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SEP 27 2011

To: City of Ashland
Re: Transportation System Preferred Plan
From: Ashland Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors
Date: September 27, 2011

Background: Pam Hammond, President of the Ashland Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors was appointed by the Mayor to the TAC for the Transportation System Plan last year to represent the interests of the Board. She was a regular attendee of the meetings held by the TAC throughout the process. Additionally, Public Works Director, Mike Faught and the paid consultants have made regular reports to the Ashland Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors on the progress of the plan and received direct feedback from the Board on various elements within the proposed plan. Most recently, Mike Faught made a report at the September 8, 2011 Board meeting presenting new projects being recommended in the plan as well as some the Board had been told would not be included. The Board asked to receive the full report and for the opportunity to provide response. Following the meeting, the Chamber was sent the report as well as a schedule for when comment would be solicited. This memo will include specifically proposed projects in the downtown (L3, L4, L5, L6, L7, L8, L9, S1, S2, S8, Cross section modification of East Main, Transit).

Overview:

The Chamber appreciates the work of the Transportation Commission, the TAC, the Planning Commission and staff in preparation of this plan. Indeed, it was critical that the Chamber had representation in this effort as the resulting Plan will affect the livelihood and sustainability of our businesses and employment in Ashland. Please know we look forward to working with you in the successful development of this plan and offer assistance by our members who represent core businesses in the downtown and will be the ones most affected by any plan you approve. The Chamber was mentioned numerous times in this report as a partner in helping to make it a success. Of course, we are interested in providing this assistance and partnership. There are a few items in the Plan that have just been presented to us within the last few weeks that are of great concern as we believe they are a detriment to conducting successful business particularly in the downtown and are a waste of funds. We are also concerned that the comments made previously by the Board were disregarded and have appeared back in the Plan.

Situational Analysis: The Downtown

Commerce is what happens in the downtown and what draws people to our core. It is where the primary employment exists and those businesses need effective transportation taking into account their needs. In addition to employment, the area provides needed taxes that fund our city

services. The downtown is not only the historic heart of Ashland but it creates the cultural character that draws people to visit, to live and defines much of our quality of life. The community needs a downtown that serves everyone, not just those who can bike or walk but those who are elderly, disabled or otherwise not interested in biking or walking. Shouldn't their needs be just as important?

Plan Assumptions and beliefs:

Having read the Plan, it is clear that the interests of pedestrians and bicyclists were the priorities. The goal is to reduce vehicular traffic particularly in the downtown to make it more difficult to drive or park creating more congestion so that people will walk and bike more.

Our Assumptions and beliefs:

The Chamber believes that while the goal of providing better pedestrian and bicycle amenities is important, the higher goal should always be maintaining and improving the economic viability of Ashland and, in this case, the downtown. No one would want to walk or bicycle in the downtown or railroad district if the businesses were not successful and the area had deteriorated. Frustration with traffic congestion and lack of parking will lead people to go elsewhere resulting in a decline of customers from the downtown, creating business failures and job losses. Just look at the experience in our own state of the City of Eugene. Millions of dollars were spent to eliminate traffic in the downtown, businesses failed, people lost their jobs and then millions more were spent opening the downtown back up to traffic. *Goal 3 states that the goal is to maintain the City of Ashland's small town character, support economic prosperity and accommodate future growth.* We do not believe this goal can be met if some of the elements in this Plan are pursued. Why not create a Plan that improves the pedestrian and bicycle amenities while preserving the parking and transportation needs of business and all the citizens of Ashland? Frankly, we are at a loss of why this is not the goal.

Agreements:

The Chamber is very supportive of providing better pedestrian and bicycle amenities including larger sidewalks and bike lanes but would also like to see included in the Plan better and more consistent lighting throughout the downtown and railroad district. Additionally, landscaping including hanging flower baskets in areas of high pedestrian traffic such as the downtown and railroad district but not limited to those areas should be of high priority in the plan.

Comments on specific proposals:

L3 – Incorporate wider sidewalks

There is support for larger sidewalks if the goal is not just *to provide additional capacity for pedestrians and pedestrian activities*, but to include pedestrian amenities and safety such as better lighting and significantly improved landscaping and maintenance. It has long been the Chamber's opinion that maintenance and upkeep of the downtown is lacking and in serious need of better planning. Just incorporating larger sidewalks without a plan that includes lighting, trash receptacles and landscaping will not be adequate.

L4 – Street Patios

This suggestion was met with serious opposition when it was first presented to the Board earlier in the year. The Chamber Board has a large number of businesses represented in the downtown area including real estate, lodging, dining, retail and service. There was strong unanimous concern that this proposal was taken from a downtown community very different from Ashland lacking a strong vital visitor economy. This was expressed to the consultants and to the staff present at that meeting. The Board was told it would no longer be considered and yet it was never taken out of the plan. The comment in the plan states *downtown restaurant owners would apply for temporary seasonal street patios to provide additional seating capacity for restaurant owners to have outdoor cafes during the summer months facilitating economic prosperity and preserving sidewalk space for pedestrians*. This indicates to the Board, including the restaurant owners present, a lack of understanding of the vital need for parking in the downtown especially on Main Street. The restaurant owners mentioned how inefficient it would be to cross the sidewalk to serve a customer not to mention the visual clutter that would ensue. Those who remembered the photos used in the example recalled the downtown model was of a much deteriorated downtown street that did not have foot traffic or much business. Certainly not what Ashland currently enjoys in the high season. Finally, it was of concern to the non-restaurant businesses why restaurants should be singled out as able to have this ability. Why would it then not be legal for retail businesses to move their operations onto the street? Certainly, this is not the feeling we want in our downtown.

