

The ONEN Plan: Paved With Good Intentions

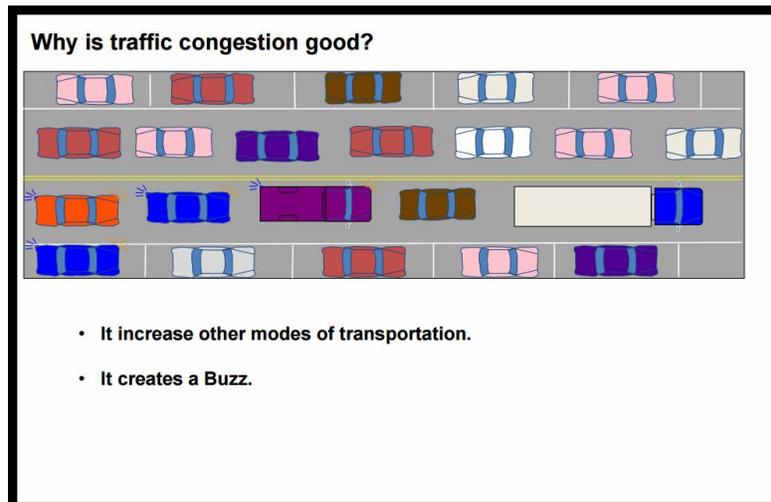
The Old North End Neighborhood (ONEN) Board of Directors, in collaboration with Colorado College (CC) and City Transportation Manager Kathleen Krager, has proposed a major reduction of traffic lanes on streets through ONEN. The proposal, labeled the [Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety Plan](#), calls for “safety sizing” (also known as “road dieting”) Nevada, Cascade, Wahsatch, and Weber to one lane in each direction, followed later by Fontanero and Uintah (1).

This is not the first time the ONEN Board and CC have pushed this plan. There were similar efforts in 2007, 2008, and again in 2013. In 2007 the proposal died after receiving “[harsh opposition](#)” (2) from residents of the affected neighborhoods. Similarly, the City Council [rejected](#) the [2008 plan](#) (3, 4). The 2013 proposal was likewise opposed. Now, three short years later, the ONEN Board and CC are making another go at it.

Over the years these proposals have consistently called for road dieting, although the rationale for it has varied. Justifications have ranged from protecting the environment to “making the area more neighborly” (1), but the most frequently cited reasons are:

- Safety of CC students crossing streets on or near campus
- Encouraging bicycling and increasing cyclist safety

These are worthwhile goals, but trying to achieve them through road dieting causes more problems than it solves. Reducing lanes on streets connecting populated areas to a city center provides little-to-no improvement in safety but does increase traffic congestion. Perhaps that’s what Plan proponents want; Krager has suggested before that [traffic congestion is “good”](#) because it “increases other modes of transportation” (5).



Slide from Krager’s May 2015 presentation.

We doubt residents will agree—they didn't in Boulder. In 2015, Boulder City Council learned this the hard way after spending time and money implementing road dieting only to quickly reverse the changes amid [intense public backlash](#) over [the worsening traffic conditions](#) (6, 7).



Daily Camera photograph of a Boulder Intersection after lane reduction.

We fear but expect similar results for Colorado Springs. The ONEN Board and CC are relying on questionable data to push an extreme solution in response to exaggerated problems, all while dismissing solutions that would better achieve their goals.

Exaggerated Problems

The ONEN Board is resurrecting the road dieting plan after a CC student was seriously injured crossing Cascade in January (2016). But the reality is the risks to CC students are minimal and vehicle-pedestrian accidents are rare. There are well over 150,000 pedestrian crossings per school yearⁱ at CC, which means more than 1.8 million crossings from 2000 to 2012, yet the proposal only cites [30 pedestrian-vehicle collisions](#) in that period (8).

And of those 30, only 10 actually involved people walking; the other 20 were skateboarders and, more often, cyclists inappropriately using the crosswalks (8). Furthermore, the report only lists 5 collisions in which the vehicle in the first lane stopped but the vehicle in the second lane failed to yield (8). The other collisions happened in the first lane, a problem lane reduction doesn't even address. That means, out of 1.8 million crossings, the current proposal would address only 5 collisions.

