

Islington

Street

Lab

Islington Street Lab:

A Tactical Urbanism Project
in Portsmouth, New Hampshire

Prepared and submitted by

Portsmouth Smart Growth for the 21st Century
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PORTSMOUTH
SMART GROWTH
FOR THE 21ST
CENTURY

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INTRODUCTION

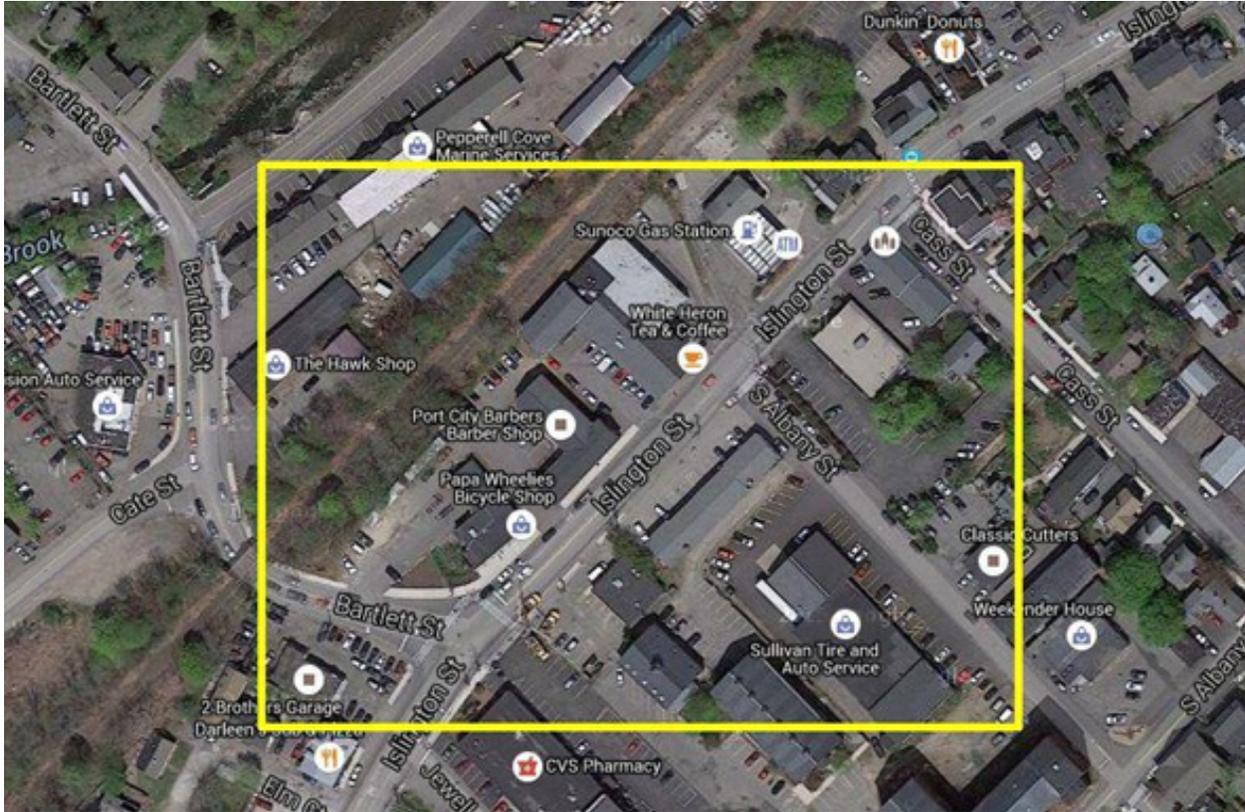
Islington Street Lab, a community-based tactical urbanism project that spanned five weeks in May and June 2016, culminated with the temporary transformation of a block of Islington Street from Albany Street to the Bartlett Street intersection in the West End of Portsmouth. Tactical urbanism is the use of short-term, low-cost demonstration projects to showcase changes that are possible in a neighborhood.

The Islington Street Lab project targeted a busy block in the developing West End, where residents and business owners had expressed concern about speeding and pedestrian safety and where potential for significant improvement was seen.

The project’s temporary streetscape changes included creating crosswalk markings, on-street parking and café seating, and decorative elements (banners, signs and landscaping) that were installed on June 2 and remained active until June 5, 2016. (Some of the project elements, such as signage and painted “sharrows” on the street, were still place at the time of this report’s submission.)

Portsmouth Smart Growth for the 21st Century (PS21) planned and initiated the project and led its implementation with the assistance of the City of Portsmouth, West End Business Association, numerous sponsors and partners, and the hands-on help of many volunteers.

