

# Linden is for People: Contact City Hall Today!

**Important: Please email your comments to the Planning Commission at [kathleen.onufer@richmondgov.com](mailto:kathleen.onufer@richmondgov.com) and cc: VCU President Michael Rao at [president@vcu.edu](mailto:president@vcu.edu)! The meeting is Monday, June 20.**

Who should our public spaces be for? This question is often forgotten, and now the City and VCU have a plan to widen a street in the heart of the Monroe Park campus and keep it unsafe for the vast majority of its users.

## What's going on?

In between the VCU library and two other VCU buildings is a small stretch of [N Linden Street](#), running from Floyd to Grove Avenue. **For about half a century, VCU has been committed to opening it up to pedestrians by closing it to motor vehicle traffic.** This was reaffirmed in its [2013 Master Plan](#) (pg 100), which is still current VCU policy, which was passed with community and student input. VCU needed approval from various city departments to close the right of way to cars, and it received that approval.

But sometime in the past year, something happened. **A few people inside VCU's planning department decided they knew best.** They in fact didn't want to pedestrianize the street, and so they quietly lobbied against their own plan, and got a city department to withdraw its approval. Now, they say, the city is preventing them from giving up the right of way, so even though official VCU policy is still to pedestrianize the street, the city bureaucrats are not letting them do it.

## So what are they proposing now?

The [plans](#) call for narrowing the street from 30 feet to 21 feet, widening the sidewalks, removing parking on both sides of the street and creating a contra-flow bike lane (going north).

## That sounds great; what's the problem?

They certainly made it sound so, but the devil is in the details.

- *Lane widths:* Currently, there is parking on both sides of the street, which means the travel lane is only about 12 feet mirror-to-mirror. While very wide already, this keeps cars moving at least somewhat slowly. However, **the plan will actually increase the travel lane to 14 feet**, which is in fact two feet wider than the standard on interstates! In fact, **the proposed lane width violates the city's own Urban Design Guidelines**, which state that "the lane widths on local and collector streets should be between 9 and 10 feet" and "[a]n 11 foot travel lane should only be utilized along corridors designed for speeds in excess of 40 mph." (PDF pp-10) At the Urban Design Committee the VCU planner said this was due to wide vehicles like trucks and emergency vehicles, but Virginia State Code mandates a [maximum vehicle width of 8.5 feet](#). **While the city classifies this change as**

**a "road narrowing" (which it is because the curb-to-curb distance will be narrowed), because of the elimination of parking the width of the driving (aka travel) lane will actually widen.**

- *Unprotected bike lane:* The bike lane will be the absolute minimum 5 feet wide with a two-foot buffer. However, people often double park near campus, and cars trying to get around double-parked **cars will frequently invade a bike lane** to get around unless there is a physical barrier preventing them from doing so. **Because there is no protection for the bike lane, and because two vehicles can fit side-by-side in the 21 feet curb-to-curb width**, we can expect many cars to be driving or parking in the bike lane. VCU should not have to station an officer there all day to enforce safety; **safety should be by design.**
- *Incompatible with the adjoining campus:* South of this stretch of Linden, from Floyd to Main and Main to Cary, VCU has pedestrianized what used to be a street. It is filled with students and locals walking and biking. They've done the same at the other end, where the Compass is pedestrianized in all four directions. **This urban, walkable area makes VCU what it is; no one would propose opening up the campus to cars!**

**VCU must have consulted with its community and come to a consensus about this change of plans, right?**

Wrong! VCU has barely talked with anyone. No letter has been sent to students, staff or faculty about this, and in fact we found out about this by overhearing a conversation about it at City Hall. When talking with students and employees on campus, many were excited that the street would finally be pedestrianized now that the library renovation is over, and they were disappointed to hear plans had been changed behind closed doors without any notice.

**Well surely they'll have a public meeting about this before it goes through, right?**

Wrong again! Not only is there no public meeting for the VCU community, but the two city meetings required by law are being held this month, in June, when most members of the VCU community are away.

**Well, they're having a June meeting because that's what fits the timeline, right?**

That's what they said when they testified at the first city meeting. But when a committee member asked why the project was going straight to final approval instead of going through conceptual approval first, like almost every other project does, they said it was because the project's design was so far along and so detailed that it was basically ready to send out for bids.

**But if it's that detailed, surely they knew about it while the spring semester was going on and could have held a meeting then, right?**

Well, this is coming from the institution that held a [student forum about the tuition increase in the middle of finals week](#).

**Ok, so what's the City's position on this?**

In reviewing this item, the city's staff quoted from the Downtown Master Plan, mentioning this item for its section on VCU: **"A key recommendation ... is to protect 'the pedestrian character, college atmosphere, and security of the campus'."**

### **How does allowing cars to drive through campus protect its pedestrian character, college atmosphere and safety?**

We have no idea, and no one has yet been able to answer that question. We believe it is in direct opposition to each of these three goals.

### **But isn't a connected street grid important?**

The Downtown Master Plan does mention the importance of the street grid, and in general street grids are good: suburban cul-de-sacs isolate neighborhoods and move too much traffic onto arterials that are unsafe and uncomfortable for people to walk and bike on.

