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Newarkers fear road improvements won't be better for pedestrians, historic house



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The interchange between Route 280 and Route 21 in Newark has never made any sense.

It's been this way for 60 years, from the time that the state Department of Transportation built the interstate. Motorists can't get to Route 280 west from Route 21, whether they're traveling north or south on the road. Nor can they get to Route 280 east, if they're driving north on Route 21.

The state plans to fix this traffic blunder – with \$93 million in federal funds – by building new ramps and repairing deteriorating bridge decks on Route 280.

That all sounds good, but a coalition of 17 community groups says there are design problems that will make it unsafe for pedestrians. The coalition, which includes urban planners, preservationists and environmentalists, also says the plan undermines the structural integrity of the nearby Plume House, Newark's second oldest building, constructed in the 18th century.

Damon Rich, a Newark urban planner leading the charge, says there are no provisions for lighting beneath several sections of the proposed Route 280 overpasses and ramps, so that residents walking home from the Broad

Street train station will have to pass through dark corridors. He also says traffic coming off the highway will make it difficult for pedestrians to walk or bike around neighborhoods, including Broad and Spring streets, as well as Grant Street and Eighth Avenue.

Waterfront access to the Passaic River on foot is not enticing, either, according to the group. Someone wanting to go fishing would have to walk along a narrow, isolated path.

"They are paying scant, if any, attention to the areas underneath the overpasses," Rich says. "There are reasonable ways to build streets in 2015."

The community groups have a point, if you consider statistics compiled by the New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition. Executive Director Cyndi Steiner says 30 percent of the people killed on New Jersey roads last year were pedestrians.

"We have a problem in the state," Steiner says. "If there's an opportunity to make something safer for pedestrians, we're going to speak up about it."

In a city where 50 percent of its residents do not drive, the coalition has good reason to make a stink about this project, which the coalition believes can be changed before it gets well under way.

The DOT says it is listening to the complaints about its plans for roadway improvements.

DOT spokesman Daniel Triana says a plan has been established to create adequate lighting underneath the bridge overpasses.

Access to the waterfront also has been addressed, according to Triana, who says that his department has worked with the Department of Environmental Protection on guidelines to make sure people can safely get to the Passaic River.

The Plume House issue has not been solved, however. It's an aging historical home, built before 1725, and Newark preservationists don't think it can withstand the Route 280/Route21 construction project.

They're worried because the house is 4 feet from the Route 280 overpass at Broad and State streets. Liz Del Tufo, president of the Newark Preservation Landmarks Committee, says the foundation of the home has been damaged over the years by vibrations from heavy truck traffic on the overpass.

She wants the NJDOT to repair the foundation of the house before work begins on Route 280, but it doesn't look like that is going to happen.

Triana says NJDOT advised the community groups that they can seek grants to help with the preservation of the building.

"We want them to repair the foundation and they're refusing," Del Tufo says. "They don't think it's their fault. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that the damage was caused by the traffic on the overpass."

What NJDOT will do is install sensors in the historic building to measure vibrations and changes that occur during the project.

If vibrations exceed a threshold limit, Triana says, the sensor will send an alert to the contractor. Then, NJDOT officials and the contractor will check out the situation to determine what needs to be done.

As part of the project, NJDOT plans to soften the appearance of the roadway with landscaping.

Such greenery may look nice, but residents want to know how long it will stay that way.

Several residents, including Janise Afalo, say NJDOT doesn't take care of the grass on its exits and entrance ramps to highways in Newark now.

"I give it a less than a year," Afalo says. "It looks pretty on the drawing board, but its' just going to become a dumping ground."

Triana says NJDOT will maintain landscaping on State Street, and the city will be responsible for the work along Route 21.

The project has many moving parts. Getting them to work together – and to address community concerns – is tricky. There have been 20 meetings since the project was announced in 2008.

When the road is done, sometime in 2018, we'll see if this puzzle comes together in a way that satisfies everyone.

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