

Redesign Fifth Street for everyone's safety

Putting this traffic corridor on a 'road diet' would cut down on crashes and offer better downtown access for bikers, pedestrians and motorists

By Dennis Dingemans, Steve Tracy, Tony Martin, Kathleen Groody, Bruce Winterhalder, Cyndi Marshall, Peter Gunther and Sheryl Gerety

SPECIAL TO THE ENTERPRISE

On Tuesday evening, the Davis City Council will again consider changes to the design of the Fifth Street/Russell Boulevard corridor, between A and L streets. Opportunities to put missing bike lanes on the street and deal with ongoing safety issues have been missed in the past. We hope this time the community can learn from the experience in other similar situations, set aside fear and emotion, and support a decision to create a safer street that will serve everyone better.

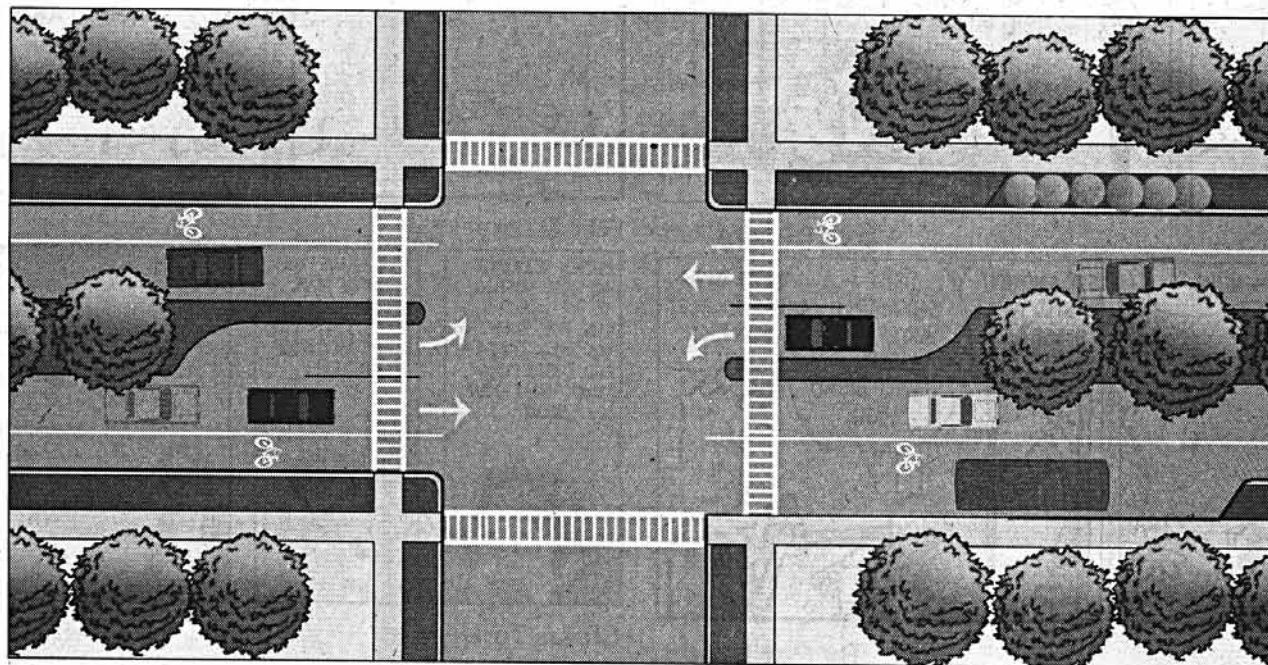
In February 2005, the timing of the traffic signals was modified at the intersections where F and G street meet Fifth Street. The new timing, called "split-phase" in traffic engineer vernacular, allows only one direction of traffic on Fifth Street (eastbound or westbound) to flow at a time.

Now, left turns off of Fifth Street at those intersections are "protected" because oncoming traffic is stopped with a red light. This eliminated many dangerous broadside accidents at those two intersections. The Public Works Department should be applauded for addressing a serious problem created when drivers rushed into unsafe left turns against oncoming traffic.

