

REPORT TO THE PLYMOUTH COMMUNITY REGARDING PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES ON THE SHELDON ROAD UNDERPASS PROJECT

**By: Alan C. Helmkamp, Assistant Wayne County Executive
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Judging by recent inquiries from interested persons, it's time to provide another periodic update to the Plymouth Community about the status of the Sheldon Road Underpass Project. Let's start by acknowledging the obvious- that the project has experienced some difficulties and delay over the summer, including the lack of observable construction and the August flooding. The Plymouth Observer has reported some of these problems, but this is an opportunity to provide additional information and describe progress that is not readily noticeable, as well as challenges.

The good news is that by the time you read this, contractors are expected to again be on site doing "jack and bore" digging for the new water main, to be followed by mass excavation of dirt at the railroad crossing and construction of the temporary bypass tracks. The pump house has been constructed, and key components such as the 30" water main gate valve is being fabricated following months of design work with the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD).

So what has been the biggest hold up? "Among the problems involved in this project was the relocation and reconstruction of existing utilities..." This statement comes from the Wayne County Board of Road Commissioners in its Annual Report for 1941! Although it obviously refers to a different railroad grade separation project, this conclusion has uncanny relevance to our project. It really does seem that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

This complex project involves various government agencies, the CSX Railroad, DWSD, many contractors, some building owners in the project area and utilities such as DTE and AT&T. Coordinating such a substantial undertaking requires that all parties perform their required tasks on time and in a particular order. If one entity drops the ball, like a domino effect other tasks are delayed.

The utility companies have both underground and overhead facilities like fiber optic cable and electric transmission lines that must be relocated. When this project began, DTE committed to completing its many required jobs by June 1, according to the Walter Toebe Construction Company, the general contractor. DTE had a company wide computer system change earlier this year that delayed design work for their eight jobs on this project. There were other complicating factors, including coordination delays with the building owner at 909 Sheldon, regarding the relocation of electric lines at that location.

Recently, DTE has made some progress by completing portions of its work, but is still playing catch up, as many of its jobs remain unfinished. AT&T has been

working steadily for months, but its removal of underground fiber optic cable currently is the “top priority” before the mass excavation of dirt on the north side of the tracks can begin. It is crucial that the large utility companies and the other participants appreciate the importance of this project to the community and continue to assign whatever resources are necessary to complete their tasks on a timely basis.

Another question that has been raised is whether a temporary access road can be constructed to reopen Sheldon while the construction continues? There was active consideration of this proposal when design started back in 1998. Ultimately a bypass road could not be included in the plans in large part because the owner of the building at 909 Sheldon would not make its front parking lot available, as the temporary road would come within ten or twelve feet of its front door.

Adding a bypass road now cannot be accommodated. Although one large tenant has left 909 Sheldon, other large companies are still tenants and the front parking lot at that location is still fully used. In addition, it could take a year or more to acquire the necessary property interests, railroad permits, and design and construct the temporary road.

We recognize that some persons most affected by this project probably will not find these explanations very satisfactory. Everyone involved in leadership understand and appreciate the sacrifices being made by Sheldon businesses and residents and do not take their concerns lightly. The government leaders of Plymouth Township, Plymouth City and Wayne County regularly communicate with the engineers so that they understand the situation, and press for progress. Emergency agencies like police and fire are getting to where they need to be during the shutdown.

As the pace of construction picks up, we anticipate finding ways to mobilize additional resources during the remaining fall and through the winter, which is predicted to be relatively mild. In the face of frustrating challenges, those of us who are working on this project in good faith want to assure the community that we are doing everything reasonably possible to complete this project on schedule by the end of 2008. However, the odds of that occurring are becoming longer and will require the utmost cooperation from all participants to catch up and then stay on schedule.

The support of the community is helpful in encouraging all the participating agencies, contractors and utilities to make this project a top priority. In the meantime, we encourage folks to support affected businesses in the community. We also invite communication if there are additional questions or concerns. When the project is completed, the elimination of traffic delays waiting for trains and having an uninterrupted north-south artery for northwestern Wayne County will be a great benefit. Until that day, we appreciate the continuing patience and cooperation of all concerned.

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