



MEMORANDUM

TO: Village Trustees and Evan Teich, Village Manager.
FROM : Robin Pierce, Community Development Director
DATE : 26th February 2019
SUBJECT: Design Five Corners Study

Discussion. Following on from the very successful design Five Corners Trustee sponsored charrette, and the presentation by Julie Campoli at a Village meeting the Village applied for a grant to study how to integrate the results of Design Five Corners into the Municipal Plan. The benefits of Design Five Corners are; more efficient movement of vehicles through the Village core while reducing wait time at traffic lights, more pedestrian friendly road crossings by narrowing crossing widths, the development of open space in an area that has very little currently, an increase in green space and the potential to develop community events close to our growing Village Center. This study is the core information needed for inclusion in the new Municipal Plan which will be completed this year.

Cost: There is no cost at this time to the Village.

Recommendation: Village Staff recommend that the Trustees approve the Design Five Corners Study and ask Staff and the Planning Commission to have it included in the new Municipal Plan of 2019.

Design 5 Corners

Implementation Plan

Draft Report
February 2019



**DuBois
& King**
INC.



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Project Background

What is Design 5 Corners?

Design 5 Corners is a community design process of the Village of Essex Junction, completed by Terra Firma Urban Design in 2015. It followed the community values developed during the Heart & Soul Essex engagement process and garnered ideas from public engagement to create a conceptual design and vision for the future of the Village.

The public input portion of Design 5 Corners informed the project by asking residents about what they think is needed in 5 Corners and what would make them more likely to walk to 5 Corners. It also included a design workshop, where participants envisioned what growth will look like in Essex Junction.

Key Takeaways from Design 5 Corners

- Maximize space in the Village Core
- Slow traffic
- Reclaim more space for people

Design elements that were favored throughout the public input process and were incorporated into the overall design:

- Central green and pocket parks
- Buildings lining the streets
- Pedestrianized Main Street
- Multi-story mixed use buildings
- Street trees

This report builds upon this design and the Village's 2014 Comprehensive Plan to quantify the benefits of the Design 5 Corners vision and forge a path to implement it.



Figure 1: 5 Corners as it exists today, image courtesy of Julie Campoli



Figure 2: Design 5 Corners vision including a central green, infill development (more buildings lining the street), new street trees, and a pedestrianized Main Street, image courtesy of Julie Campoli

The Crescent Connector

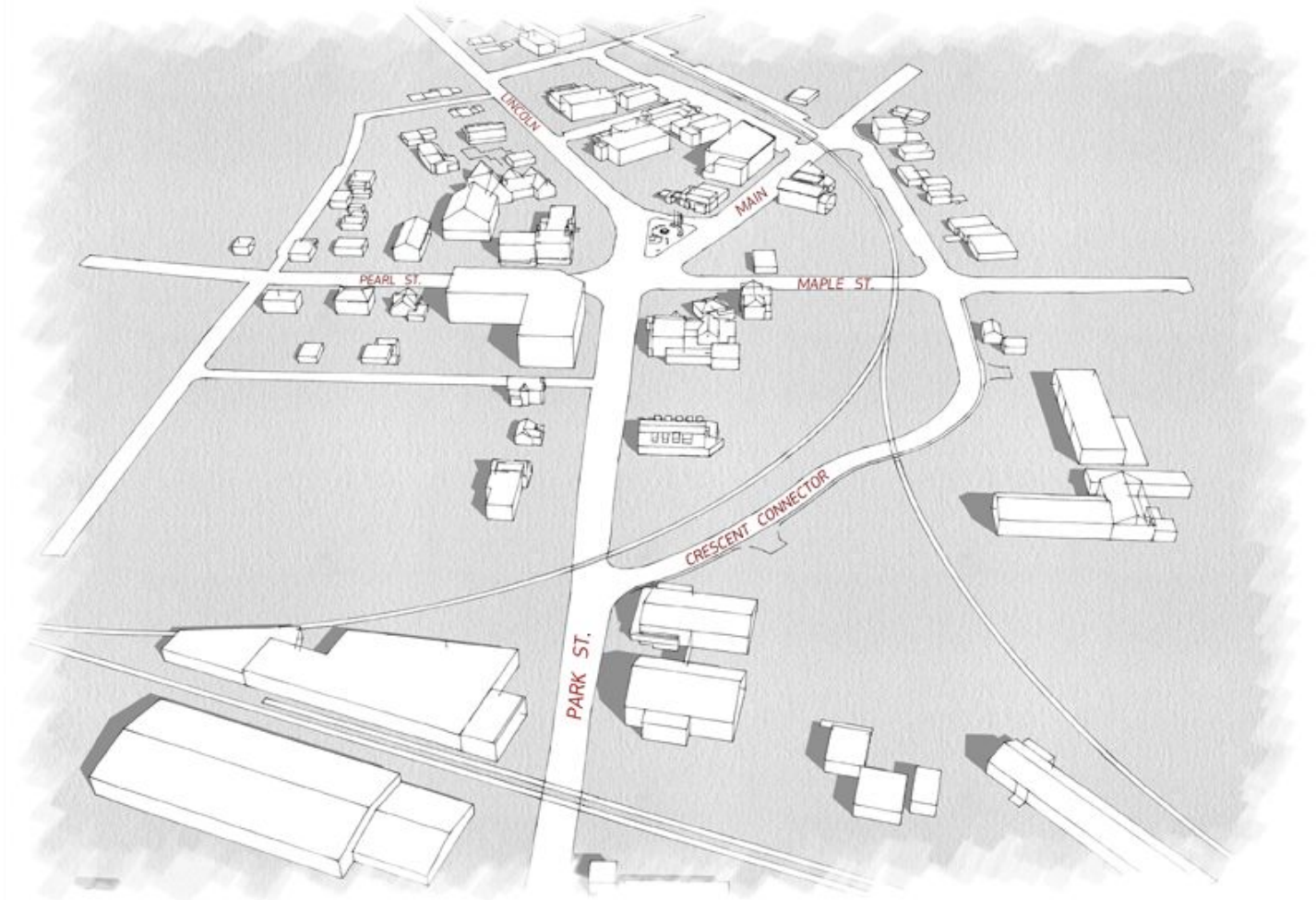
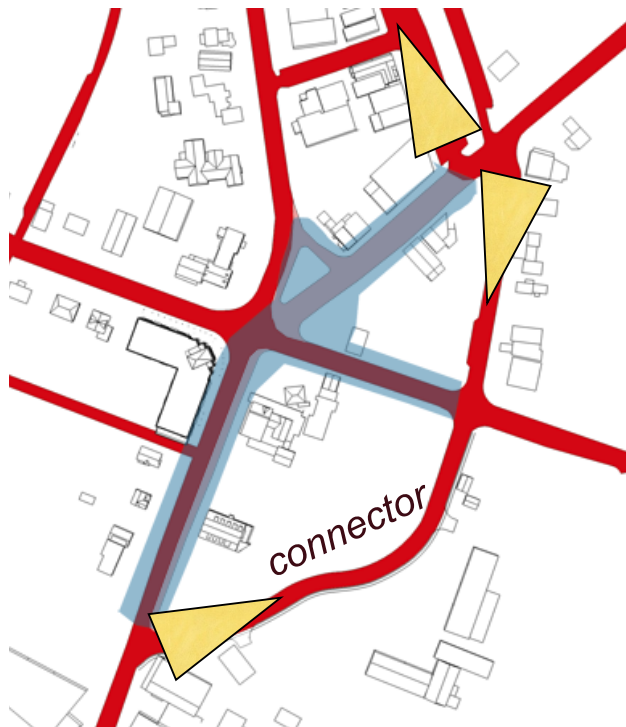