PS21 hired Mike Lydon to guide the planning and implementation of the project. Lydon is a principal at the national planning firm Street Plans, author, and co-founder of the tactical urbanism movement.



Map of Islington Street Lab area

The Islington Street Lab project had three main goals. They were to:

- Guide permanent street improvements, which are now being planned, to increase the vitality, walk ability and safety of Islington Street using traffic calming, safer pedestrian options, placemaking and beautification,
- Increase civic engagement and diversify the network of advocates in the West End neighborhood, and
- Demonstrate and develop support for the use of tactical urbanism projects in Portsmouth.

A survey, promoted on the PS21 website, in emails, on Facebook and Twitter, and in the project area, was used to document and gauge citizen reaction.

PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

The PS21 board would especially like to express its appreciation to the City of Portsmouth's staff and officials, and in particular its planning staff. Their support of this project was essential to its implementation and success.

Community Sponsors and Partners

Community support in various ways was vital to the implementation and success of this project.

The Islington Street Lab project was supported with contributions from many individuals and the following organizations:

Event Sponsors: *New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, City of Portsmouth, Griffin Family Corp., STREET, White Heron Coffee & Tea Café, VHB, Harbour Light Strategic Marketing, Weekender House, Port One Architects*

Season Sponsors: *Chinburg Properties, Piscataqua Savings Bank, Seacoast Rotary Club, Coruway Film Institute*

Event Partners: *Martin Hill Inn, SIS Bank, Signature Escrow & Title Services, Sunoco Islington Street, West End Business Association, Port City Makerspace, 3S Artspace, Ricci Lumber, Piscataqua Landscaping, Portsmouth Industrial Design, Terra Firma Landscaping Architects, Papa Wheelies Bike Shop, Pars Oriental Rugs, Seacoast Media Group, The Sound*

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Islington Street Lab volunteers striping pavement

ISLINGTON STREET LAB PROJECT OVERVIEW

While the Islington Street Lab Project installation lasted only four days in early June, the project involved a number of steps over several weeks:

Neighborhood Meeting

April 28

Gathered at Port City Makerspace in the West End to describe tactical urbanism and the upcoming project on Islington Street. Many of the approximately 40 people attending volunteered for further involvement. At the event, PS21 kicked off promotion of the project to the neighborhood and community.

Design Workshop with Tactical Urbanism Expert Mike Lydon

May 12

Held at City Hall, the workshop drew 35 West End residents and business owners. They come up with more than 100 ideas for changes on the block of Islington from Albany Street to Bartlett Street and identified priorities. Using this input, Mike Lydon created an initial site plan and consulted with the city to finalize it.

Mike Lydon Presentation on Tactical Urbanism

June 1

During this presentation at 3S Artspace, Lydon described various tactical urbanism projects nationally, and previewed the plan for the Portsmouth project, which was installed June 2. Approximately 100 people attended this event; the video of the presentation is available on the PS21 website and YouTube.

