

[← Back \(/search?\)](#)

text=The%20%27big%20dig%27%20causing%20a%20big%20flap%20in%20downtown%20Lansing&content_added=&date_from=&date_to=&pub%5B0%5D=MLCP)

The 'big dig' causing a big flap in downtown Lansing

By DANIEL STURM October 29, 2003 Publication: Lansing City Pulse (MI) Word Count: 1544

The 'big dig' causing a big flap in downtown Lansing

By DANIEL STURM

Downtown business owners have launched a petition to delay at least part of the Captitol Loop project, a two-year, \$22.5 million sewer and beautification construction program scheduled to begin in downtown Lansing in April.

The petition, which is meant for the mayor and City Council, was circulated among downtown business owners last week. Mark Latterman, its initiator, said that 23 businesses have thus far signed it.

Latterman, an attorney who represents the Radisson Hotel and Capitol National Bank, believes the decrease in visitors will be dramatic once the project begins. "This is going to kill downtown," he said.

But other merchants emphasized the expected opportunities brought by the reconstruction, which could give Lansing the boost it needs to become one of Gov. Jennifer Granholm's "cool cities."

The Michigan Transportation Department plan includes digging as deep as 30 feet to replace utility pipes and lines before repaving the streets. Lansing would replace sewers. Finally, the plan calls for the state to make aesthetic improvements, including 335 new trees, 167 historic-looking streetlights and decorative sidewalks meant to bring a distinctive appeal to the downtown area.

The costs of the \$22.5 million project breaks down as \$8.3 million for the state, \$4.8 million for the city and \$8.5 million for the federal government, according to estimates provided Tuesday by the state Transportation Department. That's if the "big dig" occurs all at once.

If opponents convince the city to delay its portion, however, the cost will climb, officials said – in the case of the state by millions. No one has estimated yet how much more it will cost the city.

Kenneth Stockwell, owner of Stockwell Real Estate Group, said he's known the project was coming but didn't know of the extent of construction until he saw the detailed plans recently. "Large portions of the downtown roads will be closed. That's a disaster. Why would anybody go downtown during the next two years, until the construction is done?"

Stockwell said he's just completed 11 lofts on Washington Square and Allegan Street and has 10 more under way. He said he wants the project delayed or more roads kept open. Otherwise, he'll consider suing them for reparations, he

said.

David Kositchek, owner of Kositchek's clothier, 113 S. Washington Sq., said that the project could be "the final nail in the coffin" for downtown retailers. He threatened to relocate if the project proceeded.

But other Lansing business owners either feel less at financial risk or believe the investment in downtown revitalization will be worth the inconvenience.

Bob Fish, the co-founder Beaner's Coffee, whose offices recently moved from Old Town to downtown, called the petition a "horrible idea."

"It's the typical American shortsightedness," Fish said. "One of the worst things that could be done is to drag this thing out. We should see the opportunities and make this a beautification project."

Fish said he thinks that the national economy has already reached the bottom of its downturn and that it's essential to make an investment in Lansing's infrastructure now.

"Lansing has been static more or less for the last 25 years. If people want to stay static, then they'll vote against this. I believe the timing is perfect."

He said that in two years, developers and business owners who come to Lansing will see a city that's moving forward.

Mike Bruce, the owner Insty-Prints at 209 S. Washington, was one of the first merchants to sign the petition against construction. Bruce said he was adamantly opposed, because he'd heard they were going to close Ottawa Street its entire length. But after two meetings with planners he'd learned they would close Ottawa in sections only, which seemed more palatable to him. Bruce has now changed his position and wants his signature removed. "It's \$20 million for the renovation of downtown. They haven't spent that kind of money in downtown ever."

State planners and city officials said that while they agree that the "big dig" downtown is going to be noisy and stressful, it shouldn't be delayed. And they say construction will be carried out in a manner allowing retailers to continue business without serious disruption.

Chad Gamble, an assistant city engineer, said that while delaying the project was certainly possible, to do so would lead to more costs and further complications. "The objective was to come down for the sole purpose to disrupt the area only once." If the sewer construction were delayed, he added, workers would have to come back in 10 years and open the streets once again.