Figure 2. The Village of Essex Junction including the planned Crescent Connector, which provides another route between Main Street, Maple Street, and Park Street that traverses the 5 Corners intersection. Image courtesy of Julie Campoli



The Crescent Connector is a new road that will connect Main Street (VT15), Maple Street (VT117), and Park Street (VT2A). It provides an additional route through Essex Junction and will alleviate some of the traffic volumes at 5 Corners by redirecting vehicles around the 5 Corners intersection. This new connection makes several elements from Design 5 Corners possible, like transforming 5 Corners into a 4-way intersection.

Figure 3 from the 2015 Design 5 Corners Project Report shows a zone of opportunity (blue) for new and appealing public spaces that will become possible when traffic is diverted around these streets along the Crescent Connector.

Figure 3: Traffic diverted through the Crescent Connector. Image courtesy of Julie Campoli

Where are we now?

To gauge the community's perspective on transportation in 5 Corners and compare changes since the Design 5 Corners project in 2015, an online survey was available for four weeks between August 24-September 22, 2018. D&K also tabled at the Essex Junction Farmer's Market in September to spread the word about the project. The survey received 157 respondents; each were asked about how often and why they choose to either drive, walk, or bike through 5 Corners.

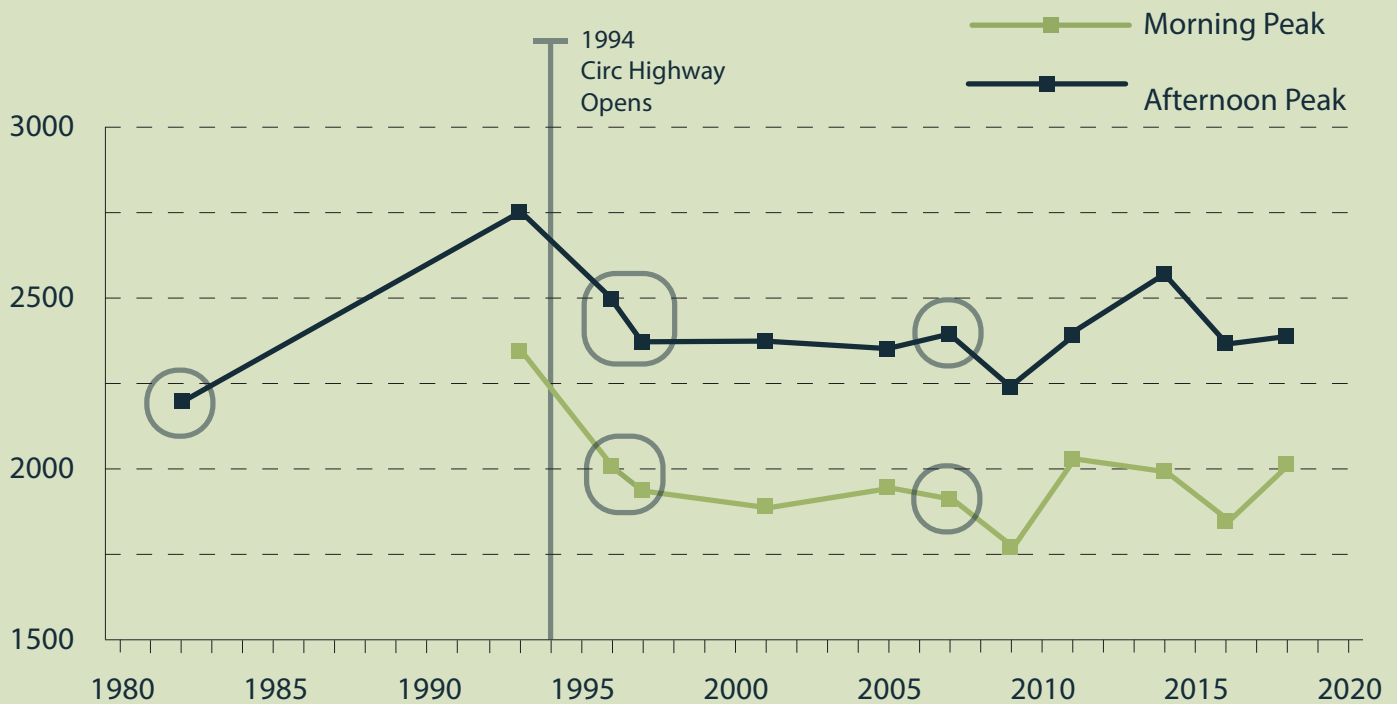
A great majority of survey respondents drive through 5 Corners on a daily basis and nearly everyone finds the traffic congestion at this intersection frustrating or challenging. According to traffic counts from the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) dating back to 1983, traffic volumes at 5 Corners have been relatively steady for the past 25 years (Figure 3). Both the morning and afternoon peak hour traffic volumes were largest in 1993, a year before some segments of the Circ Highway (also known as the Chittenden



Figure 4: Project tent at the Essex Junction Farmer's Market (County Circumferential Highway) were built.

Since then, traffic volumes have shown some fluctuations both up and down despite the population of Essex Junction growing by 32% between 1980 and 2010, according to US Census data from the 2014 Comprehensive Plan.

