

Traffic Calming as an Integral Element of a Suburban Revitalization Program

FOLLOWING PLANNING BY OFFICIALS AND WITH INPUT FROM COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS AND LOCAL RESIDENTS, THE PRIMARY COMMERCIAL CORRIDOR IN THE REVITALIZED NEW CASSEL AREA WILL INCLUDE RETAIL STORES, OFFICES, A BANK, SUPERMARKET, PHARMACY AND RESTAURANTS, WITH RESIDENTIAL APARTMENTS ABOVE THE BUSINESSES, DEVELOPED BASED ON SMART GROWTH PRINCIPLES AND FINANCED AS A PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP.

BY ROBERT M. ESCHBACHER, P.E.

INTRODUCTION

The New Cassel community of suburban Long Island, NY, USA, is characterized as an economically distressed area with significant poverty problems, a shortage of necessary local shopping opportunities and many vacant lots, empty storefronts and boarded-up buildings.

After years of seeing little progress to improve conditions, government officials and community leaders embarked on an ambitious, comprehensive revitalization plan through a public-private partnership aimed at addressing the housing, business and transportation problems in the area.

DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMUNITY

New Cassel is a community of approximately 13,300 residents located within the Town of North Hempstead in Nassau County, Long Island. The U.S. Census Bureau indicates that New Cassel is an economically distressed area, with most residents having a median household income 20 percent below the county average and poverty rates nearly three times the county average. For these reasons, many residents do not have access to automobiles and must depend on local businesses for their shopping needs.

The major corridor in New Cassel is Prospect Avenue, a 1.3-mile roadway with a mix of residential and commercial properties. A relatively small group of local neighborhood stores is situated within a one-block area, but there are

no banks, food markets, clothing stores, or restaurants.

PLANNING AND VISIONING PROCESS

Initial planning efforts to revitalize the New Cassel area began in the early 1990s, when the Prospect Avenue Urban Renewal Area was established by a joint effort of the Town of North Hempstead and

the local community development agency (CDA). In the last few years, however, momentum built for the implementation of revitalization efforts.

In 2002, the Town and CDA co-sponsored a visioning charrette, at which nearly 600 residents, community leaders and business owners worked in teams with planning and design professionals to develop a vision plan.

The plan served as the basis for the redevelopment of the corridor to become New Cassel's "Main Street," by incorporating smart growth principles and improving the market environment of Prospect Avenue, including improvements in public safety, visual quality enhancement, land use planning and traffic calming.

A major concern often mentioned as a hindrance to the revitalization of New Cassel was the excessive width of Prospect Avenue. This 60-foot-wide roadway provides two travel lanes and a parking lane in each direction, but carries only 13,000 vehicles per day. This excess capacity, in conjunction with a completely straight and flat roadway alignment, results in frequent speeding, which contributes to vehicular, pedestrian and bicyclist safety concerns.

Traffic accident data from the Nassau County Police Department revealed a total of 315 accidents over the 1.3-mile length of Prospect Avenue from January 1999 to October 2003, of which 25 involved pedestrians and 15 involved bicyclists. Field studies showed an 85th-percentile speed of 40 miles per hour, well above the posted speed limit of 30 miles per hour.

The data clearly indicated the need for traffic calming improvements to slow the speed of traffic and create a more friendly environment for pedestrians and bicyclists. This was further demonstrated by the input from the community visioning process, during which local residents expressed their fear of crossing the wide roadway with limited pedestrian safety

features or using the sidewalks in front of stores with vehicles speeding along the adjoining roadway. They indicated that they would be hesitant to shop in the proposed stores unless their traffic safety concerns were addressed properly.

REVITALIZATION PROGRAM

Based on community input and strong support for a major revitalization program, the Town issued requests for proposals from private developers to undertake the redevelopment of properties for a mix of residential and commercial uses in accordance with the vision plan. To date, the Town already has awarded development rights to eight sites along the Prospect Avenue corridor.

