Activists work to save brick Convention Street

Official says paving likely

By AMY WOLD
Advocate staff writer

Road crews working on Convention Street uncovered a bit of the past recently when they scraped off the old asphalt and revealed a brick road.

Repaving work is expected to start in the next few weeks, but for now the old brick road stretches from North 10th Street to North 19th Street.

Andy Simon, owner of Riverbanks City Storage on the corner of North 19th and Convention streets, said he'd like to see the brick road stay.

"If you've had a driveway and you had a choice of a brick driveway or a concrete driveway, which one would you choose?" Simon asked.

However, city officials said delaying or stopping the repaving is unlikely.

"I don't believe it's going to be possible now because of all the patches on it already," said Ray Burgess, street rehabilitation program manager.

He said the bricks were scarred during the asphalt removal.

Other concerns, he said, are that the brick road isn't as smooth of a surface as asphalt, and the bricks are not durable enough for the road.

"I don't think the street will hold up without an overlay," Burgess said. "Or, it never would be overlaid."

Although the city is responsible for the maintenance of the brick portion of France Street downtown, Burgess said that's different.

"France doesn't have nearly the traffic that Convention Street does," Burgess said.

However, another business owner along Convention Street disagrees about the amount and type of traffic that uses the street.

"This is not a traffic area," said Frank Kean, owner of Kean's The Cleaner. "If we have it (the brick road) there I think it just adds character."

Kean's dry cleaning store sits on the corner of North 19th and Convention streets. He said he has a photo of the store taken in 1926 that shows the brick street in existence at that time.

"I thinks it's a piece of history. I'd like to see it restored," Kean said. "It's lasted all these years without blacktop."

However, Burgess said that traffic in 1926 wasn't anything like the traffic today.

In addition, the road already is patched with concrete or asphalt, and some areas have been scarred by the removal process, he said.

The two business owners said they know the road isn't perfect, but that's the price to pay for history.

"The road's already scarred right now, but not destroyed, scarred," Simon said. "You have to take the good with the bad."

A brick road lends a historic atmosphere to an area, said Davis Rhorer, Downtown Development District director.

The brick road on France Street, which was incorporated into the design of the Sheraton Baton Rouge Convention Centre, adds something to the area, Rhorer said. "It conveys an ambiance of what the area used to be like."

He said he looked at the Convention Street brick road and was impressed.

"I loved it," Rhorer said. "I was amazed at the condition."

As part of the plan for the arts district around the Old State Capitol, Rhorer said, there are plans to redo the streets in the area with materials other than asphalt such as granite, brick or some other medium.

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Andy Simon, a business owner in the Convention Street area, says he'd like to see the brick road uncovered by construction crews left in place.

Brick

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The city-parish will be in charge of that project, Rhorer said.

Mayor Pro Tempore Lori Burgess said she supports historical preservation but added that she would need to look into issues such as the paving contract, feasibility and what area residents want before she could state her position about the road.

“Basically, if there's no liability on the city's part ... I would join with the residents on that,” Burgess said.

Ray Burgess said that the repaving work should begin in the next two or three weeks.

In the meantime, Simon said he plans on talking with more people and Baton Rouge groups about the possibility of keeping the road the way it is.

“I'm not necessarily trying to stop the wheel, I just want to slow it down,” Simon said, which would give interested parties the chance to talk about options for the road.