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Traffic study vital to downtown plan

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By the Messenger-Inquirer

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The transformation of downtown Owensboro in the coming years will be most evident in what's built from the ground up. The new river wall and expanded Smothers Park, the proposed Market Square Plaza and new hotel and indoor events center will become new signature sights for Owensboro.

But just as essential to what fills in vacant lots or replaces existing buildings is the transportation network that helps define downtown and moves visitors and residents through the area.

To that end, the Owensboro City Commission authorized last week a \$320,000 study for downtown that will be a map for rerouting motorists through downtown and changing the flow of traffic through Owensboro's core. It's essential to downtown redevelopment's success and will change the nature of downtown streets by encouraging retail and residential development.

The vision of downtown by city planners and the goals of downtown streets set by traffic engineers can be at odds.

The engineer looks at how to move cars and trucks as quickly as possible, which can mean vehicles cruising through synchronized traffic lights on a one-way street. That's seen now along Second and Fourth streets, with trucks and cars using these two thoroughfares to primarily move through, not move to, downtown.

The goal of the downtown master plan is to bring people downtown and encourage them to stay, shop, dine and stroll. It's not a plan for how to move as many people through the area as possible; it's a method for encouraging them to stop, and creating space for their vehicles when they do.

That's what the downtown master plan is about -- attracting people to downtown, not moving them through. The lack of a system of streets that encourages that will hinder other efforts downtown.

So over nine months, the staff with the Lexington-based firm ENTRAN will analyze traffic at 62 intersections in downtown and determine how to convert one-way streets to handle two-way traffic.

It's a process that's not as simple as replacing a broken white stripe down the center of the street with double yellow stripes. Traffic will still need to move through or around downtown, and this plan will help determine the best way to route that flow.

The study will also examine the consequences of keeping the transportation infrastructure the same.

Converting Second and Fourth streets to two-way requires approval by state and federal officials, and this plan is integral to that process. Without this study, those changes can't be made, and this study is required by the officials that will make those decisions.

ENTRAN will also conduct a separate parking study that can guide changes to better accommodate downtown workers, residents and an increased flow of visitors.

These studies carry a hefty price tag, but it's a necessary expense paid for from the insurance-premium tax increase adopted by city government earlier this year.

Reinventing downtown is going to take wholesale changes that require more than just new buildings or new businesses moving into empty storefronts. Different pieces, such as the traffic and parking studies, will ensure this is a holistic effort that supports each aspect of downtown development.