

Comments regarding the Chris Farley House redevelopment proposal

Well, Madison planning staff, engineering and traffic engineering staff, Plan Commission members and elected officials are all poised to drop the ball again.

The east end of Olin Avenue looks like every other major highway interchange in Madison. unobstructed views at the intersection, adequate lanes to handle the traffic volume. There are no steep approaches to deal with when entering or leaving the intersection.

The west end of Olin Avenue is another story. The intersection with Park Street looks much the same as it did about a hundred years ago with the exception that Park Street has widened to four lanes and traffic signals were installed. The East end of Olin Avenue is notorious for its steep approach to Park Street. No doubt many drivers have killed their engines trying to get going from a dead start at this intersection ever since 1910 or so when mass production of automobiles made them affordable for the masses. Here is a picture of a previous gas station at 1129 S. Park Street. Behind the old automobiles you can see Olin Avenue's steep grade as it approaches Park Street.



[Click on this link to see a better quality version of the above image.](#)

Traffic Engineering has known of the issues with this intersection for years yet they have consistently ignored opportunities to improve the intersection in any meaningful way. Due to the grade issues at this intersection, either the elevation of the Olin Avenue approach to Park Street needs to be raised or the elevation of Park Street in the vicinity of this intersection needs to be lowered or a combination of both in order to design a safe and modern intersection at this location.

The [recent city planning staff report](#) for the demolition and reconstruction of the Chris Farley House dated January 28, 2019, is the latest example of city staff ignoring this problematic intersection. The existing elevations of both of the first floors of the buildings at 810 and 814 West Olin Avenue is 860.00 feet above sea level. The proposed elevation of the new building proposed to replace them is 858.60 feet above sea level. This is 1.4 feet lower than the first floors of the existing buildings and nearly 2 feet lower than the elevation of the south west corner of the property at 814 W. Olin. The gas station at 1129 S. Park Street which shares that lot corner sits on land that was built up to a higher elevation over the years since the first gas station was built at the location back in the early 1900's The current gas station is at least the third gas station building to be built on the property over the years. In the image below you can see that a retaining wall and fence separates the gas station property from 814 W. Olin. This retaining wall starts out about one foot high near

the south property corner and is over four feet high at its north most end due to the land on 814 W. Olin naturally sloping downward to the north and east on that property.



Over the years, I have talked with planning, engineering, and traffic engineering staff regarding the steep grade at the west end of Olin Avenue. I have suggested that as the opportunities present themselves, the city should work at planning ahead to reconstruct this intersection in the future so that the steep grade at the west end of Olin Avenue can be reduced. I believe that as the various properties surrounding this intersection change ownership and new redevelopment proposals are developed, every attempt must be made to fashion those development proposals around a redesigned intersection that would then be constructed once enough surrounding properties have been modified to permit the reconstruction of this section of Olin Avenue.

All the properties surrounding this intersection except for the newer gas station are reaching the end of their useful lives. I envision one day that the hardware store at 1201 S. Park as well as the single family home on the lot next door at 809 W. Olin will be razed and a new multi-story multi-use building with retail (maybe even the same hardware business) will occupy that area with residential housing on upper floors of a three or four story building with off street parking in the basement level. With the proposed redevelopment of 810 - 814 W. Olin, those properties could be built up with a higher ground elevation and slightly higher first floor level. A temporary retaining wall could be constructed at the property line between 810 W. Olin and 808 W. Olin. Then when the opportunity arises and the remainder of the 800 block of Olin Avenue is redeveloped, those properties can be re-graded with a higher ground elevation and the entire 800 block of West Olin Avenue can be reconstructed with a more gradual grade leading up to the intersection with Park Street.

Right now the grade change is so steep between Park Street and the east end of the hardware store that you can enter the first floor of the hardware store on Park Street but if you walk around the sidewalk corner and about 110 feet down the Olin sidewalk you can enter the back door of the hardware store at the basement level.



I ask that city staff reconsider their view of the long term vision for this major transportation corridor intersection. I think it is possible to refine redevelopment proposals for this area to greatly improve the chances that this intersection can be reconstructed with improved sightlines and intersection approach grades. However, to do this the first floor levels of any new buildings on the 800 block of West Olin must be set at appropriate elevations for this to happen.

I believe that the proposed new Chris Farley house should be constructed with a first floor elevation around 862 feet above sea level and the landscaping include a temporary retaining wall at the east property line shared with 806 W. Olin. This retaining wall would be approximately 2-1/2 feet high. The front lawn can be designed to slope down to the existing grade of the sidewalk on Olin Avenue but in the future when Olin Avenue is reconstructed with a more gradual grade leading up to the Park Street intersection, the front lawn would be nearly level. I believe that the proposed ADA sidewalk on the east side of the property can still be accommodated with this slightly higher floor elevation.

If the city fails to make the necessary grade changes on the current plans and approves this redevelopment project as it is now proposed, the Olin Avenue and Park Street intersection will always be a problematic one for not only vehicles but also for pedestrians and bicyclists far into the future.

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