

History of College Ave and Walnut St

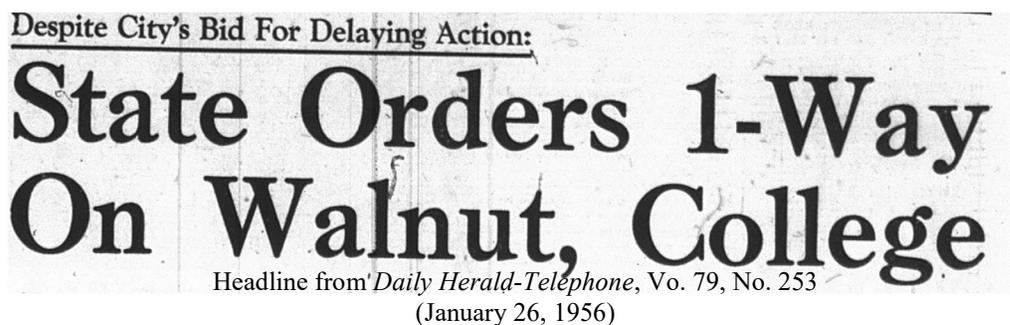
Executive Summary

This report was prepared as part of the College Ave and Walnut St Corridor Study to provide context around the history of the corridor's traffic pattern. In the spring of 1956, Bloomington Common Council voted to designate College and Walnut one-way streets. This was the result of a months-long back-and-forth between the Council and the State Highway Department. Though the one-way proposition was unpopular, the State threatened to withhold funding from College Ave and remove parking along Walnut St unless the traffic pattern was changed. Today, College and Walnut remain one-way streets, which see hundreds of crashes every year. The corridor study is evaluating whether the current traffic pattern serves our community's needs and align with the Bloomington Transportation Plan.

One-Way Debate

On December 20, 1955, Bloomington's Common Council passed a unanimous resolution beginning the process to make College Ave and Walnut St one-way streets. On December 29, the motion was sent to the State Highway Department for its approval, as both streets were state highway routes. The change had first been proposed in April of the same year. This was the final session of the incumbent council before new members were sworn in in January. The new council in January 1956 was made up of a new mayor (Thomas Lemon), six freshman members, and only one experienced member.

At the new council's second meeting on January 17, 1956, it unanimously rescinded the former council's motion to make College and Walnut one-way and returned the matter to the Traffic Commission for further study. In response, the state announced on January 26 that the reversal would not be possible, as the one-way designation had already been approved by the director of the State Highway Department. Mayor Lemon said that the matter "is out of the City's hands." The change was purported to "make parking in the downtown area easier" and "generally increase the flow of traffic." The Bloomington director of traffic and safety said that he believed one-way traffic would be safer than two-way traffic.



In the weeks following this announcement, the one-way proposition faced public backlash. The Bloomington Federation of Labor (BFL) passed a resolution requesting the highway department to delay the one-way project for thirty days so that it could be discussed by the public. Two petitions opposing the change were signed by business owners and residents and presented at the February 21 council meeting. Several businessmen at the meeting, along with two petitions, expressed concerns about how the traffic change would affect businesses. A state official present at the meeting responded to this by saying that most cities were beginning to switch to one-way traffic, and that, in other communities' experience, business traffic returned to normal by the third month of the change. When residents named specific local traffic problems that could arise from the change, the state official admitted that State Highway engineers had only considered the flow of traffic "along the highway route and have not worried about local problems." The state official recommended that the city plan for a six-month trial period, and if it were unhappy with the one-way traffic at the end of the trial, the streets could be reverted. At the end of the meeting, the Council again voted unanimously to oppose one-way traffic on College and Walnut.

On February 24, a state official responded to the Council's motion, calling the move "unwise." He announced that

if the state honored the motion and rescinded the one-way action, "it may then decide to merge Highway 37 traffic through the city, rather than leaving it split on College and Walnut" as it was at the time. He said that "the traffic flow was split originally with the idea that the two streets would become one-way eventually" and "College and Walnut are now 'legally' one-way streets," with the only hindrance to enforcement being the lack of signage.

On March 6, the council considered the traffic commission's February motion favoring one-way traffic on College and Walnut. The council did not vote on the matter. Two days later, on March 8, the state announced that in light of the streets remaining two-way, it would "remove its state highway route from College, putting all through traffic back on Walnut" and ban parking on Walnut to "facilitate the increased flow of traffic." The state would also halt plans to install a stoplight on College Ave and 11th St, "as College may no longer be a state route." A letter to the mayor announcing this said that "it would not be economical for the State to maintain two parallel streets in anticipation of distant future one-way travel." The mayor responded, saying that this move would add an increased burden on Bloomington taxpayers.

In the following week, public opinion changed in reluctant favor of one-ways. Most agreed that one-way traffic on both streets would be better than the state's proposal, and a petition signed by nearly 200 residents favored one-ways. On March 20, 1956, the city council adopted a resolution declaring College and Walnut one-way streets. April 16 was the official changeover date. There were four car crashes along the corridor on the day, and a week later, the director of traffic and safety expressed concern that speeding had increased as a result of the one-ways. Though the city and state had agreed to a six-month trial period, no further discussion of the traffic pattern was had at the six-month mark.



WRONG-WAY MOTORIST—Driver of car left (above) was one of several local motorists who today found themselves going wrong way on Walnut and College after one-way traffic went into effect this morning. Meanwhile, Street Department started working immediately on parking meters and angle parking lanes to make them conform, and no parking signs were hung on meters about Square.

Photo from *Daily Herald-Telephone*, Vol. 79, No. 222 (April 16, 1956)

Conclusion

College and Walnut remain one-way streets today. While they are central in our community and home to hundreds of businesses and thousands of homes, they are not meeting the needs of all our residents. The one-way design facilitates the hundreds of annual crashes along the corridor. One-way streets are correlated with decreased levels of driver attention and high rates of speeding. This makes these streets a high risk to pedestrians and other vulnerable road users. Additionally, one-way streets reduce the visibility of businesses along them. The College Ave and Walnut St corridors have little economic vitality outside of the downtown, likely due in part to the traffic pattern. The corridor study seeks to improve safety for vulnerable road users and enhance the vitality of businesses downtown. This report adds context to why the corridor became one-way and how the community felt about the change. College and Walnut were not made one-way streets to benefit Bloomington, but rather to serve the State Highway Department's goal of making its route more efficient. The decision was made in opposition to the community's desires. Since the state route no longer goes through Bloomington's downtown, we should evaluate whether the current traffic pattern serves our community's needs and meets the standards we have laid out in the Bloomington Transportation Plan.