Islington Street Lab Project Installation

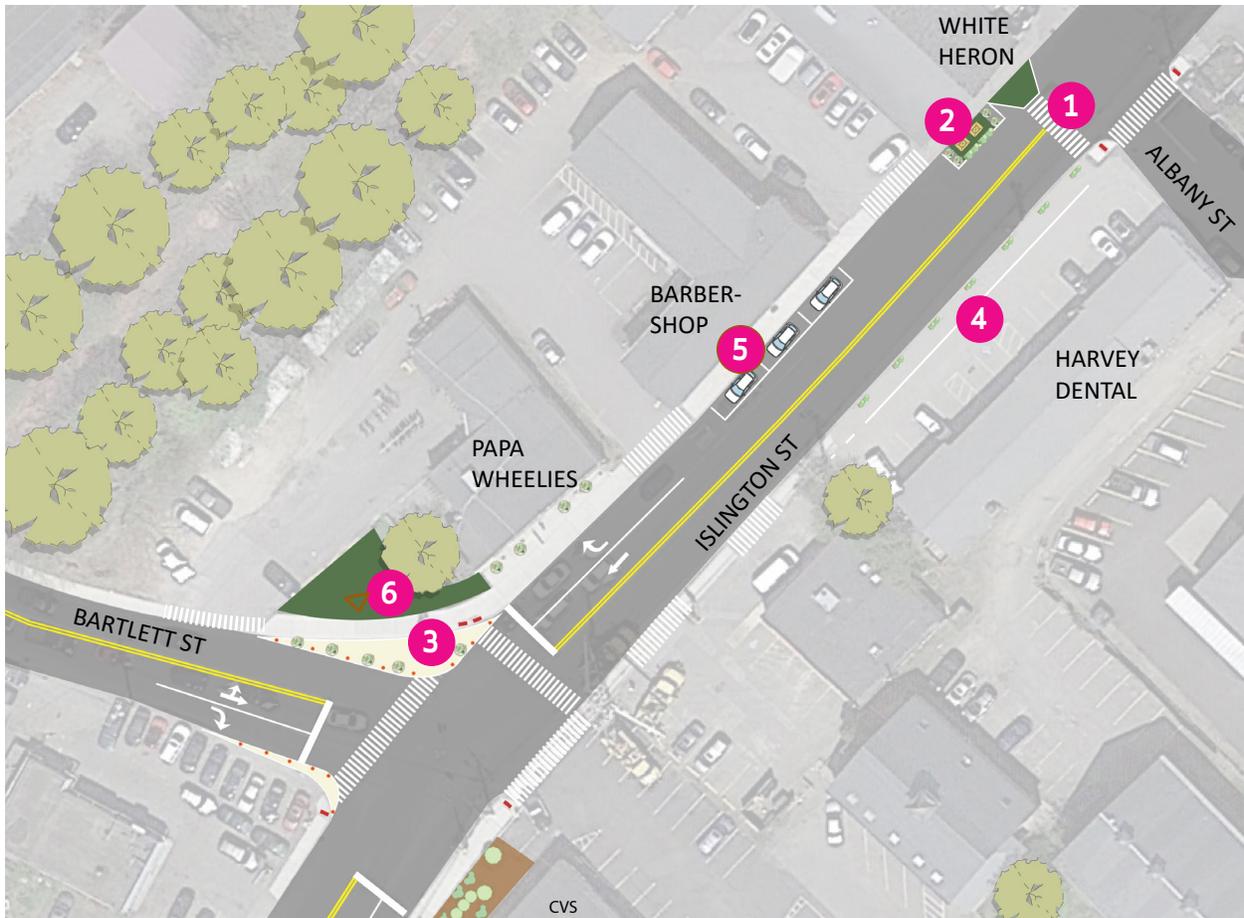
June 2 – June 5

The installation started early morning on June 2, with approximately 40 volunteers and city staff implementing the changes on the street and adjacent parking lots and sidewalks. Responses to the project were actively solicited from the public, and collected via an online and paper survey from June 2 to 10.

Sharing of Project Results

Ongoing

In addition to this report, PS21 is sharing results directly with city officials, at its website www.ps21.info, in a press release, on social media, in the organization's e-newsletter, and in a short video. The PS21 board also was invited to make a presentation about the project and the group's other activities at the Northern New England Chapter of the American Planning Association conference that will be held in September 2016 in Portsmouth.



Islington Street Lab elements and design plan

PROJECT'S STREET ELEMENTS AND DESIGN

The key on-street elements of the Islington Street Lab were:

- 1** **Crosswalk at Albany and Islington street intersection.** Participants at the design workshop indicated this crosswalk was their highest priority. This is an often-used crossing point for pedestrians, bicyclists and drivers, particularly those who are headed to the popular White Heron Café.

During the project, the crosswalk was marked with removable pavement tape. The distance from one side of the street to the other was reduced from three lanes to two by creating a small “parklet” and marking a painted bumpout with traffic cones on the White Heron side. For traffic approaching the area from downtown, traffic cones funneled vehicles into a narrower driving lane as they approached the area. Crossing signs were added, and the bumpout and parklet enhanced the crosswalk visibility. In addition, pedestrians could carry pennants (called PedFlags) that were left in containers on either side of the crosswalk to increase their visibility while crossing.

- 2 **Parklet.** In front of White Heron Café on Islington Street, a parklet with AstroTurf covering the pavement functioned as a small-scale outdoor café. The parklet narrowed the street and added variety to an area where the only public space is the street.
- 3 **Curb extension at the corner of Bartlett Street.** The rounded corner of Islington and Bartlett was squared off by a bumpout, which was demarcated by pavement tape, planter boxes, and traffic cones. The bumpout shortened the crossing distance for pedestrians and encouraged drivers to take the corner more slowly, making it safer for pedestrians and bicyclists. This element was another priority for workshop participants, who described the speed of cars at this intersection as dangerous.
- 4 **Pedestrian sidewalk definition in the Harvey Dental parking lot.** On the east side of Islington Street, the sidewalk ends after Albany Street and pedestrians are confronted with a parking lot. White striping with removable pavement tape defined a sidewalk area and planter boxes were added.
- 5 **Three on-street parking spaces.** On the west side of Islington Street in front of Port City Barbers, three parking spaces were created and marked with removable pavement tape. This narrowed the street and shortened the right-turn lane approaching Bartlett Street.
- 6 **Other elements.** The project included a new, tall customized wooden sign on the Papa Wheelies' corner of Bartlett and Islington streets that indicated the direction to various types of West End businesses. (This was funded by the project and remains in place to this date.) Other wayfinding signs were installed, enhancing the sense of the West End as a place and destination. Greenery and banners were added to improve the area's appearance. In addition, crosswalk striping across curb cuts and bicycle markings in the street ("sharrows") reminded drivers to share the space.

