

By SABRINA GARRETT

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Tennessee Department of Transportation's proposed plan to redesign the Lebanon Public Square into a roundabout format is currently on hold – but one downtown merchant would like to see plans shelved indefinitely.

Carolyn Markham has operated Markhams Shoes on the Square for the past 21 years and said that while she is in favor of a new safety plan, the proposed plan is going to be “more dangerous.”

The proposed plan would take out parking spaces around the statue of General Hatton and instead place a flow of traffic. Additional parking spaces would be available directly in front of businesses.

“It would be less parking spaces than what we've got now. Even the trucks like the UPS truck are saying they will have a hard time,” she said. Markham added that she distributed a questionnaire to 78 fellow business owners, Square employees and customers. Of these 78 questionnaires, Markham said four were returned in favor of the proposed changes.

“We are not against improvements, but we are against taking away all of this parking,” she said. “We think it is going to be more dangerous for customers who pull up and just hop out.”

Lebanon/Wilson Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Sue Vanatta said that the need for a new plan became a reality after Chamber Board Member Rick Smith was one of two pedestrians to be injured crossing the crosswalk to get to the Square's middle parking area last year.

“It is a safety issue,” she said of the proposed TDOT project in conjunction with the City of Lebanon. “We are willing to work with the city. Yes, you are going to lose a few parking spots – but there are benefits.”

These benefits include safety of Square shoppers and a more aesthetically pleasing design to attract consumers and tourists.

Markham said tourists frequently will venture to Lebanon to see the statue of General Hatton. If the plan goes into effect, she fears they will not be able to pull up next to the statue and park to have their photo taken or be injured crossing the traffic to see it.

Vanatta said the Chamber serves as a chaperone to many groups who wish to visit the statue.

“Typically buses park in the space where the old courthouse used to be and we escort them over to the statue. We can make it happen – the Chamber is there to support the safety project of the Square.”

Crystal Couture store owner Helene Cash is also in favor of the safety project. “I love the idea of a safety project through TDOT and the roundabout readjusted to park in front of the stores. It is much safer for the customers that are coming to the Square. I have had positive feedback from customers who have seen the plans and have heard about it through the grapevine. They are in support of it,” she said.

“We need to address the safety,” Lebanon Mayor Philip Craighead said, adding that he is in favor of the proposal. “If you talk to anybody who has been on the Square – their biggest concern is trying to get from the center to the businesses or the Chamber without getting hit by a car – and for drivers, their biggest concern is trying not to hit somebody when they circle.”

Craighead said the plan that has been presented qualifies Lebanon for financial assistance from the state on the project. “The state will pay for those improvements and that will take the burden off the citizens of Lebanon.”

Staff Writer Sabrina Garrett may be contacted at sgarrett@wilsonpost.com .