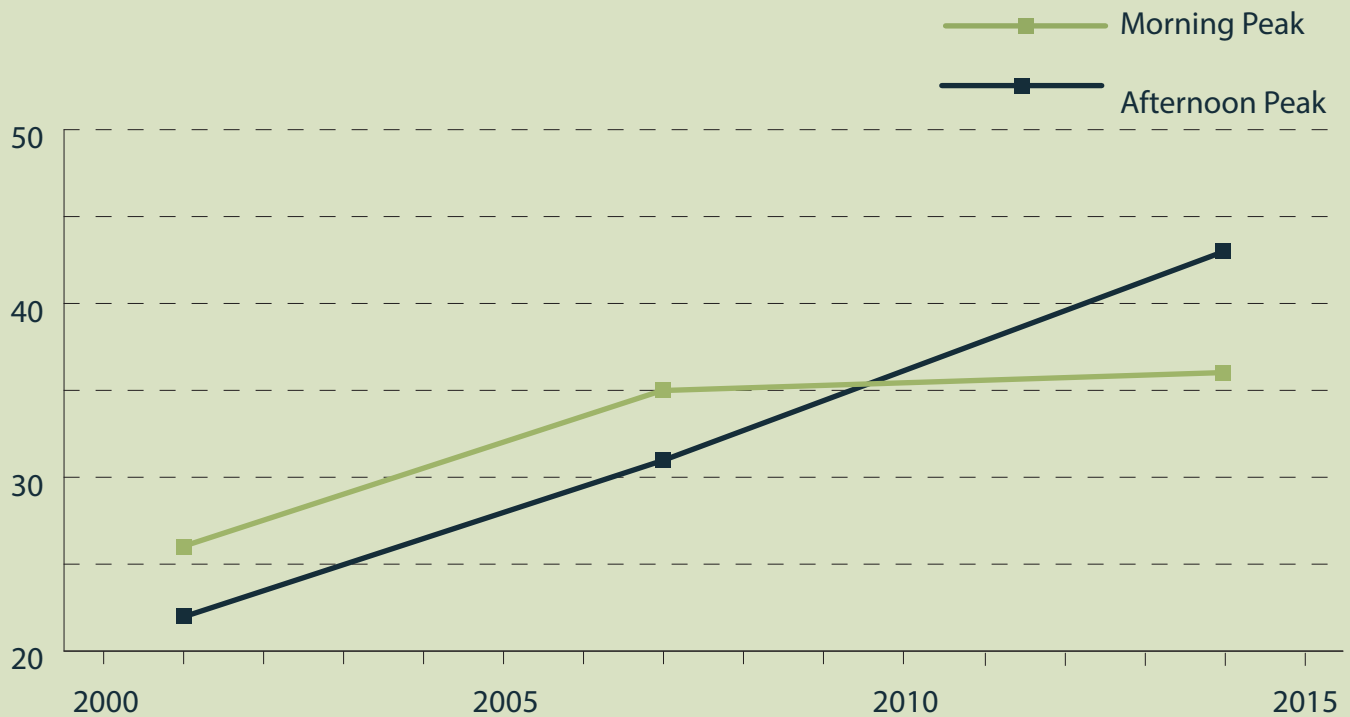
However, the pedestrian volumes at 5 Corners



Peak Hour Traffic Volumes at 5 Corners, 1982 - 2018

Circled data points are counts taken during the school year, all others are from July or August

Figure 5: Peak Hour Traffic Volumes at 5 Corners, 1982 - 2018. Source: Vermont Agency of Transportation



Pedestrian Peak Hour Volumes at 5 Corners, 2001 - 2014

Figure 6: Pedestrian Peak Hour Volumes at 5 Corners, 2001 - 2014. Source: Vermont Agency of Transportation

have been increasing since 2001 (Figure 4). To understand this pattern, we took a closer look at the survey results. Respondents who walk through 5 Corners often said that reasons they walk include:

- I live within walking distance (90%)
- I like walking to the restaurants and shops (90%)
- I like to walk for exercise (88%)

The main obstacles people reported as deterring them from walking in 5 Corners include:

- It's too far for me to walk to (55%)
- Lack of places to walk to (49%)

Additionally, we asked survey respondents how many minutes they thought it would take to walk the route shown in Figure 7, from the Park Street School to the Amtrak Station. The Google Maps estimate of walking this route is 7 minutes; respondents estimated that it would take nearly twice as much time—13 minutes—to walk this route.



Figure 7: Survey respondents estimated that this 7 minute walking route through 5 Corners (in red) would take 13 minutes to walk, showing a large difference in the perception and reality of walking in Essex Junction



Figure 8: Crossing without a crosswalk on Main Street

People overestimate distance when they are asked to consider active transportation (walking or bicycling) instead of driving, unless they are already familiar with walking the route¹. This misconception of distance may be keeping people from walking in their neighborhood from the start—54% of survey respondents reported that they rarely or never walk through 5 Corners. To overcome this barrier in Essex Junction, the Village needs to attract and appeal to pedestrians, by becoming more walkable.

Walkability is a common term that generally describes how friendly an area is to walking. Several elements contribute to the walkability of a place, but the following components have significant contributions to the attractiveness of walking environments²:

- Green street facilities
- Parks
- Separation from vehicle traffic
- Pedestrian network connectivity

In Essex Junction, survey respondents who do not

walk frequently said the following changes would encourage them to walk more:

- More places to walk to (67%)
- Better walking environment (benches, trees, lighting) (58%)
- More spaces in the village that are safe and pedestrian friendly (52%)

Essex Junction already has a robust pedestrian network connecting the Village. Design elements from the 2015 Design 5 Corners project bring the other walkability components to Essex Junction: rain gardens, a village green, and safe pedestrian spaces separate from vehicles.

Looking beyond the auto-centered identity of 5 Corners and creating an environment where people want to be is fundamental in revitalizing the Village center. As pedestrian volumes are growing and vehicle volumes are holding steady in Essex Junction, implementing the Design 5 Corners project marks an important step in making the Village Center a healthy and vibrant focal point of the community while the Village continues to grow.

1 Dangaia Sims, Stephen A. Matthews, Melissa J. Bopp, Liza S. Rovniak & Erika Poole (2018) Predicting discordance between perceived and estimated walk and bike times among university faculty, staff, and students, *Transportmetrica A: Transport Science*, 14:8, 691-705, DOI: 10.1080/23249935.2018.1427814

2 Arlie Adkins, Jennifer Dill, Gretchen Luhr & Margaret Neal (2012) Unpacking Walkability: Testing the Influence of Urban Design Features on Perceptions of Walking Environment Attractiveness, *Journal of Urban Design*, 17:4, 499-510, DOI: 10.1080/13574809.2012.706365

Envisioning Essex Junction



Figure 11: Park Street with new buildings lining the streets and pedestrian improvements. Image courtesy of Julie Campoli

The Design 5 Corners vision elements created a framework for reconfiguring the 5 Corners intersection that closes a portion of Main Street to traffic, making it a 4-way intersection. The goals of this concept are focused on improving transportation circulation conditions for vehicles and pedestrians, while creating new public spaces that improve quality of life and enhance the economic vitality of the Village.

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN VALUES & GOALS

Transportation improvements that will move traffic more efficiently while making the Village a more welcoming place for all modes of travel.

Pedestrian improvements in the public realm that create a high quality pedestrian experience and improve access to and the safety of pedestrian facilities.

