

Committee on Facilities: 2008-2009

April 15, 2009

This report is divided into four sections. The first section addresses each of the specific charges given to the 2008-2009 committee. The second lists issues that might be given attention by the 2009-2010 committee. The third contains some comments about the operation of the committee and makes some suggestions that might improve its effectiveness. The concluding section summarizes the committee's recommendations.

Section I: Specific Charges to the 2008-2009 Committee

- A. In consultation with the working group chaired by Marie Witt, Maureen Rush, and Kevin Mahoney, review plans for dealing with the problems associated with the closing of the South Street Bridge, including the use of alternative modes of transportation such as bicycles.

Reviewing plans in conjunction with the working group would have provided an unnecessary – and probably unproductive – additional complication to what was already a difficult process. We have instead looked at the effects of the closing and considered possible ways to ease those problems which have arisen. Although there have been many problems with the closing of the South Street Bridge they have not, at least to date, been as severe as many of us had feared. While this may be due as much to good luck as to careful planning, those involved in the planning surely deserve commendation.

The closing of the bridge has had an impact on vehicle traffic, on green space and on bicycle and pedestrian traffic. Since the latter two are subjects of two of our other charges, this report considers effects of the bridge closure on those areas in sections devoted specifically to green space (C) and to bicycle and pedestrian safety (D).

The South Street Bridge provided one of the main routes for traffic between Center City and University City. It also provided one of the routes between the Schuylkill Expressway and University City. While the ramps between the bridge and the expressway were fundamentally flawed, many motorists used those ramps in spite of their flaws. Traffic on alternate routes has increased since the bridge has closed, and is often miserable during rush hours – especially in the evening. The increase in traffic problems, however, appears to be mostly one of degree rather than one of scale. Unfortunately, the Expressway could not handle rush hour traffic conveniently before the bridge was closed, and delays and generally sluggish conditions were not unusual. The current conditions would probably be even worse if the downturn of the economy had not postponed much of the planned construction east of 30th Street on Chestnut and Walnut Streets.

Ronald Ward reports that the service on Penn Transit has been somewhat slowed, but sliding delays have generally not been observed. A particular problem for Penn Transit is evening traffic on Chestnut Street, which is hampered by construction, short-term parking

in front of the new retail post office, and the jam of vehicles turning either north or south on Schuylkill Avenue to reach the Expressway ramps. The jam of traffic at this location and the construction is not a new phenomenon, but the vehicles waiting for short-term parking at the new retail post office have added an untimely new obstacle to smooth traffic flow.

North-south traffic through the campus, although heavier, does not appear to be subject to markedly more serious problems than previously. The good news is that traffic, although worse than prior to the closure of the bridge, is still bearable. The bad news is that there is nothing obvious that can be done to improve the flow of traffic. Worse yet, the construction underway on Civic Center Boulevard and that planned between Chestnut Street and Walnut Street will almost certainly mean that traffic will never return to its pre-closure levels.

The most serious problem associated with the closing of the bridge may be the increased danger experienced by bicyclists. This is explored in more detail in Section D.

B. Examine the building plans for the East Campus extension and address the needs of all potential users.

The current financial situation has led to a significant reduction in the pace of planned construction. This pause provides an opportunity to look in an unhurried fashion at the needs on campus. We assumed that the needs of specific schools are being effectively presented by the deans of those schools. We decided to focus our effort on those groups that might have University-wide perspectives. To this end we have solicited input from each of the five constituencies that are represented on University Council. Since we got a rather late start on this effort we plan to spend most of our April meeting on the responses we have received, and will issue, if appropriate, an update to this report.

C. Study the current availability of green space on campus with a goal of providing a benchmark against which future plans could be compared.

A subcommittee was specifically assigned to examine this issue and report back to main committee on their findings this year. The committee as a whole met with Mark Kocent, who gave detailed explanations of the Universities plans for green space in its development plans with particular details given about Penn Connects and the development of the postal lands. In addition, the subcommittee met with members of the department of recreation with the goal of both obtaining information and also looking at specific needs of the department regarding green space and open playing green-space.

