

Havana Street corridor undergoing a “rebirth”

AURORA

City developing years-long plan to improve thoroughfare

By Saja Hindi

The Denver Post

Over the past two decades, Mark Gurzhiev of Solomon’s Grocery & European Deli has seen a lot of changes on the Havana Street Corridor in Aurora, some for better and some for worse.

The corridor is known for its food selections from all over the world, with Mexican, Korean, Ethiopian and Chinese restaurants along its streets. Mixed in, visitors can find small retail shops, grocery stores that sell African or Asian staples, and service-oriented businesses such as nail salons, auto shops and dental offices. The popular corridor is also a major thoroughfare and state highway, and it includes a residential area, which has led to some transportation challenges.

One thing Gurzhiev has noticed in particular is the frequency of crashes that occur near his family-owned store at 1939 S. Havana St., especially at the intersection of South Havana Street and East Jewell Avenue — an area he calls “very, very dangerous.” He has seen collisions involving cars, pedestrians and bicyclists.

As Aurora grows so does the number of people using the corridor, whether they’re driving, biking, using RTD buses, walking or using wheelchairs to get from one place to the next. That’s why the city launched the Havana Street Corridor Study, meant to provide recommendations for transportation needs and strategies to improve the corridor, particularly at key locations that have a lot of crashes or need traffic calming measures and enhancements for mass transit. Planners also want to add “gateway features,” which include landscape and lighting improvements, bus stop enhancements and even utility box art to highlight a residential and commercial area considered vibrant and successful.

City staff members estimate Havana Street has daily traffic of about 30,000 to 40,000 vehicles with posted speeds from 35 to 45 mph, making it risky for people to cross the road midblock without some pedestrian traffic protections. The corridor also serves a high number of people using mass transit, with RTD Bus 105 getting about 4,300 riders on an average day.

The study focuses on a 6-mile area, a half-mile radius around Havana Street from Montview Boulevard south to Dartmouth Avenue. And the goals of the study include creating infrastructure that’s safe, efficient and inclusive for all users whether they live in, work in or visit the area, while ensuring the corridor is prepared for future economic and development growth.

“We would like to send a message, a clear message, number

one to the drivers that they’re entering a different area so they shouldn’t drive too fast, and watch for pedestrians, watch for bicyclists, watch for transit riders,” said Huiliang Liu, principal transportation planner for the city of Aurora. “And so, that’s one thing. And also by creating those gateway features, it will help to really enhance the distinct characteristics of the corridor. That’s another way of helping the corridor in terms of economic development.”

The intersection that Gurzhiev was referring to at Jewell Avenue is among the busiest intersections for pedestrians and pedestrian crashes, especially those causing injury, according to city data. It's also among the intersections that has had the most bicycle crashes causing serious injuries.

From 2012 to 2019, 7,513 crashes were reported on the Havana Street corridor: 12 included fatalities, and 507 had injuries, the data show. Bicycles were involved in 55 of the crashes and pedestrians in 147.

In one of the surveys conducted by the city about the corridor, residents shared comments about some of their struggles on Havana Street, such as difficulty moving from bus stops to stores, a need for wider sidewalks with landscaping that would force cars to slow down, and better lighting.

After rounds of public and private input in 2020 and 2021, the corridor study resulted in 73 recommendations for improvements, such as adding lighting and ADA improvements at bus stops, widening and connecting sidewalks, creating curb extensions, raising medians and creating six neighborhood bikeways.

Although all the improvements aren't certain to go in specific locations on Havana Street, they have spurred planning discussions among business and property owners, city officials and the Colorado Department of Transportation about future plans for the corridor.

City staff members expect to present the recommendations to the City Council in August or September.

"When you slow folks down and when you add safety improvements, I think you get more eyes on the amazing things that the Havana corridor has to offer. So I think we'll see an increase in patronage to the businesses who currently make the Havana corridor home while making it a safer environment for everybody involved," said Aurora Councilman Juan Marcano, who leads the city's Transportation, Airports and Public Works Committee.

Several of the survey respondents seemed to agree with Marcano.

"These suggestions would make the Havana corridor a more visually appealing area and a more pleasant area to spend time in as well as a safer area to travel in and possibly spend more time in than just running a quick errand or two," one respondent wrote. "It could become a destination rather than a necessary stop."

Marcano said he hopes to see more of southeast Denver's residents go to the area when some of these improvements are implemented.

Jong Wook Lee owns five businesses on Havana Street — Seoul K-B.B.Q. and HotPot, Mochinut, Coffee Story, Seoul Mandoo and ThankSool Pocha K Pub — and his operating director Rose Lee has been working on Havana Street for about 13 years, including under different ownership.

Like Gurzhiev, Rose Lee has seen a significant number of car crashes in the area, and she said the sidewalks along Havana Street could use some repairs and connectivity. She wants to see increased lighting on parts of the street and specified bike lanes, particularly as more people and traffic come to the corridor.

