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Op-Ed: Durham Residents and Leaders Should Demand the Redesign of NC Highway 55

"Durham's environmentalists, activists, and planners must reevaluate what Highway 55 represents to Durham and more broadly North Carolina."

BY GABRIEL GADSDEN DEC. 21, 2022 6:00 A.M.

In 2017, the NC Department of Transportation (NCDOT) began Project U-3308. More commonly known as the Highway 55 (Alston Avenue) expansion project, NCDOT deemed the project necessary to "reduce congestion and improve safety" along the corridor of Highway 55, connecting Highway 70 and the Durham Freeway. The plan also included sidewalks on both sides of the roadway and wide outside lanes to accommodate bicycles. The road expansion was completed in 2021. However, nearly five years and millions of dollars later, congestion is no better than before, nor is pedestrian and bicycle travel safer.

Though unfortunate, the tale of Project U-3308 is not uncommon, as globally, municipalities strive to keep pace with rapidly changing cities. Too often, though, the plans approved impede progress. The Highway 55 expansion project hurts Durham citizens rather than aiding congestion due to myriad issues, from failing to innovate outdated road planning, neglecting the reality of climate change, and disregarding social cohesion. Cities will continue to grow, and upgraded travel infrastructure will be needed. But in its present state, the Highway 55 expansion project set Durham farther away from being prepared for the



future urban experts predict. To ensure North Carolina's future includes sustainable urban growth and development, an integrated and green redesign of Highway 55's Alston Avenue corridor and the entire NCDOT planning process is needed and must be a top priority for citizens and political leaders.

Failure to innovate urban road planning

America's car-centric society has shaped urban design and form for decades. Urban sprawl and ardent individualism mean there are nearly 284 million cars on the road in the United States. Up until three decades ago, it was thought road expansion was the only viable solution for efficient travel. But the mega-hybrid roads in the United States, including Highway 55, pair high-speed traffic with residential intersections and numerous traffic lights, creating traffic congestion that cannot be remedied by more lanes. Frameworks like the Dutch sustainable road safety, which advocates for slower speeds and smaller lanes near residential areas, demonstrate that adding lanes along the Alston Avenue corridor was a callous decision.

Failure to recognize how road expansion exacerbates climate change and pollution

In addition to road expansion increasing congestion, it also increases the emission of greenhouse gasses that are known to cause respiratory illness. Road expansion also increases stormwater runoff, polluting water systems and increasing the urban heat island effect. In a world already experiencing more intense storms and drier weather, road development without environmental considerations is likely to lead to sewage overflows, localized flooding, and abnormally hot weather, all of which have the potential to cause public health emergencies for ill-prepared communities.

If NCDOT had properly accounted for climate change, its highway design would have included significant funding for infrastructure including bioswales, street trees, and more land for parks to mitigate air pollution, reduce heat islands, and manage stormwater runoff. Perhaps more importantly, forethought regarding the effects of climate change would have meant considering alternate forms of transportation altogether. Transportation alternatives include fully protected bidirectional bike lanes, light rail, and updated bus infrastructure. Even without the introduction of costly projects like light rail and bus right-of-ways, the U-3308 project may have been more successful at easing congestion with thoughtful integrated urban canopy planning and technology rather than more vehicle lanes.

Failure to account for historical institutional harm directed at East Durham



The development of urban roads also decreases social cohesion as roads widen and become more challenging to cross. The expansion of Highway 55 originally cut through the East Durham neighborhood. East Durham was once a burgeoning upper-middle-class neighborhood supported by Durham's textile industry. Yet, like many affluent neighborhoods, 1950s practices of blockbusting, neighborhood grading, and predatory lending left East Durham devoid of political capital and open to environmental degradation, reeling from generations of neglect and, frankly, racism. The Highway 55 expansion project exacerbated these historical harms by avoiding environmental justice rather than embracing it. Instead of adding green space and greenway overpass bridges to connect Durham residents, Highway 55 continues to bisect a minority community while doing nothing to quell the air pollution exposure of nearby residents. The Highway 55 expansion ignored urban ecology's best practices of collaborative thinking and resilient infrastructure, and was counterproductive to climate justice, public health, and neighborhood solidarity goals. For a community that has already experienced neglect for nearly 70 years, the expansion will likely only exacerbate disinvestment as large expansive roads are unideal for communities to who strive to congregate.

