

Lakeshore Drive Corridor Project – FAQ's

Starting soon contractors will begin taking down the parking deck that has been on the waterfront since 1978. The “big deck”, as a lot of people call it, has been a fixture downtown for more than a generation. Once the deck has been demolished the street will be rehabilitated with new sidewalks, a pedestrian plaza will be built on Pewabic Street, the two parking lots will be improved, and rain gardens will be built. That part of Lakeshore Drive will be able to become a contributing part of our downtown.

Following are answers to frequently asked questions about the deck and the project.

Why did the City build the deck?

When malls were being built all over the country many downtowns suffered. One way for downtowns to combat the convenience of malls was to create a lot of really convenient parking for shoppers – just like malls had. The City was able to obtain a large grant in the 1970's which funded most of the deck construction. Back then the Houghton waterfront was not what it is today. It was mostly warehouses, railroad tracks, and bare gravel. There were no trees, no recreational trail, no parks, no gardens, and so on. Putting the deck there made sense at the time.

Why is the City tearing the big parking deck down?

The deck is more than 40 years old. It was never designed to last forever. The City cannot afford to maintain such a large piece of infrastructure. Taking it down before it experiences a major failure protects the public.

Didn't the City maintain it?

The deck did not have any major maintenance work done for many years. In about 2011 a structural inspection was done that recommended the City either take the deck down or invest in some maintenance that would extend its useful life for another 10 years or so. The City paid for over \$1 million worth of work then which extended the life of the deck. We are nearing the end of the life of “10-year fix” and now millions more would have to be invested to keep it safe – and as the deck ages the cost of constantly repairing it is not affordable.

Why didn't the City put more money into the deck over the years?

It did to some extent, but the funds needed for major maintenance were only committed once the need became critical. The parking fund did not, and still does not, generate enough money annually to maintain something as expensive as the big deck along with plowing and other maintenance.

Why didn't the City charge more for parking so there would have been money to fix the deck?

When the deck was built there were parking meters on it, but many complained that shoppers should not have to pay so they were removed. Even then there was still a lot of unused parking on the deck. The City sold passes to downtown employees to park on it, but the price of those passes did not generate the needed funds for maintenance.

What was wrong with the deck? Wasn't it designed to last longer?

The way it was designed, the structure is susceptible to corrosion, mostly from road salt that falls off of cars, which weakens the steel cables inside the concrete. The deck slab itself is only about 7 inches thick. The cables inside pull on the concrete to hold it together. A few years after this one was built the concrete industry no longer recommended building parking decks like they built ours in northern climates because of the same problems we have with our deck.

What about those other smaller decks, do they have the same problems?

The four other decks were built out of precast concrete beams on steel frames which is much different than the way the big deck was built. The steel frames look similar, but the concrete used is very different. They can be more easily maintained because of their smaller size and the way they were built.

Where is everybody supposed to park with no deck?

Every professional parking study Houghton has had done has shown a surplus of parking downtown. During construction, persons with permits will park in other locations according to a brochure that has been distributed. Once the project is done there will be two large parking lots where the deck once stood. Permits will be sold to persons wanting to park in those lots. The City has a lot of underused public parking around downtown which will be put into use.

What about covered overnight parking after the deck is gone?

Overnight parking will be in the surface lots along the waterfront with overnight parking on one side of the lot or the other to allow for snow removal. There will be a number of covered spots available under some of the other smaller decks.

Why doesn't the City just build a new deck there?

There are a lot of reasons. First is that we cannot afford one. A new parking structure costs about \$30,000 per parking space. If just replacing the 220 or so spaces on the top deck a new deck would likely be more than \$7,000,000. The original deck was an incredibly inefficient use of the space over the large surface area. Also, it can be debated if it even makes sense for the City to build a parking deck on today's beautiful waterfront, so if the amount of land were to be minimized the cost would be more like \$11,000,000 to make up the number of spaces.

Where did the City get the money to do this project?

The City Council obtained a bond, which is a loan, to take the deck down. They borrowed \$1,500,000 which will be paid back over 15 years. They also got a grant for \$1,000,000 from MEDC so the project could build placemaking elements there like sidewalks, green spaces, gardens, and gathering areas. The project bids came in over budget, so the City worked with the engineer and contractor to delete some of the work and also reallocated funds from some other projects to make up the difference. The plan was to possibly sell some properties the City owns and once developed the tax base will grow; both helping to offset the cost of the bond.

Why didn't the City just use the money to fix the deck?

Recent estimates to "fix" the deck are far more money than we could responsibly borrow. Also, things like repairing an old parking deck have not been, and are still not, eligible for grant assistance. The City looked for grant assistance for the deck for decades. The City has been successful in leveraging available

grant dollars by making improvements downtown, such as the Pier and the placemaking work happening when the deck is taken down, by applying for funds in alignment with what the grant programs' goals are.

What is happening to the parking lot property down there? I thought someone was going to build condos?

As of this moment the only sure plan is that the property is going to be parking lots and green space. No one has put forth any plans or made any offers to buy any part of the property. What will be happening is the City is going to explore what could be done there, take public input on what the community would like to see happen down there, and then using that input the City Council will need to make a decision about what happens next with the property.

How do people get from the parking lots to Shelden Avenue?

The project is going to build a pedestrian-friendly walkway on Pewabic Street between Shelden Avenue and Lakeshore Drive. The walkway will have three ways of getting back and forth; a direct sidewalk, stairs, and an accessible ramp system that meets ADA grades. Part way down the hill there will be a large, flat area with table and chairs. The area will be lit. The City plans to plow it over the winter. Also, the walkway next to the Douglass Agency will be improved and will be another way for people to get back and forth.

What about the businesses who had back doors onto the deck? What are they supposed to do?

The City worked with MEDC to bring in professional assistance on this. In April a consultant hired by MEDC met with the businesses on what improvements they can make to their buildings and what they could do for accessibility after the deck is gone. The consultant is working on their reports and will be getting back to those businesses. Several of those existing businesses are actually viewing the deck coming down as an opportunity and have already started to work on projects to improve access or activate outdoor space. Others have varying challenges that are being worked on by the resiliency consultant.

How long is this project going to take?

The project has already started. The major demolition work is going to happen in June and July. The project itself is scheduled to be completed in the fall.