

ONEN Residents Oppose Lane Reduction

A note for City Council.

Summary

In early 2016, the Old North End Neighborhood (ONEN) Board of Directors, in collaboration with Colorado College (CC) and City Transportation Manager Kathleen Krager, released a plan calling for lane reductions on multiple roads throughout ONEN in the name of pedestrian safety (1). Though the proponents claimed to be interested in collaborating with “the broader community” (2), many ONEN residents felt their views weren’t being represented. In response we put together an outline of our objections: “The ONEN Plan: Paved With Good Intentions” (3). Additionally, as of June 21, 2016, over 600 ONEN residents have signed paper and online petitions opposing lane reductions (4).

In the wake of increasing public backlash, Krager dropped the ONEN plan and instead proposed lane reduction only on Cascade Avenue through CC campus (5). According to the City, this compromise was an attempt to balance “mixed public support” for lane reduction with “the pressing safety concern on Cascade Avenue” (6).

On June 16, 2016, the City Planning Commission heard Krager’s proposal as well as public comments on the matter (7). For every commenter who supported Krager’s proposal, there were at least three more who opposed it. After hearing the wide variety of reasons residents object to this proposal, the Commission voted 6-2 against it.

We would like City Council to likewise reject Krager’s proposal. We detail our objections here.

Cascade Avenue is not a pressing safety concern.

The safety concern on Cascade Avenue is, in fact, almost non-existent and certainly not urgent (3). In 2013, CC commissioned an analysis of the effects of lane reduction in ONEN (8). Based on CC’s pedestrian estimates¹ and vehicle counts², from 2000 to 2012 over 3,870,000 pedestrians have crossed Cascade and over 18,000,000 vehicles have driven it through campus (8). Of these millions of potential interactions, CC was able to cite only 15 pedestrian-vehicle collisions on Cascade in that time frame (9). In other words, less than 0.0004% of pedestrian crossings resulted in a collision. Many of those collisions involved only minor injuries or no injuries at all (9).

From 2000 to 2012, Colorado College has seen over **18,000,000 vehicles** drive Cascade and over **3,870,000 pedestrians** cross it. Out of millions of potential interactions, CC can cite **only 15** vehicle-pedestrian collisions.

Now Krager claims she must narrow Cascade before CC students return in August because “We’re having an increasing number of pedestrian accidents, and it’s just a matter of time” (10). Krager cites no data to support her assertion, and publicly available facts suggest the opposite: pedestrian accidents are

¹ Per CC’s Transportation Master Plan (2013), Figure 2-6: Cascade Avenue sees a 2,150 pedestrian crossings during peak hours; 2,150 crossings per day x 150 days per school year x 12 years (2000-2012) = 3,870,000 crossings. Note this calculation doesn’t include crossings during non-peak times of the school day or days when school is out, making 3.8M a conservative estimate. Also note in our previous analysis we only included lunch hour crossings and did not include the morning and evening peak hour crossings, giving the even lower but still substantial estimate of 1,620,000.

² Per CC’s Transportation Master Plan (2013), Cascade carries an average of 10,000 vehicles per day (vpd). 10,000 vpd x 150 days per school year x 12 years (2000-2012) = 18,000,000 vehicles. Note this calculation does not include days when school is out, and it doesn’t account for the higher vehicle counts on Cascade before 2012, making 18M vehicles a conservative estimate.

decreasing. CC cited 15 pedestrian-vehicle collisions on Cascade over a 12 year period, or 1.25 collisions per year. According to data from CSPD, in the 3.5 years since CC has had 3 pedestrian-vehicle collisions on Cascade, or 0.86 collisions per year (11). Krager's sense of urgency is misplaced.

The minimal safety issues on Cascade are not solved by lane reduction.

Even if Cascade were a pressing safety issue, lane reduction isn't the solution. Eliminating traffic lanes only addresses one type of pedestrian-vehicle collision: the "hidden car" collision, which is when the vehicle in the primary lane (the lane closest to the pedestrian) stops, but the vehicle in the secondary lane fails to yield.

During the June 16 Planning Commission meeting, Krager claimed that *every* accident she's researched on both Cascade and Nevada has been a "hidden car" collision, implying these are the only types of collisions and thus lane reduction will prevent all relevant danger. We can't know what sources Krager was referencing, but we do know that CC has provided an accident summary that says otherwise (9).

For 2000 to 2012, of the millions of pedestrians and vehicles using Cascade,
CC cites one "hidden car" collision.

CC's accident summary describes "hidden car" collisions using the following language: "One car stopped and [pedestrian/bicycle] hit by car in other lane" (9). The summary describes only one such collision on Cascade from 2000 to 2012; the other descriptions included vehicles in the primary lane failing to yield and pedestrians, skateboarders, or cyclists running into vehicles. Lane reduction will not prevent these types of collisions.

