

West 3rd Street Traffic Calming Proposal

Comments by Jim Rosenbarger, chairperson, Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety Commission

March 16, 2012

Introduction

Some of the dialog about this specific traffic-calming proposal has been diverted by critiques of the established process of the Neighborhood Traffic Calming Program (NTSP). The NTSP is a City ordinance and has been in effect for longer than a decade. Revisions to the NTSP may be considered at some point, but that discussion should not further delay or undermine the Council's review of the West 3rd Street application.

Painstakingly guided by the Engineering Department in adherence to the lengthy NTSP steps, the citizens supporting this application have invested countless hours in a sincere, three year effort to reach this point. Changing the law for this application would be a travesty of genuine citizen involvement.

General comments about the NTSP process are included at the end of these Comments.

Background

The Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety Commission (BPSC), in accordance with step 7 of the NTSP, reviewed this proposal at our February 27, 2012 meeting. After listening to the engineering staff presentation and to comments from citizens, we approved the petition unanimously.

The BPSC had previously reviewed traffic studies for the petition during our December 14, 2009 meeting as required by Step 3. The BPSC voted unanimously to acknowledge a safety hazard and to recommend advancing the petition in the NTSP process.

Comments on the Engineering Report

Page 8, Step 2:

Engineering comments state that a speeding problem did not exist. Yet their 85th percentile speeds of 26 mph exceed the posted speed limit of 25.

Also note that 85th percentile measurements do not include the fastest 15% of speeds.

The report compares W. 3rd to streets of similar classification and volume without regard to the actual configuration of the street and its context. W. 3rd is very narrow with an unprotected, attached sidewalk on one side, and with the fronts of houses very close to traffic. Tight proximities can create an environment with very little margin for error on the part of drivers and pedestrians.

Page 9, Step 5

The report notes the interesting dichotomy between on-the-street residents and “traffic studies.” The report indicates that no problem really exists while residents are clearly “convinced” otherwise. While traffic studies are essential to a rational analysis of the problem, the report fails to include some significant studies that could strongly validate the resident’s concerns.

Average automobile stopping distances: Note the wide range of stopping distances from various speeds. (truck stopping distances are longer)

<u>mph</u>	<u>ft/second</u>	<u>stopping distance ft.</u>
10	14.7	27
15	22.0	47
20	29.3	69
25	36.7	95
30	44.0	109
35	51.3	155

Pedestrians hit by vehicle traveling 20 or 30 mph:

<u>mph</u>	<u>fatalities</u>	<u>injuries</u>	<u>no injury</u>
20	5%	65%	30%
30	45%	50%	5%

A speed decrease of 10mph results in 40% improvement in survival rates or approximately a 4% improvement in survival rates for each 1mph speed reduction. (Injury and death rates are much higher for older people.)

While the report implies that neighborhood residents are reacting irrationally, the above speed studies support the residents’ concerns.

Page 10, Step 5:

The ‘modified speed hump’, known as a speed cushion appears to be a very useful, and simple traffic calming device that is acceptable to drivers of emergency vehicles.

Page 10, Step 6:

The approval percentage of 74% was high.

Page 12, Street Classification

In this section, the report is making an argument that W. Third, legally classified as a residential street, should be considered to be a collector.

The report takes a stand that the Growth Policy Plan has incorrectly identified W. 3rd as a residential street. This argument steps outside the purview of the report in an attempt to defeat the proposal.

The determination of residential, collector, and arterial streets is a policy decision made by elected officials, not staff.

Pages 13 -14 Traffic Speeds

The 4 to 7 mph reduction approximates a 16 to 28% improvement in survival rates for pedestrians struck by vehicles.

The report shows that 85th percentile speeds recorded after the 2004 traffic calming were overwhelming above the current speed limit of 25mph.

The use of the 85th percentile ignores the fastest 15% of vehicles. The 85th percentile is a good tool for designing highways, and for comparisons. It seems limited in determining safety for residents because it is the fastest 15% that are the most dangerous.

Page 15 Traffic Volumes

Measured 'diversion' falls within the guideline of the NTSP.

Note that W. Third still carries far more cars than W. Fourth and that both streets are classified as Residential/Local.

Also note that traffic calming installations are a potential option for W. Fourth or any other surrounding streets.

