

Birmingham City Commission Special Meeting Minutes - Workshop
March 10, 2025
Municipal Building, 151 Martin
6:00 p.m.
Vimeo Link: <https://vimeo.com/1064453365>

This will be considered a workshop session of the City Commission. No formal actions will be taken. The purpose of this workshop is to discuss unimproved roads.

I. Call to Order

Therese Longe, Mayor

II. Roll Call

Present: Mayor Longe
MPT Baller
Commissioner Emerine
Commissioner Haig
Commissioner Host
Commissioner Long
Commissioner Schafer

Absent: None

Staff: City Manager Ecker; City Clerk Bingham, Assistant City Manager Clemence, City Engineer Coatta, Assistant City Manager Fairbairn, Finance Director Gerber, City Attorney Kucharek, Department of Public Services Director Zielinski

III. Presentation and Commission Discussion

A. Presentation from City Engineer Melissa Coatta

CE Coatta presented the item. Staff answered informational questions from the Commission.

B. City Commission Discussion and Comment

Commissioners made the following comments during discussion:

- For every contact made to the City about unimproved road concerns, there may be many more residents concerned about the same issue that have not contacted the City.
- There were years the City did not keep up with its regular cape sealing program. There were fewer complaints about the roads when cape sealing was more regularly done.
- A cape seal program of two miles a year would cape seal every presently unimproved road in the City every 14 years.
- The City’s newer road improvement program has encountered some resident concerns, and comparing the rate of road improvements under the road petition process versus under the City-initiated process could be useful.
- The City moved to a City-initiated road improvement process in order to improve public safety and to reduce opportunities for disputes between neighbors.
- The costs for improving roads will continue to increase, and all unimproved roads will eventually be improved. Improving roads sooner could be more financially beneficial for residents within the special assessment district.
- All sewers in the City should be updated by 2055. At this point, the oldest sewers in the City would be 135 years old. The sewer liners that have been installed have 50 year guarantees.
- It would be helpful to know the costs per lane mile for different repairs and improvements, how those costs have increased, and the different costs for the utility and pavement repairs.
- Some unimproved roads have updated utilities, and some do not. It would be helpful to know the costs to improve a road with already-updated utilities, versus the costs to improve a road that requires utility updates.
- The cost to improve the remaining unimproved roads will be significant.
- Former CM Markus noted in previous discussions that the sewer and water funds limit the pace at which the City can improve roads, that all the road infrastructure cannot be improved at once, and that contractors are often less interested in doing more than a mile a year.

- The 85%/15% cost split for road improvements has been in place in the City since 1955. Residents that have contributed 85% to improved roads may feel it unfair if that split is changed.
- The collective investment in the City's infrastructure is what helps contribute to a feeling of fairness.
- If the cost split were to change and the City were to pay for more of the infrastructure work, the City would be able to improve fewer miles of road per year.
- The City only retains 34% of the taxes collected.
- It would take about 28 years to improve the remainder of unimproved roads. Those costs will be distributed over that time. Residents on unimproved roads would, on average, have their roads cape sealed twice in that time, given a 14-year cape seal cycle.
- There may be other ways to improve a mile of road per year. It is possible that perceptions of fairness should not be a primary factor in how these projects are done.
- The Commission's focus should be on coming up with creative solutions. These costs could be bonded, and not every road has to be fully improved. There may be intermediate options between cape seal with decaying edges and fully improved roads. There may be ways of making road usage charges more equitable.
- Because they have been sufficiently addressed, presentations to the Commission should no longer focus on the introduction, background, or definitions of this matter. Residents may be directed by staff to recordings, reports, and other documentation that can provide an overview of the issue if requested.
- Residents are unlikely to watch a meeting regarding this issue. The City needs to provide a background summary, an explanation of the challenge of improving unimproved roads, an explanation of how the City is approaching that challenge, and an explanation of how residents can participate in the process.
- The community needs to be informed, and expecting the community to be informed in the way that is most convenient for the Commission is an unlikely prospect. The City needs to determine the best way to make the information clear and accessible to the widest possible audience.
- The Commission needs to determine whether one type of road is appropriate for all contexts, whether there are additional ways the City could generate revenue for road improvements, and how the City can better engage residents throughout this process.
- Cape seal fails faster without appropriate drainage. The City Engineer has made well-informed recommendations about best practices for road improvements.
- Some roads in Birmingham have had a surface retreatment, which is more involved than cape seal. It can make a significant difference to the road surface. If the road surface upgrades do not address the underlying infrastructure at the same time, the road must often be damaged and repaired in the near future when the underlying infrastructure fails.
- Maintenance on improved roads is paid for by the City. Once the remainder of the unimproved roads are improved, taxes will need to increase to cover improved road maintenance. The Commission needs to be considering both one-time and ongoing costs. Residents need to be educated on the matter. The City needs to determine how to balance the maintenance cost increases if all the roads are improved with residents' desire for improved roads.
- This is not just a Birmingham issue. The State legislature will be reviewing Public Act 51, with the aim to increase the amount of road repair funding communities receive.
- Staff should recommend how some City funds might be reallocated to increase road improvement funding. Funds should not be reallocated from public safety services.
- The 85%/15% cost split for road improvements is prohibitive for younger families and older residents. Some residents have expressed worry that the City does not adequately consider alternative engineering options, or that they have a challenging relationship with the Commission and with the City. These matters should be meaningfully addressed.
- The City uses alternative engineering options in its road improvements whenever appropriate. Other residents have expressed appreciation for the Commission's efforts to listen and be responsive to resident concerns.
- Expectation management will need to be part of these discussions as well. Residents must be informed that if a significant investment is made, the roads can be improved completely and relatively quickly, and that less investment will necessitate a slower and/or more fragmentary process.
- It is unlikely that any solution to this issue will receive unanimous resident support, and it would be helpful if residents could bear in mind the challenging nature of this issue.

IV. Public Comment

Pat Hillberg commented about how new home buyers could be informed about upcoming road improvements and supported Birmingham pursuing a Headlee override.

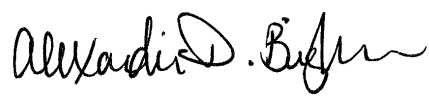
Rosie Koul commented about the way the current road improvement process impacts residents and the work of the Multi-Modal Transportation Board.

Tom Chisholm commented about the challenging condition of his unimproved street and about the petition process for improving a road.

Gordon Davies supported improving the road surface when the underlying infrastructure is improved and clearer information about the cost differences between a cape sealed and an improved road.

V. **Adjourn**

The meeting was adjourned at 7:28 p.m.



Alexandria Bingham, City Clerk



Laura Eichenhorn, City Transcriptionist