What to do

I suspect many Durham natives have spent countless miles on Highway 55. It truly is the main artery of Durham, as it takes drivers to Highway 70, the Durham Freeway, Highway 85, and Interstate 40. The illustrious NC Central University borders Highway 55, and the Union Insurance building and numerous recreation centers are blocks away in either direction. Should one of the oldest roads in Durham that connects numerous neighborhoods and is dotted with history not be more than asphalt to "ease congestion"? A sustainable redesign of Highway 55 is a necessity. Durham's environmentalists, activists, and planners must reevaluate what Highway 55 represents to Durham and more broadly North Carolina. Project U-3308 suffered from a lack of integrated and complex thinking needed to build a sustainable city and tackle the challenges facing many urban cores. Highway 55 can ill afford to remain shackled to antiquated ideas of urban expansion. Rather than putting Durham further from reaching its goals of decarbonization, Highway 55 can be an example of sustainable urban design meant to adapt to the trends of urbanization while creating healthy and connected citizens.

Gabriel I. Gadsden is a second-year PhD student at Yale School of the Environment and a Durham native.

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TRAFFIC

'Like a race track.' Raleigh residents seek relief from cars speeding on their streets

BY [RICHARD STRADLING](#)

UPDATED DECEMBER 22, 2022 7:58 AM



Several traffic-calming measures along a 1.2-mile stretch of Brentwood Road, in Raleigh between Capital Boulevard and New Hope Church Road include nearly a dozen "chicanes," or small islands that are built in pairs to create an S-curve. BY [TRAVIS LONG](#)



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RALEIGH

Bart Street in Southeast Raleigh is like countless others in the Triangle. Lined with houses, a cemetery and a city park, the street is too narrow for lane markings, and drivers must weave around parked cars.

But that doesn't keep people from driving too fast, according to many residents. Nearly all of those who filled out a ballot as part of Raleigh's traffic-calming process supported a city plan to install three traffic circles and four speed humps along Bart's .6-mile length.

"We need them bad," said Charles Collins, a semi-retired brick mason who has lived on the street for 15 years. "These nuts come through here half flying."

Bart is one of 18 residential streets throughout Raleigh where the city will install speed humps and other traffic-calming measures in 2023. They'll join 49 other streets that have been altered under the city's program since it started more than a decade ago.

Each project begins with one or more residents asking the city to try to slow traffic on their street, says Will Shumaker, Raleigh's traffic calming administrator.

"They don't feel safe pulling out of their driveways. They don't feel safe walking their dogs. They don't feel safe gardening in their front yards," Shumaker said. "And a lot of that has to do with the speed at which drivers are driving on neighborhood streets."

Speeding on residential streets is not a problem unique to Raleigh or the Triangle. Nationwide, residents have pressed local leaders to find ways to slow cars down in their neighborhoods. Among them:

- In Denver, the city council voted 11-1 to reduce the default speed limit on residential streets from 25 mph to 20, following a campaign by the [Denver Street Partnership](#) that included thousands of #20isPlenty and #SlowTheFunkDown yard signs.
- In New York, the city began operating a network of 2,000 speed cameras, capable of automatically issuing tickets, in and around school zones 24/7 this year. The city [saw a 72% decline in speeding where and when the cameras were operating](#) and has expanded their use to non-school hours.

- In Charlotte, the city council this year [made it easier for residents to request traffic calming measures](#), by eliminating the need to gather signatures on a petition. Now if a resident requests a change, and the city deems it reasonable, [other nearby residents are given a chance to object](#) before construction begins.

There are about 5,000 residential streets in Raleigh, many of them built when the primary concern was moving cars as swiftly and efficiently as possible, Shumaker says. His office averages about 300 requests a year from residents seeking help with speeding on their streets.

“We’ve been building auto-centric streets since the ‘40s and ‘50s,” he said. “So there is not a lack of demand out there.”

IT OFTEN BEGINS WITH LOWERING THE SPEED LIMIT

The first step in every case is to lower the speed limit if possible. State law sets the default speed limit within cities and towns at 35 mph. That may seem reasonable to a driver but not someone outside the car, Shumaker said.

“Thirty-five to a pedestrian — if you’re walking your dog, if you’re out in your yard — 35 is going to feel like a race track,” he said. “It’s going to feel way too fast.”

It’s also less safe. A person hit by a car going 20 mph will survive 90% of the time, [according to the Institute of Traffic Engineers](#), a trade organization. The survival rate goes down to 20% if the car is going 40 mph.

Shumaker’s office asks residents to vote on lowering the speed limit, to either 25 mph on neighborhood streets with fewer than 4,000 cars a day, or 30 mph on collector streets that funnel traffic to busier thoroughfares. If fewer than half object, the City Council has the final say and generally approves the reductions a few at a time throughout the year.

Since 2015, the city has reduced speed limits on 341 neighborhood streets, including 213 this year.

The city measures average speeds on each street before lowering the limit and again afterward to see how drivers respond. In about 70% of cases, most drivers abide by the lower speed limits, Shumaker said. That’s especially the case where most of the drivers also live in the neighborhood.

“It’s your neighbors, and they want a safe and happy and vibrant neighborhood as well,” he said. “So it’s kind of like, ‘Oh, OK, the appropriate speed through here is 25; I’m going slow down.’”

