

## CITY COUNCIL STUDY SESSION ITEM

### **SUBJECT**

An overview of commuter traffic in neighborhoods: a traffic calming approach.

### **STAFF CONTACTS**

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### **POLICY ISSUES**

Several comprehensive plan policies are included in the neighborhood and transportation elements that provide guidance to minimize the impact of arterial traffic flowing into neighborhood areas. These policies include:

- N-1: Enable neighborhood-tailored solutions to localized issues while ensuring that they meet citywide responsibilities
- TR-28: Monitor traffic growth on collector arterials and take measures to keep volumes within reasonable limits.
- TR-151 Balance the needs of all roadway users when designing and building neighborhood traffic safety projects.
- TR-152: Design or retrofit residential streets to discourage cut-through traffic, while providing for connectivity.
- TR-153: Employ traffic calming measures to slow vehicular travel speed along residential streets and to reduce the volume of cut-through traffic.

### **DIRECTION NEEDED FROM COUNCIL**

#### **ACTION**



#### **DIRECTION**



#### **INFORMATION ONLY**



Staff will present an overview of neighborhood commuter traffic issues in Bellevue, how these issues have been historically addressed, the root causes and symptoms, how the issue has changed over the years, and how commuter traffic issues are now being approached through the City's neighborhood traffic calming program.

### **BACKGROUND/ANALYSIS**

#### **Bellevue's Traffic Calming Program**

The City's Neighborhood Traffic Safety Program (PW-M-7) was created in 1985 to address neighborhood traffic concerns such as speeding, commuter traffic, non-resident/spillover parking and school-related issues. This long-standing and successful program involves Transportation Department staff working with residents and other stakeholders to find solutions to address their concerns (see Attachment A). Most of the current requests received through the traffic safety program continue to be speed and safety related and can be addressed effectively through traditional tools such as speed humps, raised crosswalks, traffic circles, radar signs etc. The program continues to have a significant backlog of projects and requests, and the Transportation Levy has provided a new resource to address this backlog.

## **New Challenge – Commuter Traffic**

Regional and City growth and the associated traffic are contributing to commuter traffic in neighborhoods. Bellevue has grown from a relatively quiet, suburban bedroom community (gaining 30,000 residents since 2000) to a bustling City of 140,000 residents and 148,000 jobs. The robust job market and natural beauty of Bellevue attracts travelers from all over the Puget Sound region, an area that has grown by nearly 800,000 people since 2000. Though mobility options continue to expand—both Citywide and regionally—the rate of expansion of mobility options lags that of the growth in the City and region. While Bellevue residents enjoy the many benefits of an economically prosperous City and region, these factors are creating longer evening commutes as drivers seek to avoid weekday commute traffic snarls in favor of less-congested neighborhood streets.

Over the past few years, staff has seen an increase in concerns related specifically to commuter traffic. “Commuter” or “cut-through” traffic is defined as drivers not having an origin or destination in neighborhood areas they are driving through. Traffic is a concern felt by all neighborhoods Citywide with issues tending to be concentrated in specific neighborhoods adjacent freeway corridors and activity centers (e.g. Bellecrest, Enatai, Wilburton and Woodridge). These neighborhoods have had traffic calming measures implemented in years past including speed humps, traffic circles, medians and raised crosswalks. While these tools are addressing excessive speeds effectively, they are no longer as effective at discouraging commuter traffic because driving even traffic-calmed neighborhood streets is preferable to congested freeways and City arterials.

Also challenging, the advent and increased use of navigation applications (e.g. Google Maps, Waze) provide motorists’ the fastest path of travel in real-time, sometimes shifting travel into neighborhood areas. The apps are designed to provide information to the driver of the shortest travel time from point A to point B. This can mean that at certain times of the day, notably the PM peak, drivers are routed through a neighborhood to avoid a more time-consuming commute on the congested freeways or arterials. We have found navigation app companies do not remove routing through specific streets in neighborhoods simply upon our request.

The impacts of the resulting commuter traffic are often felt disproportionately in neighborhood areas. Increased traffic during commute times results in delay for residents getting to or from home, real or perceived safety issues for people driving, walking and biking and an impact to livability through the increased noise and visual clutter of excessive traffic.

