

1. In a thesis-like statement, why have a referendum on the Edgewood Road improvement project?

ANSWER: The administration has not been transparent regarding the Edgewood Road improvement project (“Project”). The administration claims the Project is about improvements to Edgewood Road and utilities along the road. While those improvements are covered by the Project, they are not the reason for the Project. The stated purpose is to create a direct route from the south side of Mount Vernon to the east side of the Coshocton Avenue retail district, including Knox Village Square (Rural King), and east of the city. The administration claims the direct route is necessary because, due to a lack of connectivity in the street system around the Knox Village Square, the adjacent residential neighborhoods have an increasing amount of cut-through traffic on roadways that were not designed to be through roads. Despite the alleged need, the administration considered not moving forward with the Project, but decided to proceed with it due to “citizen comments” requesting a safe north south route to that part of the city. Any such comments, however, were, for the most part, noticeably missing from discussions about Edgewood during the Resolution’s three readings and the March 6 public hearing.

The Project isn’t needed. A direct route from the south side of Mount Vernon to the east side of the Coshocton Avenue retail district already exists, for the most part on roads built and intended to handle heavy traffic. That was established when the student traffic study conducted at the request of then Councilman Matt Starr in 2019 found that, when adhering to traffic laws, there is not any appreciable time difference to get from the south side of Mount Vernon to the Coshocton Avenue retail district by taking Mount Vernon Avenue, cutting across Edgewood Drive and using residential streets, versus taking the designated truck route. Traffic studies by Carpenter Marty, an engineering firm used by the City, show the Project will have a negligible effect on travel time.

If there is a problem, the Project won’t resolve it. Assuming for the sake of discussion that a direct route from the south side of Mount Vernon to the east side of the Coshocton Avenue retail district and east of the city is needed, extending Edgewood Road isn’t the answer:

- **Edgewood Road is on the west side of the retail district, not the east side.** Drivers won’t stay on Edgewood Road to connect to Coshocton only to have to travel east to get to their destination on a road that is already too congested. Instead, they will continue to do what they are doing now, use neighborhood streets adjacent to Edgewood to get to the east side of Coshocton Avenue! Venedale Drive, Teryl Drive via Yauger Road, Vernonview Drive, Woodlake Trail and Upper Gilchrist Road all intersect with Coshocton Avenue further east than Edgewood Road. The problem will only get worse as the City continues to expand east.
- **There’s a better alternative.** In 2019, the City of Mount Vernon went so far as to generate a concept drawing of a SR-229/US- 36 connector route via Upper Gilchrist Road that would create a direct route from the south side of Mount Vernon to the east side of the Coshocton Avenue retail district; and would have actually connected to Coshocton Avenue at the east end of the retail district. Additionally, it would have better served points east of the city both now and in the future as the city continues to expand in that direction. As recently as August, 2023, City Engineer Brian Ball indicated that ultimately the thought is to route traffic from Coshocton Avenue to Ohio 229 via Upper Gilchrist and Ohio Eastern Star roads, but that project is long-term. In March, 2024, Safety Service Director Tanner Salyers admitted that Edgewood Road has been a problem for 50 years. Let’s not wait another half century. The City should pursue the Upper Gilchrist connector now, while the land is still available and undeveloped, and save \$19 million dollars.

- **Lack of public involvement and input in the development of the Project.** The administration should have sought to involve the public and seek their input through a series of public hearings during the “planning stage”, when the Project was first being developed. The only public hearing regarding the plan before it was put before city council in February was on March 13, 2018! While the public will have the opportunity to participate in the “design phase” if the Project passes, the ability to influence and effect the final scope of the Project will be much less than it would have been in the planning phase. Subsequent to the completion of the planning stage, Tanner Salyers said it is the intention of the City to extend Edgewood Road to Coshocton Avenue. He allowed, however,

if...in the design **we** (emphasis added) find out this is not the right thing for this community to do, and when I say this community, I don’t just mean the Edgewood community, I mean a comprehensive traffic study that says that Mount Vernon should not do this...if that’s not the right move for the City to do, **we** (emphasis added) won’t do it.

In the design phase of any project, “we” refers to the administration and ODOT, not the public. The design phase is not a democratic process. Decisions as to the ultimate scope of a project are made by the administration and ODOT. The public doesn’t get a vote. In the planning stage, however, the public has some ability to control the decision-making process through their elected representatives on city council who must vote to approve the project, or through the referendum process. Who can say how different the preliminary or concept drawings of the Project would have looked if the public, people living on Edgewood Road and in the surrounding neighborhoods, had been given a voice in the planning phase?

