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Byron Center, Michigan 49315

Thursday, July 1, 2004

Hon. Albert H. McGeehan , Mayor
City of Holland
270 South River Avenue
Holland, Michigan 49423

Mr. Mayor,

I am writing to you as a former Holland (and still West Michigan) resident concerned about some of the latest developments in downtown Holland. I have been following the City's need for additional downtown parking in order to continue encouraging visitors and locals alike to shop and dine downtown. I am also aware of the Michigan Department of Transportation's reluctance to eliminate lanes of travel on Seventh and Ninth Streets to accommodate additional parking spaces.

I read, with interest, in the *Holland Sentinel* earlier this year a plan whereby MDOT would transfer control of a portion of Seventh Street to the City so that the City could add the parking spaces they needed. This plan seemed to indicate the City would keep the Business Route signage (for Business US-31 and Business Loop I-196) in place for the benefit of the motoring public.

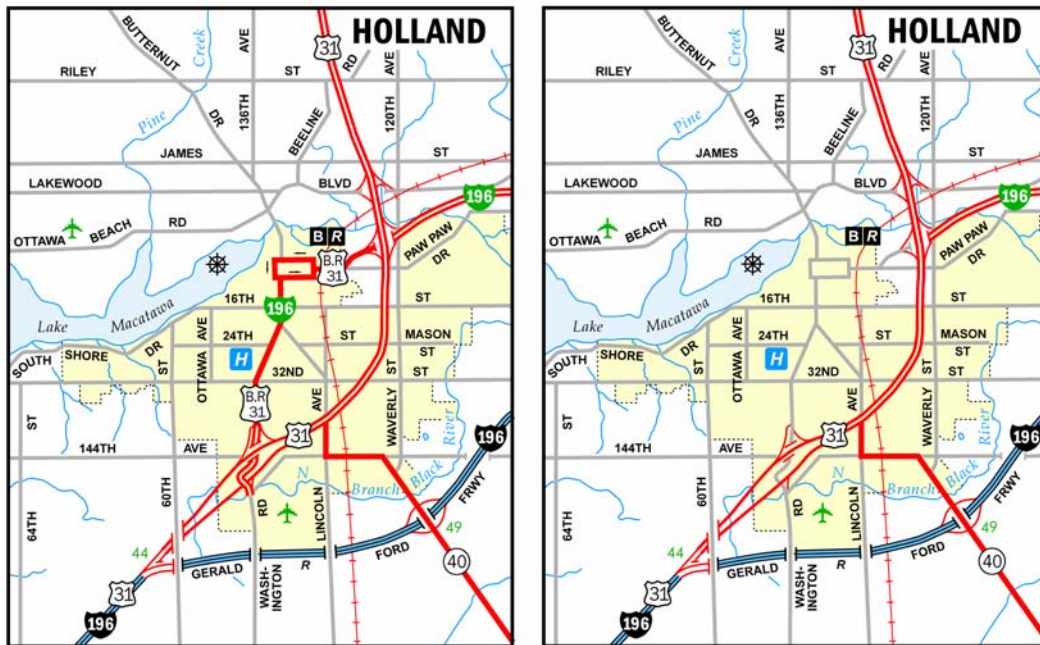
However, after contacting MDOT recently, I have been told the state is initiating the process of transferring *ALL* of the Business Route within Holland—from the US-31 and Chicago Drive interchange northeast of the city to the US-31 and Washington Avenue interchange south of town—to the City and County. MDOT states they would be removing all Business Route signage and the loops through the City would be no more. I believe this would have many unintentional negative side-effects for the city as a whole and especially for the downtown area and merchants.

The loss of a marked Business Route through the city, especially a city the size of Holland, would definitely discourage tourists and casual visitors from leaving the mainline highways—both US-31 and I-196—to visit downtown. Currently, those visiting the city are presented with a reasonably well-signed and well-mapped loop route into town. This route utilizes several different streets and can be less-than-intuitive for non-locals. The helpful and decorative "Downtown" directional signs erected in recent years to direct motorists into downtown may help bring traffic into the center of the city, but they are less effective at helping traffic find their way back to the highway once they have completed their visit. The current signed Business Routes feature not only the mainline highway designations (US-31 and I-196), but also directional banners above the signs indicating the direction they need to travel in order to return to, say, northbound US-31 versus southbound US-31.

Another casualty of removing the signed Business Routes from the City of Holland will be the associated removal of the Lake Michigan Circle Tour route from the city. Since the Lake Michigan Circle Tour route follows the state trunkline highway closest to the lake at any given point, once the Business Routes are gone, the Circle Tour will then have to follow the US-31 bypass around the city. Many tourists and casual visitors look for the Lake Michigan Circle Tour signs as they follow the route up and down the coast of the big lake. Currently, the Circle Tour routes these visitors right through downtown Holland, giving the downtown merchants valuable "face time," if you will, with these travelers. I fear losing both the signed Business Routes and the Lake Michigan Circle Tour would mean many fewer tourists and other visitors venturing off the mainline highways into downtown.

