

Op-Ed: The Case for Universal Design Adding Value to Our Town



At our recent Town Meeting, the governing body of the town, we heard differing views on the meaning, intention and uses of the proposed multi-use pathway, which is an item on Tuesday's referendum, asking to affirm spending 80,000 upfront for the initial design phase, to be 80% reimbursed, among other town improvement referendum questions.

The pathway grant supports connectivity. Connectivity is a concept of universal design to make inclusive improvements to our community environment that are mobility-oriented, pedestrian-friendly, and senior-friendly. These design concepts help make multiple destinations more accessible to pedestrians, joggers, bicyclists, and to create public spaces convenient for social interaction, and help increase safety for people of all ages.

Compared with the traditional zoning concepts, these outcomes can promote more sustainable and healthy development patterns. 'Connectivity' simply means "the ease of travel between two points. The degree to which streets or areas are interconnected and easily accessible to one another."

We have seen the catastrophic impact of isolation, especially on homebound members of the community, on students, and on elders. We are living in long-term pandemic times. We need healthy connection. We have an amazing opportunity to resource more outdoor,

healthy engagement within our community as we endeavor to recover from this pandemic and the next.

We can access funding to improve our community safety through this state grant. Sidewalks and streets with clear crossings and slower vehicle traffic are safer and easier for older people, families with children and baby strollers, and people with mobility issues who may need longer time to cross. These concepts, 'universal design' and connectivity,' are also entirely consistent with pedestrian-friendly and senior-friendly concepts that promote aging in place, and supporting residents across the age and mobility continuum to increase access to social engagement and freedom of mobility with safety measures.

I am proud to live in Easton, a welcoming community to families of all ages, and proud of our willingness to invest in improving the inclusion and safety of our community members that promotes a future that is less automobile/carbon-centric, fossil-fuel-dependent and more climate resilient. In approving this expenditure, we harken back to Easton's roots as a farm community, and demonstrate our commitment to a decarbonized future while addressing the climate crisis with support for bicycle and pedestrian-friendly pathways.

When we improve our accessibility, we show through our collective spirit that we indeed value all people, of all ages and abilities, and that we will look out for one another and protect one another, even if they are some else's family. And THAT is what makes our town so attractive to young families and empowers our seniors in town. Done well, livable communities enhance the quality of life for all residents, create tremendous economic value in towns like ours, promote healthy living and support environmental sustainability. This is why I support tax-exempt handicapped vehicle ordinance, the update to the ethics code and board, and the land use ordinance that we are voting on in Tuesday's referendum. These are all responsible, thoughtful improvements to our life as a self-governing community.

As your State Representative, I have worked with town government to submit a grant request for ARPA capital funding to replace the EMS building, that has decayed dramatically even while we are meeting about our town's needs. I hope we can build on our stewardship of state-awarded resources like this safety grant for the multi-use pathway, and welcome more resources from federal relief funding to revitalize our town. If we don't work to secure these improvements, you can bet other towns will, and they will enjoy the benefits of these state and federal funds. Let's do this Easton!

Anne Hughes, State Representative of 135th District: Easton, Weston and Redding.