City Senior Planner Ryan Tefertiller [has agreed](#) the frequency of accidents at CC is low, yet the ONEN Board has [repeatedly acknowledged](#) that the single accident from January is “the driving force” behind the far-reaching changes they propose (9, 10). And unlike pedestrian traffic at Colorado College, the road restrictions will remain in effect 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, rain or snow, irrespective of traffic overflow for annual downtown events.ⁱⁱ



The Festival of Lights draws tens of thousands of attendees, many of whom pass through ONEN.

If the plan cost nothing and provided a modest improvement in safety it might be worth it. Unfortunately, a more likely outcome will be traffic congestion, which itself leads to higher accident rates and therefore less safety in ONEN and surrounding areas.

Questionable Data on Traffic and Congestion

The ONEN Board cites data from a [Colorado College analysis](#) to assure us that lane reduction will not cause traffic congestion (11). They specifically point out that, on average, Wahsatch, Weber, Cascade, and Nevada see between 2,200 and 2,500 vehicles per lane per day. They compare this to 7,200 to 9,200 on Academy Boulevard and conclude that ONEN streets can easily handle a higher per lane average without getting congested. But this analysis is off-base.

The per lane average for the roads near CC is poorly calculated.

According to the same CC analysis, the daily vehicle totals for Wahsatch, Weber, Cascade, and Nevada are highly variable, from as low as 3,000 vehicles per day (vpd) on Weber to as high as 16,000 on Nevada. Calculating per-lane averages across all four of these roads creates artificially low values for Cascade and Nevada. In addition, a more recent count by City traffic engineers put Nevada at 18,000 vpd, not 16,000.

Academy Boulevard is not a valid comparison for ONEN streets.

Academy is designed to handle much higher traffic levels without congestion. It only has crosswalks at well-spaced, signaled intersections, whereas there are many unsignaled crosswalks in much closer proximity to each other in the ONEN and Patty Jewett neighborhoods. These cause more frequent and less predictable disruption to traffic. The ONEN roads also pass many residential driveways, where traffic has to slow for exiting and entering vehicles. And Academy Boulevard has turn lanes *in addition* to its four traffic lanes, allowing vehicles to turn without impeding through traffic.



It should be no surprise that Academy Boulevard (top) handles more traffic than ONEN roads (bottom).

The data doesn't apply year-round.

The data for the CC analysis was collected during September and doesn't factor the detrimental effect of many months of winter weather on traffic. Similarly there is no indication Academy Boulevard handles 9,200 vehicles per lane per day without congestion in rain, ice, or snow, or how the weather and plowing schedules vary between Academy and ONEN streets.

The analysis considers heavy traffic "acceptable."

CC analyzed "level of service" during peak traffic periods for the roads in question and gave most a "B" grade, some a "C" or "D," and none an "A." The report defined good levels of service to be when vehicles averaged 50-80% of the "free flow" speed, which was approximately 5-7 mph over the speed limit. So for a 35 mph street (on which the free flow speed is 40-42mph) vehicles could average as low as 20mph and CC analysts would define that as good service. For reference, 20 mph is the school zone speed restriction on Nevada for the morning and afternoon migration of Steele elementary children. This is the speed the ONEN plan considers acceptable for all hours of the day.

Proponents maintain that although traffic may feel ‘heavy’ at the Uintah intersections with Cascade and Nevada, it is acceptable. But is “acceptable” preferable? And if these roads warrant only “acceptable” grades under current traffic conditions, what grades will they get when road dieting increases the total vehicles per lane?

Finally, CC points to data showing traffic has decreased on ONEN streets over the last decade or so, primarily due to improvement on I-25. But this improvement is a temporary effect. The population of Colorado Springs has been [increasing steadily](#) for decades (12). Any safety measure that primarily relies on lane reduction will have to be repeatedly revisited as traffic increases with population growth.

Larger studies conclude road dieting leads to congestion and doesn’t reduce accident rates.

