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Input still sought on Square redesign

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Several hundred questionnaires regarding the Tennessee Department of Transportation's proposed roundabout redesign of the Lebanon Public Square have been turned into Mayor Philip Craighead's office since being released to the public via email and on the city's website early last week.

Downtown merchants like The Art Mill, A-Plus Print & Design, Crystal Couture Store and Historic Lebanon Tomorrow said they would like the stream of favorable interest to continue.



This photograph shows how the Lebanon Public Square looked in the 1940s.
Photo courtesy of Jack Cato



This creation by Mike Manous of Manous Design shows what the Lebanon Square could look like after the proposed Tennessee Department of Transportation redesign is completed. **Submitted**

"It is an incredible opportunity for our community," said Helene Cash, owner of Crystal Couture about the safety project, which would be funded by TDOT at no expense to the city.

The projected restructuring would transform the Square into a true roundabout, with four quadrants of parking – eliminating the center parking lot that surrounds the monument to Civil War General Robert H. Hatton and crosswalks that guide pedestrians from that area to storefronts.

Carolyn Markham of Markhams Shoes was one of the first merchants to publicly speak out in opposition to the redesign this January – stressing that construction time, loss of parking and access to the statue of Gen. Hatton would hurt Square retailers.

Craighead explained that there has been some confusion over the time of TDOT's construction – with many saying it could take up to a year. The mayor said that the actual construction time would be four to six months, and that the yearlong estimate includes design, engineering, bidding work and closing out. "It wouldn't be 12 months of just closing the Square."

"It is a short-term inconvenience for a long-term benefit," said The Art Mill's Kirsten Harris.

"They would do the construction in areas. Traffic would not be stopped and there would be a marketing plan in place and incentives to get people to continue to

come out," Scott Harris, owner of The Art Mill, added. "Change is necessary. Status quo just isn't going to cut it anymore. Our Square needs a facelift."

The Harrises, Monica Alsup of A-Plus Print & Design and Kim Parks, executive director of Historic Lebanon Tomorrow, agreed that the safety redesign is just what the Square needs to maximize growth potential and attract tourism to the city.

"It is the key to what we have been trying to do for years," Parks said.

"I think a lot of the concern is based on fear of change and uncertainty. I have a business on the Square in Cookeville and it is fantastic. They have a fantastic day life and activities at night. You see families ride their bikes at night," Harris said. "Right now, I am the only business open on the Lebanon Square at night. Hopefully if we get the redesign you will have more businesses that stay open later and a Square that is active 24 hours a day."

He pointed out that single parking quadrants could even be blocked off and used for live music events or fundraisers for local organizations – allowing patrons to park in one of the other quadrants or in the parking lot next to A-Plus which would be repaved during the project.

The group also believes that the redesign would help preserve the monument to Gen. Hatton – not hurt tourism, as mentioned in another interview with longtime Wilson County resident Jack Cato, who expressed concern that tourists would not be able to visit the

statue listed on the Civil War Trails.

Harris mentioned that in an act of vandalism, Gen. Hatton once ended up with a pumpkin on his head. Police Chief Scott Bowen confirmed that the incident did take place "several years ago" and that the LPD has "taken a couple of reports where someone has stolen the decorative tops off of the fence that surrounds him."

"We were selected as one of the Civil War Heritage sites. You can't just invite people to town and then not let them be able to see it," Cato said, suggesting that in lieu of a redesign the city should consider investing in solar powered traffic signals to slow traffic on the Square and prevent accidents.

"We respect the concern for Hatton – but this plan does not block him off. It makes him the centerpiece of our Square," Parks said.

Reed Davis of Sons of Confederate Veterans supported Cato's stance that as the plan stands, there is "no safe access" to the monument. Davis noted that there are inscriptions of the statue and maintenance needs that would still require someone to cross traffic to keep up the grounds.

"We are all for improving the cosmetics of the square – but let's do it right," he said.

Craighead has contacted TDOT about adding a crosswalk to Hatton in the proposed plan; however, he has not yet heard back if it would disqualify the city from the safety plan funds.

"They are studying that," he said.

If the plan were to be enacted without a designated crosswalk, Lebanon/Wilson Chamber of Commerce president and CEO Sue Vanatta has said that a chamber representative would gladly escort a tour group to the monument safely.

In a guest column to *The Wilson Post*, Ken Griffith of Griffith's Studio on West Main Street, worried that the quadrant parking areas would be too cramped for UPS and FedEx delivery trucks and could be potentially hazardous to shoppers trying to maneuver their vehicles in and out of parking spaces.

Parks said that delivery trucks are operated by "professionals," and that they could easily perform their deliveries.

"FedEx and UPS deliver to every city in this country – cities like New York with little to no parking," she said.

Parks warned that if initiative is not taken soon, the city could possibly lose these funds to a competitor.

"TDOT is going to use these funds somewhere. It isn't the kind of circumstance where we can put it off and then bring it back in a few years," she noted.

Craighead said that once all of the surveys are collected, he will hold a public meeting on the issue.

"I am so excited about this plan," Alsup said. "We need to be thanking TDOT for wanting to do this for us."

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