Health & Recreation improvements that maintain an aesthetically attractive urban environment that is sensitive to the natural environment.

DESIGN 5 CORNERS ELEMENTS

Converting 5 Corners to a 4-way Intersection

Better Pedestrian Crossings at 5 Corners

Pedestrianized Main Street

Central Village Green

More Street Trees

Green Stormwater Infrastructure

Implementing the Plan



Figure 12: Rendering of the reconfigured 5 Corners intersection and surrounding development. Image courtesy of Julie Campoli

The Design 5 Corners process created a vision for what growth will look like in the Village, and how it can attract investment and create value for generations to come. This conceptual design is an important step for Essex Junction to achieve the goals set forth in the Comprehensive Plan. Moreover, it has many benefits that can be measured and quantified based on the Village's values and goals.



COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

2014

Adopted August 26, 2014

The Comprehensive Plan

Transportation Improvements

Goal 2: Promote thoughtful growth (Priority Goals for Next 5 Years)

Goal 4: Implement projects that will move traffic more efficiently while making the Village a more welcoming place for all modes of travel. (Priority Goals for Next 5 Years)

Objective 4.3: Consider alternatives for vehicular traffic through Five Corners, such as redirecting Route 15. (Priority Goals for Next 5 Years)

Pedestrian Improvements

Objective 2.4: Continue improvements in the public realm for a high quality pedestrian experience. (Priority Goals for Next 5 Years)

Objective 4.2: Consider the pedestrianization of Main Street. (Priority Goals for Next 5 Years)

Objective 1.3: Emphasize local access, public transit, bicycle facilities, pedestrian safety and access, and aesthetics in future streetscape projects. (Transportation)

Health and Recreation

Goal 2: Create urban open spaces. (Recreation & Natural Resources)

Objective 2.1: Encourage the provision of plazas and other urban outdoor areas in major redevelopment projects in the Village Center and Transit Oriented Development Districts. (Recreation & Natural Resources)

Objective 2.3: Consider the development of a village green within the Village Center District. (Recreation & Natural Resources)

Implementing the Comprehensive Plan

Many components of the Heart & Soul and Design 5 Corners projects were incorporated into the Essex Junction Comprehensive Plan (Adopted 2014). Comprehensive Plans include goals and objectives that are intended to be implemented during the life of the Plan. The following page indicates the goals and objectives that directly relate to the implementation of Design 5 Corners.

Economic Vitality

Goal 2: Increase the Village's relationship with the local business community. (Business/Economic Development)

Goal 4: Preserve and enhance the appearance and historical character of the Village of Essex Junction. (Business/Economic Development)

Objective 4.5: Continue streetscape and landscaping efforts to attract private sector investment.

Green Infrastructure

Goal 2: Create Urban Open Spaces. (Recreation & Natural Resources)

Objective 2.3: Consider the development of a village green in the Village Center District. (Recreation & Natural Resources)

Goal 1: Provide a Village infrastructure system that adequately ensures the availability of potable water, discharges storm and ground water runoff and disposes of sanitary wastes in a manner which ensures community health and is environmentally sound. (Utilities/Facilities)

Transportation Improvements

How is a 4-Way intersection better for traffic?

There is a general consensus that traffic congestion at 5 Corners needs to be alleviated. The 5 Corners intersection marks the convergence of three state routes. Each of the intersection's five legs has high traffic volumes, whereas more typical five-way intersections have one leg with relatively low volumes that doesn't take up as much time in the signal cycle. With all five intersection approaches needing to be serviced and the occasional exclusive pedestrian phase (where all cars must wait while people cross the intersection), 5 Corners is very inefficient in moving traffic.

Closing one leg of 5 Corners becomes possible because of the Crescent Connector providing an alternate route through Essex Junction. Main Street is an obvious choice because of its dense commercial block that would benefit from more public space, and because it enters the 5 Corners intersection askew from the other approaches—at a 45° angle instead of 90°.

Diverted Traffic

With the Crescent Connector in operation,

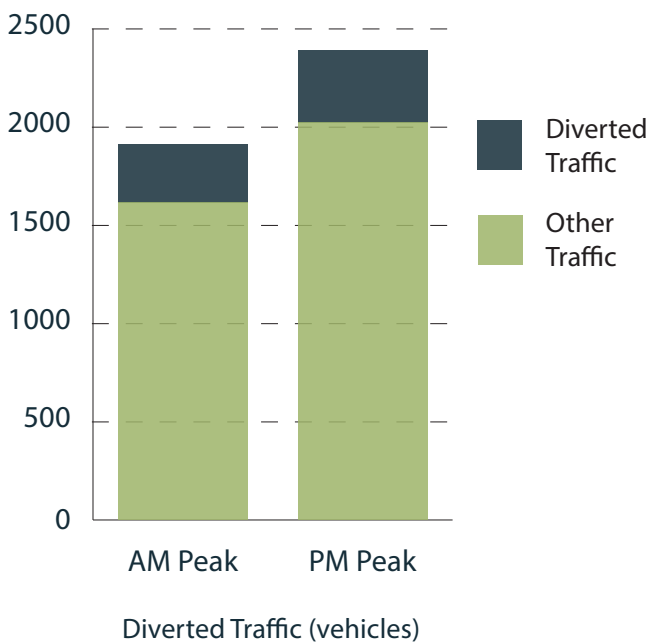


Figure 13: Traffic diverted from converting 5 Corners to a 4-way intersection

closing Main Street will affect less than one fifth of the 5 Corners traffic (Figure 13)—the vehicles traveling between Main Street and Pearl Street. This traffic will either use Maple Street and the Crescent Connector, a minor diversion when traffic throughout the street network is moving more efficiently overall.

The CCRPC and D&K created traffic models of the Essex Junction street network using Synchro and SimTraffic to evaluate the impacts of converting 5 Corners to a 4-way intersection. Below are screen shots from both traffic models.



Figure 14 (top): 5 Corners SimTraffic Model

Figure 15 (bottom): 4 Corners SimTraffic Model



The traffic models use traffic volumes projected to 2025 for the afternoon peak hour, which historically has worse traffic congestion than the morning peak hour. They yielded the following results.

Average Delay

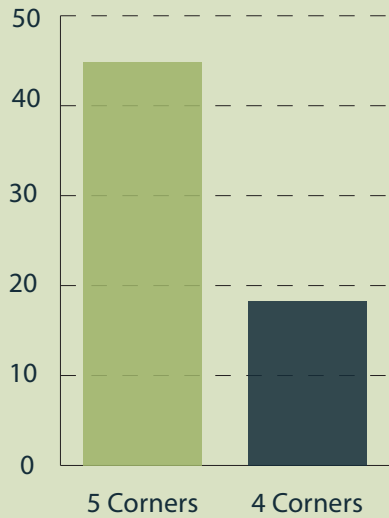
Converting 5 Corners into a four-way intersection makes it much more efficient. The average delay per vehicle—that is, the amount of time in seconds that a person has to sit and wait to get through the intersection—is reduced from 45 seconds to 18 seconds. There are several factors contributing to this reduction: the typical geometry of the 4-way intersection allows eastbound and westbound traffic to travel at the same time and northbound and southbound traffic also to travel at the same time, which simplifies the signal phasing that exists at 5 Corners. Another factor reducing delay is that pedestrians will be able to cross the street while traffic is still moving, instead of needing an exclusive phase.

