

November 25, 2013 email to: Patti Austin, Mike Sexton, Rick Tilton, Director Tracie Davies

cc: Councilmember Paley, Nancy Sully, Councilmember Zach Klein, Gretchen James, President of City Council Andrew Ginther, Randy Bowman

Thank you for meeting with the Short North Civic Association's Shared Streets Working Group and providing us information on the recently conducted speed studies. This issue is very much a hot button topic in the neighborhood with a long history. This is evidenced by the large turnout at the public forum for the Neil Avenue traffic signal replacement project and subsequent attendance at SNCA meetings. As City staff can attest, most of the concerns were not about the actual hardware but speed limits, timing of lights, push-to-walk, and the safety of the pedestrian and bicyclists on our residential streets.

Our view is that all of these components together are important for the street in our historic neighborhood. Urban streets are more than pavement to move traffic as rapidly as possible, vehicular safety is far from the only relevant concern, and the weight to be given to non-numeric components of a speed study is primarily a matter of political judgment, not engineering. What kind of central city do we want? The extent to which traffic speed and noise affect the quality of life in a neighborhood, and the extent to which motorists should be required to share streets with other modes of transportation (such as bicycles and pedestrians) do not lend themselves to pure engineering solutions.

We agree that it is time to remove the temporary designation and have a permanent speed limit that is enforceable. The current temporary speed limits have been in place since 1995, so we do not understand the desire to get this done by year end. We very much want to work with you on resolving this issue as we have with other issues that have come up.

Due to the very sensitive nature of speed limit changes and the neighborhood's desire to look at this holistically, trying to move this forward so quickly backs the SNCA into a corner. It leaves no time to discuss the issues with city administration and no time to properly engage and educate the neighborhood. The only thing we can do at this point is encourage everyone to come to the T&PC meeting on December 3rd, since it would be the only opportunity for the community to comment. This rush to make changes after 18 years will create distrust and an adversarial situation. This is not in character with how SNCA views its relationship with the city administration and moving forward so quickly undermines the neighborhood's trust of both the City and SNCA. We think an additional 60 - 90 days to properly vet this issue is reasonable.

All that said, simply removing the temporary designation and maintaining the 25 mph limit that has worked successfully for 18 years would be met with no objection from the neighborhood and allow the city to move forward on its own schedule. We believe it is feasible for the City to do this *either* by using its "home rule" authority to re-designate "through highways" as "non-through highways" pursuant to O.R.C. § 4511.65(B), or by requesting that ODOT approve a change to 25 mph pursuant to O.R.C. § 4511.21(I).

We believe that 25 mph is an appropriate speed limit for Neil, 3rd, 5th, and King Avenues because they are residential streets in a historic urban neighborhood, some have marked bike "sharrows" and islands, all have substantial pedestrian and non-motor vehicular usage, and all are configured to amplify noise – among other reasons. Attached is a more detailed summary of reasoning with a focus on Neil, but it is also applicable to the other streets.

We note that in 1995, ODOT approved a temporary 25 mph speed for all four streets based on (1) anticipated congestion due to construction and (2) noise. ODOT was not told about all of the other reasons, as outlined in the attachment, why this speed limit is reasonable. The City has articulated no actual basis for the supposition that ODOT might now disagree with a request to make the 25 mph limit permanent – which is not much of a reach (especially given that “rounding” is to the *nearest*, not the next highest 5 mph). If ODOT is looking for additional justification to approve such a request, it exists in abundance (see attachment).

We look forward to hearing the results of your investigation of § 4511.65 as an option to address neighborhood speed limits, to working with you on this very important issue and to coming up with a solution that is satisfactory to everyone.

Please let us know ASAP if there will be a change in the schedule you proposed. We will need to notify the neighborhood by Tuesday, November 26 if the December 3 T&PC meeting will be their only opportunity to comment.

Jeff Smith, President Short North Civic Association

Maryellen O’Shaughnessy

Jack Decker

Kristen Easterday, President Harrison West Society

Ethan Hansen, University Area Commission

Pete Anderson

Rob Pettit

Case For Maintaining Current Speed Limits on Neil Avenue

(Also applies to a lesser extent to King, 5th & 3rd Avenues)

The formulas in the Traffic Engineering Manual, under which a "speed study" is conducted to determine a "safe" and/or "reasonable" speed, take into account customary motor vehicle speeds. They do not take into account other information about the street, how it is used, or the neighborhood through which it passes. The Manual does permit the City, and ODOT, to consider such factors, but assigns no particular numerical weight to them.

We believe that urban streets are more than pavement to move traffic as rapidly as possible, that vehicular safety is far from the only relevant concern, and that the weight to be given to non-numeric components of a speed study is primarily a matter of political judgment, not engineering. What kind of central city do we want? The extent to which traffic speed and noise affect the quality of life in a neighborhood, and the extent to which motorists should be required to share streets with other modes of transportation (such as bicycles and pedestrians) do not lend themselves to pure engineering solutions. 25 mph is not per se unreasonable:

- Neil and the other streets are "through highways" as defined at O.R.C. § 4511.65(B) because they function as arterials – most cross streets have signals or stop signs. O.R.C. § 4511.21(B)(3) states that the prima facie speed limit is "[t]hirty-five miles per hour on all state routes or through highways within municipal corporations outside business districts...." O.R.C. § 4511.65(B) says that in "residence districts," "a municipal corporation may by ordinance designate said street or highway, or portion thereof, not to be a through highway." In that case, O.R.C. § 4511.21(B)(2) sets the speed limit at 25 mph.