EVALUATION: COMMUNITY SURVEY RESULTS

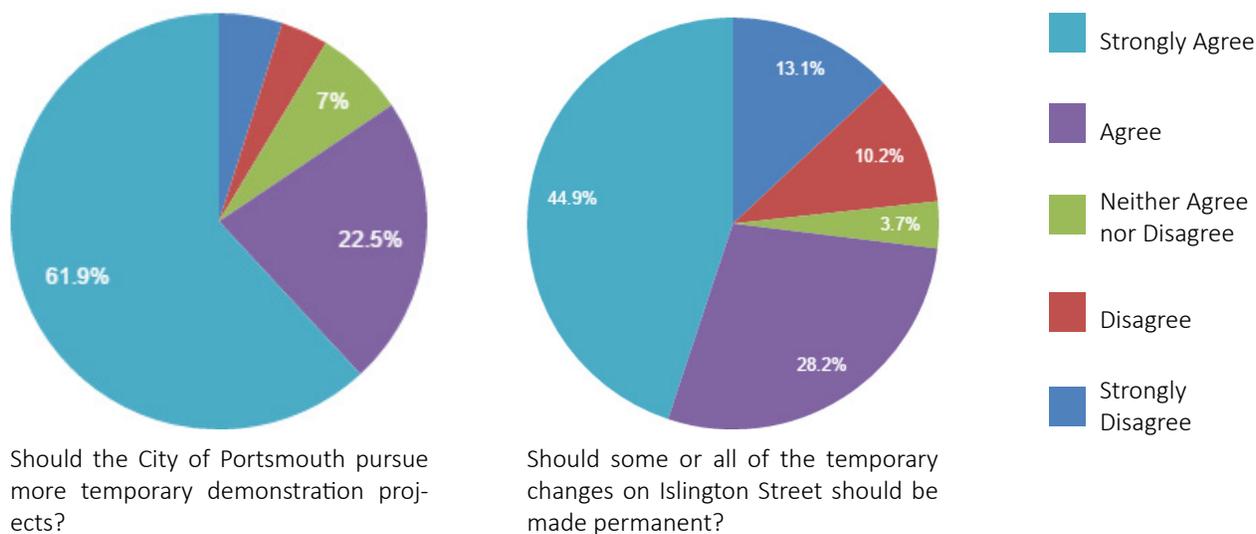
The survey resulted in 265 respondents, with 225 responding online, 29 completing paper surveys, and the remainder conveying their comments to city officials. The survey had four overarching questions and space for comments. *(The full survey is available in Appendix A and the survey comments are in Appendix B.)*

The survey asked respondents to describe their modes of travel through the project area. Most respondents chose both walking and driving.

The results show overwhelming support for the tactical urbanism approach. A majority—85 percent of respondents—thought the City should pursue more tactical urbanism-style temporary demonstration projects. Respondents also greatly supported specific elements of the temporary installation: 73 percent thought some or all of the project elements should be made permanent, and 68 percent thought that the project calmed traffic and made the street more comfortable.

Respondents' enthusiasm for the project was reflected in the frequent use of words including "love," "beautiful," "great," and "safer"; a number of respondents also thanked the project implementers. One respondent wrote, "I love how the temporary project made walking on the street feel a lot less about passing through, and much more about the experience of being a part of a growing, vibrant community."

Those who indicated dissatisfaction with the project installation cited increased congestion and what they saw as decreased safety. About a quarter of the total respondents cited traffic delays, the shortened right-turn lane onto Bartlett Street, and difficulty entering Islington from side streets.



SPECIFIC SURVEY COMMENTS

Most of the more than 150 comments related to design elements and are summarized below:

- 1 Crosswalk at South Albany Street.** This crosswalk was the most widely commented on element of the street redesign. Comments were overwhelmingly in support of this feature. Many respondents asked for a crosswalk to be installed permanently as soon as possible. White Heron Café initiated a petition to install a permanent crosswalk and more than 250 people have signed it to date.