Lost Time

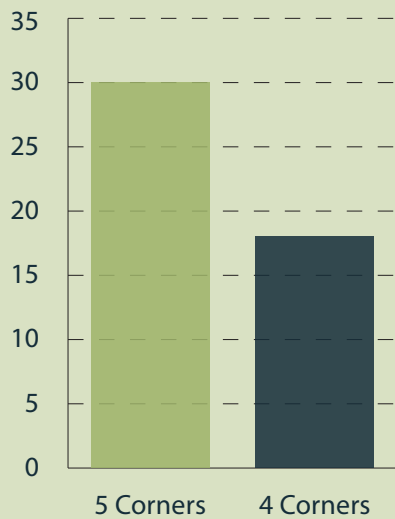
Additionally, the typical four-way geometry reduces the lost time at the intersection. “Lost time” is when no vehicles are moving through the intersection during the “clearance time”—the time between one approach’s light turning red and another’s turning green, when all of the lights are red. This is a safety measure that prevents vehicles who may be speeding to catch the end of a yellow light from hitting someone in the intersection. It is considered lost time because typically nobody is moving through the intersection during this period. Because there are significantly fewer phases to switch between at a 4-way intersection, the lost time is reduced by nearly half.

Capacity

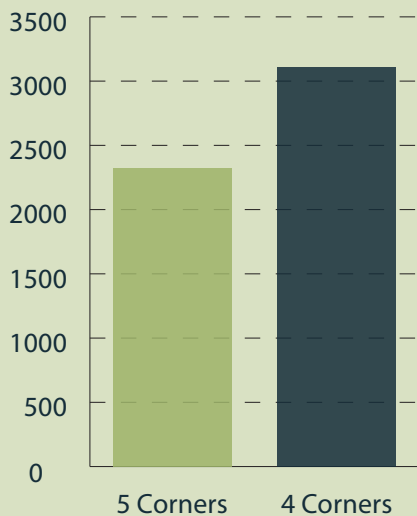
With less lost time and fewer signal phases taking up time at a four-way intersection, there is more time available for vehicles moving through the intersection, and therefore higher capacity. “4 Corners” has the ability to get 789 more vehicles per hour through the intersection than 5 Corners, a 34% increase in capacity.



Average Delay (seconds)



Lost Time (seconds)



Capacity (vehicles per hour)

Queuing

A higher capacity to move vehicles through the intersection also reduces the queue lengths at 4 Corners in nearly every lane. Figure 20 shows the 95th percentile queues for both 5 Corners and 4 Corners.

The queues at Pearl Street have the largest reductions, which will make it easier to turn out of side streets like School Street. Reduced queues on Park Street and Maple Street will make access to Park Terrace and nearby parking lots easier as well. Overall, shorter queues also contribute to a shorter waiting time and reducing the number of cars idling at the intersection.



Figure 19: Main Street (VT15) queue approaching 5 Corners blocks the Railroad Ave crosswalk

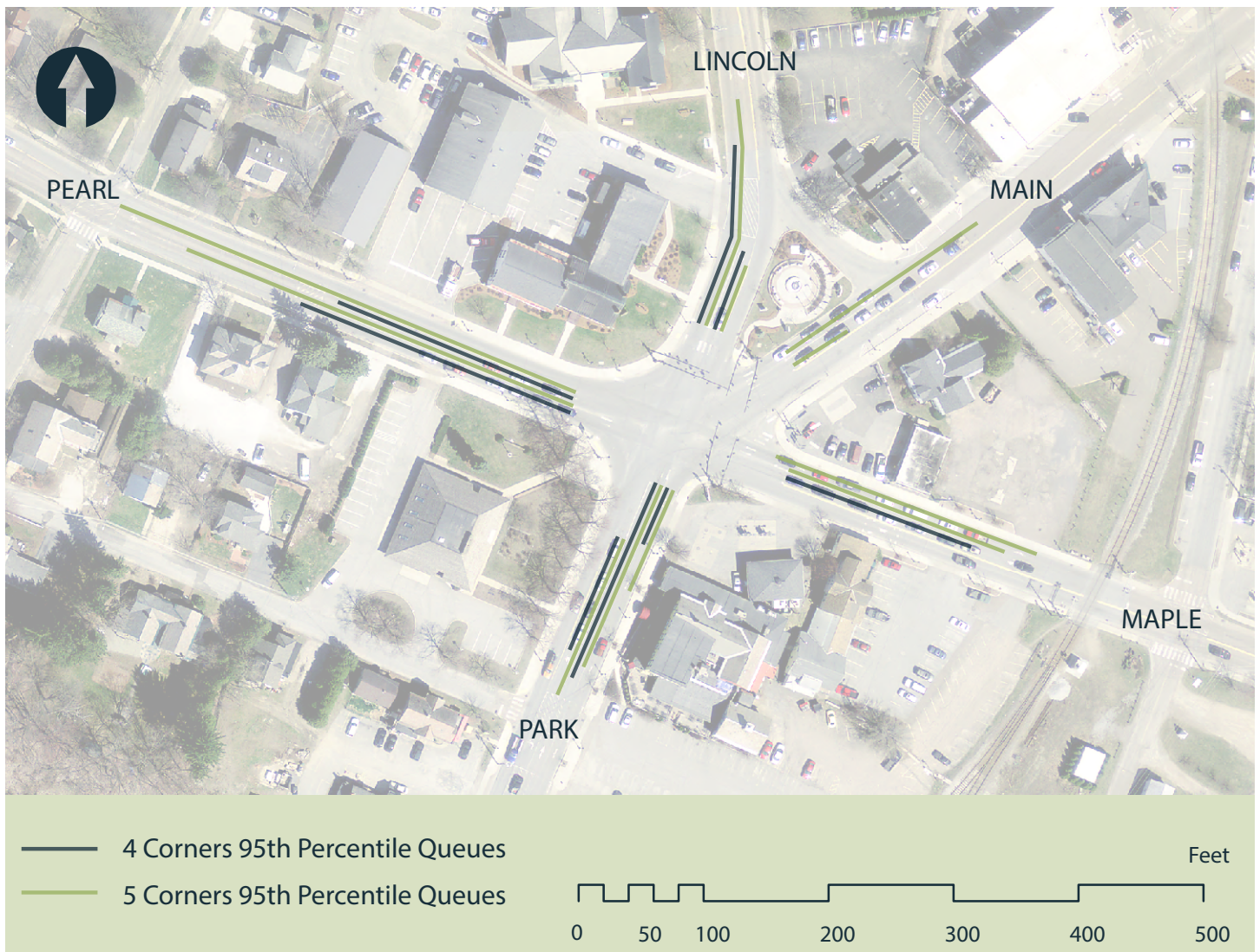


Figure 20: Comparing the 95th Percentile Queues from the SimTraffic model for both 5 Corners and 4 Corners

Safety

Approaching the 5 Corners intersection, Maple Street, Main Street, Lincoln Street, and Pearl Street are all designated as high crash segments by VTrans. A majority of the crashes in this area are rear ends, which are typically the most frequent in areas with traffic congestion. 4 Corners is more efficient and has shorter queues, so the reduction in traffic congestion may also reduce the number of crashes at the intersection.