Likewise, lane reduction will not prevent students from crossing the road inattentively or incorrectly. Note that 66% of the collisions in CC's summary involved cyclists and skateboarders using crosswalks inappropriately (9). During the June 16 meeting, Krager explained that students failing to dismount from bicycles or skateboards in the crosswalks has "been a real problem."

Cascade's relatively few pedestrian-vehicle collisions happen for a variety of reasons besides the "hidden car" phenomenon. If Krager or CC were truly concerned about pedestrian safety on Cascade, they would advocate for a solution that addresses these reasons.

A pedestrian underpass would resolve safety issues on Cascade.

During the June 16 meeting, Krager predicted that, even if Cascade were narrowed, vehicles and pedestrians would ultimately get used to the arrangement, get "sloppy," and hurt each other again. In other words, lane reduction won't prevent certain types of collisions, and whatever improvements it does provide will eventually fade. Moreover, the chances for collisions will only increase as the City's traffic grows alongside its population (12).

In contrast, a pedestrian underpass would prevent all forms of pedestrian-vehicle collisions by completely decoupling pedestrians and vehicles on Cascade. According to CC, nearly all campus users cross Cascade at least once daily (2). Instead of negotiating thousands of traffic interactions every day, pedestrians could safely use an underpass at any time, regardless of traffic conditions. And pedestrian underpasses remain effective as population increases, as demonstrated by the successful underpasses on the more populous campuses at Colorado State University and CU Boulder (13, 14).

If safety were a dire concern, Krager would not dismiss the underpass.

During the June 16 meeting, Krager again stressed the apparently desperate problem of pedestrian safety, describing heartbroken citizens asking “How many must die?” Despite this allegedly life-or-death situation, during the same meeting she dismissed the idea of an underpass because, she said, an underpass would change the campus’s look and feel. She acknowledged that the problem was not a financial issue, but rather the fact that an underpass would change how the campus functions.

Which is more important: pedestrian safety or how CC “looks and feels”?

Krager and CC can’t have it both ways. Either (a) pedestrian safety has become such a desperate problem that it justifies rushing a proposal through without commissioning any studies, collecting any data, or even allowing proper public feedback, or (b) pedestrian safety is such a minimal issue that the look and feel of the campus are bigger priorities.

The underpass solution has been suggested repeatedly for nearly a decade (15,16,17). If CC had built an underpass by now, the Cascade accidents Krager uses to justify lane reduction would not have happened, and residents would not have to keep revisiting the lane reduction debate in the name of pedestrian safety.

Eliminating flashing light crosswalks is the middle ground.

Even if Krager and CC are set against the more effective underpass, there are other solutions to the minor pedestrian issue besides lane reduction. Nevada Avenue has both higher average vehicular traffic and fewer pedestrian-vehicle accidents than Cascade (8,9). This phenomenon is likely in part because Nevada has fewer crosswalks, and the crosswalks it does have are signaled, whereas Cascade has multiple unsignaled crosswalks. As CC has explained, signaled crosswalks lead to timed and expected traffic flow, providing “clarity to drivers and pedestrians alike” (2).

In contrast, according to Krager, unsignaled crosswalks with only flashing lights can make pedestrians “feel too safe,” making them inattentive when crossing (17). Participants in a 2013 CC Working Group suggested that CC remove the flashing lights, but three years later the lights remain, as do the safety issues they contribute to.

During the June 16 meeting, Krager said removing the flashing lights would teach students to look both ways before crossing. However her newest proposal does not address removing the lights. She does propose removing two of the unsignaled crosswalks on Cascade (10), but there’s no specific mention about removing the flashing lights from the remaining two crosswalks.

If pedestrian safety is the primary goal, the most effective solution is still the underpass. An underpass fully eliminates pedestrian exposure to all forms of pedestrian-vehicle collisions. Fewer unsignaled crosswalks are the second choice, decreasing (though not fully eliminating) exposure to all forms of collisions. Removing the flashing lights from all crosswalks is yet another option, increasing pedestrian attentiveness and decreasing driver distraction.

But lane reduction is the least effective choice, neither eliminating nor decreasing most types of pedestrian-vehicle collisions. To make matters worse, lane reduction is also the option that would have the most negative impact on vehicular traffic.

Krager offers no data to justify her proposal.

During the June 16 meeting, residents pointed out that Krager hasn't provided any data to establish the effects of narrowing Cascade alone. When the Planning Commission questioned Krager on this point, she cited the 2013 CC analysis. Problems with the CC analysis aside (3), it does not examine narrowing Cascade only; it considers consecutively narrowing multiple roads throughout ONEN (8). Krager cited no other studies or publications, saying only that the traffic engineering department had input data into their models and "sat around and looked at it."

