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# Evaluating Accessibility Issues in Urbana to Improve Safety at an Intersection

Paula B. Wheeler  
*Parkland College*

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Honors Proposal  
Completion Paula B.  
Wheeler  
OTA 111

Faculty Member: Rebecca Bahnke

December 8, 2013

My project was to advocate for better community access at the intersection of Philo Road and Florida Avenue in Urbana. Originally I spoke with Eric Trusner, the Independent Living Coordinator of PACE (People Assuming Control of their Environment, Inc.), in person, at a meeting in late October to better understand the concerns of the disabled community that use this intersection. This intersection is also the closest one to their offices. Eric was very helpful and we both attended an informational meeting with the City of Urbana. At the meeting, I met with the Senior Engineer, Joe Smith, in charge of the project along with a couple of other city officials. I told Mr. Smith of the concerns with the City plans and of an incident I had witnessed while taking pictures of the intersection. Mr. Smith seemed very receptive to the ideas proposed and was sympathetic to the issues posed by the incident I witnessed (a woman with a walker getting stuck). I spoke with Mr. Trusner several times after the meeting and also spoke to my expert engineer, a personal friend, about the City's proposed plans. The plans appeared to address all ADA issues but, of course, we were hoping to get better than the legal minimum.

I followed up the meeting with a letter to Mr. Smith detailing concerns about the intersection and noting my understanding of our discussion at the meeting. His response to my letter was very positive. Mr. Smith stated that he agreed with my points and thought they would be addressed when construction begins in March 2014. His response and Eric Trusner's response are attached to this form along with a photograph of the intersection as it appeared in late October 2013.

This project was important to me because it helped me become more engaged in the community and also helped me become more aware of the issues of public access for the disabled community. I learned from Mr. Trusner that the disabled themselves are always the best judge of what will work for them, and that I should not presume to understand their concerns without their direct input. In March, when construction begins and is supposed to end, I will be in contact with Mr. Trusner to get the input of the disabled people that actually use this intersection to see that the new design meets their needs. If necessary, I will endeavor to see that the City of Urbana stands by their statements and their own Human Rights Ordinance guaranteeing public access for all their citizens

December 3, 2013  
Mr. Joe Smith  
Senior Civil Engineer  
Public Works Department  
City of Urbana  
706 South Glover Street  
Urbana, IL 61802  
Sent by U.S. Mail and email to: [jlsmith@urbanaininois.us](mailto:jlsmith@urbanaininois.us)

Re: Traffic Signal Improvement Florida and Philo Road

Dear Mr. Joe Smith:

I was at the informational meeting on October 24, 2013, and had the opportunity to speak with you about some of the possible issues concerning the traffic signal improvement for the intersection of Philo Road and Florida Avenue.

I explained to you that I was an Occupational Therapy Assistant student at Parkland College and that we had received a complaint about this intersection, and that I had spoken with Eric Trusner of PACE about some of his concerns. He also attended the meeting.

The complaint that we received at Parkland was that the curbs were not marked by being painted yellow or some other bright color, and were therefore a tripping hazard. Further, I showed you recent pictures I had taken on my I-Pad of the current problems at the southwest corner of the intersection where a gas station is located. If a person follows the sidewalk it leads straight into the parking lot of the gas station. This was easy to do because the curb of the sidewalk was very low and not painted to show the proper direction to go. That week, I actually witnessed an older woman with a walker take this exact direction. She immediately got her walker stuck in the grates of a manhole cover just beyond the sidewalk and had to traverse several feet of broken concrete all around this manhole cover. I realize that this manhole is on private property but it should not be that easy to get to and fall into it. You said you would look into it, and did not think painting the curbs or raising them higher would add substantially to your costs.

Another change that is proposed is shortening the pedestrian crossing times by adding bump-outs. Although this will reduce the time to cross because the distance will be less, you also stated that the plan was to reduce the signal time for pedestrians to cross, so that pedestrians are not actually gaining any time to cross. You said this could be monitored to make sure that pedestrians are crossing safely in the time that is allowed.