The General Assembly has determined that 25 mph is a reasonable speed limit for at least some streets through residential districts that are configured as arterials. But if Neil Avenue, for instance, does not qualify for a 25 mph speed limit, it's hard to imagine a "through highway" through a residential district in Columbus that would.

- Under the 2003 OTMP, a plan agreed upon between the City and the Short North neighborhoods, the City committed (at p.9) to construct up to 10 median islands along Neil Avenue, but only contingent upon whether "the posted traffic speed limit must remain higher than 25 mph and traffic volumes exceed acceptable volumes." Apparently, in 2003, keeping the speed limit at 25 mph was viewed as at least a plausible option by the City, and the median islands were not constructed.
- In 1995, the City asked ODOT to approve a 25 mph temporary limit, citing, among other things, traffic volume increases due to SSI construction and noise that forces some residents to "live in the back of their residences," while others "report being disturbed during their sleep." Although traffic volumes have subsided somewhat since the SSI construction ended, they are again increasing as the result of increasing density, and the construction of higher-density commercial and residential structures along High Street, across from Select Specialty Hospital, near Buttles and Dennison, and in Grandview Yards. Similar conditions are likely to exist as prompted the "temporary" speed limit request in 1995.
- The temporary 25 mph limit has been in effect for 18 years. Although there have been occasional complaints about the length of time the "temporary" signs have been up, there has been no noticeable adverse effect on the overall transportation network as a result.

Factors that make 25 mph particularly appropriate for Neil Avenue:

- Neil Avenue passes through a densely populated, urban residential district.
- The area has been designated as a historic preservation district under § 3119.41 of the Columbus City Code since 1975, and is subject to architectural review standards under Chapter 3116.
- The street, consisting of two lanes (and a single central turning lane), is relatively short (as “through highways” go). It serves mainly to collect traffic from nearby residential districts, and to connect the southern portion of the OSU campus with downtown. It is a local collector. Traffic traveling north and south from more distant points is likely to use SR 315, Olentangy River Road, High Street, or Summit and North Fourth Streets.
- Neil Avenue is a City-designated bicycle route, marked with “sharrows.” There is no designated bicycle lane, and bikes must share the same lane with motor vehicles traveling at much higher speeds. This is one of the most heavily used bicycle routes in the City, if not the most heavily-used. Many cyclists are students, or others who use bicycles as their primary mode of transportation. Cyclists are present at all hours of the day and night. Unfortunately, a number of riders do not use lights. A 20 mph speed difference between the posted limit and typical bicycle traffic is a serious safety concern.
- As a densely populated residential neighborhood, there is also a substantial amount of pedestrian traffic – particularly near campus, Goodale Park, and Thurber Center.
- For almost its entire length, Neil Avenue has on-street parking on both sides. There are also a few curb cuts for driveways. Accordingly, vehicles are frequently backing into a parking space from the traffic lane, or pulling into the traffic lane from almost anywhere. Residents must step nearly into the traffic lane to enter or exit vehicles.
- Neil Avenue used by two bus routes. Buses start and stop, take on and discharge pedestrians, and pull in and out of the traffic lanes.
- Neil Avenue was developed in the 19th Century. It is fronted by closely spaced residential structures, near the street, that form walls that contain, reflect and amplify traffic noise. This configuration differs substantially from that of most “through highways” passing through residential areas where buildings are lower, further apart, and set back further from the street. Traffic noise, of course, increases exponentially with speed. Even with at 25 mph limit, many Neil Avenue residents cannot sleep in front bedrooms or open windows facing the street.
- Neil Avenue contains three median “islands,” installed 20 years ago as traffic calming measures, which narrow the street substantially in three areas. If a motor vehicle encounters a bicycle or other slow-moving vehicle near an “island,” the motor vehicle must slow down abruptly, because it cannot pass a bicycle at the “island.” This again creates various unsafe differences in speed among vehicles.
- Traffic volumes, including volumes of pedestrians and cyclists, will increase in the near future. The area is undergoing commercial redevelopment along the High Street corridor and Grandview Yards. In addition, high-density residential development is occurring in those two areas, as well as the complexes under construction near Select Specialty Hospital and the former Leafy Dale near Buttles and Dennison. Some of these developments have limited parking and are designed to appeal to residents who rely on public transportation, bicycles and walking to get around.

- Setting a 25 mph speed limit along selected residential arterials that are also heavily used by cyclists and/or pedestrians positions Columbus as a forward-thinking City that promotes the safe coexistence of various transportation modes.

Factors that make the ODOT Traffic Manual method incomplete:

The First Commandment of Traffic Engineering, as we have been told by traffic engineers, is that one of the unsafe conditions that should be avoided is traffic traveling at markedly different speeds. This condition is present on Neil Avenue and the Short North because of starting, stopping and slowing vehicular traffic and a large number of bicycles.

- The first number ODOT would have us look at is the 85th percentile – that speed at or below which 85% of the measured traffic travels. Assuming the 85th percentile for a street like Neil is just over 35 mph, for purposes of determining this number, it makes no difference if the slower traffic is moving at 30 mph or 10 mph.
- The second number is the “pace,” the 10-mph range within which the largest percentage of measured speeds falls. This number, likewise, is unlikely to take any account of outliers, such as buses, starting and stopping traffic for Neil’s numerous obstructions, or bicycles.

Although the Chapter 4511 definition of “vehicle” includes bicycles, and the manual does not otherwise define it, bicycles, pedicabs and other non-motorized vehicles may or may not be included in the measurements, even though they occupy the same lanes as other neighborhood traffic. For the above reasons, however, bicycle traffic, even if measured, is unlikely to affect the result (except that a larger number of measured vehicles would bring the 85th percentile cut-off down a hair). It is virtually as if they were not on the streets at all.