Where large numbers of drivers are just passing through, though, the lower speed limits are less effective. Bruce Stanley asked the city to lower the speed limit on Ridge Road, where he lives on a side street. The speed limit was 35 mph, but drivers frequently went faster, Stanley said.

“You can’t pull out fast enough,” he said. “You look each way, and it being clear is still not enough to pull out without a car being right on you.”

The city reduced the speed limit to 30 mph earlier this year. Stanley says people may be driving slower on parts of Ridge but not near his street at the northern end where drivers are coming on and off the Beltline.

“I’ve been disappointed,” he said. “It was a nice try, but it hasn’t worked.”

Enforcing speed limits isn’t easy, as anyone who [drives on North Carolina’s interstate highways knows](#).

Lt. William Harding heads a small speed enforcement unit for the Wake County Sheriff’s Office and often gets requests to patrol residential streets in unincorporated areas. He says the impact can be fleeting.

“Say you’ve got a speeding problem and you go out there and you work it pretty aggressively for a week, two weeks,” Harding said. “And people see it and they reduce their speeds. But then you’ve got other areas in the city or the county that you have to pay attention to. And then when you’re not seen out there, the speed just kind of comes back. It’s kind of like a revolving door.”

WHERE DRIVERS WON’T SLOW DOWN ON THEIR OWN

That’s where traffic calming comes in. The term refers to physical changes on the street that compel drivers to slow down even when peer pressure or fear of getting a ticket does not.

The prescription for each street differs based on factors such as traffic patterns, the width of the pavement and the presence of hills or curves.

Common measures include speed humps, roundabouts at intersections and bumping out the curbs to narrow the street in places. It sometimes includes adding stop signs to intersections, though that can have the opposite effect farther down the street, [according to the city’s guidelines](#).

The process begins with another ballot. Among those who participate, if 70% of residents on a street and 60% of those living within two blocks vote to consider

traffic calming, the city will develop a strategy. After soliciting feedback, the city will refine its ideas and present them again to residents for their input. Then it puts the final design to an up-or-down vote. Again, if 60% to 70% of voters approve, the project goes to the City Council.

The balloting is all anonymous, as are the initial requests to lower the speed limit or calm traffic. The process can be polarizing, Shumaker said, and the city doesn't want to discourage people from asking for help.

Even after traffic calming measures are in place, debates can remain fierce and often play out on online forums such as NextDoor or Reddit.

Last year, the city installed several traffic-calming measures along a 1.2-mile stretch of Brentwood Road, between Capital Boulevard and New Hope Church Road in North Raleigh. Among them were nearly a dozen "chicanes" or [small islands built in pairs to create an S-curve](#).

Drivers navigate through traffic-calming measures along a 1.2-mile stretch of Brentwood Road, between Capital Boulevard and New Hope Church Road in North Raleigh, on Dec 12, 2022. Among them are nearly a dozen of these "chicanes" or small islands built in pairs to create an S-curve. Travis Long tlong@newsobserver.com

A Reddit discussion began last winter with a photo of one of the chicanes and the question: "[Dear Brentwood, what are these absolute abominations?](#)" The ensuing exchange produced 234 comments, including many sympathetic to the initial post.

"Ya this road is a s*** show," one person wrote. "I think they put those in to get people to take other roads. It works, I avoid that road like the plague."

But others praised the chicanes, saying they work to slow people down and drive closer to the speed limit of 25 mph.

"I think they're great — people need to start slowing down, and they need to start paying better attention," one person wrote. "It ain't hard to navigate if you're driving at the speed you're supposed to be driving at."

Magie Gainey has lived on Brentwood for 10 years and says she loves the chicanes. Gainey says they're a big improvement over the speed humps that used to be in front of her house. She says she witnessed at least three accidents when people slowed for a hump and were hit from behind.

"I haven't seen anybody wreck over these things," she said, gesturing to the chicanes. "Plus you have to slow down."

The chicanes work best when cars are coming from both directions and both have to slow down to safely navigate the S-curve. Cars coming alone tend to drift out over the yellow line and drive down the middle. But even then, they go slower than they would before, Gainey said.

A HUMP THAT 'REMINDS US TO SLOW DOWN'

After it installs traffic-calming measures, the city returns to again record traffic speed and volume. On Brentwood, the average speed dropped nearly 16%, Shumaker said, from nearly 37 mph to 31 mph.

And the Reddit poster who spoke of avoiding Brentwood isn't alone. The amount of traffic on the street dropped nearly 15%, to just over 4,000 trips a day on average, Shumaker said.

That kind of reduction is typical, Shumaker said, and the city rarely sees an uptick in traffic on parallel residential streets, leading him to conclude that drivers are sticking to major thoroughfares such as Capital and New Hope Church rather than cutting through a residential neighborhood.

