

The Star-Ledger

City's epicenter getting a \$20M broad stroke

Newark project for major street is under way

Sunday, April 29, 2007

BY CARMEN JURI

Star-Ledger Staff

Broad Street in Newark will be getting a dramatic makeover that will transform the city's hardworking main drag into a more pedestrian-friendly and aesthetically pleasing gateway to rival those in Chicago, Philadelphia and New York City.

Plans call for plant-filled center medians, bump-outs at intersections, and tree-lined curbs. Construction on the \$20 million project is expected to begin on May 7.

When the work is completed, planners hope Broad Street will resemble North Michigan Avenue in Chicago, Broad Street in Philadelphia and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan -- all streets that Newark studied when designing the Broad Street project.

With the October opening of the Prudential Arena, which will be on Broad Street, city officials said it is the right time to get the project moving.

"It's a holistic approach to a street," Todd said. "It creates an environment where you want to sit, shop. It creates a more familial landscape for the area."

Phase one of the Broad Street project will encompass the area between Clinton and Branford streets.

City engineer Michael Gelin said the changes are intended primarily to address pedestrian safety.

"Broad Street is 90 feet from curb to curb. Pedestrians have problems to cross," Gelin said.

The medians will prevent pedestrians from jaywalking and act as a pedestrian refuge, minimizing the crossing distance. Fence panels, which will be used to link planters, will also prevent mid-block crossing. Intersections will be realigned to make it safer for pedestrians.

While the community has shown enthusiasm for the project, one small aspect of the plan was met with controversy. The original plan called for a median that would block the entrance to Edison Place for those traveling south on Broad.

Ironbound merchants protested, saying that Edison is the most direct route to the business community on Ferry Street. East Ward Councilman Augusto Amador waged a campaign to stop it.

"The mayor and council have agreed the streetscape will not prevent a left turn onto Edison," Todd said.

Though he received assurances from city officials that the street would remain open, Amador, with the help of the Ironbound Business Improvement District, still collected 75 signatures this week from business owners.

He said the petition reinforces the need for the street to serve as a connector from the central business district to the Ironbound.

"As far as I'm concerned, it makes absolutely no sense to build an arena and not allow people to travel from Broad to the Ironbound when there's a sense of urgency connecting the arena to the Ironbound," he said.

"We need to show support, and that's just a little help," said Lizete Costa, IBID board member, in speaking of the petition. "We want to make sure they realize how important it is to keep that street opened."

Costa, whose family runs New Lusitania on nearby Market Street, said closing Edison Place would create a traffic nightmare on the already congested Market Street.

"It would be chaos," she said.

Libby Heller owns Star Parking on Edison Place along with an adjacent 106-year-old building she and a partner are in the process of developing. The renovation of the building will result in a sports bar on the ground floor with residential space above.

"It would have been devastating. Edison Place directly flushes straight to Ferry and West Market into the Ironbound. If you go down Lafayette Street, you go into the residential section," she said.

She said a 2005 traffic study that the city commissioned revealed that some 275 vehicles will make the left hand turn onto Edison Place from Broad Street during peak morning hours. City officials confirmed the report by Vollmer Associates.

"That's how important the street is," she said.

Gelin said the city took the concerns seriously and decided to shorten the median to allow vehicles to turn onto Edison Place. But, he said, if that street becomes a pedestrian alley in the future, the median could always be extended.

Pointing to a 1920s picture of Broad Street, Gelin said the elements of the project will highlight Newark's gloried past. Throughout the Arts District, in the region of Lincoln Park, historic plaques will denote significant political events and figures in Newark's history. A bronze plaque with the city seal is planned for the area known as Four Corners, at Market and Broad Streets.

"We're trying to bring the grandeur that Broad Street had in the past," he said. "To invite people to come to downtown Newark and visit, just like 34th and Seventh Avenue," he said.