

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING
REPORT IN RESPONSE TO BUDGET FOOTNOTE 12
FROM THE OFFICE OF GOVERNMENTAL AND COMMUNITY
AFFAIRS

NOVEMBER 1, 2017

[Pursuant to 2017 Session Laws, Chapter 120, Original House Bill 1,
Section 067, Footnote 12]

Submitted to the Joint Appropriations Committee

Footnote Requirement: 2017 Session Laws, Chapter 120, Original House Bill 1, Section 067 (12): *The University of Wyoming shall request a meeting with the City of Laramie to address the need for vacating Fifteenth Street between East Willett Drive and East Iverson Street to unify the campus and protect pedestrian traffic. The University shall report to the joint appropriations committee not later than November 1, 2017 regarding the findings, costs and impacts, including possible mitigation actions, of the plan.*

Summary

In response to the footnote in the University of Wyoming budget, the University of Wyoming and representatives of the City of Laramie held numerous meetings—both formal and informal—from April through October of 2017. No attempt was made to offer a final determination of the advisability of vacating 15th Street—a major arterial street in the community—because of the complexity of the impacts such an action would have on the city and the university.

No recommended plan is being brought forward, as there has been neither the opportunity for the retention of planning consultants nor a source of funding identified for such necessary work in the few months between the effective date of the budget footnote and the deadline for the submittal of this report.

Instead, there is recognition that a vacation should not occur without significant assessment of whether such an action would accomplish any measurable increase in pedestrian safety, whether vacating the street would genuinely serve to enhance unification of the campus, and whether the displacement of vehicular traffic to other routes in Laramie could be addressed safely and responsibly. Considerable further study is necessary to determine whether impacts caused by the vacation might be of such significance and would require a dedication of sufficient resources toward mitigation so as to outweigh the possible benefits of eliminating through traffic on the section of 15th Street.

15th Street Today

15th Street is identified as a major arterial roadway by the City of Laramie. It is one of the primary north-south traffic corridors of the community, and one of three primary north-south

routes for traffic in the area considered to be the traditional campus of the University of Wyoming. The street provides vehicular access to UW parking lots in the area of the Wyoming Union, Coe Library, and Half Acre Gymnasium. In addition, vehicles access Sorority and Fraternity rows and—to a degree—the UW IT Building and the Buchanan Center for the Performing Arts from 15th Street. UW bus routes use 15th Street, accessing a primary loading and unloading area in the Union lot. The street is primarily four lanes of traffic—two in each direction-- in the area identified by the footnote.

Pedestrian Crossings of 15th Street

The area identified in the budget footnote is a three block section of 15th Street which is crossed thousands of times a day by pedestrians, most of whom are University of Wyoming students. The street is bordered on each side by the University of Wyoming campus. Students living in the UW residence halls primarily cross 15th Street diagonally at Ivinson Avenue, a crossing site described as perhaps the busiest such intersection in Wyoming, although no formal counts of pedestrians has been attempted. The intersection is controlled by traffic lights, and pedestrian-only crossing pattern is incorporated into the light sequence. One block to the north, pedestrian traffic crosses 15th Street at Sorority Row, an intersection controlled by a traffic light, with a pedestrian crosswalk and crossing signals. Further north is the Fraternity Row roadway. There is no formal crosswalk for pedestrian traffic at this intersection, although pedestrian crossing is common. Still further north is Willett Drive, an intersection controlled by a traffic light with a pedestrian crosswalk. All painted crosswalk markings are faded and some have been displaced through construction and pavement overlays.

The City of Laramie has enhanced the Ivinson crosswalk through the installation of crosswalk timers, audio alert devices, and by limiting right turn on red options for traffic on 15th Street. Many agree that the reduction of the speed limit from 30 MPH to the current 20 MPH, instituted in 2008, was a significant and positive step.

City Construction Plans for Ivinson Avenue and 15th Street

The City of Laramie has existing plans to reconstruct Ivinson Avenue from 9th Street to 15th Street, and 15th Street from Ivinson Avenue to Willett Drive.

