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Two-way traffic experiment on Gilman Street rejected

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June 11, 2008

Concerns about pedestrian safety helped convince members of Madison's Public Safety Review Board to vote unanimously to reject making part of Gilman Street near State Street a two-way road temporarily.

The 400 block of West Gilman Street, which includes several residential buildings and commercial businesses such as Amy's Cafe, Laundry 101 and Yummy Buffet, is currently a one-way street, but the resolution rejected by the panel calls for a pilot project that would test the street as a two-way for 120 days, with an additional traffic light regulating cars turning onto University Avenue.

Despite Tuesday's vote, the proposal for the pilot project will still go through the Pedestrian-Bicycle-Motor Vehicle Commission, which meets next on June 24, before being brought before the City Council for a final decision.

Board members and members of the public at a meeting Tuesday cited concerns about pedestrian and driver safety should the intersection be altered. In particular, the addition of a traffic light would shorten the walk signal for pedestrians crossing Frances and Gilman streets at University Avenue -- which Madisonian Rosemary Lee said is already somewhat difficult for a healthy individual to cross in time. Keeping track of the increased number of potential turns for drivers from Gilman onto University or Frances would also distract many drivers from paying attention to pedestrians and bicyclists crossing, she said.

Capt. Richard Bach of the Madison Police Department added that concerns regarding traffic and pedestrians would be elevated when UW-Madison is in session and particularly during special events such as football game days, and he said a pilot project in the summer would not be representative of the safety risks.

The pilot project, proposed by Ald. Mike Verveer, was one of three potential suggestions to improve the appearance of the street and help boost business. Ald. Eli Judge, who had backed the proposal at an earlier meeting, said he was in favor of working to improve the street, calling it "one of the ugliest blocks" he has ever seen. After "soul-searching" for past weeks, however, he said he had changed his mind about the potential for a two-way street to do that.

Chris Petykowski from City Engineering said the other two suggestions were to make Gilman Street two-way with a stop sign rather than a traffic light and to keep the street one-way and expand the sidewalks, creating more of a terrace atmosphere. Several on the board expressed support for the latter option as a potential means to enhance the street without adding further traffic and safety concerns.

"I certainly agree that it's becoming a bit seedy-looking on that block and it could stand improvements, but I would go the other direction,

which is less traffic on there and turning it into a pedestrian mall -- sprucing it up that way," said board member Mike Scott.

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