

Plan On It

A Dutchess County Planning Federation eNewsletter



May/June 2017

Hay Bales and Toilet Plungers *New Tools for Reshaping Your Community*

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Planning blogs were abuzz recently with the curious case of some 120 tactically deployed toilet plungers along a stretch of 63rd Street in Omaha, Nebraska.

Plungers were wrapped in reflective tape and glued along an existing painted bike lane, physically demarcating vehicular and bicycle traffic. The eye-catching move, carried out by a group of bicycling advocates in an accident-prone area of 63rd Street, was intended to draw attention to the lower speeds and overall safety that protected bike lanes often result in. Albeit an extreme example, this group of advocates executed an increasingly popular approach of using low-cost materials to test out ideas, such as street redesign or improvements to the public realm, before investing large sums of money. This test-before-you-invest strategy has become known in jargon-rich planning circles as **tactical urbanism**.



Toilet plungers deployed as a makeshift protected bike lane in Omaha, Nebraska. [Photo credit: Omaha World-Herald]

Despite its academic sounding name, tactical urbanism is simply a pragmatic way for communities to experiment with an idea before committing to full-scale implementation. In 2009, Times Square in New York City was famously closed to traffic with a little bit of paint, some planters and a lot of beach chairs. While the move was not universally embraced at first, after a year of data collection the New York City Department of Transportation found that shutting down Times Square to traffic actually improved congestion in the area, and even more importantly, the move reduced pedestrian accidents. Eventually, a majority of New Yorkers, visitors and the business community came to appreciate how the pedestrian plaza improved Times Square. On an admittedly grand scale, New York City proved that even in the densest, most congested area of the country's largest city, the simplicity of tactical urbanism can work. But how can it work in your community? Let's look at an example from closer to home: the City of Poughkeepsie's Market Street Connect project, launched in October 2016.

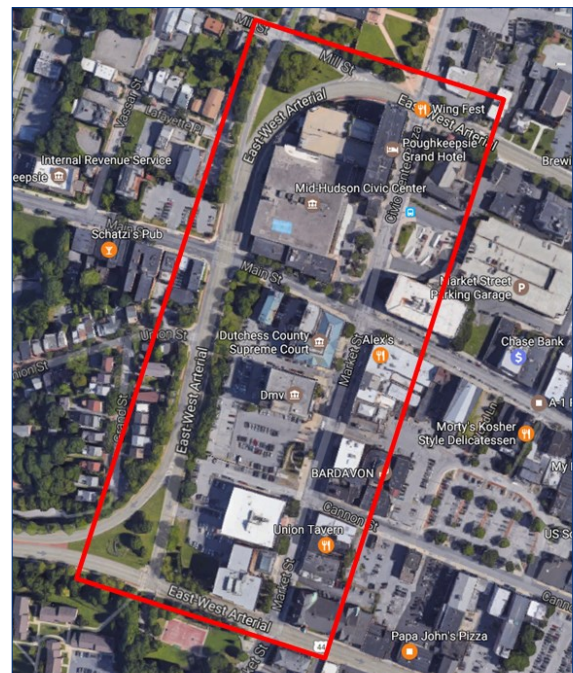


Times Square before (left) and after (right) being closed to vehicle traffic and turned into a pedestrian plaza. [Photo credit: New York City DOT]

Employing Tactical Urbanism Locally

In the City of Poughkeepsie between the east-west arterials, Market Street is the city's primary civic corridor. Important anchors along these three blocks include Dutchess County government, courts, community and family services, and New York State DMV. Other major anchors include the Bardavon Theater, Mid-Hudson Civic Center and Grand Hotel. Restaurants, cafes, a variety of small shops and the city's Transit Hub round out the other land uses along this stretch.

For all of this, Market Street is a destination, particularly during the day. It's also a primary gateway into the city's downtown, especially for people coming off Route 9 and the Mid-Hudson Bridge. So what's the problem with Market Street, and why was a tactical urbanism intervention conducted last fall?



Focus area for the Market Street Connect project. Click on map for larger image.

This stretch of Market Street is a three-lane, one-way northbound street designed to move traffic as expeditiously as possible. For motorists entering the City of Poughkeepsie from Route 9 or the Mid-Hudson Bridge, turning left onto Market Street places you into a complex loop of one-way streets that encircle the county office complex. For motorists unfamiliar with these streets, it's easy to become confused and disoriented. If you passed your destination but noticed this too late, to turn around can become a frustrating case of "you can't get there from here," especially when entering the east-west arterial loop. Even more frustrating is the pedestrian experience along this corridor. Because of the

concentration of both visitors and employees in this location, Market Street is one of the busiest pedestrian areas of the city; and that presents numerous potential hazards as pedestrians are forced to cross a wide street, sometimes mid-block, amidst busy traffic. It is precisely because of the busy pedestrian traffic on Market Street that the City of Poughkeepsie sought to experiment with how to make this street safer for all users. Enter: the Market Street Connect demonstration project.

Market Street Connect

Fundamentally, the safety problems along Market Street are a design problem, and this type of problem has a design solution. The concept of making Market Street a “[complete street](#)” — essentially ensuring that all users of the street are given equal consideration, including pedestrians, bicyclists, persons with limited mobility, transit users and motorists — has been discussed for a number of years. The city secured a grant from the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority to study, in part, how the pedestrian environment and safety could be improved. With the grant, the city was able to hire Sam Schwartz Engineering and Street Plans Collaborative to help with the effort. Each firm has extensive experience in these kinds of demonstration projects, with Street Plans literally [writing the book on tactical urbanism](#). While the broader project goals were to reduce vehicle trips and promote a positive pedestrian experience in all downtown streets, Market Street was chosen as an opportunity to test how complete streets interventions could be introduced in a tactical urbanism style, both as a proof of concept and as a replicable model for other downtown streets.

