

GPA Traffic-Calming Subcommittee competes with other interest groups

With the population of the United States piercing the 300 million mark in October of this year and expected to cross 400 million by mid-century, planners in towns like Guilford have plenty of grist for their mills. Further, the East and West coasts and particularly, areas within the catchments of large cities on the coasts, such as New York, are expected to experience more accelerating trends. This may increasingly pit drivers against a growing volume of bicyclists and walkers. While the Guilford Preservation Alliance can, and has, taken credit for stimulating action on planning for the future of the town center (see our Summer Newsletter: TCS—A Voyage of Discovery), the Alliance has been a late comer to the community's effort to advocate for the lowly pedestrian. But as Town Engineer Jim Portley, the czar of traffic calming in Guilford, says of that effort, "You have to strike a balance" among competing interests, so the GPA joined the competition.

As the Town itself focused on managing growth in the village proper, our Village Center Committee (see lead article in this issue), seeking to coordinate efforts with those of the Town, set up a Traffic Calming Subcommittee to secure a place at the conference table. The subcommittee in 2005 picked up the banner of a pedestrian-friendly town center that had been raised at the GPA's 2004 brain-storming charrette by some 100 local participants, and ran with it. We shortly met with Jim Portley and were soon won over to three initiatives already undertaken by the Town, namely construction of sidewalks, pedestrian crosswalks and traffic islands respectively.

The first of these initiatives had already borne fruit in the ongoing construction of a sidewalk on the east side of River Street between Broad Street and Route 1. Theoretically, sidewalks

serve to define town centers, giving increased coherence to urban precincts as well as attracting pedestrians, who discourage automobile speeding on accompanying streets. The River Street project has demonstrably increased pedestrian traffic there, although it remains to be seen what impact it is having on the speed of vehicular traffic. Portley hopes to extend the sidewalk southward to Water Street.

At the same time, urged by the GPA subcommittee, the Town decided, after lengthy discussion, to build a pedestrian crosswalk across River Street at its intersection with Broad, effectively extending the north sidewalk on Broad Street into the Guilford Land Trust's property along the West River. This should encourage visitors to cross this increasingly fast moving street and enjoy this park, which is a true jewel of the village district.

In the meantime, with our enthusiastic support and that of a number of other organizations, Portley has overseen the design and prospective placement of seventeen pedestrian crosswalks around the Town Green. If all goes according to plan, the crosswalks will be in place by next spring. Their design will resemble that of the crosswalk recently placed on Whitfield Street just south of the train tracks.

Finally, work on the third initiative, traffic islands, has already progressed to a point where mixed feedback can be heard—and attended to. As Portley concedes, some of the islands, especially those in rural areas, have not worked out as anticipated and, accordingly, may be removed. But he defends the new island placed at the new crosswalk on Whitfield Street mentioned above. That island was designed - neighbors say well designed - to discourage speeding in an increasingly residential neighborhood and to facilitate pedestrian crossing of Whitfield Street. However, just a few months after construction, it has been the scene of several minor traffic accidents despite signs at the approach and

on the island itself. Undeterred, Portley points out that the first three accidents, according to the police, involved driving while under the influence and thus tend to support the case for some kind of traffic-calming intervention at that location. Still, as with other islands recently placed in town, he is studying this particular one's effectiveness and contemplating "tweaking" it through lighting or road-surface markings to alert drivers to its presence. He is specifically not planning to erect new street signs. Says Portley, signage, especially in the village proper, has already passed the point of diminishing returns.

--Patrick Smith