

Complaints detail issues during downtown Marshall project

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Marshall Police Department officers are called to the work site downtown after an interaction between construction employees. (Contributed Photo)

Downtown business owners in Marshall have reported numerous negative interactions with construction crew members as well as loss of business during the ongoing downtown revitalization project at the 300 and 400 block of North Washington Avenue.

Since the project officially began in January 2024, three separate community members have reported negative interactions with a Casey Slone Construction company employee and Casey Slone himself.

Along with negative interactions between business and building owners with Casey Slone Construction employees, a number of downtown business owners have expressed concerns over the project costing them a significant amount of money in sales.

Both City Manager Terrell Smith and Casey Slone, while noting they are doing what they can to address issues, emphasized that the previously completed sections of the project have added value to the downtown area, and that once the current project is completed it will be a net positive for the community as Marshall has seen done with the last two blocks.

“At the end of it I will be happy and it will be extremely nice from the courthouse down to 80,” Slone said.

Personnel Issues

A Freedom of Information Act request submitted by the News Messenger uncovered two separate email chains sent to Public Works Director Eric Powell with downtown business owners discussing concerns over direct interactions with a Casey Slone Construction employee.

On April 23, building owner Larry Watts, at 303 N. Washington Ave., had an altercation with a construction company employee outside of his property on North Washington Street, during which the two discussed the work being done on the project in front of the building owned by Watts.

“I lifted our electrical wire from the concrete so the workers could continue to finish the concrete without its interference and tried to point out the void being left around and behind our pipe to the person finishing the area,” wrote Watts in an email the day of the incident to Powell, “At this point, Slone Construction told me to leave his workers to their job. I complied and requested that he please make sure they get cement back in and around the electrical pole so that we don’t have a void.”

Watts wrote that one of the employees “told me to let his people do their work, I explained my concern about the void that they were not aware of and I’m asking him to please take care of it.”

The man, Watts wrote, because aggressive, got in his face and again told him to leave. Watts wrote he did so after telling the employee about his concern again.

The altercation escalated with the employee contacting the Marshall Police Department, with officers coming out to the work site, though no charges or an incident report were filed by the department after the meeting.

Casey Slone said that the employee contacted the police after requesting that Watts leave the open job site on numerous occasions, and that lay people are not allowed to walk around an active construction site without permission or supervision.

“Joe Public can’t be in our work zone when there is work ongoing,” Slone said, “You cannot be in my work zone when an active concrete pour is taking place. I don’t care who you are. Joe Public can’t direct workers in an active construction zone.”

Raigan Davis, with Royal Cypress at 310A N. Washington Ave., reported to Powell on April 16 that while discussing concerns over a newly poured sidewalk blocking her business on Friday and Saturday, she was told “don’t get your pantyhose in a wad” by the employee.

“This statement was inappropriate, rude, and absolutely uncalled for. This project has been mismanaged from the start. I understand how construction goes and I know we have to be flexible, but it has gone on too long with no updates, many sunny days of street closures with no work, the signs the city had made stating we are open pushed over on the ground and not stood back up and much more,” Davis’s email to Powell reads.

Slone himself also had an interaction with Paige Yohn, owner of 304 N. Washington Ave., during which time witnesses to the incident said Slone became belligerent.

Slone denies he was belligerent during the interaction and would not comment further on interactions between himself and Yohn. Yohn filed suit against the company the following day for damages the lawsuit alleges were done to her property by Casey Slone Construction during the downtown project.

Business Concerns ‘An Emergency Issue’

Davis mentions in her email to Powell that the project has caused an immense burden on her daily business, which caused her stress over having to be closed on a Friday and Saturday due to sidewalk pouring — two days she said she is the busiest.

Davis joins a chorus of voices from downtown Marshall expressing concern over the project. On Feb. 26, a group of downtown business and building owners held an informal meeting at Cajun Tex in Marshall with Powell present, during which time the issue was determined to be “an emergency situation” for most retail stores in downtown.

Notes from the meeting emailed to those in attendance, including Powell, stated that everyone in attendance agreed that the end product is needed and will be excellent, but outlined a number of serious concerns from business owners.

“Retail is in dire straits. They are seeing a drastic reduction in revenue from January 2023 compared to January 2024. It is a real struggle to maintain business. Even with a business that does not have traditional retail, the reduction in walk in traffic has all but halted (sales),” the email states.

City Manager Terrell Smith said that from a city perspective there is no way for the city to actively fund any businesses or offer grants to those affected by the construction. However, he said that he has personally been working with a number of business owners with alternative methods of funding to assist them through the construction period.

