthening retail and better connecting the square to surrounding neighborhoods, which range from upscale Shaker Square to Buckeye, a low-income, majority black neighborhood.

The planning project, which will include cost estimates and recommended sources of funding, is scheduled for completion in late June. Reconstruction could begin in 2021, if money can be raised, planners said.

The plan could still evolve in discussion with working groups this month and next before presentation to the city’s planning commission in June, according to the project schedule. Planners also continue to seek responses to the latest ideas through an [online survey](#).

The final proposal would continue to develop in discussions with the city, Cuyahoga County and the Ohio Department of Transportation in 2020.

As late as last week, designers were hedging on whether they’d show a plan version that would still include Shaker Boulevard. Then they nixed the idea.

Removing the boulevard is “the only way to really transform the square,” Mary Margaret Jones, a senior principal at Hargreaves Associates, a national landscape firm leading the design, said Thursday.

The Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority’s rapid transit tracks, which also cut across the square, would remain. But removing the east and westbound lanes of Shaker Boulevard from either side of the tracks would create room for more landscaping and outdoor events.

The concept is based on extensive public input gathered since November and traffic data showing that the impact of re-routing vehicles around Shaker Square would be minimal.

Traffic consultants from the firm of Nelson Nygaard said that driving around the square at rush hour would add only 16 seconds in comparison to driving through it.

Removing Shaker Boulevard would make room for a north-south pathway in the center of the square, which would cross the tracks and link to a proposed new trail on North and South Moreland Boulevard.

Enlarged public spaces at the square could accommodate an open lawn and a concert stage, a children’s play area and a splash pad, plus new landscaping and plazas.

Reactions to the latest version of the plan were mixed among 250 residents and business owners who attended the two meetings.

A majority expressed through a show of hands that they thought the plan needed more work. They said it would cram too many functions into too little space. They also pointed out that the plan didn’t provide public restrooms.

Also at issue is whether the current head-in parking around the square’s perimeter should be replaced with parallel parking. Some participants doubted they’d feel comfortable parallel parking on a curve.

Despite the criticisms, there was no groundswell against removing Shaker Boulevard from the square. Then again, the planners intentionally didn’t ask for a yes-no response to the concept.

“We’ll never ask that pointed question because when people vote on something in a meeting they feel like they’ve made a decision and it needs to be stuck to,” said Wayne Mortensen, director of design and development at Cleveland Neighborhood Progress, which is co-leading planning in collaboration with LAND Studio.

Yet Mortensen said he believes a consensus is forming in favor of the idea.

Hunter Morrison, former director of city planning for Cleveland, said that the difficulty of improving Shaker Square without altering traffic patterns illustrates the tension between maximizing mobility through the city rather than creating great public space.

“You’ve got conflicting realities,” he said.

Tensions over traffic could increase in 2021 after completion of [Opportunity Corridor](#), a \$300 million boulevard designed to connect I-490 to University Circle, just downhill from Shaker Square, he said.

Yet at least one prominent business owner is firmly in favor of the plan.

“I love it,” restaurateur Doug Katz, owner of Fire Food and Drink, an anchor establishment on the square, said about removing Shaker Boulevard.

The new plan would “beautify Shaker Square and make it this amazing place where people are going to want to come and eat,” he said.

NOTE: This story has been updated with additional information about how the Shaker Square plan will continue to develop, and that it is based on extensive public input and traffic data.

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