With the team in place, planning for the demonstration project began in the summer of 2016. After some initial public engagement with businesses, employees, visitors and other stakeholders along Market Street to discuss issues and potential solutions, two main design concepts were produced: 1) a two-way conversion of the street with one northbound lane, one southbound lane, turning pockets at intersections and curb extensions at pedestrian crossings, and 2) a “road diet” consisting of a reduction in lanes from three to two, maintaining northbound direction but expanding the public realm into the street. Because of the complexity of the two-way conversion of the street, especially considering the intersections with the New York State DOT-controlled east-west arterials, option 2 was chosen for our one-day traffic experiment.

Hay Bales, Chalk and Safety Cones

The plan called for the deployment of several hundred traffic cones, large planters and hay bales strategically placed to block off the westernmost lane to traffic, filling that space with café tables and chairs, artificial turf and spray chalk art on the pavement; artistic crosswalks painted at the intersection of Main and Market; and information booths and activity stations set up at each leg of the Main and Market intersection. In order to pull this off, considerable coordination was required with city and county Public Works staff, Dutchess County Department of Emergency Response, City of Poughkeepsie Police and Dutchess County Sheriff’s Office, as well as an army of local volunteers.



In the early morning hours, the project team worked to close a lane with traffic cones and create artistic crosswalks ahead of the morning rush hour.

In the early morning hours of October 7th, city staff, consultants and volunteers began executing this grand experiment, narrowing Market Street from three to two lanes and adding in pedestrian amenities ahead of the morning rush hour. More than 30 volunteers came throughout the day to help enliven the newly created pedestrian spaces with temporary chalk art. The project team staffed feedback tables, handed out pre-stamped postcard surveys to motorists at stop lights, and talked with more than 250 members of the community, making this a highly successful method of public engagement. Getting the public to come out to any workshop can be challenging, but taking the proposal directly to the public, allowing them to experience the plan in “real time,” proved highly effective. Although not everyone initially understood what we were doing, the demonstration project was so visible and so provocative that people were galvanized to talk with us about the project.

A Successful First Effort

The feedback we received from the public was enormously helpful and overwhelmingly positive. People were appreciative that we were trying anything at all, but they really appreciated the focus on making Market Street safer and more pedestrian friendly. For one day last fall, we narrowed the street. Narrower streets are slower streets, and slower streets are safer streets for all users. The walking public understood this very well.

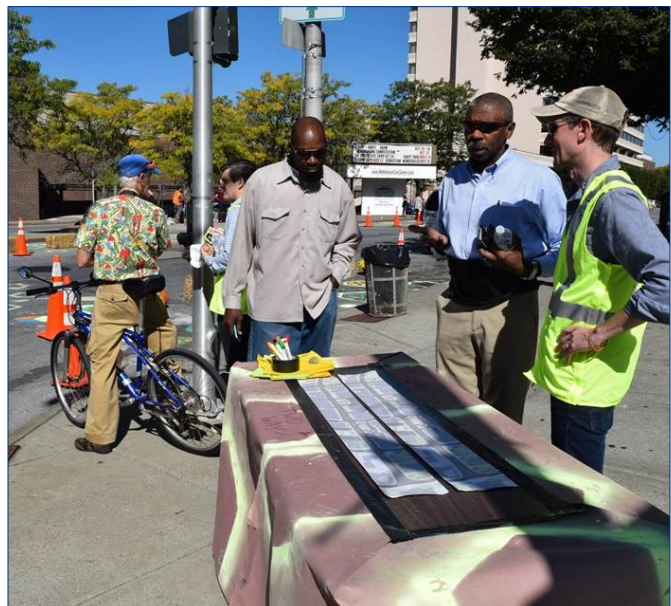
Another important discovery was that the reduced number of lanes did not result in worsened traffic congestion, an early concern expressed by some. Building on this successful, one-day traffic experiment, the city plans to test a more extended pilot street design of making Market Street 2-way for the course of six months to a year in order to test the impacts. Keep your eyes open for this temporary transformation. We would love your feedback, and it will be a great opportunity to see tactical urbanism in progress.

Is Tactical Urbanism Right for Your Community?

A tactical urbanism approach can work in any community as long as the situation is appropriate. For local governments working in the current milieu of ever-diminishing funding, using low-cost materials and ingenuity can lead to a valuable learning experience



Pedestrians enjoyed the expanded sidewalk with café tables and chairs, planters, hay bales and artificial turf.



City staff discussed the project with the public at Main and Market Street.

and demonstrate that change really can happen in a short amount of time. Some experiments lead to long-term improvements, while others may not work out as well as hoped. But there's as much value in failure as there is in success, and if you have a hazardous intersection or street corridor one thing is for certain: if you don't try something, nothing will change. So pay attention the next time you find yourself traveling along a stretch of road that could use some improvements; get creative and think about how you can work with your local government officials and highway superintendents to test out your idea. Who knows, it could lead to lasting change, and you'll probably have fun trying it out.

More Information

[Poughkeepsie City Center Connectivity Plan](#)

[Full Summary of Market Street Connect Demonstration Project](#)

[Group Glues 120 Toilet Plungers onto Omaha Street to Show What a Protected Bike Lane Could Do](#), Omaha World-Herald article

[Times Square/Broadway Pedestrian Plan](#)

[Tactical Urbanist's Guide to Materials and Design](#)

[Street Plans Collaborative](#)

[Sam Schwartz Engineering](#)

[What Are Complete Streets?](#) – Smart Growth America

[National Association of City Transportation Officials](#)

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