Complex intersections like 5 Corners have more conflict points between vehicles, pedestrians and cyclists than four-way intersections. These conflict points include places where vehicles merge, diverge, or cross paths in the roadway and represent places where crashes may occur. Figure 23 shows the vehicle paths and pedestrian paths through the 5 Corners intersection. Each point where two lines intersect is indicative of a conflict point; there are 48 in 5 Corners, excluding pedestrian conflicts. The 4 Corners intersection has only 31 conflict points (Figure 24).

Furthermore, 4 Corners is more compact with better sight lines, since all of the legs intersect closer together at a 90° angle. The four-way intersection is much simpler and more clear for users, making it a safer facility.



Figure 21: Rear end crashes in the vicinity of 5 Corners, 2014 - 2018 (Source: VTrans Crash Query Tool)

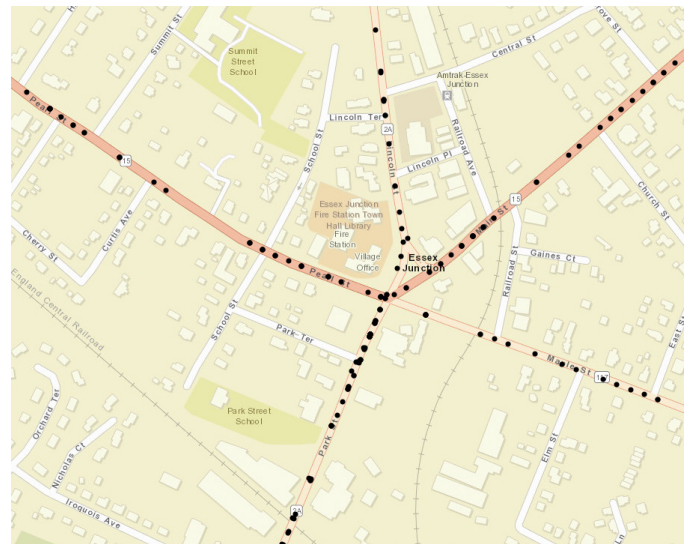


Figure 22: All crashes in the vicinity of 5 Corners, 2014 - 2018 (Source: VTrans Crash Query Tool)

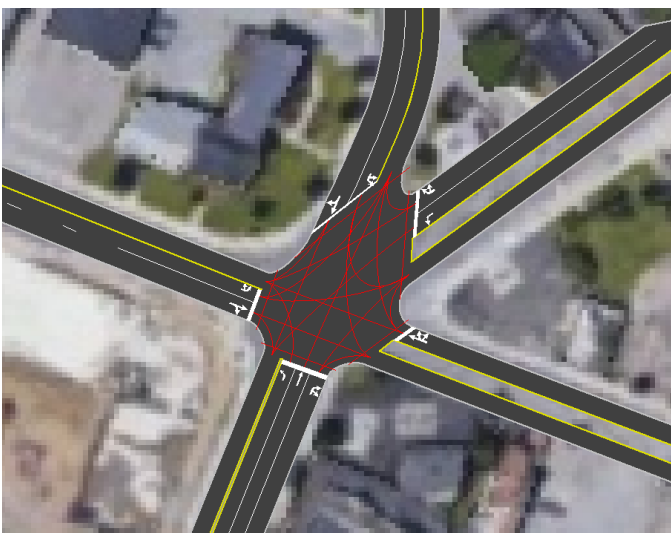


Figure 23: Intersection paths showing the 48 conflict points at 5 Corners



Figure 24: Intersection paths showing the 31 conflict points at 4 Corners

Pedestrian Improvements

The elements in Design 5 Corners create a high quality pedestrian experience in Essex Junction and offer walking as an attractive transportation choice for those living in and visiting the Village.

The benefits of pedestrianizing Main Street and transforming 5 Corners into a four-way intersection are twofold. Similar to the reduction in vehicle delay, the amount of time a person will wait to cross the 4 Corners intersection on foot is drastically reduced. This is because vehicles are only traveling in two directions, and pedestrians are able to cross the street while traffic is moving concurrently. For example, people can cross Maple Street or Pearl Street while vehicles on Lincoln Street and Park Street also have a green light. This configuration is more common and more efficient for both vehicles and pedestrians alike. To improve the safety of people crossing the road, a leading pedestrian interval (LPI) can be used to give people a few seconds head start before traffic starts to move. That way, pedestrians are more visible to turning vehicles.

Additionally, people walking are exposed to less traffic at 4 Corners. The actual distance as well as the number of lanes that people must cross to get to the other side of the road is reduced when the fifth leg of 5 Corners is eliminated, as illustrated in Figure 25. The intersection becomes much smaller and more approachable for pedestrians.

Other amenities for pedestrians in Design 5 Corners create a pleasant and welcoming walking environment. Street trees provide shade in the summer and also a sense of enclosure, which calms traffic and makes walking more comfortable. Having a central green would be a focal point for the village and a destination for pedestrians.

By investing in pedestrian infrastructure, the Village takes a key step in entering a "virtuous cycle," where attractive and walkable streets draw in more people and encourage them to spend more time there, which supports the growth of local businesses, and in turn draws in more people.