According to [a report by the Federal Highway Administration](#) (FHA), even with a dedicated center turn lane, road dieting is actually *counterproductive* on streets with 20,000 or more vpd (13). And given the ONEN proposal does not include continuous center turn lanes, it seems highly likely the busiest routes (Nevada, Cascade) will see significant increases in congestion and thus accidents. Indeed, Nevada currently handles 18,000 vpd and Uintah 30,000, which means they are already flirting with or are well over the limit for effective road dieting. Population growth will only make matters worse. As City Transportation Manager Kathleen Krager [has stated](#), congestion and traffic volumes result in higher accident rates, and [needless stops waste gas](#) (14, 15).

Even if road dieting didn’t increase congestion, it’s not effective at reducing accident rates. The FHA report found that road diet sites had the same accident rates with the same severity as they had before lane reduction. And while the CC analysis was based on about a month of data from a few roads of questionable comparability, none of which had actually undergone road dieting, the FHA report is based on years of data from multiple road diet sites across multiple cities. Additionally the FHA report was commissioned for general information, and not in an effort to get a specific policy implemented. It’s reasonable to expect the FHA report to be the more relevant and accurate of the two.

Better Solutions

None of this is to say we should give up on pedestrian safety or increased bicycle access. We agree with those goals. However, we think there are better ways to achieve them.

Ensure pedestrian safety by building an underpass.

Just as there is a history of trying to reduce lanes in ONEN, there is a history of calling for a pedestrian underpass instead. As far back as 2007, Colorado Springs colleges have [advocated for underpasses](#) (16). Residents have been [suggesting it](#) starting as early as 2008 and [repeatedly](#) since then (4, 17). In fact, when CC started pushing for lane reductions again in 2013, ONEN residents attended [a CC working group meeting](#) to give [a full presentation](#) on why an underpass would be a preferable solution, citing the design of the underpass already present at University of Colorado, Colorado Springs (18, 19).

That same year [The Gazette](#) pointed out that the University of Colorado, Boulder is largely unaffected by adjacent traffic, despite a much larger pedestrian population crossing a much busier thoroughfare (a

state highway) (20). Boulder's success is largely thanks to their pedestrian underpass. Likewise, in late 2015 Colorado State University [began designing a second underpass](#) after having so much success with its first (21). The Gazette [suggested the underpass solution again](#) after the CC student was injured in the January 2016 collision (22).



Rendering of the newest underpass at Colorado State University.

Proponents of traffic restrictions point out many of the 30 accidents in the last 12 years involved a vehicle in the first lane yielding to pedestrians but blocking the view of a car in the second lane which didn't yield. Reducing roads to one lane would prevent this but would do nothing to stop accidents when vehicles in the first lane fail to yield, or collisions like the one in April 2012, in which [a skateboarder ran into a vehicle](#) (9). As [Krager has explained](#), part of the problem is that some pedestrians aren't patient enough to wait until it's safe to cross the road (23). Completely decoupling pedestrians and cyclists from traffic would address all of these issues.

Underpasses solve the problem irrespective of population growth.

Opponents of underpasses point out how much larger and busier Boulder is than CC, suggesting such a solution wouldn't be as effective in Colorado Springs. But the truth is quite the opposite; the fact that a busier, more populous area has had lasting success with pedestrian underpasses suggests our own underpass would continue to be effective as our city grows. This is in sharp contrast with lane reductions, which become increasingly problematic with population growth. A pedestrian underpass does not increase traffic congestion in either the near- or long-term.

When we bring this argument to proponents of the ONEN plan, they sometimes switch from lane reduction in the name of pedestrian safety to lane reduction in the name of bicycle access. But the ONEN plan doesn't make sense from this perspective either.

Improve bike infrastructure through foresight and planning.

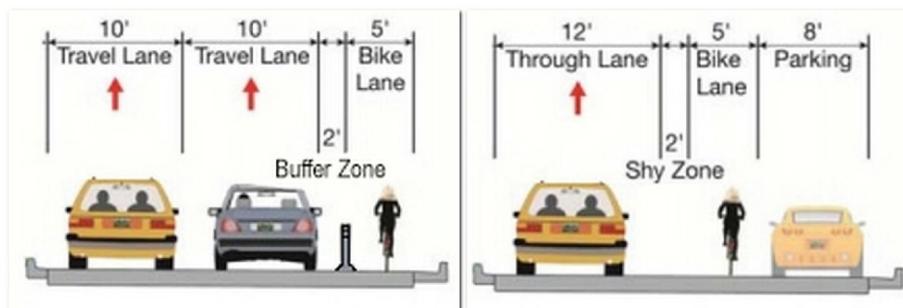
We're proud that both our [state](#) and our [city](#) are highly ranked nationwide for bicycle friendliness (24, 25). However, when it comes to bike infrastructure, there's room for improvement.