Page 18, Balloting

The NTSP threshold of approval is very high. A majority of households is required, not just a majority of voters.

Page 20, Accidents

In the chart under 'Driver Contributing Circumstances' unsafe speed is listed directly in 3 accidents. 'Ran Off Road', and 'Overcorrecting' would also seem to be an issue with speed. Another four accidents could likely have involved speed.

Hitting the curb of a traffic calming device would indicate either driver inattention, speeding, or drinking and that the device is essentially doing its job.

Page 21, Recommendations

The report previously included data showing that vehicle diversion is within NTSP guidelines. However, in the Recommendations, diversion is stated as a reason to reject the proposal and no mention of the actual compliance is given.

The report's discussion of noise levels and aggressive drivers is inconsistent. On page 16 the report states that aggressive driving incidents diminish "as

drivers become accustomed to the devices.” In Recommendations, an increase in aggressive drivers is included as a significant barrier to approval.

Also on page 16, the report states that “no noise studies were conducted for this evaluation.” Yet in Recommendations, an increase in noise levels is cited as a reason for rejection.

Comments Summary

The Report’s bias is a problem. The report strays from a concise evaluation of facts to an unnecessary editorial of policy considerations. In some cases, the actual facts are blurred, omitted, or contradicted.

The test installation of speed cushions clearly shows a speed reduction from above current limits to a compliance with current law. The test also showed traffic diversion compliance within the limits of the NTSP.

This traffic calming process has demonstrated the value of speed cushions. They are simple, effective, and reasonably accommodating to emergency vehicles.

General Comments on the Neighborhood Traffic Safety Program

Context

Our culture has a long history of designing our cities around what makes drivers happy. Slowing vehicular traffic movement is still seen as threatening to engrained feelings about what constitutes mobility and freedom. Politically, traffic calming is a minefield. It’s either loved or hated.

In this context, the implementation of slowing traffic has largely been undertaken by those who could be labeled NIMBY’S. It has taken NIMBY determination to move from understanding the problem to actually doing something about it.

The NTSP is a citizen driven, ‘bottom up’ process that harnesses and channels NIMBY power. Participation requires a very high level of commitment and organizational skills, and even with these qualities outcomes are very unpredictable. Yet residents have stepped up and invested hundreds of hours in attempts to make their streets safer and more livable.

Diversion vs. Sharing

The negative connotations of traffic diversion ‘stem’ from the suburban style layout of streets with the cul-de-sac at the top of the livability ladder. The cul-de-sac has been seen as what we all want: a ‘private’ street which carries only it’s own residents. From the cul-de-sac traffic increases and livability

declines to the local, collector, and arterial streets. Most require crowding onto arterials.

In the last few years, the advantages of connected street networks have become re-recognized. In this system street grids distribute traffic loads among streets rather than forcing all traffic to the arterials. While some streets carry more traffic than others, the differences are less pronounced.

With a policy that emphasizes multiple connections and shared networks, 'diversion' can be seen as less of a problem. For example, new developments might be connected to surrounding local streets and cul-de-sacs to help carry traffic load in and out. The goal might be to create an equitable sharing of traffic rather than to avoid diversion.

For projects like W. 3rd Street traffic calming, it might be asked what is equitable for the neighborhood? W. 3rd and W. 4th are both exclusively residential in use, are of similar width, and both are classified as local streets. Neither street is configured as a straight, east - west connector. W. 3rd carries more traffic than W. 4th, so some diversion might be seen as equitable given our policy of connectivity.

A Big Plan

The NTSP can be criticized for its small scale changes, and for not looking at the 'big picture' of traffic flow. To some extent, the NTSP does take into account surrounding streets by limiting the amount of diversion, and traffic calming techniques have not included simply closing off a street. It should also be noted that other streets in the neighborhood have the option of undertaking a traffic calming process.

Demanding a larger study is of course a common way to stop or delay projects. It should also be noted that a larger study could be undertaken by the City in parallel to a NTSP application. Or the City could undertake a study to traffic calm an entire neighborhood. Since those top-down activities haven't been taken, the need remains for small scale, citizen led efforts.

25 MPH

The City's effort to broadly lower speed limits throughout its area demonstrates a change in the culture of speed. Reduced speeds most likely won't occur through enforcement. The NTSP can serve a valuable role in the effort to create safer streets throughout Bloomington.