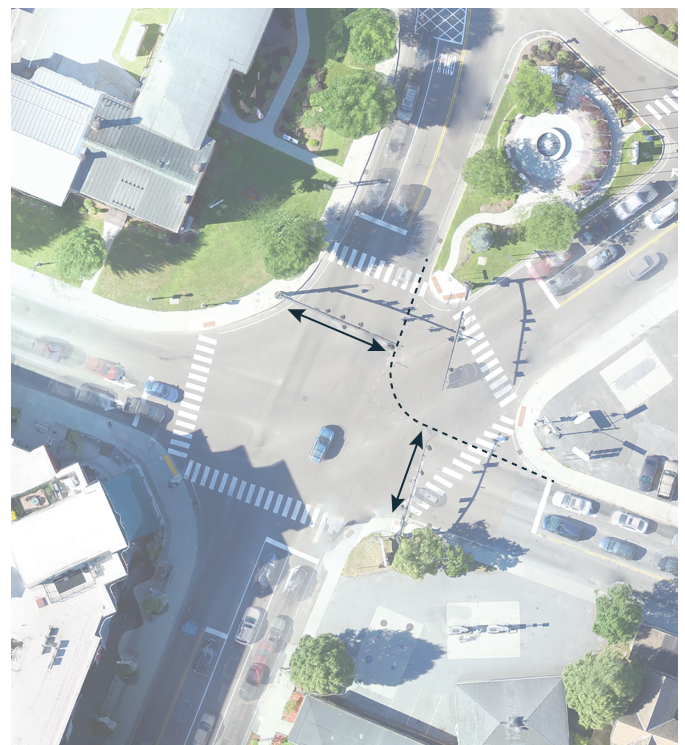
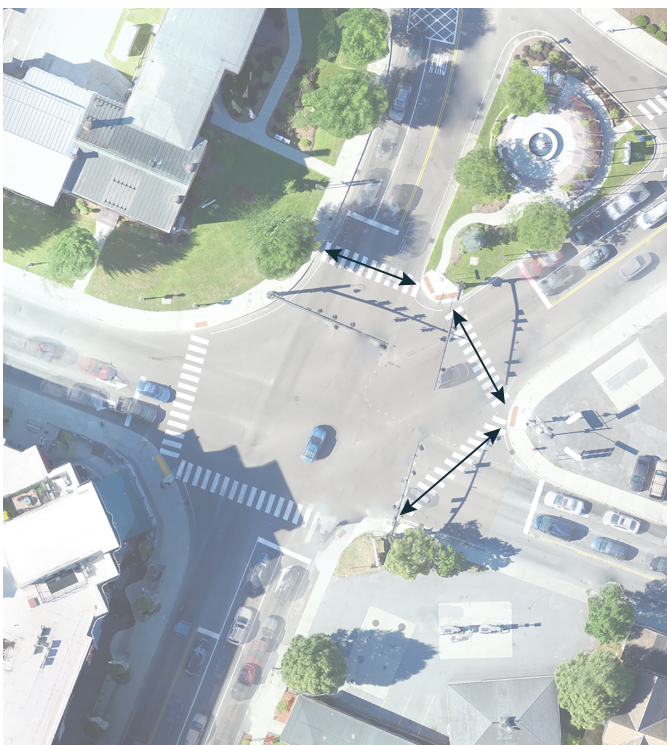


Figure 25: Pedestrian's exposure to traffic at 5 Corners (left) and 4 Corners (right)

Health & Recreation Improvements

Public Space

For the Village to become more vibrant, the amount of space dedicated to cars (roads, parking lots, etc.) needs to be replaced with an increase of people-oriented space. This shift does not have to be substantial if new human-centered spaces, like a village green or pedestrianized street, take advantage of and enhance existing assets, like the businesses on Main Street.

Survey responses indicate that many people would be more likely to walk in Essex Junction if there were more places to go and things to do. By improving the streetscape and creating more human-scaled space, with amenities like a village green, park benches and public gathering spaces,

Essex Junction's Village will become a more inviting place to be.

The enhanced environment will encourage more people to travel by foot or bike to the Village, which has health benefits as well as economic benefits for the whole community.

The Health Benefits of Walking in Your Community

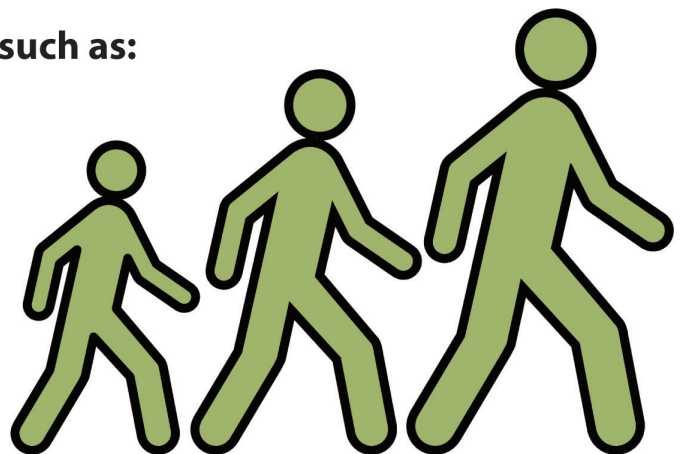


Improves cardiac risk factors such as:

- cholesterol
- blood pressure
- diabetes
- obesity
- vascular stiffness and inflammation
- mental stress

Walking help protect against conditions such as:

- dementia
- peripheral artery disease
- obesity
- diabetes
- depression
- colon cancer



Economic Vitality

Walkable Environment

According to the Urban Land Institute, retail areas with unique visual, cultural, social and environmental qualities provide competitive advantages. Their “place-making dividend” attracts people to visit often, stay longer and spend more money.

One of the most high-profile examples of the economic benefits of creating a walkable environment took place in 2008 when Broadway, a diagonal street through Times Square in New York

City, was closed to traffic and became a pedestrian plaza. Businesses reported revenue increases of 71%.

Walkable communities put people on the street, which supports the local business environment and increases its appeal. Walkers and cyclists are encouraged to visit multiple neighboring stores and—most importantly—locals become repeat customers.



Figure 26 (top): Looking Northwest at Main Street from the 5 Corners intersection as it exists today

Figure 27 (bottom): Looking Northwest at a pedestrianized Main Street with a village green and infill development from 4 Corners
Images courtesy of Julie Campoli



Green Infrastructure

Closing Main Street to vehicles reclaims several thousand square feet that can be used to reduce human impacts on the environment. Adding new green space to the Village and replacing some of the pavement on Main Street with rain gardens has many benefits, including: reducing stormwater impacts, serving as public space, making the street more pleasant, and providing an educational opportunity.

Preliminary calculations based on the Vermont Rain Garden Manual indicate that about 2,000 square feet of rain gardens could absorb the stormwater runoff from the 12,500 square feet of pavement along Main Street (from the 5 Corners intersection to Railroad Ave). They would also provide space for trees, beautifying the street while reducing the amount of stormwater that flows into municipal infrastructure. The addition of

a village green in place of a vacant lot also reduces the amount of stormwater runoff in the Village by replacing impervious pavement with grass and greenspace. Shown in Figure 28, these stormwater and aesthetic improvements would provide:

- 7,580 SF new greenspace
- 41% reduction in impervious area

Another positive aspect of rain gardens, especially when they are next to public spaces where people are able to linger, is that signs can be installed to inform both kids and adults about the water cycle, why the rain garden is there, and how it is helping the rivers and lakes of Vermont.