The green space on campus comes in many forms, and a simple listing of the total area does not give very much useful information. The value of those spaces ranges from simple visual pleasure to formal arenas for intercollegiate athletics. There is an expected and planned increase of 21.5% in total green-space and 126.4% in recreational green space over the time period from 2005 to 2010. The majority of this increase in open

playing green space will occur due to development of two large recreational fields in the Penn Park project. The current plan calls for artificial turf to be used as their base material for the fields leading to improved maintenance and usage.

Unfortunately the total green space on campus has been significantly reduced by the South Street Bridge reconstruction. The formerly-open fields immediately north and south of the bridge are now devoted to staging areas for the Bridge. Bower Field, now used by the Department of Recreation and Intercollegiate Athletics, will be closed this summer to permit work to begin on Penn Park. In these circumstances it is essential that all other areas be preserved and utilized as effectively as possible to compensate for these losses. Hill Field, Highline Park, and the open areas near the highrise residences should all be programmed for fuller use in the interval before Penn Park is completed. The committee recommends that the Department of Recreation be given increased access to these fields so that intramural athletic programs can continue during this time period. It will also be important that a high level of maintenance be continued on these fields so that they remain playable during this period.

The completion of Penn Park, coupled with the return and restoration of the fields currently devoted to the South Street Bridge reconstruction, will make a very positive impact on overall green space. It will be important, since this space is somewhat remote from the center of campus, to make it as attractive and as flexible as possible. It is possible that one or two open pavilions would draw more people. These structures would serve several purposes including the protection against inclement weather and could be used for both scheduled and non-scheduled social activities. It is also important, in future years, that the green space of Penn Park and the remaining open playing green space in the western campus not be whittled away by the construction of new buildings.

D. Examine and evaluate issues pertaining to pedestrian and bicycle traffic on campus, including frequent sidewalk closures due to construction projects and the use of bicycles on pedestrian walkways.

1) Pedestrians

In spite of the rather cavalier treatment of crosswalks and traffic lights by Pennsylvania motorists and the general disregard for “don’t walk” signals by Pennsylvania pedestrians, vehicles and pedestrians appear to have found an uneasy but tolerable coexistence around the campus. The mid-block crosswalks on 33rd Street and 34th Street are not significantly more life-threatening than before the closure of the South Street Bridge. The primary effect of the bridge closure on this relatively benign situation is the closure of the South Street entrance and exit to the University City SEPTA station. All riders must now leave and enter the station at mid-block on Convention Avenue. During the morning rush hour the simultaneous arrival of two trains results in hundreds of pedestrians crossing Convention Avenue within a period of a few minutes. Until recently, in spite of signs forbidding the practice, almost all pedestrians did cross at mid-block – in part because doing so is by far the most convenient way to reach their destinations, and in part because the alternate route recommended was frequently blocked for construction. A pedestrian

crosswalk has now been installed at this location, and most of the SEPTA passengers use it.

Additional crosswalks and traffic signals have recently been installed in this area to accommodate the new traffic patterns around the medical complexes. It is as yet too early to judge how effective these changes will be. Since those traffic patterns may result in more vehicle traffic on Convention Avenue, it is important to assess, in the next few months, whether the new signals and crosswalks provide adequate safety for pedestrian safety.

One of the concerns expressed to the committee is the very slow removal of snow from the Chestnut Street and Walnut Street bridges across the Schuylkill River. The number of pedestrians who now use these bridges is very large, and a slip on ice can easily cause an unlucky pedestrian to fall into the nearest lane of heavy traffic. This problem should be addressed either by the City of Philadelphia or by the University.

2) Bicycles

Bicyclists have not found a reasonable coexistence, either with motorists or with pedestrians. Bicyclists are menaced by motorists and bicyclists in turn menace pedestrians. Neither the public streets nor the campus itself was designed with the needs of bicyclists in mind, and the efforts to retrofit do not appear to have been very successful.