In 1991, the city commissioned a "Combined Sewer Overflow Project Plan" to bring Lansing's sewage system up to par. Rain water and sanitary water from restrooms flow into the same pipe, which flows into the Grand River. After the project's completion, sanitary flows will go to the wastewater treatment plant rather than polluting the river. Lansing is required by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality to complete the sewer separation project by 2018.

Kari Arend, the Michigan Department of Transportation spokeswoman, said reconstruction of the Capitol Loop includes replacing all the steam pipes and water pipes beneath the roads and repairing cables and fiber optics. Arend said that some of the main utilities haven't been replaced since 1892. With routine maintenance, the work shouldn't to be repeated for 30 to 40 years.

The renovation and beautification of downtown Lansing was originally scheduled to take place in 1999 but was delayed so that the state could overlap its project with the city's planned sewer separation.

"This is saving us million of dollars by doing it at once," Arend said. She added that she doesn't know what will happen if the city doesn't approve its part of the funding. "The dollars for the Capitol Loop are in the 2004 state budget. We'll have to wait for the city's decision and make our decision then."

Shane Silsby, a city transportation engineer, said state and city planners would hold weekly meetings in order to help businesses find the best alternative routes for delivering products and receiving supplies. "For a good portion of time

there will be some sort of a driving surface, so these vehicles can get across to the buildings, even if it's gravel or dirt." Silsby also said people shouldn't be worried about parking, because city parking ramps and side streets would provide enough space.

He pointed out that last year, the city replaced the sewer system in the Colonial Village neighborhood, where he lives. "Sometimes I had to take a different route, but I still went to Hollywood Video, and I still got gas at the gas station." He said there were three days in the two years when he had to park about 150 feet away from home.

Paul Steinman, a state Transportation Department project manager, said construction crews will have to sprinkle water onto the site to keep dust levels low. The state has asked the city to waive its noise ordinance, to allow construction from 6 a.m. until 10 p.m. and on weekends. The current ordinance allows construction from 7 a.m. until 8 p.m., Monday through Friday. The Transportation Department would halt construction work at noon Saturdays and resume on after 1 p.m. Sundays in order not to disrupt weddings and church events.

Steinman said that the state plans to begin construction on April 4 if snow is already off the ground. A contractor still has to be selected.

The City's Public Service Department and the Transportation Department will answer questions on the issue at a City Council Committee of the Whole meeting tomorrow, Oct. 30. Council is tentatively scheduled to act on funding on Nov. 24.

The Principal Shopping District has been bringing planners and businesspeople together to discuss the project. "We're not pushing for or against the project," said the organization's director, Leanne Stites. "We're asking businesses what it takes to accommodate them during the construction period, so we can forward this information back to City Council, the mayor's office, and to the Michigan Department of Transportation."

After hosting three informational hearings so far, Stites has found "an awful lot of misinformation out there." For example, some merchants thought that Ottawa and Allegan would be closed for the entire duration of construction and were glad to learn that only parts of the road would be closed, and in stages.

Stites believes that, aside from the new infrastructure, there could be further benefits as a result of the construction, such as the conversion of one-way streets into two-way streets.

Other ideas include having downtown restaurants serve special lunches to people who want to come and watch the construction. There has also been discussion on possibly establishing a shuttle bus loop between downtown and Old Town to ease commuting for state workers.

Stites said that the Principal Shopping District wants to increase its marketing efforts during the construction period but needs partners who'd be willing to help educate the public.

It's not without irony that the Principal Shopping District has decided to show 20 outdoor sculptures of cars during its 2004 "sculpture in the streets" event. During the construction, driving around downtown may become difficult, but visitors might consider parking their cars and taking a stroll to view the fiberglass sculptures.

Care to respond? Send letters to letters@lansingcitypulse.com. View our Letters policy.

Lansing City Pulse (MI)

Date: October 29, 2003

Copyright (c) 2003 Lansing City Pulse. All rights reserved.