

Community welcomes updated Emory Village plans

by Laretta Miller

A large crowd gathered in White Hall on the Emory campus on the evening of Tuesday, August 17th, to listen and respond to presentations on the updated traffic plans for Emory Village and the surrounding area. In the audience were Druid Hills residents, Village business owners and merchants, and representatives of Emory University, the Alliance to Improve Emory Village (AIEV), DeKalb County government, the Atlanta Regional Commission, and the Clifton Corridor community. Presenters included Tom Walsh of the AIEV Board, urban design consultant Peter Drey of Peter Drey and Company, and traffic engineer Brian Bolick of URS Corporation. A lively question-and-answer period and many positive comments followed the presentations.

What has changed since March?

Discussions centered about the revisions to the Emory Village revitalization plan as a result of input from a community meeting held last March. At that meeting, AIEV presented recommendations that called for a roundabout (traffic circle) and accompanying road diet along North Decatur Road as a means of making access to the village more pedestrian-friendly and improving traffic flow. Major changes to the proposed roundabout configuration presented at the August community meeting are threefold – (1) The left turn from north Oxford Road onto North Decatur Road has been reinstated. (2) Emory University has proposed that Dowman Drive be a one-way road, with traffic entering the campus only. (3) A public park will be created along north Oxford Road.

Emory Village planning has moved ahead steadily from its inception in 1999 with extensive community input, initially facilitated by former Atlanta planning commissioner Leon Eplan, now with the Urban Land Institute, and the Georgia Institute of Technology Urban Design Workshop. AIEV, which was formed in May 2001, secured funding from Emory University, DeKalb County, and the Druid Hills Civic Association to engage Peter Drey and Company to assist in the translation of the ideas generated through the community workshops into a revitalization plan. AIEV obtained subsequent funding from the Atlanta Regional Commission,

through its Livable Cities Initiative, and DeKalb County to support the transportation and related public improvements needed to implement the plan.

As part of the planning process, AIEV considered several options to improve traffic flow and increase pedestrian and vehicle safety in Emory Village. Some configurations did not work, either because of community concerns or significant increases in traffic delays during peak travel hours. As a result of computerized modeling with recent traffic data, AIEV and its consultants have identified an option that improves traffic and pedestrian flow to and through the Village and minimizes any adverse impacts on the surrounding community.

Community goals remain constant

Goals that have guided AIEV consultants during the planning process derive from community participation in numerous public meetings. These include creating an urban village that promotes safety, walkability and compactness, economic viability, and mixed-use development (primarily retail and residential) that will serve Druid Hills and Emory University. Here are some specifics from the Emory Village revitalization plan. AIEV is committed to retaining all historic buildings as essential to the aesthetic character of the Village. Zoning revisions will permit buildings that will accommodate retail on the first floor and offices or residences on the upper floors. New buildings will be constructed close to the sidewalks without parking lots in front. Sidewalks will be wider. Parking will be hidden behind (or beneath) the buildings, and parallel on-street parking will be permitted. Trees will line the streets and offer shade to pedestrians. Sidewalk cafes will be permitted, and retailers may have displays on the sidewalks in front of their shops. The plan also calls for bike lanes to be added from Lullwater to Clifton Road. A small park will be designed for the end of North Oxford in front of Jimmy's Chevron. Trees in the park will beautify and shade the intersection. A roundabout at the Oxford, Dowman and North Decatur intersection can be an attractive spot and will dramatically reduce the amount of pavement in the intersection.

Road diets and roundabouts

The big issue has been to civilize traffic and improve the pedestrian environment in the Village while maintaining or improving the safety and functionality of the traffic system. Two innovations you have read about in earlier editions of the *Druid Hills News* are the Emory Village roundabout and the road diet along North Decatur Road. These will improve the area by slowing traffic and eliminating queues for traffic light changes. In response to community

participation, the Village roundabout has been shifted slightly, and cars using North Oxford will have full access to North Decatur Road. Emory University's decision to make Dowman Drive one-way inbound to the campus made it possible to shift the roundabout.

The present-day intersection is manifestly inconvenient and unsafe for pedestrians. AIEV monitored pedestrian behavior at the crosswalks and found that the majority of pedestrians don't even bother to push the crosswalk buttons. Even when they do so, most people do not obey the traffic signals. Pedestrian crosswalks near the roundabout and on North Decatur will increase functionality and safety for residents and students. DeKalb County safety records show there were 36 automobile accidents in a 36-month period at the intersection of North Decatur Road, Oxford Road and Dowman Drive.

A "road diet" is a transportation strategy that reduces the number of travel lanes to two lanes, but provides a center turn lane for cars to turn left. While some people fear the reduction in lanes will worsen traffic flow, the computer models show no significant increases in travel times. The average travel time from Briarcliff to Clairmont is about the same with the new arrangements. Evening traffic would increase by about one minute. Travel times using the road diet are possible because the roundabout permits traffic to flow through the North Decatur-Oxford intersection more efficiently than the current five-way signalized intersection. Computer modeling shows that the intersection level of service will improve during rush hour compared to the current intersection. With the roundabout, we will see an end to those lengthy waits for lights when there is little traffic. In addition, reduced traffic emissions will reduce the intake of fumes along with your al fresco coffee or lunch.

Where roundabouts have been implemented, car crashes have fallen dramatically. Traffic may move more slowly, but it is steadier. Drivers feel less frustration and do not speed up to "make" lights. With a lower velocity, there is less chance of personal injury and serious damage to vehicles in an accident.

What's Next

AIEV will now move into the design phase for the Emory Village revitalization plan. EDAW, a nationally recognized planning firm and URS, a traffic engineering firm, have been hired to complete the design and develop construction documents. More community input will be needed to work out many details and fine points in the revitalization plan. Design work will

be completed over the next twelve months, and construction of the public improvements is expected to begin soon thereafter. The White Hall audience was excited by these prospects.

For more information and details about roundabouts, road diets, the Emory Village revitalization plan, traffic, and project financing (covered in earlier editions of *The Druid Hills News*), go to the Alliance to Improve Emory Village website www.emoryvillage.org. To receive e-mail updates about meetings and Emory Village revitalization efforts, enroll in the AIEV list serve on the web site.