

Just how far have Alton streets come toward a goal of ‘Great?’

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Four years ago, in February 2019, the Illinois Business Journal had reported that Downtown Alton was selected by the East-West Gateway Council of Governments as a recipient of a Great Streets Initiative grant. Consisting of nearly \$500,000 in planning assistance, the grant would help the community expand the way it thinks about its streets while charting a course for improvement implementation.

Back then, Alton Main Street Executive Director noted, “Rather than viewing a roadway solely as a way to move more automobiles faster, the goal of the St. Louis Great Streets Initiative is to trigger economic and social benefits by centering communities around interesting, lively and attractive streets that serve all modes of transportation.”

Some of the goals of the initiative’s process were to increase safety by calming the speed of traffic, create welcoming and imaginative green spaces for people to enjoy, and design interpretative and wayfinding signage to help visitors navigate the district.

A finalized Great Streets plan was published in June 2020. The IBJ recently decided it was time to review this initiative, the plan and its process, and find out where things stood with Alton’s Great Streets initiative. We recently reached out to the City of Alton’s Planning & Development Deputy Director Andrea Yancey with some Q & A for an update.

IBJ: First, can you briefly describe the research process that was involved in getting to the finalized plan published in 2020 and what the catalyst was for its creation?

Yancey: East-West Gateway Council of Governments approached the City of Alton regarding grant funds available under its Great Streets Initiative. Understanding the value of this type of strategic plan, the City of Alton applied for and was awarded funding under the program.

From project kick-off to final report, the ten-month planning process included two workshops in Alton comprised of work/listen sessions with business and property owners, the community advisory committee and the technical advisory committee, and two open house events for public input. Three facilitated meetings allowed the public to learn about the project and provide their opinions and feedback regarding their long-term vision and proposed improvements to the Study Area.

Each meeting was accompanied by an online survey through the City of Alton’s project page, which enabled stakeholders to submit feedback online. Activities at the workshop focused on creating a two-way dialogue through keypad polling and small-group facilitated activities and discussions. Due to COVID-19 outbreak, the third engagement session was modified to an online format in the form of videos and an interactive survey.

IBJ: What actions have been taken or completed since the plan’s publishing?

Yancey: The city is set to receive Congressionally Directed Spending funds from Senator Duckworth’s office to complete the engineering work for one and a half blocks surrounding the intersection of Third Street and Broadway.

Additionally, AltonWorks, led by John and Jayne Simmons, recently announced construction is underway

for the Wedge Innovation Center, a \$21 million revitalization project that will function as a business accelerator, incubator, co-working space, and digital hub. This aligns with the development assets portion of the plan, which recommends creating a co-working space and establishing a workforce development/job training center.

Yancey: The increase in safety is largely centered around safer pedestrian connections through the entertainment district, with a pedestrian connection across Piasa being a primary focus. Piasa bisects the entertainment district and carries four lanes of relatively high-speed traffic. The city has applied for grant funding to construct a pedestrian bridge over Piasa.

other uses and the built environment, to create an innovation and entrepreneurial hub – a regional destination.

The development of the Wedge Innovation Center by AltonWorks is expected to catalyze investment in the district with the goal of maintaining a mix of uses and incorporating vibrant public space, walkable amenities, professional services, and arts and culture to create “collisions” for the cross-pollination of ideas and businesses. The mix of related and complementary uses will strengthen the economic vitality of the area.

IBJ: Infrastructure improvements have been ongoing in Alton for some time now. What else is being done to help brand Alton in the positive and take the details of this plan forward?

Yancey: The city is prioritizing way-finding signage and district gateway signage, as outlined in the plan, as a near-term goal. This will help visitors navigate downtown Alton while also enhancing Alton’s branding efforts and providing a sense of place to residents and visitors as they move through downtown Alton.

IBJ: What are the top priorities for the City of Alton in terms of what’s presented in the Great Streets Plan? What can we expect to see the results of in the immediate future?

One year out? Three years out? Five years, and beyond?

Yancey: The city is currently focused on leveraging funding opportunities to implement the right-of-way enhancements outlined in the plan. This includes rebalancing the right-of-way along Broadway to better accommodate all users, with a focus on pedestrian enhancements and connecting downtown Alton to the regional bike trails in the area. The city will utilize the \$3 million investment announced by MCT to begin construction of the bike path outlined in the plan.