When completed, these sites will yield 200 residential units and 50,000 square feet of commercial space to serve the local area, including a food market, bank, pharmacy, restaurants and retail stores. Designation of developers for an additional four sites currently is underway.

To control the desired redevelopment, the Town prepared "Seeking a Shared Vision Plan for New Cassel," which contains design guidelines aimed at improving the character of the street by redefining the public space—an atmosphere that attracts people to the street and creates a safe and pedestrian-friendly environment.

To complement the planned \$50 million in private investments, the Town sought and received funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the New York Empire State Development Corporation and numerous funding assistance programs from local government agencies.

TRAFFIC CALMING PROJECT

In 2004, the Town of North Hempstead competed for and received a \$750,000 grant from the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT), under its Local Safe Streets and Traffic Calming Program, to implement a traffic calming project along Prospect Avenue. The Town is contributing an additional \$100,000 for its local share of the funding for the project.

Although the Town eventually intends to implement traffic calming measures

along the entire Prospect Avenue corridor, to undertake all the improvements at one time would be difficult and financially unfeasible. As a first step in demonstrating the Town's commitment to the New Cassel community, a multi-faceted traffic calming project is being planned for a six-block section.

Within this approximately 1,600-foot stretch, the intention is to provide a raised median, a single lane of travel in each direction, bicycle lanes, curb bulb-outs at intersections, contrasting and textured crosswalks and parking lanes on both sides of the street. Traffic analyses have confirmed that the elimination of one travel lane in each direction will not adversely impact level of service conditions at the intersections.

The project also will close off East Broadway where it intersects with Prospect Avenue in close proximity to Bond Street. This will serve to reduce motorist confusion and improve safety for pedestrians and bicyclists.

The existing traffic signal at the intersection of State Street and Prospect Avenue, which is utilized by children attending a nearby elementary school, is being redesigned with enhanced crosswalks, pedestrian pushbutton controls and pedestrian signal indications. The existing signal will be coordinated with several proposed traffic signals to control the speed of progression and provide for safe vehicular and pedestrian passage through this area.

New street lighting, tree plantings, bicycle racks and trash receptacles also will be installed. This streetscape improvement component of the project is expected to improve the overall character of the environment surrounding the project site.

Beyond the primary project area extending to Brush Hollow Road in a westerly direction and Cantiague Rock Road to the east, the modified roadway section, including the bicycle lanes, will be continued using pavement markings. The Town also is coordinating with NYSDOT to connect the Prospect Avenue bicycle lanes with the existing Wantagh State Parkway bicycle path.

It is expected that these improvements will result in an overall reduction in travel speeds and will provide a much safer envi-

ronment for pedestrian and bicycle traffic throughout the entire corridor and, particularly, in the immediate vicinity of the proposed neighborhood business district.

STATUS OF THE PROGRAM

Over the past year, the Town of North Hempstead has issued building permits and granted zoning approvals for the redevelopment of the eight mixed-use development sites, of which three currently are under construction. The Prospect Avenue traffic calming project soon will enter the design phase and will be combined with a major roadway reconstruction project in the area.

Finally, the Town has adopted the New Cassel vision plan as an official planning document, which requires that the Town utilize its goals when making decisions affecting the New Cassel community. The Town also requires that developers demonstrate how proposed projects conform to the vision plan. ■

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ROBERT M. ESCHBACHER,

P.E., is president of Eschbacher Engineering P.C., a Long Island based transportation engineering firm that he founded 20 years ago.

He has completed the study and design of numerous projects in New York involving traffic calming, master planning, traffic impact studies, downtown revitalization, traffic signal systems, highway and intersection design, pedestrian/bicycle facilities and smart growth planning during his 33-year career. He obtained his bachelor's degree in civil engineering from Manhattan College and his master's degree in civil engineering from Northwestern University. He is a member of ITE.