Colorado Springs has over 100 miles of on-street bike lanes, but, as [Krager has explained](#), these lanes are a "polka-dot system": a non-continuous series of paths that often end abruptly (26). Resident cyclists have long [been frustrated](#) with a system that [discourage bicycle commuting](#) (27, 28).

According to [City bike program coordinator Brian Shevock](#), simply adding bike lanes to major road projects led to lanes ending abruptly and, at times, dangerously (29). The City is now making a more concerted effort to add lanes along identified routes with logical and safe endings. "We're trying to spend money to actually connect [the lanes] so that we can get from one end of the city to the other," [says Krager](#) (27). Having recognized the folly of unplanned non-continuous bike lanes on congested roads, one would expect proponents of bike access to offer a better strategy. Unfortunately those pushing the ONEN plan are offering more of the same ineffective approach.

When pressed for specifics about bike lane strategy, one [proponent stated](#) the plan "leaves exact routes to the City Traffic Department" (30). In fact the plan calls for replacing driving lanes with bike lanes on Wahsatch, Weber, Cascade, and Nevada before even confirming whether the City considers these roads suitable for bike lane additions.

Anyone who has tried to bike along the ONEN roads covered by this plan knows they already aren't suitable for bike lanes. How much less fitting will they be if the proposal is adopted? The CC analysis [includes schematics](#) for adding a bike lane between street parking and the lone remaining through lane (11). But City engineers and cyclists [prefer dedicated trails](#) to more bike lanes and isolated lanes to lanes open to traffic (29). (Our cycling community already refers to one stretch of unbuffered bike lane as the "[Killing Zone](#)" (27).) Instead the current dieting proposal offers the worst of both worlds: no dedicated trails and bike lanes between congested traffic and street parking. Such an approach will expose cyclists to collisions from through traffic, parking vehicles and those moving in and out of the parking lane. And all this for a bike lane that does exactly what Krager and others have highlighted as a mistake: stop and start abruptly without connecting to other lanes, much less to a dedicated trail or the city center.



Left: If cyclists can't get dedicated bike trails, they'd prefer buffered bike lanes.

Right: Instead, CC & ONEN Board propose putting cyclists between traffic and street parking.

Furthermore, the City's Nonmotorized Plan prioritizes bike infrastructure projects based on whether they will [move people off of congested roads](#) (31). But the ONEN Plan will likely increase congestion on the very roads where it intends to add bike lanes. Traffic is already sufficiently heavy on many of the streets in the ONEN plan to ward off cyclists. Indeed, local cycling enthusiast and advocate J. Adrian Stanley [specifically named Nevada](#) (28) as one of the roads she prefers *not* to bike on.

State transportation commissioner Les Gruen [has stated](#) bike infrastructure may be the most critical project of all unfunded road projects in Colorado Springs (28). As a nationally ranked city of cycling enthusiasts, we should be able to create a strategic, thought out, effective plan that makes bike infrastructure a real priority. Instead, the ONEN Plan treats bike infrastructure as an after-the-fact rationalization for lane reduction on inappropriate roads.

ⁱ Per the Colorado College Transportation Master Plan (2013), at peak times Cascade Ave sees 900 pedestrian crossings and Nevada sees 200. These numbers don't include the crossings during the rest of the day or at other locations. 1100 crossings per day x 150 days per school year = 165,000 crossings, making 150,000 an extremely conservative estimate that doesn't even include pedestrian crossings when school is out.

ⁱⁱ Among [many other year-round festivities](#), Downtown hosts the St. Patrick's Day parade (draws [thousands of people](#)), the Summer Rodeo (draws about [7,500 people](#) per event), and the Festival of Lights (draws [tens of thousands](#) of people) (32, 33, 34, 35).

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