But not every street is the same. The 6th Street Marketplace's failure in the 1980s has colored the city's thoughts on street closures ever since, but this is not a marketplace. It's a college campus. And the heart of VCU, most of which is already pedestrianized. **The grid in VCU is not a car grid but a walking grid: that's the grid we need to protect!** This small portion of Linden connects the pedestrian network around the Compass to the one around the Student Commons: it is the missing link in VCU's pedestrian grid. **No one has ever looked at the Compass and said, "Boy, you know what would make this so much better? Cars driving through it!"**

### **Isn't this a balanced plan, a good compromise?**

The only compromising thing about this plan is that it compromises the character and safety of the campus and its users! **People often define compromise as allowing everything, but that just makes it unsafe for everyone.** Car traffic should stick to Harrison, Laurel and Belvidere; **allowing cars to use Linden just funnels them onto Floyd, our first and only Bike Walk Street.** Pedestrianizing this section of Linden is different from other grid streets, because it wouldn't block a long street, cutting it in two; it's already only one block long, and most users would just use Harrison or loop back onto Grove or Park. No one is talking about closing down Broad or Main!

### **But shouldn't cars have equal access?**

Drivers often say that the public right of way should be divided according to the number of people using each mode. Fair enough. We did a time-use survey recently and found that in a 30-minute period there were **34 people in motorized vehicles, 22 people on bicycles and 778 people walking. 96% of Linden's users are not using a motorized vehicle, yet cars will get a 14-foot travel lane while pedestrians will be squeezed onto sidewalks.**

**This plan will give 4% of users 40% of the space.** We design interstates for cars; we should design our busiest pedestrian environments without cars.

## Well, what about access to adjoining buildings?

All adjacent buildings are owned by VCU, and the one single-family home in all the adjoining blocks has one resident, an older woman who is happy to pedestrianize the street.

## But aren't there deliveries to the library?

Absolutely, and those need to be maintained, along with access for maintenance and emergency vehicles. But private motor vehicle access is not necessary to allow these uses: UPS trucks drive onto private VCU property all the time; it doesn't need to be right of way to maintain vehicle access.

## Won't these vehicles create conflict with pedestrians?

Of course, the VCU planner made that argument. But they'll also create conflict with pedestrians if the street remains open to cars, and it won't just be these few deliveries and tree trimmers but an average of nearly 1,000 other vehicles per day that pedestrianization would remove. If VCU is so concerned about vehicles in pedestrian areas creating conflict maybe it should remove [its pickup trucks sitting on the Compass last week](#) and its [riding lawn mower off the brick pedestrian plaza](#) (and this is a common occurrence).

## Won't the city have to pass an ordinance to close the right-of-way, which will require more work?

Yes, that's exactly why the VCU planner didn't want to do it. But the city had already said they would be willing to do this; we shouldn't have a flawed plan for decades just because some bureaucrats didn't want to fill out some paperwork.

## So what should the city and VCU do? What does a real balanced plan look like?

Well, besides having an open and transparent public process, something neither has been very good about recently, **there is a plan that has already been approved by the VCU community, VCU's Board of Visitors, the Fan District Association, adjoining property owners, and all relevant city departments: Pedestrianize Linden to make it like the rest of VCU's campus.**

- Make Grove and Park a one-way loop for motor vehicles, clockwise or counterclockwise, so cars are pushed away from Linden and the heart of campus;
- Construct the visually appealing circular brick proposal at each end of Linden to visually and physically differentiate campus from the road network, and add signs restricting traffic onto the street to VCU use only (including delivery truck, maintenance and emergency use)
- Put bricks along the entire length of Linden, raising it to the level of the sidewalk, just as with Linden south of Floyd and the area around the Compass; this connects the pedestrian network and highlights the contrast with the road network;

- Give up the public right-of-way and put bollards on Linden just south of the entrance to the alley, forcing everyone to exit using the alley instead of going to Floyd, but allowing pedestrian access, and bollards on both sides of Floyd so cars don't try to enter now that the intersection is raised.

This is a truly balanced plan, that diverts cars away from the center of a college campus, allocating space to the 96% of users who aren't in a motorized vehicle while keeping access for necessary vehicles. It is safer, preventing dangerous interactions between unprotected users and cars trying to cut through campus. It integrates better with the campus, which is pedestrianized in almost all directions from Linden. And it is what everyone agreed upon before a few faceless bureaucrats reversed almost half a century of VCU policy without so much as a whisper of community involvement.

### **What can I do to help?**

Please **email the City Planning Commission** to register your displeasure with this plan. It doesn't have to be long (but can be); just mention any of the many reasons you think this plan needs to go back to the drawing board. Members of the VCU community are important (students, staff, faculty, alumni), but so are people who live and work in the city, or just love the city. Email [kathleen.onufer@richmondgov.com](mailto:kathleen.onufer@richmondgov.com) and cc: VCU President Michael Rao at [president@vcu.edu](mailto:president@vcu.edu).

You can also show up in person to testify at the Planning Commission Monday, June 20 at 1:30 p.m. at City Hall, 900 E Broad St in the 5th Floor Conference Room.