

Rebecca Matthews

Toomer's Roadblock

Birds chirp. Children drink lemonade out of their Toomer's Drugs Styrofoam cup. It is a typical summer day in downtown Auburn, aside from the fact that a chain-link fence blocks off majority of the area and a thick cloud of dirt hovers in the air.

Construction to the cross street of College Street and Magnolia Avenue—commonly known as Toomer's Corner— began on May 11 and is scheduled to be completed by August 17, the day school starts for Auburn University students.

The Corner Construction Project is a \$2.2 million dollar project that will transform the downtown area to be more of an event space that people can enjoy year round. The company that got selected to be in charge of the project is Bailey Harris.

"The renovation out of the downtown came out of a downtown master plan that we're doing for Auburn," said Jeffery Ramsey, the Corner Construction Project manager. "We invited all the citizens, all leaders of the community to come together and talk about what they wanted the downtown area to look like."

Earlier this year Auburn University completed their own renovation project on their side of the corner. They replaced the contaminated soil from the poisoning of the oak trees, installed new bricks, retained the 1917 brick gates and created a circular seat wall. While the two projects are not linked together, Ramsey made sure that the design mimicked the universities side

Ramsey also decided to have the construction take place during the summer months since that is when population and motor vehicles in the town are at its lowest.

"If you're going to make a mess at least do it when nobody is there," Ramsey said.

While the population in the city is at its lowest during the summer months, local business are hurting significantly more this summer than any of the previous ones. The construction blocks off majority of the downtown area limiting parking spaces for consumers and making the area more difficult to navigate.

To compensate for the lack of parking additional spaces have been made available in the municipal parking deck as well as making all parking free. Signs have been posted all around town with the slogan "Downtown is still open" in order to attract business to the area as well as having a public relations outreach campaign.

Yet, this still is not enough.

For the local business owners of Ellie Boutique, this is not enough by 40 to 50 percent.

Natalie Gilbert and Kelly Poole have co-owned Ellie Boutique for 12 years this November and business has never been this bad. While both expect the summer months to be a slow time for business sales “the construction has made it significant,” Gilbert said. Loss of sales is down by 40 to 50 percent then last summer.

In addition, Gilbert and Poole were forced to close the store for two entire days because of construction to the sidewalk.

At the Ellie Shoe Boutique—which is right across the street from the apparel store—they now open later, close earlier and have cut down the hours of their employees. In order to compensate for the loss of sales, they rely more on email and social media to spread the word on new merchandise and flash sales.

Incidentally, Gilbert’s father happens to be the owner of Bailey Harris, the construction company in charge of the renovation project. When asked how she felt about the renovation project she said to have mixed opinions.

“Obviously I don’t feel great about it right now because it’s been a very tough summer,” Gilbert said. “But I think at some point that stuff had to be done.”

Although, Downtown Merchant Association president and owner of the custom design and printing business Stamp, Eric Stamp is “all for it” despite his retail sales being at its worst.

Overall Stamp seemed pleased with the decision that city officials made to go forward with the project. He stated that the city communicated very well with the Downtown Merchant Association – which is in charge of all downtown affairs such as: events, advertising and construction.

Despite the temporary decline of business sales and the drowning clatter of construction workers and trucks the finished outcome of the project for downtown business owners is something they seem to be highly anticipating. According to Ramsey the construction is on time and will be completed by the scheduled date of August 17.

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