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Report warns against conflicting traffic patterns in downtown Fairbanks

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05.13.10 - 02:38 am



FAIRBANKS – Chronic traffic snarls could emerge if transportation leaders apply both one- and two-way traffic patterns to major downtown streets, consultants said Wednesday.

But the consultants' report also suggests the roads — Cushman and Barnette streets — could generally leave current traffic patterns in place

while using smaller changes to accommodate improvements sought by urban planners and many business owners.

City engineers requested the traffic study last summer after overlapping municipal policies called for returning two-way traffic to the northbound Cushman and its southbound counterpart while leaving the streets' northern ends readied for one-way traffic over bridges — one existing and the other under construction.

The consulting firm, Kittelson & Associates, suggested choosing one-way or two-way traffic but not both.

Either option would carry benefits and drawbacks, and Kittelson engineer John Ringert said two-way traffic held the best prospects for improving downtown's retail climate, while one-way patterns would make things easier for drivers, cyclists and pedestrians to get around.

The report concludes that transportation officials could slow traffic, improve sidewalks and add parking spaces along the two streets, all options previously recommended by the Vision Fairbanks downtown revitalization plan.

However policy makers choose to use downtown's street grid, smaller east-west routes such as Fourth and Fifth avenues can likely handle two-way traffic, Ringert said.

The study counters a smaller 2009 report that had suggested that a complicated blend of two-way traffic and one-way bridges might work.

The new report could present room for compromise on parts of the Vision Fairbanks downtown redevelopment plan, which has met a mixed response from municipal leaders. Members of a technical advisory panel for the community's municipal planning organization, the Fairbanks Metropolitan Area Transportation Systems, chose Wednesday to review the report and formally weigh in early this summer.

Groups backing the Vision Fairbanks plan urged the panel Wednesday to try to return two-way traffic to Cushman Street, the plan's centerpiece. It was converted to one-way in the 1970s to accommodate trucks.

Charles Bettisworth, an architect and a lead proponent of the plan, said the expected economic benefits of the change would outweigh slower driving speeds, as cross-town drivers have other routes from which to choose. Other visitors, however, questioned whether more on-street parking could make it harder to plow snow.

A switch to two-way, the consultants said, would mean another redesign to plans for Cushman and Barnette's intersection in front of the Daily News-Miner and the headquarters for Denali State Bank.

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