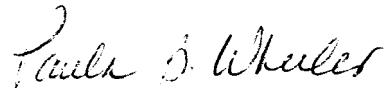
Mr. Joe Smith  
December 3, 2013  
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A current feature of this intersection that is particularly helpful to the visually impaired is the audible signals announcing which street they are crossing. You said that would still be included but placed in better positions to hear it and would also include a countdown. As proposed, that change sounds very helpful.

At present, I can only applaud your adherence to the Urbana Human Rights Ordinance which prohibits discrimination in access to public accommodation based on an individual's membership in the class of physical or mental disabilities, and hope this new busy intersection will be a tribute to the City.

Please let me know if the above is not your understanding of what we discussed, and please place me on your email list for further information about this intersection. I look forward to the developments in March 2014 when construction begins.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Paula B. Wheeler".

Paula B Wheeler  
1412 Quail Run Drive  
Savoy, IL 61874  
Cell: 312-375-9191  
asa\_becker@yahoo.com

cc: Eric Trusner, PACE





To Me  
Dec 4 at 8:46 AM

Paula,

I have read the attached letter and agree with your points. The sidewalks at the SW corner will be designed to prevent as much as possible the potential trip hazards and manhole grate problem. We will install significant landscaping to prevent direct paths across that grate. As far as painting curbs I will yield to our Operations staff if they can hand paint the curbs that are the most problematic. Typically we do not paint curb ramps as it is a labor intensive operation and from the sheer number of ramps in the City it would become an expensive item to keep maintained on a yearly basis. I will discuss with him this winter.

I will keep in contact via this email address of any further updates or design changes.

Joe Smith, P.E.  
Senior Civil Engineer



To Me Alan ThomasHadley Ravencroft  
Dec 3 at 10:38 AM

Paula,

I want to applaud you on being an outstanding advocate for pedestrians with disabilities who use the Florida Avenue - Philo Road intersection. In particular, I was unaware of the private property manhole cover instance, but, like you, believe that such an instance is well within the city's right to (at minimum) inform the property owner of a need to change the cover to facilitate public safety. Too, remember that likelihood of safety is statistical in its nature, and that safety needs to be as nearly as possible guaranteed at the extremes of a bell curve distribution/population.

Too, holding the City of Urbana to its word is important, and I appreciate your remarks that you (we) will be advocating for any changes that may need to happen as a result of the proposed changes.

This may be a can of worms. Initially when the city was concerned about "reducing" accidents involving pedestrians and motor cars, they were suggesting that a safety "feature" of a roundabout was speed-reduction. I for one believe that slower traffic speeds could favor pedestrian well-being if an accident were to occur. When I suggested simply lowering the speed limit as partial solution to the problem instead of installing a costly (and not accessible) roundabout, it seemed to be met unfavorably by the city board. Again, from my perspective, it would seem to me that this speed-reduction may warrant further investigation. Intuitively, I do think that 30MPH on both legs would be somewhat safer than 30MPH and 35MPH for such a pedestrian intersection. 25MPH for both legs would be even better during school hours, again from an intuitive perspective. I have not yet gathered statistical data to support such an assertion.

If you would like, you are welcome to attend our Advocates for Access meeting which is held most every third Wednesday, from 3-4PM. There we, as a group, look at the issues of Access in our community, and what may be done to make changes to increase access to people with disabilities in our community.

Ultimately, I would defer visibility-related "acceptance" of the new intersection and updates to our consumers who are blind or who have low vision. The same is true of people with mobility concerns: they are experts as to what works for them. Again, the same is true for people who have hearing impairment, or who are Deaf – the intersection must be accessible for people visually. To the truism of Independent Living Philosophy: experts are the people with disabilities who are expected to successfully use such public accommodations. They'll tell you what works and what doesn't. "Nothing about us without us."

Regards,

Eric Trusner, Independent Living Coordinator  
PACE Center for Independent Living