The Ivinson and 15th Street project, as currently designed, will feature significant changes to traffic patterns, with single lanes of traffic on 15th Street, dedicated, two-way “bicycle track” corridors on both 15th and Ivinson, and a major redesign of the intersection of 15th and Ivinson, wherein the entire intersection would be raised to curb height. Vehicles would drive up and down slight inclines to the raised intersection “table,” which would be further characterized by stamped and colored concrete. All of these design elements are intended to enhance awareness of the significant pedestrian presence.

The project is on hold due to budget concerns, and the budget footnote regarding the vacation of 15th Street has been mentioned as another factor in the delay. Of possible relevance, the Wyoming Department of Transportation plans to perform significant construction work on Grand Avenue, which parallels Ivinson Avenue, in the summer of 2019.

Accident History, Traffic Counts

The City of Laramie identified a total of six reported traffic accidents involving pedestrians in the past ten years on 15th Street from Grand Avenue to Willett Drive, a number considered by the city to be very low. The most notable recent accident occurred in 2012, and involved a non-fatal injury to a pedestrian. In that incident, a speeding driver failed to negotiate the Iverson intersection and struck a UW student who was standing on the sidewalk waiting to cross the street. The driver, who was not affiliated with UW, was alleged to have been impaired. According to figures provided by the Wyoming Department of Transportation, total annual vehicle accidents on 15th Street in the area under consideration has varied significantly over the past ten years, from a high of 15 in 2008 to a low of two in 2016. It is possible that a change in traffic lane patterns contributed to a significant reduction from the total of 11 in 2014—the year prior to the changes—to a total of two accidents in 2016, the year after the changes were implemented.

Traffic counts for the area are several years old, and predate the construction of the new Laramie High School. The relocation of the high school from the area north of campus to the eastern area of Laramie may have affected traffic counts to the degree that prior numbers may be of limited relevance. Traffic surveys were conducted during the summer of 2017, when the intersection of Grand Avenue and 15th Street was completely blocked due to construction.

Meetings In Response to the 2017 Budget Footnote

University staff met with staff from the City of Laramie in April of 2017 in order to discuss the footnote to the UW budget. As a result of the meeting, a PowerPoint presentation outlining possible scenarios for vacating all or portions of the three blocks of 15th Street was developed for discussion purposes. Alternatives to vacation of the street, such as the construction of a pedestrian overpass or pedestrian underpass, were also discussed and added to the visual presentation.

The PowerPoint was presented during a public work session of the Laramie City Council in April. As an element of the same meeting, the City Council traveled to campus, toured the 15th Street corridor, and continued the work session in a lecture hall on the UW campus.

The budget footnote was an item of discussion on two occasions when Laramie Mayor Andi Summerville and City Administrator Janine Jordan met with UW President Laurie Nichols.

The Legislative Relations committee of the University of Wyoming Trustees discussed the budget footnote and progress on the UW report in September of 2017. The footnote and the report were also discussed by the full Board in September. Laramie's Mayor and City Manager addressed the committee—which is chaired by former Speaker of the Wyoming House of Representatives Kermit Brown—and the full board during the September meeting.

At the suggestion of the Associated Students of the University of Wyoming, the Laramie City Council held four formal public listening sessions, co-hosted by ASUW, in October of 2017. Two sessions were held in city facilities, and two were held on campus. All were well attended.

