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Portland Press Herald Maine Sunday Telegram

Franklin Arterial's future looks better than its past

There's no shortage of ideas for improvement, but there is of means to accomplish them.

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Everything looks good for improving Franklin Arterial, a four-lane road crossing Portland's downtown peninsula that certainly could use an upgrade, except for one thing:

The money.

There may not be a consensus on exactly what changes to make to the 0.7-mile stretch of roadway, but there is certainly a widespread local view that something needs to change.

When it was built in the late '60s and early '70s, the road reduced Lincoln Park's size by a third and split neighborhoods in half. It is almost impossible to cross without risking one's life except at a few intersections, and it cuts through an area the city is looking at as one of the few spaces left downtown for new businesses and housing.

City planners and a 15-member panel appointed by the City Council have been studying the roadway for about nine months. The Franklin Street Study Committee held a meeting this week to let area residents discuss three variant proposals on how the swath the road cuts through their neighborhood might be improved.

Two of the three proposed options, the "urban street" and "urban parkway" concepts, would push the road lanes close together in what is now a wide, grass-covered median strip.

Four lanes of traffic would run from Marginal Way to Congress Street, narrowing to two lanes from there to Commercial Street on the waterfront.

The "urban street" plan would use the newly opened space on either side of the road for mixed-use development, creating a "wider Congress Street," in the words of committee co-chair Markos Miller. That plan would have three- to four-story buildings linked by sidewalks and bike lanes, and offer shopping, office space and high-density housing opportunities. Pedestrian traffic would be a priority under this plan.

The "urban parkway" option would use the new road's edges for open space and an expansion of Lincoln Park to almost its former dimensions. It would also include a bike and pedestrian pathway on its east side, and generally be the most pedestrian-friendly option of the three.

The third proposal, called the "multiway boulevard," would be the most urbanized, with access roads for cars, bicycles and pedestrians on each side of the main roadway along its wider portion, offering access to developable land where buildings as high as five to six stories could be constructed.

Residents at this week's meeting didn't express a strong preference for any of the plans, but any of them would require tens of millions of dollars to bring to fruition.

The roadway is part of the federal highway system, and thus the city and the state can expect help with improvements if they can sell them to federal officials, something that is uncertain at present.

But if a journey of seven-tenths of a mile can begin with a single step, the city has taken it. It just can't stop now.

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