There were caveats. Some respondents cited the three-lane street width as a related issue, and recommended that the street there be reduced to two lanes. Some thought the crosswalk should be moved up or down the street a bit. A related recommendation was to make turns from South Albany Street onto Islington Street right turn only.

- 2 Parklet in front of White Heron.** Approximately 50 survey respondents commented (18%) on the parklet. Some indicated they thought the in-street location endangered people who sat there. Others viewed the parklet positively, with some referring to it as “inviting.” A few suggested that the parklet limited drivers’ view when exiting from the Sunoco gas station or White Heron Café.
- 3 Curb extension at the corner of Bartlett Street.** The intended impact was to increase pedestrian safety by decreasing the crosswalk length and slowing vehicles turning at this corner. Those supporting the change referred to excessive speed and near-accidents at the intersection. Critics felt the curb extension was unnecessary or that it hindered traffic.
- 4 Pedestrian sidewalk stripe in Harvey Dental parking lot.** Only one survey respondent specifically commented on this element, requesting that plazas generally set a clearer definition between what is sidewalk and what is parking lot, and pointing out that there are several locations along Islington street where this is an issue.
- 5 Three on-street parking spaces in front of the barbershop.** About 11% of the respondents commented specifically about this element. Most objected to the shortened right-turn lane and cited traffic back-ups as a problem. Some assumed emergency vehicles would have difficulty because of the traffic; however, one respondent observed a fire truck and ambulance turning at a busy time without difficulty.
- 6 Other elements.** The project included additional elements to improve placemaking, beautify the neighborhood, and increase safety. One notable element was the wooden neighborhood directory sign at the corner of Islington and Bartlett Streets, which was made by Portsmouth Industrial Design at Port City Makerspace. One respondent wrote, “Love the directory sign and how it makes the area more of a community. [It feels like] it’s part of a West End neighborhood instead of just a road heading to or away from downtown.”

Other Comments Regarding the Project Area

One street element identified at the design workshop as needing attention was the CVS parking lot, whose entrance is at the Bartlett and Islington intersection. This challenge was not addressed during the project because the lot is privately owned. However, the confusion and risk caused by this access to Islington Street was cited by workshop participants and came up repeatedly in discussions with local residents and businesses.

Also worth noting, 78 self-described cyclists responded to the survey, and 26 made comments about the street and cycling. Some commented that they felt safer and more visible with the project changes, while others felt the bumpouts and narrower street made cycling more hazardous. Many requested that there be dedicated bike lanes.

Other comments on the survey regarding the project area (but not specifically part of the scope of this project) included wider sidewalks, dedicated bike lanes, a bike lane parallel to Islington by the railroad tracks, and a rotary at the intersection of Islington and Bartlett.



Islington Street Lab parklet setup

FOLLOW-UP ON THE ISLINGTON STREET LAB PROJECT

Overall, the survey results suggest there is significant community support for:

1. **Testing a number of the project elements with a low-cost interim project**—specifically the crosswalk and bumpout at Albany and Islington streets, and the curb extension at Bartlett Street, both of which received strong support.

Parking in the right-turn lane in front of Port City Barbers/Harbour Light Strategic Marketing building was useful in that it slowed traffic, provided parking and created a barrier between traffic and pedestrians. However, it appeared to contribute to traffic delays, and fewer spaces might have the same positive effects.

A pilot project would allow an assessment of these features and their impact from a number of perspectives, such as traffic speed, pedestrian and cyclist usage and safety, emergency vehicle travel, delivery vehicle access, winter feasibility, and noise levels. Also recommended is the delineation of the sidewalk through the Harvey Dental parking lot and crosswalk striping in curb cuts.

2. **Implementing tactical urbanism projects throughout Portsmouth.** The sheer number of responses to the survey, as well the 85% of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that the City should pursue more temporary demonstration projects, indicates significant support for implementing other tactical urbanism projects in the city. This would continue the project's example of experimenting with streetscape alternatives and allowing citizens and participants to more closely interact with city officials on these changes.

This report was written and submitted by the board and volunteers of Portsmouth Smart Growth for the 21st Century (PS21). It presented the Islington Street Lab as part of its 2015-2016 series to stimulate discussion about policy and planning issues affecting Portsmouth.

PS21 is a group of residents and business people who support and present informational events as a basis for discussing planning and development in Portsmouth. PS21 presents ideas and encourages discussion and policy development towards a long-term vision for the city. Our goal is to support a vibrant, sustainable, livable, and walkable community compatible with the principles of Smart Growth, the historic nature of Portsmouth, and the context of the 21st century.

PS21 maintains a website, including an archive of video recordings of its many events, at www.ps21.info