Options presented in April 2017 for the purposes of discussion

1. Vacation of all three blocks of 15th Street, from Ivinson Avenue to Willett. No private vehicle through traffic
 - Could provide maximum pedestrian safety along the entire three blocks if vehicular traffic is eliminated.
 - Provides maximum campus unification effect of the options presented.
 - Could necessitate new access for vehicles to Union parking lot, fraternity and sorority row streets.
 - Would result in the significant disruption of north-south (or south-north) transportation routes for all vehicles
 - Would some element of the street surface be retained, much like Lewis Street, or be completely eliminated and perhaps replaced by landscaping and pedestrian pathways?
 - Would travel by emergency vehicles and busses be allowed?
 - Ownership and maintenance of significant sub-surface infrastructure would have to be addressed. This includes city-owned water, sanitary sewer and storm sewer, as well as natural gas and other lines.
2. Vacation of only one or two of the three blocks of 15th Street
 - Still provides enhanced pedestrian safety by eliminating through traffic by private vehicles
 - Could allow for vehicle access to Union parking lots and Fraternity and Sorority Row from 15th Street
 - Would result in significant disruption to vehicle traffic routes
 - Limited campus unification effect
 - Sub surface infrastructure ownership and maintenance would have to be addressed
3. Pedestrian overpass at Ivinson and 15th Street
 - Pedestrian safety at Ivinson is addressed
 - No disruption to vehicle traffic routes (following construction)
 - No likely beneficial impact to other pedestrian crossings
 - Sidewalk barriers would have to be considered to prevent pedestrian crossing at street level
 - Significant ramp construction on both sides in order to meet ADA requirements
 - Snow and ice clearing considerations
 - Expense of construction
 - Limited unification benefit
4. Pedestrian underpass at Ivinson and 15th Street
 - Pedestrian-vehicle safety issues addressed, however raises other possible safety concerns associated with lighting, visibility
 - No disruption to vehicle traffic routes (following construction)
 - No beneficial impact to other pedestrian crossings
 - Impacts to underground utilities
 - Expense of construction
 - Limited unification benefit
5. Existing City plan for Ivinson, 15th Street reconstruction

- Limited pedestrian safety enhancement
- Enhanced vehicle awareness of crosswalk, intersection
- No disruption of current vehicle traffic routes
- No impact on unification

It should be noted that detailed exploration of costs of construction, design of alternative travel routes and other mitigation measures were considered to be well beyond the limitations caused by existing planning budgets and staff resources.

Items Relevant to the Consideration of Vacation of 15th Street

- Ownership of 15th Street is under the control of the city. The street is owned by the City of Laramie, and no vacation of the street could occur without formal action by the city council.
- UW has commissioned a 10-year Housing Study, which will make recommendations likely to impact the existing residence halls and, possibly, King Street, the small street which runs to the east from the intersection of 15th and Ivinson.
- Another street has been partially vacated by the City of Laramie in recent years, with UW taking ownership. Significant portions of Lewis Street, directly to the north of campus, have been vacated by the city as a result of multiple UW facility construction projects in the area between 9th Street and 13th Street. The vacation of several blocks of Lewis Street allows UW to assume responsibility for the development of the area following the purchase of multiple private properties north of Lewis. UW will still provide access to UW busses and to emergency vehicles, but through traffic of private vehicles is no longer permitted.
- Prexy's Pasture can serve as only a limited window on the benefits of elimination of vehicles in a central area of campus. The proposal by then UW President Phillip Dubois to eliminate vehicle access, road surfaces and all vehicle parking in the area was bitterly opposed at the time, yet is widely praised as a visionary decision today, and one which few might wish to reverse. That said, the decision primarily affected the university community, not the community of Laramie as a whole. The possible vacation of 15th Street requires buy-in from a far broader constituency.

Discussion

A primary consideration relative to the possible vacation of 15th Street is stated simply in this way: Where will that traffic go, and what will be the impact? The redirection of hundreds of vehicles a day from 15th Street will have an undetermined but likely significant impact on the nearest north-south routes—9th Street and 22nd Street. Both streets have existing challenges. Ninth Street, in particular the area from Ivinson Avenue to Lewis Street, is not an arterial street by design nor by designation. The already busy street features multiple crosswalks which are used by a large number of pedestrians each day, while anecdotal accounts abound of significant pedestrian crossings outside of designated areas. Were 15th Street to be vacated, displaced traffic could substantially increase the challenges associated with pedestrian safety on 9th Street, and mitigation measures would likely be required. The question of whether a potential pedestrian safety issue at 15th Street would simply be shifted to an already problematic area on 9th Street deserves study beyond that which is available at this writing.

22nd Street traffic continues to increase with development in the northern neighborhoods of Laramie. Problems at already-busy intersections from Willett to Reynolds streets could be multiplied by traffic no longer able to access the 15th Street corridor, and mitigation efforts should be studied.

Laramie's traffic patterns may already be likely to change with the move of the viaduct over the Union Pacific rail yards from the current Clark Street location to the Harney Street overpass now under construction by the Wyoming Department of Transportation. While a shift of a few blocks may not seem substantial, its potential impacts on traffic routes in Laramie are considered to be significant. Add to this the possible elimination of the 15th Street corridor, and the cumulative impacts in numerous areas are deserving of study.