Even Councilman Mel Severns, head of the Streets and Public Buildings Committee, contacted Brian Ball before the first reading of Resolution 2024-23, stating,

“I don’t remember discussing Resolution 2024-23 that would take Edgewood through to Rt. 36. Are we sure the resolution is correct? There will be a lot of controversy over it. I know we talked about doing this in the future, but are we ready to adopt a resolution now? Without public meetings for input?”

As Councilperson Janis Seavolt once so eloquently stated, “They (referring to the public) have got to be able to know what’s going on. It’s their money.” Such a simple, yet profound statement!

The Mayor and his administration talk about their desire and need for public involvement and input on issues. It appears, however, they don’t really want it; and when they receive it in the form of unprecedented numbers of individuals packing city council meetings and public hearings and voicing their objections and opposition to the Project, they ignore it.

Residents want Edgewood Road and the associated utilities improved and or replaced. They don’t want to extend Edgewood to Coshocton Avenue and make it a connector route between SR-229 and Coshocton (US-36). They fear it will destroy the neighborhood, put homes too close to the road and accompanying improvements; increase traffic, including semi-trucks (which currently use Edgewood despite it being illegal); damage their quality of life (i.e. noise); and decrease the value of their homes. Repaving Edgewood Road and replacing or upgrading utilities does not require passing Resolution 2024-23.

The State of Ohio has always recognized that ultimate authority was intended to and properly rests with the people, not politicians. It is in recognition of that right, and responsibility, that those opposing Resolution 2024-23 sought to have the Resolution placed on the ballot.

2. What are the group's concerns if the project were approved? Please be specific.

ANSWER: The concerns include those raised in response to Question 1. The City has not been transparent regarding the Project. It isn't needed; it won't solve the alleged problem, it exacerbates it; there is a better, viable alternative, and the planning process was done without public involvement and input.

Other concerns are:

- **Widening of Edgewood Road.** Although the City amended Resolution 2024-23 to change references about “widening” Edgewood to “reconstruction” it, the LPA Federal ODOT-LET Agreement which governs the work to be done pursuant to the Project, states the purpose is, “The widening of Edgewood Road from Gambier Road (US-229) to US-36. Roadway improvements are to include widening...”. Several grant applications also refer to “roadway widening”. Even the letter from ODOT informing the City its funding application had been approved refers to the “Edgewood Road widening project...”. The most concerning documents suggesting Edgewood Road will be widened are a CORPO grant application that references a 2023-2050 CORPO TRANSPORTATION PLAN Project Listing that describes the Project as “Major Widening”. The “Project Description” is given as, “Edgewood Rd. from SR 229 to US 36: Connection and Major Widening”. The same information is included in a 2018-2040 CORPO Transportation Plan Project Listing.

Carpenter Marty Transportation (“CM”) is an engineering firm hired by the City that has been paid, according to records provided pursuant to a public records request, over a quarter million dollars from May 4, 2018 to July 17, 2024, not necessarily all related to Edgewood. CM estimated the right-of-way cost for the Project to be \$4,435,100 dollars. Coupling the high right-of-way costs with the many documents referring to Resolution 2024-23 as a roadway widening project, it appears residents’ concerns that Edgewood will be subject to extensive widening are valid.

- **The taking of private property by eminent domain.** Despite what someone may have thought over three-quarters of a century ago, Edgewood Road is not a thoroughfare. The right-of-way for Edgewood Road from Gambier Road to where Sugar Street would intersect with Edgewood if Sugar Street were extended east, is only 40 feet. Major thoroughfares have at least a 60 foot right of way. It has served as a neighborhood street for at least 77 years. As Tanner Salyers has said, it was not built to handle the current volume of traffic. In a memo from City Engineer Brian Ball to the Board of Zoning Appeals dated November 2, 2022, Ball indicated Edgewood Road is classified as a Secondary Collector road. In the next paragraph, he states “The Secondary Collector classification equates to a major collector, otherwise defined as a Secondary street (not a thoroughfare), meaning a street or road...which serves or is intended to serve as the *principal* (emphasis added) traffic way between large and separated areas...and which in (is) the main means of access to the main thoroughfare system...”. By definition, Edgewood Road does not appear to be a secondary collector because, currently, Edgewood does not extend and has not extended to Coshocton Avenue for 77 years. The last line of Brian Ball’s memo is instructive. Ball said, “As a Secondary Collector Edgewood Road would ideally have a minimum Right of Way width of 80 feet (twice that of Edgewood) and a **minimum** (emphasis added) pavement width of 40 feet (the entire current right of way of Edgewood, no room for utilities, curbs, gutters and an 8-foot sidewalk). Structures would be located a **minimum** (emphasis added) of 40 feet from the right of way line.” All told, that would require 160 feet; more than 50 yards; or half a football field, excluding the end zones. For perspective, the current right away is less than 15 yards. The City would need to take 120 feet, 40 yards, by eminent domain for Edgewood to meet the ideal criteria, with **minimum** paving and setbacks, for a secondary collector road. Since the administration has gone on the record saying that

Edgewood Road won't really be widened (which is why Resolution 2024-23's wording was amended to a "reconstructing project") there is a problem. Either, contrary to the administration's public statements, Edgewood Road will have to undergo extensive widening; or the administration intends to reconstruct Edgewood Road for a specific purpose that, when it's finished, won't meet the ideal criteria with, minimum paving and setbacks, for a road intended for that purpose!

