

Changing How We Think About Retail Corridors

The Colerain Avenue Corridor Study

By Eric Anderson, AICP

Colerain Avenue is a historic and important arterial corridor in Cincinnati, Ohio, connecting from north to south and drawing populations from a wide range of areas in Ohio and Indiana. The corridor runs the entirety of Colerain Township, from Struble to Byrnside Roads, with many distinct areas of commercial development along it. Since its widening in the 1960s, access management, safety, and desirable development patterns have been an issue.

Colerain Township is located north of Cincinnati and is conveniently located off two major interstates providing easy access to our residential and business communities. Colerain Township is the 2nd largest township in the state of Ohio, encompassing 42.9 square miles while serving 58,499 residents.

U.S. Route 27, also known as Colerain Avenue, was once a turnpike supported by tolls, and in 1925 it became one of the original interstate highways connecting northern Michigan and the southern portion of the United States. Along with interstate traffic, it drew travelers between Cincinnati, Oxford and areas of Indiana as a retail hub, as well as serving as a connection point to Hamilton via State Route 128 in Ross, Ohio. In the mid 1960s, the stretch of Colerain Avenue from Struble Road to the Cincinnati city limits was widened to a four-lane roadway with no access control, as the explosive growth of the next 30 years could not have been foreseen. As the growth did occur, zone changes contributed to most of the frontage of the avenue being commercially developed. Population increases also aided in bringing even more traffic to the area, as well as the construction of the I-275 interchange at Colerain. The combination of high-volume traffic, no access control and rapid development of commercial areas has created the current congested urban arterial route. From then on, it has become apparent that traffic congestion and access needs to be addressed along the corridor.

To help remedy these issues, Colerain Township has commenced on a year-long planning effort to make strategic, long-term enhancements to the Colerain Avenue Corridor. The Township has been working for more than 20 years to improve traffic and aesthetic conditions along Colerain Avenue, however the resulting efforts have led to an improved vehicular-oriented roadway but has left much to desire in terms of urban design and pedestrian environment. Downtown Cincinnati-based KZF Design collaborated with the township to provide design concepts and recommendations as well as conduct a study on the existing conditions of the roughly 4 1/2-mile Colerain Avenue corridor, which includes the roadway and surrounding properties spanning from Green Township to Butler County.



The Township has teamed with KZF Design to conduct a study, including an evaluation of existing conditions, traffic counts, etc., and to provide design concepts and recommendations to outline improvements and physical changes to the Colerain Avenue Corridor. The goal of the project is to create a consistent, appealing, and safe public environment within Colerain Township.

“Colerain Avenue is the most important corridor in the Township” says Township Administrator Geoff Milz, “and the Township Trustees are committed to making the experience of using the road safer, easier and more enjoyable. This plan will identify projects that will improve Colerain Avenue and set us up for success in applying for grants to fund the projects.”

In July, the Colerain Township board of trustees and staff revealed several possible improvements to Colerain Avenue. The core concepts of the recommendations include:

- Landscape medians and median U-turns, which eliminate the need for left-turn lanes at intersections and drastically reduce collisions.
- Sound access management principles intended to improve safety for pedestrians, bicyclists and vehicles
- Streetscape design strategies and gateway elements which promote a cohesive look and feel along Colerain Avenue, but also reflect the unique character of different segments of the roadway.
- Redevelopment of Northgate Mall into a mixed-use, “Town Center” style development with single and multi-family housing and outdoor mall corridors with dining, pedestrian spaces, and plazas.

“The condition right now is concrete sidewalk and paved parking lots. It’s pretty harsh,” said Eric Anderson, project manager and community planner for KZF Design. “By adding landscaping, we can soften that and make it easier to navigate.”

Median U-turns would eliminate left turns at Colerain Avenue’s signaled intersections. This type of U-turn can reduce congestion and severity of crashes by up to 60 percent, according to the Michigan Department of Transportation.

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Colerain Avenue has long been considered home to some of the most dangerous intersections in the state of Ohio. The Ohio Department of Transportation shows five of the 25 most crash-prone intersections in Southwest Ohio were on Colerain Avenue.

A possible redevelopment of Northgate Mall into a mixed-use “towne center” would include single- and multi-family housing and outdoor mall corridors with dining, pedestrian spaces and plazas.

Draft recommendations can be reviewed on the Colerain Township website: <https://www.colerain.org/DocumentCenter/View/2065>. ■



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Geoff Milz, AICP LEED AP

Please share a little bit about your career path. How did you choose planning as a career, and how did you end up in your current role?

I was very active in environmental advocacy in high school and college. I studied environmental science at the University of Cincinnati for undergrad and loved Carla Chifos' environmental planning class. I came to the realization that the best way to make effective change is from inside an organization. That class made me realize that planning was the path to make the world better and make the most positive change in a community. I then decided to get my master's degree in economic development at UC. Being that I graduated in 2008 at the start of the great recession, I had to look far and wide for a job. I landed a job with Cayuga County, NY as a planner. I liked Cayuga County because it was a very rural county – and was interested in using sustainable agriculture as an economic development tool. I was able to do a lot of farmland preservation work, helping to protect 3000 acres of farmland total. I worked at Cayuga County for four years, then wanted to come back home to Cincinnati, so I found a great job with Colerain Township. I did some great work with affordable housing, blight removal, the repositioning of a local mall called Northgate Mall, and working to eliminate visual clutter along Colerain Avenue, a busy retail corridor. I then moved on to a job at City of Covington doing economic development work and then back to Colerain Township as Assistant Administrator and now Administrator.

What is a typical day like for you?

There is no typical day! I start at 5:00 am and chart out my day with a cup of coffee, catch up on emails and try to journal if possible. I get to work around 8:30 am and the rest of the day just unfolds. While I try to plan my day, it never ends up as I planned. My work involves lots of time communicating – with trustees, staff, stakeholders in the community and economic development contacts. I try to keep an eye on the vision and make sure we're all rowing in the right direction. Then if I don't have a night meeting I head home to my family between 5:00 and 5:30pm.

What are the rewards of the job? The challenges?

The thing I like the best about planning is being able to see the physical manifestation of my work in the built environment. I love to see a project come out of the ground. When I drive past my projects, I enjoy being able to point them out as something I helped create. I also enjoy working with social organizations and community groups. It's very rewarding to see community organizations build confidence in what they're doing and take on projects. Right now, working in local government is a challenging time because I feel like we've lost the ability to have tough conversations or being able to disagree but still get along at the same time. As a public servant, we are always trying to get input and have the work we do be reflective of the community. Constructive conversations have become more and more challenging – but it's the most important part of our job as planners. The tone has gotten sharper and more personal.

Why is membership in APA Ohio important to you? How has it helped you?

The network of people. There is a lot of value in having a network of planners facing similar issues as myself. When you're looking to hire that network is also handy. Also, professional development through conferences, education events, and lunches provide great value.

What's the best career advice you've given?

In order to be successful in public service, you need to have a thick skin, a short memory and enduring optimism.

Anything else you'd like to share with APA Ohio Chapter members?

Keep fighting the good fight! ■

Interviewing Geoff Milz, AICP was Eric Anderson, AICP. He is the Community Planner + Manager of Marketing & Business Development at KZF Design. Eric is also the APA Cincinnati Section Director and APA Ohio Professional Development Officer (PDO). He can be reached at Eric.Anderson@kzf.com.