However, the changes fixed only part of the safety problem on the Fifth Street corridor. The new signal timing brought on an additional 30 seconds of delay for most drivers using the corridor, which has led to other hazards.

For example, in the average rush hour, only one car per minute turns left from eastbound Fifth Street to northbound F Street. The new signal timing imposes a 30-second delay on drivers westbound on Fifth, all for the safety of that one driver. Avoiding that delay has drivers making unsafe turns into the residential neighborhoods north and east of downtown to avoid the signals at F and G. These neighborhoods now see much more speeding by impatient drivers, and traffic volumes on alternate routes have increased.

In the four years since the split-phase signals were installed, accidents have continued or worsened,



MAREN WALKER/COURTESY MAP

A redesigned Fifth Street, shown here at the D Street intersection, would have one lane of traffic in each direction, striped bike lanes and a single, center lane for left turns. In time, portions of this lane could be landscaped to beautify the street, supporters suggest.

especially at the unsignalized intersections in the corridor. This is the record from March 2005 through the end of 2008 for the entire corridor, A to L street:

- 109 accidents total;
- 19 pedestrians or bicyclists hit by cars; and
- 63 personal injuries requiring treatment.

With the current financial crisis threatening city services, we have a situation where 10 percent of all traffic-related calls made by the Police and Fire departments on streets in the entire city occur on 10 short blocks of one single street.

A recent AAA study reveals that the cost to individuals and society of a single injury in an automobile accident averages \$70,000. So in less than four years, we have run up a \$4 million tab on Fifth Street. Please, it's past time to correct this situation.

Diet for a healthy street

The best solution also happens to be the cheapest: It is shown in the graphic here. It's commonly called a "road diet." This sounds like a bad term, because we usually don't like diets, but this one leads to a healthy street.

This design technique has been used in literally hundreds of similar situations across the country. Yes, there was initial opposition in many cases, but the results speak for themselves. We are aware of only two cases where the design was completely or partially undone. In fact, many cities went on from their first trial road diet to redo other streets. It works.

This design merges the two center lanes into a single lane for left turns. In time, portions of this lane can be landscaped to beautify the street. We gain a lot of flexibility by merging the left-turn lanes: It provides the room to paint in the missing bike lanes. It provides for faster through travel because demand-activated left-turn arrows can be installed. This all fits between the existing curbs on Fifth Street. It requires only paint, and some new traffic lights at F and G. The existing lights can be reused elsewhere.

Between A and B streets, the only

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change would be to restripe the vehicle lanes to remove excess width, and stripe in bike lanes. Again, this all fits between the curbs. Almost 50 percent of the traffic coming east from UC Davis in the evening rush hour turns off of Russell at B, so this is the logical place to drop the extra lane, which isn't needed beyond that point.

Other communities engaged in road diet projects to address safety issues, with great results. Accident reductions often have been at or above 50 percent. The severity of crashes and injuries has seen an even more dramatic reduction, because vehicle speeds are lower, set by the prudent drivers at the head of the lines. Aggressive speeding is virtually eliminated. More information and examples are available at the Old North Davis Web site: http://www.oldnorthdavis.net/FifthStreetProposal/fifth_st.htm.

Our rationale

Arguments that have been made against fixing Fifth Street:

■ **We need four lanes to carry the car traffic:** That is not what the model conducted in 2005 showed. In fact, it revealed that travel times in the corridor between A and L streets will, in fact, go down as through traffic flow is better organized in a single lane. That is why so many other cities that have removed lanes from four-lane streets have seen traffic volumes go up after the street was fixed. These reworked streets often carry 50 percent more traffic than Fifth Street does.

It seems counter to logic, but here is why it works: We do not really have a four-lane street on Fifth between B and L at this time; we have a two-lane street with two left-turn lanes. Many drivers make left turns at the frequent cross street intersections. While waiting

for a gap in through traffic, they sit in the middle lane and block the cars behind them.