In fact, during the same June 16 meeting Krager spoke several times of her inability to foresee the effects of her proposal. Saying she has "no crystal ball," Krager acknowledged that it's difficult to predict whether narrowing Cascade would cause traffic diversion to other roads. When a commissioner asked Krager what numbers she sees if Cascade goes to one lane, Krager sidestepped, saying she doesn't expect Cascade traffic to change but that "we don't have any guarantees in traffic engineering." She explained that traffic engineering is all about how people drive and how they think, and that "we can't control that."

Federal studies don't support Krager's conclusions.

Krager has argued that narrowing Cascade will increase pedestrian safety without affecting traffic. Because Krager has offered no studies examining her proposal, there are no methods to review and no data-driven conclusions to verify.

However, the Federal Highway Administration (FHA) has reported on the effects of lane reduction (18). According to the FHA, even when a narrowed road still includes a dedicated center turn lane, lane reduction is counterproductive on streets with 20,000 or more vehicles per day (vpd). Cascade is at only 10,000 vpd, but Krager's proposal does not include a center turn lane and does include two unsignaled crosswalks (5). Moreover, drivers are likely to divert from Cascade to Nevada, which carries 18,000 vpd as it is (8). Between the traffic diversion and inevitable population increases, Nevada will experience increased congestion if Cascade is narrowed.

Traffic congestion is not only an irritation: it's a safety issue. Krager has explained that congestion and higher traffic volumes increase accident rates (19). During the June 16 meeting, many residents expressed concerns about Nevada Avenue's safety issues, which include a record of fatalities. Commissioners reminded citizens that the matter at hand was Cascade, not Nevada, but those reminders missed the point: changing Cascade affects Nevada.

And lane reduction not only causes traffic issues: it doesn't help reduce accident rates. The FHA report found that lane reduced sites had the same accident rates with the same severity as they had before the lanes were eliminated (18). Note the FHA report is based on years of data from multiple sites across multiple cities and was commissioned for general information, not in an effort to get a specific policy implemented. In contrast, the only report Krager has cited—the CC analysis—was based on about a month of data from a few roads of questionable comparability, none of which had actually undergone lane reduction. It's reasonable to expect the FHA report to be the more relevant and accurate of the two.

Most ONEN residents *do not want* Cascade narrowed.

From the beginning of this year until early June, ONEN Board members, City officials, CC representatives, and ONEN residents discussed and debated the Board's lane reduction proposal (1). During those months volunteers spent considerable time and effort collecting signatures door-to-door for a petition against lane reduction. As of the date of this note, June 21, 2016, there are over 600 signatures against lane reduction in ONEN.

In early June, with just a week before the Planning Commission meeting, Krager suddenly announced a different proposal to narrow Cascade only. During the June 16 meeting, residents offered the Commission the signatures they had collected over the last several months. One commissioner repeatedly pointed out that these signatures were not in opposition to the specific proposal before the commission, but were regarding a different matter.

It's true the signatures were collected in opposition to lane reduction on multiple roads throughout ONEN. Neither Krager nor the ONEN Board has shown much interest in whether ONEN residents oppose their proposals, so resident volunteers have tried on our own to get representation for ourselves and our neighbors. Krager allowed almost no time for the public to review her proposal and form responses before she presented it to the Planning Commission. And, importantly, Krager has offered no equivalent metric of public opinion on her proposal, instead meagerly and vaguely pointing out that there are ONEN residents who support her idea.

Given these conditions, it's reasonable to at least consider the petition signatures as a measure of how intensely ONEN residents oppose lane reduction. Indeed, during the June 16 meeting, ONEN Board President Bill Rodgers, after disparaging his neighbors as "wannabe traffic engineers and economists," told the Commission "The ONEN neighborhood supports this measure." The room erupted in "boo's" and "Nooo's," and the Commission Chair had to ask for order.

**When the ONEN Board President claimed ONEN supports lane reduction,
the room erupted in "boo's" and "nooo's."**

The ONEN Board has decided to push lane reduction regardless of whether the majority of ONEN residents agree. Krager has decided to push lane reduction without studies or data, much less public approval. But the reality is many ONEN residents are against lane reduction and are trying to get our voices heard.

Conclusion

Cascade Avenue does not present a pressing pedestrian safety concern, but if it did an underpass would be a much more effective and sustainable solution than lane reduction. Eliminating the flashing light crosswalks along Cascade would not be as effective as an underpass, but would still be more useful than lane reduction. Krager's proposal will increase traffic congestion in the area, including on Nevada, which is already a more dangerous and more congested route than Cascade. Krager has offered no data to justify her proposal, and federal studies contradict her predictions about how lane reduction would affect ONEN and CC. Furthermore, though Krager seems uninterested in public feedback, the fact is many ONEN residents *do not want* lane reduction and are trying to get our view heard and respected.

For all the aforementioned reasons, we ask City Council to reject this nonsensical proposal in favor of data-driven solutions vetted through the proper process.

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