

MEMORANDUM

To: Board of Aldermen
From: Richard Roedner
Date: October 5, 2020
Re: Community on the Commons proposal

As background, I believe on September 21, during a normal weekly call with the University, we were asked by the University if there would be any support for temporarily closing E. Haggard, between Williamson and N. O'Kelly. The desire of the University was to join its two lawn areas into a large outdoor space for events – outdoor movies, seating areas, fire pits, activities, etc.

My reply was two-fold. First, I indicated that I was unaware of any support on behalf of the Town to close E. Haggard permanently. Second, I indicated that this could be a workable concept. I talked about periodic closures, maybe something like an evening every week, or perhaps a weekend, or something along those lines.

This past Monday, September 28, we received a written proposal from the University to close E. Haggard Ave. every weekend for the rest of the semester, from Friday afternoon until Sunday evening. The stated goal of the closures was to allow the University to convert the road to pedestrian space, to bring in food trucks, and to join their lawns into a large outdoor venue.

At no time in these initial discussions was the issue of the caravan on September 19 included in the reasoning for the request. Safety of students, other than the safety from private social gatherings, was never included in the reasoning for the request.

I asked several staff members to take a look at the proposal and provide feedback to me. We also reached out to our downtown businesses for their input. Those comments, edited for brevity, are included below.

The first section is limited to logistic issues associated with a temporary closure. The second section relates to issues that need to be considered before approvals are given. The last section are some summary thoughts.

Missing Details/information for Proposed Temporary Closing

Emergency Services

- Emergency Access via Haggard
 - Food truck or other facilities on one side only
 - 20' Separation on Haggard
 - Even spacing between facilities (?)
 - No hydrants or access points (driveways, raised crosswalks) blocked
- Fire Pits
 - UL Rated
 - Extinguishers present
 - EU rep in charge of fire pits
 - Need spec sheets

- University will need an Emergency Action Plan (EAP) developed for these events – assume similar to Homecoming weekend?
 - Which buildings will be open and accessible?
 - Relocation/evacuation of students
 - Any tents proposed? No conflict with emergency access to any buildings (FD, Fire Marshall, Building Inspectors)
- Accountability
 - Would need to have 24/7 security at both ends of closure

Traffic

- Need a traffic control plan from the University
- Detour routes
- Signage details, locations, directions, etc.
- How will roads be closed? University staff present at roadblocks to open in case of emergencies?

Site layout

- Conceptual layout of area to show where facilities will be placed, points of access, etc.
- Will alcohol be served?

Permits

- Will need a Special Events permit from town, along with permits for food trucks (please see food truck comments below in “Local Business Impacts” below)

Issues/Concerns with Closure proposal

Public Safety

- Creates conflicts and hassles with response times

Access

- How will detour routes affect residents of the town?
- While vehicle traffic will be restricted, what about pedestrian and bike access?
- How will downtown businesses be allowed to participate?
- No access to downtown from the East – Oak and E. Lebanon not suitable detours, leaves O’Kelly from Haggard to Phoenix Drive to University use only

Mass Gathering

- How is the University exempt from local rules regarding mass gathering limits
- What staffing levels will be maintained overnight? How will compliance be enforced?

Local Business Impacts

- Impact of food trucks – Wed. lunch business almost stops already with Food Truck event, all weekend will be a killer
- Food trucks have no ties to community – don't pay taxes, don't hire locally, don't support local efforts, draw business from local establishments
- Impacts to local businesses are not limited to restaurants – retail uses need foot traffic to stay in business
- Effort to work with downtown businesses to create remote dining options on campus?
- Losing weekend traffic will make some businesses unsustainable.
- What about using Williamson with local restaurants?
- Concern that this will create ill will between the local businesses (who have always supported the University), and the University, particularly when they are all already suffering significant losses due to COVID 19.

Locational Concerns

- Why this location – what about other outdoor venues that the University owns, such as the Sports Complex?
- What is the need for the closure? What does it gain you with the existing lawn areas?
- How is this different from the existing events you have going on around campus? – concerts, comics, movies, etc.

Potential Partnership Opportunities with Local Businesses

- Would the University consider using local businesses to provide food for the events? With the assistance of Aramark's pop-up kitchen, different Elon-based restaurants could cook and serve food during the events or even team up to provide food instead of bringing in food trucks
- Would the University consider coming downtown for the event instead? If we were able to close the first blocks of W. Lebanon, N. Holt and W. College for a Saturday with tables and chairs in the streets, game stations, and potentially a community art project for the students to enjoy. Concerts and outdoor movies can be held there as well.

Additional thoughts

As you can see from the comments received, there are some logistic issues that would have to be worked out, and quite frankly a significant level of fear from local businesses who count on traffic in downtown. It is certainly possible that adjustments to the proposal to address some of these issues would lead to a different perspective.

You had talked about a limited trial run to see how things would work. That is certainly a possibility for a weekend, or a part of a weekend. While there could still be negative consequences, a shorter duration would certainly help, particularly if some of the downtown business concerns could be addressed.

You had mentioned Homecoming, when we have closed the road for part of a day in the past as a potential demonstration period. Another option would be the weekend of November 7. That might serve a multitude of purposes if Haggard were closed for some portion of the weekend.