Stopped buses (70 a day on this section of Fifth), bicyclists and cars slowing down for right turns also impede traffic flow in the lanes next to the curbs. Aggressive speeders slalom through these obstacles, threatening every user of Fifth Street.

■ **We need a four-lane street for trucks to get in and out of downtown:** This simply is not true. The only four-lane truck access to downtown requires trucks from Sacramento to go completely around Davis on Interstate 80 and Highway 113, then come in from the west on Russell Boulevard. Not many do that. Even then, they must negotiate two-lane streets all through downtown, as delivery truck drivers have successfully done for years. All other truck route access to downtown, from Richards Boulevard and B, L, First and Second streets is on two-lane streets.

■ **Fire trucks will not be able to get down Fifth Street:** In fact, emergency responders will have it easier. The bike lane will be available for the single lane of cars to pull into, clearing the way. This is quicker and safer than two lanes of vehicles trying to merge into a single line.

■ **There will be long lines backed up at the traffic signals:** Again, this is simply not true. Restoring conventional signal operations at F and G streets will eliminate 30 seconds of delay. Currently, a driver caught at a red light must wait out green lights for two other traffic streams. That wait will be cut in half, and so will the number of vehicles joining the line at the red light. The single line will be the same length as the current double line.

■ **Bicyclists need to ride somewhere else:** This is not consistent with federal, state or city of Davis policy. As we struggle to reduce global warming, all levels of government must promote clean transportation technologies. A recent Complete Streets directive from Caltrans headquarters states "Therefore, the department and

local agencies have the duty to provide for the safety and mobility needs of all who have legal access to the transportation system."

The Davis General Plan "Primary Bicycle Network" map shows bike lanes on Fifth Street between A and L streets. Let's get them painted, to accommodate the hordes of cyclists now riding in the gutter, in the lanes and both directions on the sidewalks.

■ **Pedestrians need to go to the signals to cross:** This is unfair, and also unsafe because of the heavy traffic volumes at those intersections and all the cars turning across the crosswalks. It takes more than five minutes for a pedestrian who wishes to cross Fifth Street at J Street or D Street to detour to the nearest traffic signal and then walk back to their route, gaining only 50 feet on their trip in the process.

Why expect this of people on foot, when the redesign will reduce delay for the people sitting in air-conditioned comfort in their cars?

■ **Only the selfish people in Old North Davis want this:** At the City Council hearings on this issue, three dozen people from all over Davis spoke up in support of the redesign. They talked about the chaotic street that makes them not want to drive downtown to shop, about the automobile accidents they had been in, and how hostile the street is for them on bicycles.

Yes, we in Old North want Fifth Street fixed. We are shocked that the business owners are so entrenched in their opposition, in spite of all the evidence that this design works. We are their best customers. Many of us are downtown every day spending money. We don't clog up the streets, and we don't take up parking spaces. We just want to get there safely.

■ **It will never work in Davis:** It already does. We don't have to look any further than B Street. Between First and Fifth streets, B Street carries almost exactly the same number of vehicles daily, and more bicyclists. These are the same drivers, in the same town, on a street that is the same width between the curbs. It has a single lane in each direction, a shared left turn lane, and bike lanes — just like the design for Fifth Street that is in the General Plan.

There were 30 accidents on the 4,000 feet of Fifth/Russell between A and L streets in 2008, eight of them involving bicyclists or pedestrians. In contrast, the 2,000 feet of B Street between First and Fifth streets had only six, one involving a bicyclist. This is the safety improvement we can expect on Fifth Street with the proper design.

As we stated at the top of this essay, our Public Works Department has demonstrated in the past that safety is its priority: The solution to the safety issues on Fifth Street is right before us. It's time.

— Dennis Dingemans is president of the Old North Davis Neighborhood Association board of directors, Steve Tracy is vice president, Tony Martin is secretary, Kathleen Groody is treasurer, Bruce Winterhalder is past president, and Cyndi Marshall, Peter Gunther and Sheryl Gerety are members.