The closure of the South Street Bridge forced most of the 1700 bicyclists who accessed campus daily from Center City to use Chestnut Street and Walnut Street. During the evening rush hour bicyclists on Chestnut Street must navigate an obstacle course. Some motorists waiting for the short-term parking in front of the post office are almost always double-parked in the bicycle lane, forcing riders into the lane of vehicles whose drivers are changing lanes for the same reason. The bicycle lane moves riders from the curb lane to between two lanes of moving traffic just before the jam of vehicles attempting to turn onto Schuylkill Avenue and hence to the Expressway. Many evening riders use Walnut Street as an alternate, either riding on the sidewalk in competition with many pedestrians or riding in the wrong direction in the bicycle lane.

Barring an effective – and extremely unlikely – redesign of both local streets and the campus, it appears that some improvement might be achieved by:

- a.) Enforcing the prohibition on vehicles stopping or parking in bicycle lanes. In those locations where the University has control of the buildings, the University should forbid vendors from parking in bicycle lanes. The University should encourage the City of Philadelphia to take action in other areas. The short term parking in front of the retail post office was apparently designed with no thought to the dangers that double parking would present to bicyclists. If another location for short-term parking cannot be found consideration might be given to moving the bicycle lane next to the sidewalk, with short-term parking between the bicycle lane and the traffic lanes.

- b) Improve behavior of bicyclists on and near campus – Bicyclists should not be allowed to ride on crowded sidewalks, they should be forbidden from riding on campus during peak pedestrian hours, and they should be cited for ignoring traffic signals. This will require that bicyclists become more accustomed to walking with their bicycles, and develop more patience with traffic signals. In the longer run, perhaps some very creative student of effective land use might devise a way to provide alternate routes for bicycles across campus.

One last note on this issue: In view of the danger of bicycling on many of the streets around the University it seems almost irresponsible to encourage more people to use bicycles to get to work.

Section II. Issues for next year's committee

General-use facilities: The investigation of general-use, as opposed to specific school use, facilities should be continued. Fortunately, the depressed state of the economy provides an opportunity for a careful look at this issue.

Bicycle Safety: It is frustrating to recognize the dangers that bicyclists face while riding to and from campus and to realize, at the same time, that the problems may be nearly unsolvable. The committee should keep looking for solutions.

Penn Park: As the Penn Park evolves the committee should continue to monitor the extent and use of green space on campus.

Facility Renewal: Many members of the committee expressed concern about both the apparent neglect of some buildings on campus and the apparently high costs of renewal that is done. The committee should better understand the limitations on facilities renewal and new construction.

Section III: Suggestions

During the 2007-2008 year the chair of the committee attempted to find a mutually-convenient time for members for each meeting. In spite of his efforts he clearly failed, since attendance was generally sparse. In 2008-2009 the meeting time was set before the committee was commissioned, on the assumption that those prospective members for whom the time was inconvenient would be dissuaded from joining the committee. This change produced even worse attendance.

Perhaps some combination of the two approaches might be better than either one. Since many of the members of the current committee may continue on next year's committee we will look for a better approach before we adjourn for the summer.

Although we had hoped to begin meeting promptly at the beginning of the school year, the process of charging the committee and completing its membership delayed the first meeting to mid-October. The requirement that a report be prepared by April 1 limits the

effective time for the committee's deliberations to little more than five months – with a long break in late December and early January. It might be reasonable to attempt to have the 2009-2010 committee begin to meet in April. At this meeting the members might begin to look over the subjects to be addressed. Much work could be done –and perhaps some progress could be made – via e-mail over the summer. The committee could then have a running start in early September.

Section IV: Summary of Recommendations

- A. Eliminate vehicles stopping or parking in bicycle lanes.
- B. Monitor pedestrian traffic across Convention Avenue opposite SEPTA station.
- C. Increase utilization of existing green space during period of reconstruction of South Street Bridge and construction of Penn Park.
- D. Enforce prohibition of bicycle traffic on sidewalks and campus walks with high pedestrian traffic.
- E. See that some agency clears snow from sidewalks on Chestnut Street and Walnut Street bridges.

Chair: Walter Wales

Staff Liaison: Taylor Berkowitz

Committee Members: James Bennett, Eugenie Birch, William Braham, Thomas Daniels, Laura Foltman, Stephanie Grant, Michael McGarvey, Mary Jones-Parker, Bernard Shapiro, Richard Shlansky-Goldberg, Elyse Sholk, Nikki Thorpe, Susan Weiss, Karima Williams.