

Grand Rapids officials back plan to redesign Wealthy Street, U.S.-131 interchange

Kate Carlson - May 9, 2022



Wealthy Street looking west toward U.S.-131.

GRAND RAPIDS — City officials are backing plans that would redesign the Wealthy Street interchange at U.S.-131 to bring the street to grade level while elevating the highway.

Part of a broader plan to redesign U.S.-131 to improve traffic safety, the proposed redesign would be a major development in support of pedestrian mobility while potentially addressing neighborhood concerns.

While a redesign is neither officially approved nor funded, Grand Rapids and Kent County officials are set to receive \$10 million in state grant funding that would consider various possibilities for the interchange.

Grand Rapids City Engineer Tim Burkman told *MiBiz* that an at-grade Wealthy Street and elevated U.S.-131 would align with the city's

goals. Wealthy Street is currently elevated above U.S.-131.

“That’s our interest, that this will look at designs and achieve that outcome of bringing Wealthy to at-grade,” Burkman said. “We’re very pleased to be receiving these funds. This will help us take a very close look at ways to achieve the desired outcomes of improving the interchange and better connecting the area.”

The Grand Rapids City Commission’s Fiscal Committee on Tuesday will consider accepting the \$10 million Michigan Economic Development Corp. grant. The grant was **initially announced** at the end of 2021 when it was included in the state’s 2022 fiscal year budget. Kent County leadership worked with the state Legislature to secure an early-stage direct appropriation grant for the Wealthy Street project, according to a city memo.

The \$10 million would be used to fund a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) environmental review, advance right-of-way acquisition and utilities relocation, and preliminary engineering and design work. The grant runs through December 2027. The city would serve as the grantee and be responsible for managing the project.

Though a project redesign is not final, city officials hope to improve the interchange from an operational and safety standpoint while also making the area more connected for alternative transit options and pedestrians, Burkman said.

“The interchange created this divide from the east and west side of the city,” Burkman said. “We believe by bringing it to an at-grade level, that will create a more cohesive connection between the areas on the east and west side.”

Funds for future construction work on the interchange have not yet been identified.

“It will take unique, special funding to realize this,” Burkman said.

“We’re seeing opportunities like that more and more today. By utilizing these grant dollars, it puts us in a position to be ready, making it viable and possibly seeing the project come to fruition.”

The Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT), Kent County, **Downtown Grand Rapids Inc.**, and the **Grand Valley Metropolitan Council**, along with the city, will be part of the project team, Burkman said.

State study

The \$10 million grant comes as MDOT conducts a Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) **study** on the U.S.-131 corridor between 28th Street and Wealthy Street. The PEL study is expected to wrap up this year, and MDOT recently concluded a public feedback survey on potential redesigns.

A report will be published on the feedback and survey results, which included 3,000 comments from the community and various stakeholders, said Dennis Kent, regional transportation planner for MDOT’s Grand Region.

“This is not the end of the PEL process, this is the end of gathering information on some of the options,” Kent said. “Next, we will get into more detail on which options are the most practical and feasible. That’s where the \$10 million enters into the discussion. We have not made a decision on what we’re going to build on U.S.-131.”

The Wealthy Street interchange was **brought up frequently** in the public feedback process, as well as comments on keeping trucks out of neighborhoods, the Franklin/Hall area and Burton Street.

Formally accepting the \$10 million would lead to an agreement between MDOT, the city and Kent County, Kent said. An agreement is expected to be considered by the Grand Rapids City Commission at a

future date, according to a city memo.

“The issue with U.S.-131 and Wealthy Street is that you can’t do something to Wealthy without impacting half a mile on either side of the freeway, so there are a lot of variables we have to work through with this,” Kent said. “We’re not quite there yet to say this is exactly what we’re going to do or not going to do.”

Bringing Wealthy Street to an at-grade level was brought up several times in the public feedback session, but it remains unclear whether it’s the best option moving forward, Kent added.

“It’s an important piece of the puzzle, but it’s hard to just look at one piece of U.S.-131 in isolation,” Kent said.

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