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New look envisioned for arterial

Residents get together to consider changes to make Franklin Arterial a better fit for the city.

By TOM BELL, Staff Writer

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Doug Jones/Staff Photographer

From left, Laura Thibodeau, Chris Cantwell, Scott Teas and James Sterling meet at the Ocean Gateway terminal before Wednesday's workshop to generate ideas for redesigning Franklin Arterial. Nearly 90 residents attended.

PORTLAND — Nearly 90 residents took part in a design workshop Wednesday to generate ideas for redesigning Franklin Arterial.

Sitting in small groups, they used pieces of colored paper to designate new housing and commercial development, roundabouts and a new alignment for the four-lane state-owned highway.

They also reconnected some of the streets that were divided when Franklin Arterial was built in the late 1960s, such as Oxford and Lancaster streets.

A city committee called the Franklin Arterial Study Group has been meeting since the fall to come up with ways to make the arterial fit better in the city's urban fabric while maintaining its ability to move thousands of motorists every day.

The committee hopes to create three options by this summer to submit for a feasibility analysis. The city could then apply for state and federal funding.

The 15-member committee includes representatives from neighborhoods, businesses and the Maine Department of Transportation.

The effort is coinciding with the state's plan to redesign Interstate 295's Franklin Arterial exit. The state wants to address safety issues that occur when traffic on the off-ramp backs up onto the highway. Public hearings are planned this spring.

At Wednesday's event, participants had plenty of real estate to play with. Because of its wide grassy median, Franklin Arterial is 210 feet wide at Oxford Street, its widest point.

Many of the participants found they could open up land for development by squeezing the lanes together.

"These lanes stay together, and you open up huge city blocks there," said former Portland Planning Board Chairman Cyrus Hagge, pointing to land along the arterial.

Sitting next to him, Portland architect Alan Holt picked up a clear sheet of plastic that displayed the width of State Street, including the street's sidewalks, and placed it over the arterial's grassy median.

"State Street fits in the green (median)," he said. "Isn't that amazing?"

Wendy Cherubini, a West End resident, said she wants new housing all along the arterial.

"We need more housing, more density," she said. "It brings more life and vitality and that urban feel."

Lucy Gibson, a traffic planner from Vermont who is a consultant on the project, said Wednesday's event helped planners get a sense of what residents want. While some cities just let city officials do all the planning, she said, "This community demands to be involved."

Mike Laberge, a Department of Transportation planner who serves on the committee, said state officials want to maintain Franklin Arterial's ability to move large volumes of traffic.

If motorists come to see Franklin as an obstacle, he said, they will end up driving on side streets and creating problems.

"We like the excitement," he said of the community interest. "We just want to make sure it's done right."

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