

Breaking new ground

Locals reflect on bike lanes, water issues and more

BY CHASE DAVIS

cdavis@mountainx.com

When it comes to breaking news, infrastructure typically is not the first thing that comes to mind. However, Asheville's infrastructure took local news by storm this year with several hot-button issues and controversial proposals.

Asheville's aging water system was the first piece of infrastructure that took the spotlight in 2023, with thousands of Asheville residents ringing in the new year without water after a cold snap led to multiple breaks and system failures across the city's waterlines. Later in the year, the addition of bike lines on Merrimon Avenue divided the community with some arguing the lanes would increase cyclist and pedestrian safety, while others worried traffic snarls would put a strain on the thoroughfare's businesses.

Here's what developers, government officials, activists and residents thought about those topics and others.

What lessons did the City of Asheville learn from the water outage, and has it made progress in addressing a future water service issue?

"After the outage, the City Council created an Independent Review Committee (IRC) to review and provide a comprehensive account of the water outage, including an assessment of the operational and emergency response, communication efforts and needed infrastructure improvements. Since then, the Water Resources Department has either implemented or is in the process of implementing the IRC's recommendations per the city's duty to provide safe, clean water to our customers."

— **Esther Manheimer**,
Asheville mayor

"First, let's recognize the city workers who committed themselves over the holiday week to fix the problem. However, in addition to our aging infrastructure, Asheville has a communication problem. During the water crisis, critical areas like the

hospital were prioritized, but that was not communicated to the community, which was rightfully upset and disillusioned by the city's response."

— **Lissa Pedersen**,
teacher and vice president,
Buncombe County
Association of Educators

"From the outside, it looks like they [are] taking it seriously with the post-mortem review that the city conducted. I have seen more underground utility work around town, so I imagine that [the city] is working toward a more sustainable water system with more dependable service."

— **Billy Doubraski**,
East West Asheville Neighborhood
Association board member

"The water outage was terrible for so many families and businesses, and the city has taken it very seriously. Since the water outage, we've invested in the Mills River Treatment Plant to fortify against extreme weather, established communication protocols to better share information with the community and updated our Emergency Management Plan to improve [our] coordinated response."

— **Maggie Ullman**,
Asheville city council member

Were this year's infrastructure priorities correct? Or should we have focused elsewhere? Examples from this year include Merrimon Avenue and McCormick Field.

"I honestly don't think the mess that was made of Merrimon Avenue and the time it took to complete the project was worth it. I am, however, grateful for the steps taken to ensure that the Asheville Tourists remain the Asheville Tourists. Much can be argued about the importance of safeguarding the things that make Asheville what it is. Our baseball team and field are a part of that. Simple to some, but as an 11-year resident here, this matters to me."

— **Ashanti Ternoir**,
community member and service
provider



NEW LANES: The proposed addition of bike lanes throughout Asheville, such as this one in the River Arts District, have been a major topic of discussion in 2023. Photo by Mark Barrett

"The infrastructure that's most impactful on our community is our stormwater system, especially given our mountainous topography. It not only feeds into our waterways, but when it malfunctions, it can cause substantial damage. I'm thankful for the city's commitment to addressing these issues through its 10-year plan, notably in areas like Biltmore Village. I was also happy with the Merrimon Road improvement. It's safer for cars and pedestrians now, which will save lives and money."

— **David Moritz**,
developer, Mori Blue Holdings LLC

"The Merrimon Avenue project, while controversial, has been a huge success. It has made Asheville a friendlier, safer and more accessible place to live. It's a great model for how we can design cities for people instead of cars. As safety data continues to come in and people get used to the change, the value of the project will be clear to all. The top infrastructure need for Asheville, however, is more housing options. Local governments and our whole community

need to be dedicated to solving the housing crisis, not only so people who live here now can afford to stay, but also to make room for the huge numbers of climate-change refugees that will be relocating here in the coming years."

— **Josh Kelly**,
public lands biologist, MountainTrue

"Supporting McCormick Field was a big mistake. The economics of supporting a minor league team are horrendous, and this investment will not pay for itself over time. At best, it's a bid for nostalgia by paying to keep a minor league team here instead of having an independent team play here. At worst, it's a huge subsidy to \$2 billion-dollar businesses, the Houston Astros and Major League Baseball."

— **Andrew Celwyn**,
former board member,
Buncombe County Tourism
Development Authority

"Correct' probably isn't the right word, but they're certainly defensible. I live in North Asheville and am slowed every day by the Merrimon Avenue



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