## **Bellevue’s Approach to Addressing Commuter Traffic**

Projects to address commuter traffic can occur outside neighborhoods (e.g. optimizing signal timing through adaptive signals, projects through the Levy-funded Neighborhood Congestion Reduction Program, legislative advocacy for regional system improvements and other avenues) or from within the neighborhood. Projects occurring from within the neighborhood utilize neighborhood traffic calming tools and often come with tradeoffs that can discourage commuter traffic but can inhibit ease of access for residents. Thus, the project development process greatly benefits from strong community engagement to determine if a project will ultimately be supported by the neighborhood. Staff work closely with community volunteers, through the formation of a traffic committee, to determine which solutions are appropriate for a particular street or neighborhood. A traffic committee creates a collaborative working relationship where the community can inform staff of detailed concerns and staff can educate stakeholders on the availability, benefits and tradeoffs of various approaches to commuter traffic concerns.

Given that traditional traffic calming measures aimed at addressing speed and safety are not as effective in discouraging commuter traffic, staff are exploring new tools such as time-based turn restrictions. Time-based turn restrictions restrict movement of all vehicles during times when commuter traffic is most pronounced. Community acceptance of turn restrictions requires educating the traffic committee of how commuter traffic patterns have changed and why traditional traffic calming tools alone are no longer as effective in deterring commuter traffic. Turn restrictions represent some of the most restrictive yet effective measures in the traffic calming/commuter traffic toolkit, and they are often only employed during commute times to reduce the overall impact to the neighborhood's residents. Aside from physically closing the roadway, there are few additional measures that can effectively discourage commuter traffic.

When turn restrictions are proposed, they must first be supported by the traffic committee then employed on a pilot basis to evaluate effectiveness and community support. Continuing turn restrictions beyond the pilot phase involves staff evaluating if the project is meeting the intended goal of discouraging commuter traffic through the evaluation of traffic data. Staff, in consultation with the traffic committee, will determine if a pilot project will become permanent.

Enforcement of turn restrictions is critical to success, but also challenging due to Police staffing and priority considerations. Recently installed turn restrictions have been enforced on a limited basis.

Another strong advantage of turn restrictions is that they do influence navigation applications' routing. For example, Waze and Google Maps do not route motorists through the turn restrictions recently implemented on 108<sup>th</sup> Avenue SE at SE 16<sup>th</sup> Street to address East Link construction traffic impacts. We have found navigation app companies do not remove routing through specific streets in neighborhoods simply upon our request; it takes an actual turn restriction for them to make the change in routing.

When restrictions are implemented, residents are often supportive of the intent of restrictions but are frustrated with having their access inhibited. Residents often suggest the use of special placards or tags to provide an exemption for residents, not commuters, to travel through the location of regulatory turn restrictions. Currently, the City does not provide such a program as Washington State case law indicates that a city or town may not restrict or prohibit non-resident travel on its streets. There are only two cases that we know of nationwide (New Jersey) employing such an exemption program. Both instances were implemented in early 2018, one of which is being legally challenged.

Another request we frequently receive is for "Local Access Only" signs. While we understand the desire to have these types of signs posted at the entry to a neighborhood, if pursued, they would do little to discourage commuter traffic as they are extremely difficult to enforce and place a burden on enforcement staffing resources. Further, local access only signs do not influence navigation apps routing.

### **Going Forward**

Bellevue's Neighborhood Traffic Safety Services staff continue to receive numerous requests to address speed and safety related issues in our neighborhoods. We are now also actively engaging in the new challenge of commuter traffic issues, as seen by recent work in the Bellecrest and Woodridge neighborhoods. Recent pilot projects show strong promise to decrease evening commute traffic through neighborhoods; however, they are not without frustration from residents that want both access for themselves and relief of commuter traffic. The neighborhood traffic safety program will continue to work with residents, and with their partnership, will seek to develop strategies to keep our neighborhoods most affected by commuter traffic safe and livable.

**OPTIONS**

N/A

**RECOMMENDATION**

N/A

**ATTACHMENT(S)**

Attachment A: Neighborhood Traffic Safety Services Brochure

**AVAILABLE IN COUNCIL DOCUMENT LIBRARY**

N/A