

Comments on Mays Street Narrowing and Retail Uses

The traffic and urban design comments in reaction to the issues regarding the proposed Mays Street narrowing are both correct in their positive effects on adjacent retail uses. There are a couple of issues that should be considered. Today's pedestrian environment on Mays is not very friendly, as the dominant character favors the automobile, car speeds and the width of the street. The objective of the downtown plan was to invigorate retail uses, provide opportunities for a greater number of activating uses, and re-build the identity of Downtown Round Rock within a rapidly changing context. Our focus on the market for commercial uses and the appropriate retail mix is integrally tied into both traffic management and urban design; the most successful downtown projects integrate all three elements into one plan. Both the parameters of the Round Rock study and our collective experience in other locations suggest that it will be very difficult to achieve the goals established by the City without narrowing Mays (and we acknowledge the complexity of the task as long as Mays remains a State Highway). From a retailing point of view, here are ERA AECOM's comments:

- The current environment does not encourage easy movement of pedestrians along Mays; a high volume of cars moving at pedestrian-incompatible speeds (more characteristic of a highway than of a downtown street) will continue to set the character unless modified through some form of traffic calming. Based on the traffic engineering standards in the study, slowing down cars on Mays through better traffic management will encourage more street-level shopping activity; remaining as a high volume traffic street will not allow/foster the same level of activity.
- The amount of available retail space in the existing downtown Round Rock area falls short of the amount of retail square footage that is market-supportable within the greater downtown area. Because of its location and width, Mays Street creates a strong division between the existing downtown core and the potential growth area west of Mays, where much of the incremental space could be adapted/created under the proposed plan. In our view, unless the barrier that Mays represents can be modified to better balance the potential for comfortable pedestrian connectivity, the logical expansion cannot be achieved downtown. The railroad creates a barrier to the south and residential neighborhoods frame the north and east; moving west toward I-35 is the best and most practical direction for growth, and keeping Mays at its current width will not foster that growth.

- Successful retail/mixed use environments typically balance approximately the same amount of pedestrian space with vehicular space; ratios less than this type of balance are usually not considered to be destinations by walking shoppers. The current width by use ratio is heavily oriented toward vehicular, not pedestrian circulation. In ERA AECOM's view, unless more space is made available for the pedestrian public realm, it will be far more difficult for retail to grow and thrive along Mays, whether existing businesses such as the gift shop in question or new retail opportunities that could expand the critical mass of downtown retail in general.
- To properly consider the best solution for downtown Round Rock as a shopping/dining/entertainment destination, it is most appropriate to take a comprehensive view of long-term outcomes. While the conditions on the date cited (extraordinary traffic volumes diverted to Mays by an incident on I-35) were intolerable, we do not believe they represent either 'typical' nor 'desirable' conditions for adjacent retail, regardless of the cause. I am sure that the traffic and shopping impacts were highly negative. Nonetheless, creating a more functional, more generously proportioned pedestrian connection to expand downtown Round Rock (both north to south and east to west) can only be achieved over the long run by decreasing the impact of a four lane Hays. The traffic implications have been explored in other discussions; the behavioral needs for this improvement seem very clear from an economic standpoint. Highway oriented real estate values are different from those associated with a balanced pedestrian environment and with downtown settings. We consider the recommendation to narrow and reconfigure Mays and the Round Rock Avenue connections to be critical elements in increasing retail property values downtown. In our experience across the country, creating successful, walkable shopping environments has added to adjacent property values and business volumes, not taken value away.

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