L5 – Incorporate Preferred Pedestrian Treatments

There was support for the inclusion of the pedestrian treatments as described in the Plan including countdown signals, landscape buffers, refuge islands and benches as enhancing the pedestrian environment. However, adequate lighting, proper trash disposal and beautification are things the Board feels are critical needs not addressed within the Plan.

L6 – Encourage Alley Enhancements

The Chamber is in agreement that the alleys need to be environmentally enhanced but want to stress the importance that they still need to function as alleys for deliveries and vehicular traffic.

L7 – Incorporate Bicycle Parking

While the Chamber is very supportive of additional bicycle parking, it should not be at the expense of vehicle parking especially on East Main Street. It was felt that areas off of East Main should be considered such as expanding the current bike racks near the parking garage. There is significant space on the bricks at OSF that could be considered as well as on the Plaza without having to take away needed parking. Additionally, it was felt strongly by the Board that a business owner should not be the one to determine how the space in front of their business should function but those decisions should be in an overall plan for downtown transportation that benefits all the business conducted in the downtown. The scenario was made that a specific business could be dependent on vehicle traffic and their neighbors could then negatively impact their ability to do business by eliminating their access to parking.

L8 – Develop Incentives for Truck Loading/Unloading

Reduce delivery and pick-up of goods during peak times through strategies such as incentives or time restrictions. The purpose of this policy is to limit potential truck loading/unloading impacts other downtown activities. It was felt that the primary reason we have truck delivery issues in the downtown is that we have a downtown that has economically evolved over the years. Most of the downtown is not served efficiently by alleys behind the businesses, such as in a mall design, or parking bays that exist in newer retail environments. Much of the downtown commerce is in restaurant and retail with the resulting need in significant truck delivery. Businesses have to buy from numerous suppliers from linen to paper to beer and groceries not to mention products. This is what the downtown is used for – business is the downtown activity that generates income, employment and commerce.

L9 – Update Downtown Parking Management

Encourage use of parking garages and work to reduce turn-over of on-street parking. The Chamber is in support of this goal of better utilization of our parking in the downtown. However, we believe the timing in the current parking garage needs to more adequately match the timing of downtown employee schedules. Changing the timing on the machine in the structure to allow for a personal match of a 12 hour period would be more efficient such as an employee whose schedule spans the 6 pm cutoff time.

S1 – Funding Sources Feasibility Study

Spending \$30,000 additionally on top of this current study seems wasteful. It is unclear from reading the report why it is necessary to yet again spend more dollars on this and why it wasn't taken care of in this report. Additionally, it would seem a staff responsibility to carry it through.

S2 – Downtown Parking Management Study

It is frustrating that the study of parking needs in the downtown continues to be funded but no action taken from the need. The City has conducted parking studies in the past and now another \$75,000 is being considered.

S8 – Downtown Couplet Transition Study

The Chamber recommends elimination from both the Preferred and Financially Constrained Plans of this idea to study the return of two-way traffic in the downtown. This idea never came up at any of the TAC meetings and having read the minutes of the July 26, 2011 Joint Study Session of the Planning Commission and Transportation Commission we were dismayed that it was given support and a \$150,000 allocation. It is great concern that the City would undertake such a study with absolutely no involvement from the business community. Why spend not only the dollars to study this but with so many unfunded capital improvement projects throughout Ashland and numerous needs in maintenance and upgrading downtown would we seriously embark on such an expensive and futile project? The answer given to us is that people “fondly remember” when traffic was two-way in the downtown. The downtown has grown in business since the 1960's, thank goodness, and needs an effective, safe and functioning system. We are in complete disagreement that this should receive any more study and certainly no dollar allocation.

Intersection projects, new roadways and roadway extensions - Main Street (OR 99 southbound) modify cross section

Reading both the report and the minutes of the July 26, 2011 Study Session, the Chamber has serious concern of the desire of the Plan to incorporate truck deliveries and bicycles in the same lane. We believe it is a safety issue and creates a dangerous situation. The idea that a center lane would be used for this purpose is frightening at best with delivery truck drivers hauling their load across a traffic lane. In addition, bicyclists would then need to not only navigate around a truck but also into the traffic lane.

Transit Service Priorities

The need for better transit service to Ashland has been discussed for at least 25 years. The downtown and railroad district businesses need evening and weekend service if the goal is to have employees use this service. As the primary business of tourism occurs not only during the day but in the evening and on weekends, the existing transit service does not meet this need. It is more important to the businesses and the employees that the service is reliable and consistent,

not that it is free. The Chamber believes so much effort is spent on reduction of rate and nearly not enough on the need for better service in the evenings and on weekends. We are completely supportive of providing this service for Ashland residents and employees as well as for SOU students.