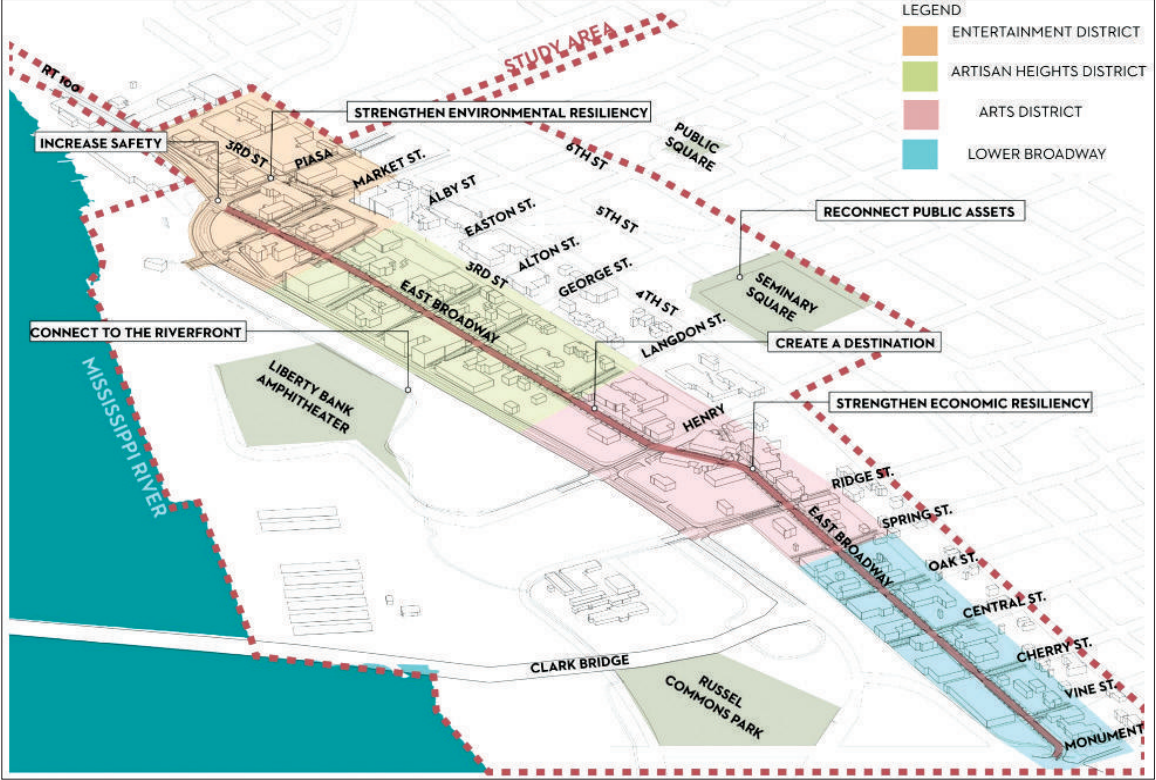
It’s worth noting that the plan identifies a long-term implementation window of approximately 15 years. As previously stated, this timeframe will ultimately be defined by market conditions and the availability of funding to achieve the goals of the plan.

IBJ: Anything else to add that we should note?

Yancey: The City has formed an ad hoc Great Streets Implementation Committee that includes representatives from MCT, Great Rivers and Routes, Alton Main Street, as well as the city council members representing the district and other key stakeholders to coordinate implementation efforts and ensure a steady path forward. The first meeting is being coordinated for March 2023.

IBJ: Where can readers go to learn more?

Yancey: Readers can learn more by visiting Great Streets Initiative: Alton – East-West Gateway Council of Governments (EWGCOG) online at ewgateway.org or by contacting the City’s Planning and Development Department [located at Alton City Hall, 101 E. Third St., (618) 463-3500.]



This infographic represents the study area that is affected by the Alton Great Streets Initiative, a plan to assist the City of Alton and its stakeholders in expanding the way its streets are thought of while also implementing a course of action for improvements. (Image provided by the City of Alton)

IBJ: What’s next, and what’s the timeline moving forward?

Yancey: The city has applied for a Reconnecting Communities Pilot grant in partnership with Alton Forward, as well as other funding opportunities, to implement several of the right-of-way improvements outlined in the plan. The City Council is in the process of designating ARPA fund expenditures and is considering directing funds toward infrastructure improvements and small business support as outlined in the Great Streets Plan. The city will continue to prioritize implementation of the Great Streets Plan, but the timeline will be largely dependent on funding opportunities and budgetary considerations.

IBJ: Has there been any changes to, or deviations from, the plan’s outline, timeline, action steps? Any challenges? If so, what was the cause?

Yancey: The city has certainly encountered challenges with plan implementation due to the timing of plan adoption taking place within a few months of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated budgetary implications. However, federal legislation passed in the wake of the pandemic, including the American Rescue Plan Act, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and the Inflation Reduction Act, have created funding and grant opportunities of which the city is eager to take advantage. The City of Alton will continue to seek out funding opportunities.

Given the number of agencies involved in certain recommendations, the city has made small deviations from the plan. One example is a proposed pedestrian bridge over Piasa, which is a four-lane road that carries relatively high-speed traffic, instead of the traffic calming measures outlined in the plan as an effort to align implementation with IDOT’s regional transportation priorities.

IBJ: In the entertainment district, it was noted [in the published plan] that a need for increase in safety and a strengthening of environmental resiliency was recommended. What do each of those look like, and what has been done to address them further?

Regarding environmental resiliency, the plan calls for green stormwater infrastructure as well as additional green space and native plantings throughout the corridor to help accommodate stormwater runoff. There is also a recommendation for the Corps of Engineers to investigate the application of a flood wall to protect the entertainment district. The city is currently working with the Corps to determine the best path forward to protect the entertainment district from future flooding.

IBJ: For Seminary Square, there’s a note [in the published plan] to “reconnect public assets.” What does that mean?

Yancey: Reconnecting public assets means just that – reconnecting the city’s historic public squares to the modern pedestrian grid, planned public improvements, and bike trails. The plan calls for the creation of a bicycle loop that connects historic squares – including Seminary Square – as well as residents in surrounding neighborhoods to downtown, to the transit center, and to the riverfront.

IBJ: [In the published plan] In the arts district, it is noted to “create a destination” and to “strengthen economic resiliency.” Again, what do each of those mean? And doesn’t Jacoby Arts Center meet the qualification for a “destination?” Are there others desired to be developed, or already underway? If so, what/where are they, and by whom are they being developed?

Yancey: Jacoby Arts Center is considered the anchor of our arts district and is certainly a destination. The goal is to leverage Jacoby’s presence, along with



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