“We understand that it’s their livelihoods in these buildings and what we are doing is meant to improve actually what their businesses are able to do,” Smith said.

Raven Lenz, owner and operator of Black Bird Bathhouse, said that she has lost about a month of business between being closed and the lack of street traffic available on the block since the project started.

She emphasized that while businesses can remain open during construction hours, the project itself makes it almost impossible for the community to access the storefronts safely, with many unaware that businesses on the block are even open.

“Often if I am open I am losing more money because we won’t get any sales and I still have to pay my electric, my employee, running this store isn’t free,” Lenz said.

Since the project began, Lenz said her family has had to revisit their finances on three separate occasions to determine whether the store will be able to remain in business.

“And we are trying to buy this building, we are working on getting enough money to purchase and renovate the space here and really do something with it,” Lenz said, “This has made everything so impossible.”

Smith said that the city is working to support local businesses through the promotion of the stores on the city run social media accounts, such as Visit Marshall and the official City Hall Facebook page.

However, Smith did admit that the city “may have dropped the ball” when it comes to signage in downtown Marshall, with the first sign placed in front of construction zone reading “No admittance without a hard hat” and “All

visitors must visit the office” before it was taken down and replaced with the current sign after a number of weeks.

“It was what we had available,” Smith explained, with Main Street Manager Lacy Burson later bringing up the idea to have a different, larger and more inviting sign placed on the block during the project.

The new sign now reads the names of business on the block stating “We are open.”

However, business owners remain concerned over the success of the sign due to it being knocked over in the wind and due to construction work a number of other times.

‘Us Working for the Betterment of the City’

Other concerns brought forth by the community were discussed by both Public Works Director Eric Powell and Slone, including the closure of North Washington Avenue a number of times on what appeared to business owners as nonconstruction days.

Slone explained that many times the business has been waiting on deliveries of supplies, which are both delivered to and stored downtown, with delivery delays and other issues out of their control.

“When you have someone on the phone telling you they’re delivering in a window, say 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., you have to make sure you’re ready at 9 a.m. right? But how often is the delivery actually on time at 9 a.m., sometimes it won’t even come that day, that’s the kind of thing we are dealing with,” Slone said. “I could complain about the deliveries, what about when it rains, I can’t control God. And that came right out of my back pocket. People maybe don’t see, and they may also not want to understand our side, but I’m not going to be complaining about it.”

Additionally, Powell explained that while crews were required to wait on certain areas of the project after Slone’s crews determined there was the need for a change order, that they never stopped working completely.

“I have heard it said that everything stopped because we had to do a change order, and that is not exactly what happened,” Smith said.

In fact, Powell said that crews were constantly at work, bouncing around the block in a way that was not originally planned to ensure that progress continued as much as possible on the downtown revitalization project while they waited for official approvals, supply deliveries and more.

Additionally, the severe rain storms that have come through the area since the project started have caused delays on work, which Slone said he personally wishes would not occur because they cost him and his crew additional days, and money to complete the work.

Not only are crews dealing with rain, but Slone also mentioned that due to the amount of rain the crews are also waiting for “drying days” when the work site is still too wet to get anything done even after storms have passed.

“When it’s all wet and muddy, sometimes you can mess up more than you can fix,” Slone said, “And sometimes it’s more beneficial to the project as a whole. But if my guys aren’t working, it’s a loss for me. I want to be there, I have no incentive at all to delay.”

Smith also addressed issues with communication to both the general public, and to business owners, stating that the city is working hard to ensure that updated information is available as soon as it can be, but that in an active construction project certain things can't be estimated.

This includes informing of business owners more than a few days in advance of when concrete will be poured outside of their buildings, as well as other factors that Smith said involve so many variables that estimating that far in advance is unrealistic.

"We don't want to set false expectations," Smith said.

While the change order did add around 15 or 20 additional work days to the project, Powell said that the original estimated end time for both blocks was not affected significantly. The project is projected to take 255 active work days to complete, and will likely be finished in early Fall 2024.

"From my standpoint, and I am speaking for the city and I think for Casey as well, this isn't an us versus them situation, this isn't an us versus anybody on this kind of deal, this is us working for the betterment of the city as a whole and the betterment for the community as a whole," Smith said. "I understand that that is sensitive because livelihoods are affected here but we're working on it and we are working with them for it."

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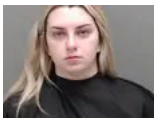
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Jessica Harker has been the city reporter with the Marshall News Messenger since 2019.