- **Improving Edgewood Road will increase, not decrease traffic.**

A. Prohibited truck traffic. Resolution 2024-23 will not make Edgewood Road a truck route (state route), making it legal for trucks and semis to use Edgewood Road (although that could be done at some time in the future). On the other hand, it's not legal for trucks and semis to use Edgewood and similar neighborhood streets now, but they do. A two (2) week traffic study conducted by the City Engineer's office in 2017 had a total count of 23,643 vehicles (an average of 1,689/day). Buses and trucks (203) and tractor trailers (114) accounted for 1.34% of the total vehicle count. Those 317 vehicles, many of which were prohibited on neighborhood streets, represent an average of more than 22 per day! If that same percentage is applied to the current total vehicle count of 4,938 per day, while it may not be totally accurate, that calculates out to 66 buses, trucks and semis per day. Limiting the calculation to semis only, the daily semi-truck traffic would be 24 per day. If Edgewood is improved, reconstructed or widened, it is fair to assume the daily semi-truck count would increase.

B. Road Reconstruction. The ODOT grant application shows East High Street, New Gambier Road and Stevens Street being reconstructed and reconfigured to merge East High and New Gambier at Stevens, essentially making East High a through street to New Gambier and Upper Gilchrist Roads. This would most likely result in a significant increase in traffic on all of those streets, including Edgewood Road and other neighborhood streets.

3. City officials say houses aren't going to be destroyed/removed. Does the group not believe them?

ANSWER: NO, we don't. Tanner Salyers has stated the Project is "part of the City's larger goal to comprehensively address traffic congestion...". The preliminary planning drawings are some of the few documents the public has about the Project. Despite demands for "drawings' ..., the City initially didn't provide them. In fact, Tanner Salyers, referring to "**detailed drawings**" (emphasis added), indicated they didn't exist. The Mayor, who was sitting next to Salyers at the time, didn't correct him. The drawings were obtained only after a public records request, and then they came from ODOT, not the City. The engineer drawings are part of a funding grant application the City submitted to ODOT. The same is true of a funding grant application submitted to the Central Ohio Rural Planning Organization ("CORPO"). Both of those applications were granted. The ODOT grant was for \$2 million dollars. The CORPO grant was for \$685 thousand dollars. Those detailed, engineering drawings show at least one home being destroyed/removed as part of a reconfiguring of East High Street, New Gambier Road and Stevens Street. Yes, that could change in the design phase if Resolution 2024-23 is passed. If, however, as the City constantly points out, nothing is final until the design phase is complete, how can the City say, any more than opponents of the Project, what will or will not be included in the final design, or what might be done as part of a future project. What we do know is that the City's preliminary plan calls for the removal of at least one home.

4. City officials say the ODOT document you're referring to is a "preliminary planning document" The city still needs to go out to design, which they've said repeatedly will have input from the community. What's the concern with the preliminary planning document?

ANSWER: See response to Question 1, “Lack of public involvement and input in the development of the Project”. Also, while by definition not final, the preliminary planning document sets forth the City’s vision for the Project. It’s aspirational. It’s like a roadmap for a trip. While some things will change, the roadmap or plan tells us where we are going and, generally, how we are going to get there; how long it will take; how much it will cost; and what we’re going to do. Concerning the Project, it has been used to justify grants totaling millions of dollars and, possibly, millions more. If it doesn’t have a purpose, if it can’t be relied upon and can be changed on a whim, if it really doesn’t mean anything, why do we have it?

Additionally, during a city council committee meeting on March 11, while explaining why some of the wording of the Resolution was being amended, Tanner Salyers made what appeared to be a Freudian slip. He said, referring to the Project, “We adopted the language (reconstruction instead of widening regarding proposed changes to Edgewood Road) that more adequately reflected **what we were aiming to do**” (emphasis added). In the video of the meeting, the Mayor, who is seated next to Mr. Salyers, says something under his breath. Salyers immediately catches himself and says, “yeah, what we were **proposing**” (emphasis added). It gives the distinct impression the administration knows exactly what they want and expect out of the Project ”design phase.”

Finally, Phase I of the Project is a construction, not design, project for Edgewood Road from Gambier Road to East High Street. If that is approved, how likely is it that Phase II, regardless of how it is designed, won’t be completed? The more momentum something has, the more difficult it is to stop.