Property owners aren't fans of all of the suggested changes noted in the Havana Street Corridor Study, but Donovan Welsh, a director for the Havana Business Improvement District and whose family owns Havana Auto Parts at 901 S. Havana St., understands the need for them even if the changes may not seem beneficial initially to individual

businesses. He said he's glad property and business owners were involved in the study planning.

"Growth is good for all of us, including businesses," he said. "With that growth comes some sacrifice and some change."

The corridor study served as an opportunity to identify the challenging areas, and more studies will be needed as well as outreach to business owners, and residential and commercial property owners as the city chooses which projects to pursue, said Chance Horiuchi, the Havana Business Improvement executive director.

Parts of Havana Street are even in Denver, Horiuchi pointed out, so the focus is not only on those who live and work on Havana Street but also those who travel to the corridor.

"The inclusivity is a really important piece of the corridor study," she said. "Of course, they know that Havana is a top producing sales tax generator for the city of Aurora. We do almost \$24 million ... and making sure that there's connectivity for the residents and also the workforce in the surrounding community. It is a major transportation corridor in the city and also in the region."

Mayor Mike Coffman said the Havana corridor is going through a "rebirth," which he credits the Havana Business District for much of and the business owners who agreed to tax themselves to create it. Havana Street had a high point in the '70s and '80s with new retail, a low point in the '90s with vacancies, and "now it's coming back," he said.

Coffman said there's a need to address transportation needs on Havana Street, and he thinks the driving force behind the corridor's growth is the business district, which implemented significant improvements to the area.

The work likely will go into 2030 — widening sidewalks alone was estimated to cost about \$6.4 million — but the city and state are forging ahead with at least a few of the recommendations in the study. Maintenance for improvements is expected to be split among the city, the Havana Business Improvement District, property owners and RTD.

"I think it's going to be well worth the wait," Marcano said. "So it's not just going to be more attractive for folks that already use it, but I think it's going to be safer for multimodal access. I'm hoping to see more people come to the area on foot and via bike as well."

Most recently, the city received funding from CDOT to make safety improvements for Havana Street north of Sixth Avenue, and officials submitted two grants to make sidewalk improvements focused on transit access that they expect to hear about in the coming months, according to city spokesman Michael Brannen.

About \$650,000 also has been identified in the city budget to install one of four traffic control lights that would let pedestrians press a button when they plan to cross, ensuring traffic comes to a stop. Brannen said city workers are evaluating which of the four locations in the study to choose: Havana Street and Bayaud Avenue, Havana Street and Kentucky Avenue, Havana Street between Garden Drive and Arizona Place; and 150 feet north of Iowa Avenue. A schedule won't be set until the analysis is complete, he said.

Aurora also received \$2.8 million in federal funding to rebuild the signal, improve lighting and widen sidewalks along Havana Street from 11th Avenue to Del Mar Parkway, Brannen said. An additional \$1.6 million from another grant will go toward designing and constructing curb extensions with high visibility crosswalks at eight

intersections in Aurora, including along Havana Street from 16th Avenue to 19th Avenue.

Other low-cost improvements that Aurora has identified from the study include installing a rectangular rapid flashing beacon between 14th Drive and Colfax Avenue and an automatic traffic control warning sign at High Line Canal near Exposition Avenue, Brannen said.

Because the specific projects, exact locations and funding have not been finalized, it's not clear exactly when corridor users will start to see construction or traffic impacts. The full cost of all the projects if adopted could be more than \$20 million, Liu said.

"It's going to be an incremental process," he said, adding that strategies like putting up signs will take less time than some of the larger projects.

Marcano said the vision for the corridor will remain the same even if changes are made to the specific projects after more input and study, and businesses and property owners know to expect some of that work in the near future.

"When the change comes, we'll adjust," Welsh of Havana Auto Parts said. "When the construction comes, we'll go the other way."

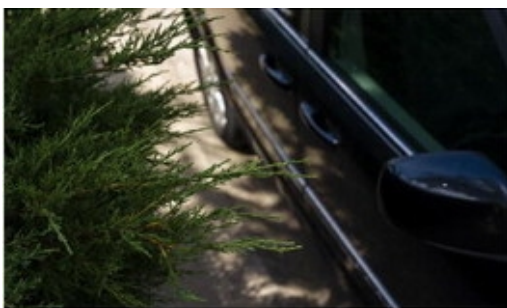
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Michael Palmer, 38, waits for the bus on the corner of Havana and 11th streets in Aurora on Wednesday.

Photos by Jintak Han, The Denver Post



A bush encroaches onto a narrow section of sidewalk on Havana Street in Aurora.



A car drives close to a narrow section of sidewalk on Havana Street in Aurora. *Jintak Han, The Denver Post*

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