Existing Impervious Area: 17,915 SF

Future Impervious Area: 10,335 SF



Figure 28: Existing impervious area and future greenspace on Main Street and the 1 Main Street lot

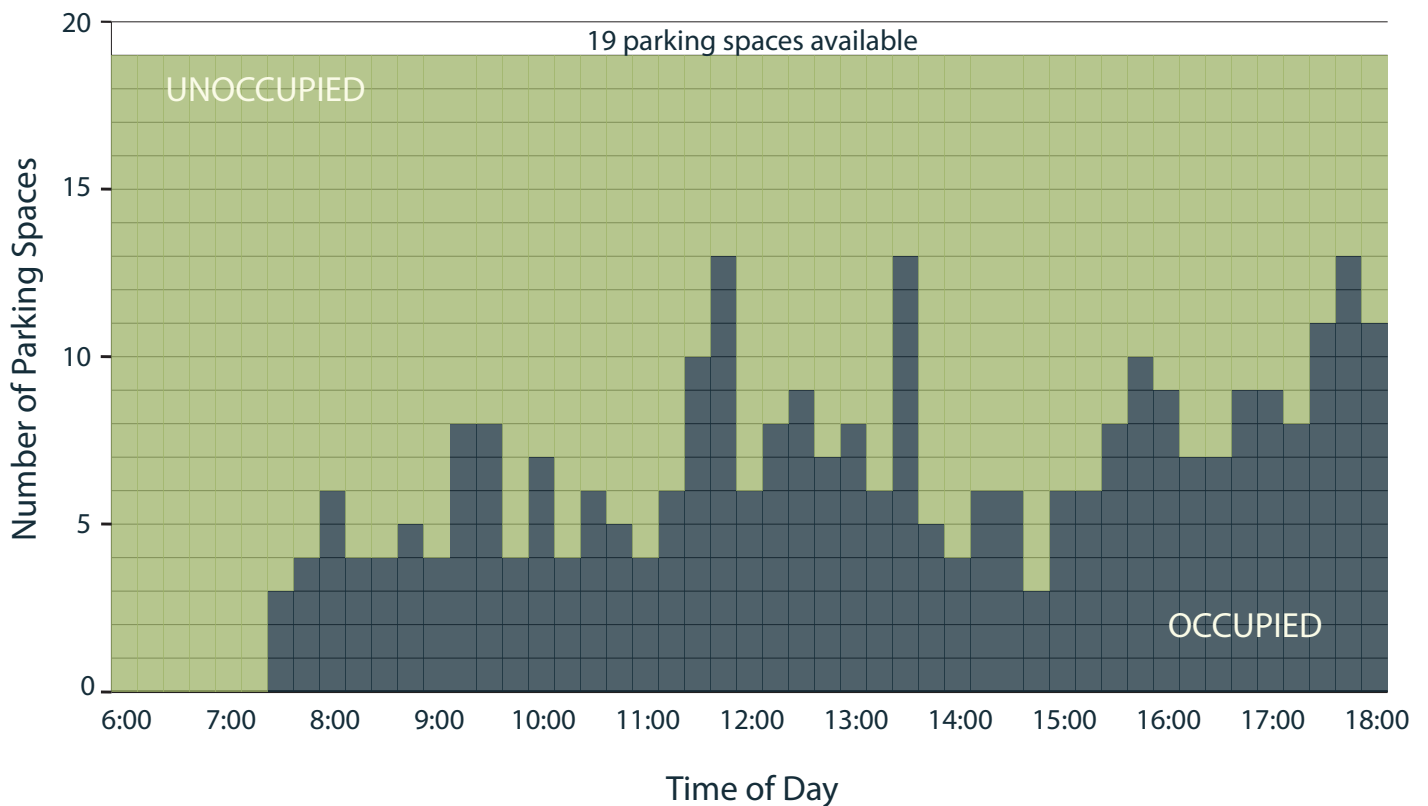
Parking Impacts

There are 19 on-street parking spaces on Main Street between the 5 Corners intersection and Railroad Ave. On Tuesday, July 17, 2018, the CCRPC conducted a 12-hour parking utilization study of these spaces. The results are shown in Figure 29. At no point throughout the day were all of the spaces occupied; at minimum, 6 spaces were available at all times. On average throughout the day, there are 6 out of 19 spaces occupied leaving 13 spaces available.

Though the parking on Main Street is underutilized according to this data, there are several restaurants and shops that still need parking accommodations for customers. Marking more municipal parking spaces as handicap along Railroad Ave at the corner of Main Street would help ensure that everyone can access the

businesses on Main Street, which was mentioned as a concern for aging residents in Essex Junction in the online survey.

According to the current plans, there will be 29 parking spaces along the Crescent Connector, 16 of which are brand new. All of these spaces are within a five minute walk, or less, of Main Street. The improved pedestrian environment will provide a pleasant walk between parked cars and the heart of the Village, and crossing Main Street south of Railroad Ave will be unhindered by passing traffic. As with many other thriving villages and downtowns, people are willing to make a five minute walk between where they park and their destination. The Crescent Connector's 16 new spaces are sufficient in substituting for the parking on Main Street.



Main Street Parking Occupancy

Figure 29: Parking occupancy on Main Street

Implementation

Key Items

This plan can be set into motion as soon as the Crescent Connector is built.

Demonstration Project

- Consult with VTrans to identify any jurisdictional issues with the proposed demonstration project.
- Pedestrianize Main Street using quick build strategies and test the operation of 5 Corners as a four-way intersection
- Using barrier elements including planters, bollards, and delineator posts, block off Main Street to vehicles, conducted over a weekend, when traffic is not as high, collect information to plan a longer demonstration (1 to 2 weeks)
- Work with local businesses to host a kickoff event or festival. A family event with sidewalk chalk contests, painting murals on the road, and live music to celebrate the Village's new public space. Ask for community input on what Main Street should look like.
- Collect data during the demonstration projects - count speeds and volumes on local streets

Update Comprehensive Plan to Incorporate Implementation of 5 Corners Project

- Revise narrative, goals and objectives of the Essex Junction Comprehensive Plan to provide a foundation for the implementation of the 5 Corners Project.

Coordinate with VTrans to Re-designate Route 15

Main Street Reconstruction

- Building rain gardens and reconstructing Main Street as a pedestrian street

Retiming the 5 Corners Signal

- Design new signal phasing for a four-way intersection

Building the Village Green

- Acquiring the Road Res-Q parcel on the corner of Main Street & Maple Street

Considerations

- High speeds are a public concern on neighborhood streets in the Village. Installing traffic calming features, including chicanes or speed humps (among many others), on some key neighborhood street routes would ensure slower speeds throughout the village.