In addition to the Business Routes (and Circle Tour) signed along the various streets through Holland, these routes are also clearly indicated on a wide variety of state- and commercially-produced maps, heavily used by tourists, travelers and other visitors. Having the "nice, wide red line" on the map not only gives tourists and other non-locals a marked path to follow from the mainline highways into downtown, but also gives them the assurance they can continue back to the main highways when they have finished visiting Holland to continue on to their destinations. Remove these "nice, wide red lines" from the maps and such main tourist routes like Chicago Drive, Eighth Street, River Avenue, Washington Avenue, etc., all look like any other city street and do not provide that visual reassurance of a route back out to the highway.

To provide a visual representation of what the City of Holland map inset would look like on the Official Michigan Transportation Map published every year and handed out for free to visitors at welcome centers statewide, mailed to potential visitors on request and now even available for download on the MDOT website, I have included the current map inset (*left*) as well as one with the Business Routes and Circle Tour route removed (*right*) below.



Also, having the signed and mapped Business Routes (and Circle Tour) helps "channel" visitors and tourists into the City via selected routes. This can help with "gateway" planning—welcome signs, tulip plantings, directional signage to downtown and tourist attractions like Windmill Island, etc—which helps to enhance the visitor's experience in Holland.

Another important point is that the current Business Routes are actually loops off two major interstate highways, I-196 and US-31. This is an enviable position for any city and Holland is the one of the smallest cities in Michigan to have signed Business Routes from two separate highways—Port Huron and Niles are the other two. This means travelers approaching Holland from the three primary directions, via US-31 from Muskegon and the north, I-196 from Grand Rapids and the east, and I-196 & US-31 from Benton Harbor and the south, are all presented with a signed loop through the city and, more importantly, right into downtown. Many cities larger than Holland have two signed Business Routes, such as Kalamazoo, Jackson, Ann Arbor and Port Huron, with Lansing actually having three posted routes!

Many cities have campaigned hard to have signed Business Routes into or through their cities to help bring more tourists and casual visitors into their cities instead of simply bypassing them on the mainline highway. Even very small cities and villages, such as Hart (population 1,950), Pentwater (population 958) and Manton (population 1,221) have been able to secure signed Business Routes into or through their cities, thus giving motorists both that signed route in the field and that valued "red line" on the state highway map. I fear

if Holland lost this signed route and line-on-the-map, it would prove very detrimental for the City and for the downtown and the merchants there.

However, keeping the Business Routes as they exist now simply brings us back to the point we are at today—a desire for additional parking spaces in the downtown area. One possible solution may be for the City of Holland and MDOT to simply swap a few streets downtown, giving the City four blocks of current state trunkline on which to implement parking and giving motorists a simpler route through the center of Holland.

This solution would simply involve the state transferring control of Seventh Street from River Avenue to Pine Street, Pine Street between Seventh and Ninth Streets, and Ninth Street from Pine Street to River Avenue to the City of Holland. In exchange, the City of Holland would transfer the two blocks of River Avenue between Seventh and Ninth Streets to MDOT. The current one-way traffic flow on River Avenue between Seventh and Ninth Streets would be altered to allow for two-way traffic. In the end, the south- and westbound Business Route traffic proceeding westerly via Seventh Street would only need to turn left onto River Avenue to continue through downtown and southerly toward US-31 on the south side of the city. This replaces the current three 90-degree turns with only one, thereby reducing any additional potentially-confusing turns for non-locals following the Business Routes.

Under this proposal, the City of Holland would then be able to implement on-street parking on Seventh Street west of River Avenue, Pine Street between Seventh and Ninth Streets, and on Ninth Street west of River Avenue. At the same time, a marked and posted Business Route (and Circle Tour Route) through downtown Holland would remain for the benefit of tourists and travelers entering the city off the mainline highways bypassing the city.

In the end, I am hopeful a viable solution can be found that both allows the City to expand the number of parking spaces available downtown as well as preserves a marked and posted Business and Circle Tour Route through the city. Maintaining a healthy and vibrant city and downtown district are important to me as they are for you and many others.

Thank you for your time. I would be very willing to discuss any of the points or ideas noted in this letter, if desired. I may be reached during the day at (616) 000-0000.

Sincerely,

Christopher J. Bessert

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cc: Soren Wolff, Holland City Manager
Jane Clark, Holland Area Chamber of Commerce
Patty Fitzpatrick, MainStreet/DDA
Steven Bulhuis, Macatawa Area Coordinating Council