

Moving Together: Getting Around A-Town



Things will change on July 15th 2011 Walking and Driving Safely to the Library

by Ed Starr

The office of Maryellen Loud, Robbins Library Director, overlooks the busy intersection of Mass Avenue, Spengler Way and Water Street. Here are her comments:

“I often hear the squealing of brakes as cars try to stop at the last minute when they see a pedestrian crossing. When leaving the library I have observed many pedestrians who are in the middle of the crosswalk confronted with automobiles that either drive right by or come to an abrupt stop inches from them. This is a very dangerous intersection as drivers don’t realize a crosswalk is there. It is fortunate that no one has been killed.”

This summer, several changes will take place to improve safety for both vehicles and pedestrians at this intersection. The Board of Selectmen unanimously voted these changes earlier this year:

1. On July 15th, a six-month trial of right turn only out of both Water Street and Spengler (Library) Way to Mass Avenue will begin.
2. Restrict parking on Mass Ave by the library within 40 feet of Spengler Way to improve visibility of the crosswalk for eastbound traffic. (In the absence of a curb extension, a parking restriction is required to ensure adequate driver-pedestrian visibility).
3. Add signage “Do Not Block the Intersection” for eastbound traffic backed up from the Mass Avenue/Pleasant Street signal. (Note that it is illegal to block an intersection).

The six-month trial will begin on July 15, 2011 after these changes have been widely publicized and warning signage has been posted.

Everyone who uses Robbins Library knows that this is a difficult intersection and crosswalk. The Transportation Advisory Committee (TAC) has evaluated this intersection previously, most recently in 2008. Several low cost improvements were made: removing a single parking space on Mass Avenue westbound at Water Street (in front of Dominos) and eastbound (by the library); trimming the plants in the island for visibility; and adding an in-street pedestrian warning sign near the crosswalk. In addition, the crosswalk and advance yield lines were marked with longer lasting thermoplastic instead of paint.

Despite these improvements, crashes continue to occur. In the last three years, there have been 14 motor vehicle crashes, four of them collisions with pedestrians. In late 2010, the Board of Selectmen asked TAC to identify further safety measures to be taken. In response, the TAC and DPW counted pedestrians and vehicle turning movements during several time periods in November 2010. The Arlington Police Department made traffic measurements on Water Street.

From the observations, it was clear that drivers making a left turn from Water Street onto Mass Ave face a difficult situation. They need to keep track of many actions, including two directions of through traffic on Mass Ave, pedestrians crossing Mass Ave, pedestrians crossing Water Street directly in front of them, jaywalkers, left turns from Spengler Way, and left turns from Mass Ave into Spengler Way and into Water Street. This is a total of eight potential conflicts with traffic and pedestrians while making this turn, a large cognitive load even for a good driver. The left turn from Spengler Way is similarly difficult. Thus, the primary safety goal of these changes is to simplify the driver's task, reducing the risk of a misjudgment or confusion that results in a collision. Around 70 percent of drivers exiting Water Street and Spengler Way currently turn right, suggesting that many have already arranged their travel to avoid these difficult left turns.

Several possible improvements were considered, ranging from curb extensions, restricting additional turning movements, beacons, and signalization. Some of these are expensive and take time to implement. After analysis, the TAC made the three short-term recommendations above to the Board of Selectmen, to be re-evaluated after a six-month trial period.

In preparation for the six-month trial, measurements have been taken of traffic on the impacted streets prior to the change. After several months of operation, a comparable set of measurements and observations will be taken, probably in November 2011, to assess the impact of the changes. In the winter of 2012, the TAC will report to the Board of the Selectmen on the effectiveness of these changes and, if needed, suggest further recommendations. Further recommendations might include curb extensions and a high-intensity beacon.

We recognize that the left-turn restrictions on Water Street and Spengler Way will require some residents to change their route of travel when returning from the library or Post Office. However, drivers who do turn right from these side streets will not need to wait for those making left turns and will find their delay reduced.

It is expected that the safety of all users of this intersection, both drivers and pedestrians, will be substantially increased by these changes.

Ed Starr is Co-Chair of the Arlington Transportation Advisory Committee.