The impacts to emergency response times of a vacation of 15th Street are a frequently cited concern, and would need to be thoughtfully addressed in any mitigation plan. If the street is closed off entirely, emergency vehicles will have a longer route to travel from one side of campus to another. Even if some emergency traffic is permitted access to 15th Street, the effects of such a change should be carefully studied prior to any decision on the future of the street being made.

Unification

Perhaps the most difficult element of the budget footnote to successfully address with confidence is the degree to which 15th Street serves to divide the University of Wyoming campus, and whether the vacation of that street would indeed serve to unite East and West campus. Students on the East campus are described by some as being isolated, and not feeling connected to the rest of campus.

Simple distance from West campus plays into the lives of faculty, students and staff whose days are spent at a considerable walk or ride from the traditional facilities in the area of Prexy's Pasture. Whether proximity, or lack thereof, has a more relevant impact on perceptions of campus unity than the presence of a major roadway deserves further consideration.

The presence of a major transportation corridor through the center of campus certainly limits options that might be developed as elements of long range planning for the university. Were the street not to exist in its current form, such plans may well take a different form than those which must, as a matter of practical consideration, address the presence of the street.

Comments Associated With Public Hearings Held by the Laramie City Council

While the budget footnote did not seek an expression of public support for the possible vacation of the relevant section of 15th Street by the city, it is worthwhile to note the sentiment of those attending the four public listening sessions was overwhelmingly in opposition to any such action. Of approximately seventy individuals who spoke on the subject, all but one were opposed to the city giving up ownership and control of the roadway. Significantly, opposition was consistent whether it was offered at one of the two sessions held on campus, or at the two sessions held at city facilities.

Several distinct themes emerged from the comments, a representative sample is provided here:

- Eliminating through traffic on 15th Street would be a significant disruption of access from one side of the city to another, when such crosstown routes through campus are already limited. Such a hardship is an unnecessary burden on the community, and might impact emergency response times.
- The possible closure would serve to further divide the city while seeking to unite campus.
- Traffic accident history does not justify the possible closure.
- Significant impacts to other streets such as 9th and 22nd must be considered, and would likely outweigh the benefits of eliminating traffic on 15th. Methods to mitigate impacts to 9th and 22nd streets should be considered, but so, too should the impact of increased traffic to numerous other area streets which would result from the closure of 15th.
- Unification of campus is a more complex issue than that which is addressed by the footnote. Simple proximity issues—distance of East campus from other parts of the traditional campus—are likely more significant than the presence of traffic on 15th Street.
- The existing plan to improve the intersection of 15th and Ivinson is preferable to closing 15th to traffic.
- While some alternatives to closing the street might be worth considering, the cost of projects such as an overpass or an underpass should not be borne by the city.
- Additional pedestrian signals would be preferable to the city vacating the street, while still enhancing pedestrian safety. Highly visible pedestrian signals at 9th and Lewis Street and on 22nd Street near the Rochelle Gateway building are effective, and should be considered as an alternative to closing 15th Street to traffic.
- Even temporary daytime closures to through traffic would be preferred over full elimination of traffic.
- The footnote serves to pit the university's interests against those of the community, causing unnecessary friction.
- Access by parents and other visitors to facilities in the Union already causes confusion, closing of the street would make the problem worse.
- The footnote is an example of legislative overreach into decisions that should be made at the local level.
- More study is necessary before any action is taken.

The University of Wyoming would agree, in particular, with the latter point. The alternatives described elsewhere in this report represent a tentative first step toward a vigorous examination of impacts, options and other considerations that should be examined and weighed by all concerned. Numerous issues may arise from the possible vacation of 15th Street, not the least of which is the question of whether the city would have any interest in such an action. That said, the footnote offers the opportunity to discuss and perhaps address issues related to 15th Street that have been the subject of conversation for decades. Limited funding for the reconstruction of Ivinson and 15th Streets, coupled with scheduled maintenance of Grand Avenue in 2019, provide a window for additional examination of the opportunities presented.