

Opinion: Wilmington residents deserve better from I-95 project

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On a dreary Monday evening, residents from across Wilmington gathered in Trinity Episcopal Church to hear plans for a major upcoming construction project on I-95 that will shut down lanes and clog traffic for over two years. The project is estimated to cost \$200 million, none of which appears designated to improve nearby communities that continue to struggle with the presence of the interstate more than 50 years after it divided the city.

Before the meeting, as neighbors and I walked over from Tilton Park, we identified some of the most obvious problems we hoped the project would address, such as the lack of adequate lighting on the bridges and pedestrian walkways above and around the interstate. When our sidewalk abruptly ended without a crosswalk, we talked about how wonderful it would be if the sidewalks and crosswalks around the interstate actually made sense.

In other words, we talked about low-hanging fruit.

By the end of the meeting, however, it was clear that there's no vision for how a project like this could benefit nearby communities. That's because this project isn't for Wilmington.

BACKGROUND

[Think your commute is bad now, wait until Wilmington I-95 project starts](#)

[I-95 neighbors in Wilmington want 'roof' over highway](#)

When it comes to moving vehicles, this might as well be any other highway in any other state. Residents crowded into Trinity's pews, hoping for their concerns to be heard, only to be met by some very kind and generous engineers who are doing exactly what they're supposed to: fixing highways and bridges. We peppered them with questions, and nobody, I'm sure, was really satisfied.

The sad truth about this meeting is that it underscored the frustrating disconnect between Wilmington residents and the government bureaucracy that's supposed to be working for us.

Do we want bridges repaired so they don't fall? Of course.

But we'd also appreciate some consideration for how major renovations to that corridor could improve quality of life. The most obvious vision, that nearly everyone shared, was that this corridor needs to be accommodating to more than just automobiles.

To that point, I have a challenge for every elected official that represents that stretch of Wilmington: follow the sidewalks up and down Adams and Jackson streets — all the crosswalks that end without a sidewalk, sidewalks that end halfway down a block, intersections that don't have accessible ramps for those with disabilities — and then imagine doing it in a wheel chair or electric scooter, in the rain, on sidewalks without ramps.

Until I walked Adams and Jackson streets, I never understood why so many scooters travel in the road. It's because the road is the more logical choice.

I walked away from that meeting grateful for the community leaders who organized the meeting, as well as those elected officials who seemed to understand what was going on. But I also walked away thinking that a lot of people are dropping the ball as we speak, and that the community response completely caught some elected officials flatfooted.



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I-95 (Photo: *The News Journal*)

Considering the unanimous opinion among residents that I-95 destroyed neighborhoods and destabilized nearby communities — an observation that is so universally recognized that it defies logic to ignore — under these circumstances, the most obvious thing to do is engage the community. Talk to people first before they come looking for you.

It's simple. Show us that you care. Words matter, but dollars matter more.

Even \$2 million, or one percent of the current project budget, for a new park space under the viaduct would have major ramifications on the surrounding communities. Those crumbs probably would have been enough to satisfy most people. Instead, all we got were plans for a refurbished highway that we get to share with 80,000 other people, or a whole other Wilmington, every single day.

Lucky us.

The meeting at Trinity would have been an easy opportunity for the mayor or governor to make a brief appearance, like they do when a new restaurant opens on Market Street, and reassure residents that the city or state is looking into it, that they're aware of our concerns, that they're trying to find the money, and so on.

But we didn't even get that. There's no vision for how this project can benefit nearby communities. We weren't even important enough to get that meaningless political posturing we hate so much.

Instead, we learned from a panel of very patient engineers that the project was on a tight budget, a very tight budget, a point that was repeated so often it could only mean one thing: "If you want something else, then find a way to pay for it."

Luckily, there is a way.

Let's make this a 2020 issue. Political pressure is a reliable, time-tested way of getting things done. There will be more meetings, so go to those. If you find yourself in a conversation with a reporter about Wilmington, bring this up.

Post an image on social media every time you encounter a dead-end sidewalk or crosswalk on Adams and Jackson streets. And, because this is Delaware, you're probably going to encounter your elected officials while you're out and about. So make those encounters matter.

Tell them that we need a bold vision for I-95 in Wilmington.