Perhaps more importantly, Shumaker said, the city has logged a 45% reduction in the number of crashes reported on Brentwood since the traffic-calming measures were put in and a 75% reduction in speed-related crashes.

Some residents along Bart Street hope to see similar reductions in speed and traffic. Spencer Mertes, who frequently walks his dog on Bart, lives a block over on Pettigrew Street, where he'd like to see the same treatment. Cars speeding through the neighborhood make it "scary to bike and walk around," he said.

"Unless there's a cop sitting there, what are you going to do?" Mertes said. "It would just be nice to slow them down."

Daniel Coleman said he's pleased to hear Bart Street is finally getting some traffic calming. Coleman headed the Citizens Advisory Council for the neighborhood for years and remembers an elderly woman who no longer lives on the street asking about it frequently.

"Some of us, when we get in a car, our minds get so caught up in everything else that we're doing that we may forget," Coleman said. "So sometimes if there's a hump it reminds us to slow down."

To learn more about Raleigh's Neighborhood Traffic Management program, go to raleighnc.gov/transit-streets-and-sidewalks/neighborhood-traffic-management.

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WAKE COUNTY

Residents just outside Raleigh have fewer options for slowing traffic on their streets

BY RICHARD STRADLING

DECEMBER 22, 2022 5:30 AM



A digital speed machine from the Wake County Sheriff's Office tells drivers on Howard Road in North Raleigh how fast they're going as they approach it. Drivers often slow down when they see how fast they are moving. RICHARD STRADLING rstradling@newsobserver.com



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RALEIGH

Like a lot of Raleigh residents, Cindy and Greg Hinshaw think people drive too fast on their street. The speed limit on Howard Road is 35 mph, but it's not uncommon for people to whiz past going 45 or faster, they say.

But the Hinshaws can't get any relief through the city's program to [reduce speeding and "calm traffic" on residential streets](#). That's because Howard Road isn't in the city; when the Hinshaws leave their driveway, they leave the city for an unincorporated part of Wake County and onto a road controlled by the N.C. Department of Transportation, not the City of Raleigh.

The Hinshaws and a neighbor, Mark DeCain, have implored NCDOT to do something to slow traffic on Howard Road, which runs about two-thirds of a mile between Creedmoor and Ray roads. The most logical step, in their minds, would be reducing the speed limit from 35 mph to 30 or even 25 as the city has done on nearby streets.

"It would hardly change the travel time between Ray Road and Creedmoor," Cindy Hinshaw said in an interview. "But it would help us tremendously."

But Brandon Jones, NCDOT's regional engineer, said the department sees no reason to reduce the speed limit on Howard Road and says it wouldn't do much good anyway.

"Speeding tends to be a driver behavior issue, as we have found drivers will drive the speed at which they feel comfortable driving," Jones wrote in an email to DeCain and the Hinshaws last February. "Our studies have shown that lowering the speed limit without sound reason does not produce the intended effect of slowing motorists."

That logic doesn't take into account people pulling out of their driveways or side streets or walking along the road, Cindy Hinshaw says.

"Speeders may feel comfortable," she said. "But those of us who live here don't."



Cindy and Greg Hinshaw have put signs in their front yard on Howard Road in hopes of getting drivers to abide by the 35 mph speed limit. The Hinshaws live in the city of Raleigh, but Howard Road is outside city limits. Richard Stradling rstradling@newsobserver.com

NCDOT did install larger speed limit signs, with better reflectivity at night and yellow panels on top that say “NOTICE” to make sure people know what it is. But the real solution, Jones told the Hinshaws and DeCain, is better enforcement.

“I do not anticipate long-term successful speed compliance without routine enforcement,” he wrote in April. “I do not have any further suggestions to get drivers to obey the speed limit when this road is already posted at 35 mph.”

That’s where Lt. Bill Harding of the Wake County Sheriff’s Office comes in. Harding and his small unit of traffic enforcement officers have been out on Howard Road several times in the last year, pulling over speeders. Harding said he recently spent an hour on Howard and stopped three drivers going between 49 and 53 mph.

But Harding says he and his officers can’t be there or anywhere else all the time.

“We’ll go out there, we’ll address the complaint, people will reduce their speeds,” he said. “Then a year later, they’ll call us back and say, ‘Hey, people are speeding again.’

It's kind of frustrating on our end.”

SPEED TRAILER WARNS DRIVERS GOING TOO FAST

One tool Harding uses is a speed trailer, which he parks at the side of the road. It displays the speed limit and the speed of approaching cars in digital numbers that flash if a driver is going five miles or more over the limit.

The trailer also records how fast each car and truck is going. Harding clocked nearly 50,000 vehicles on Howard over a two-week period last December and came up with an average speed of 31.3 mph (drivers coming out of driveways or side streets tend to go under the speed limit). He said 15% were going 41 mph or higher.

Harding brought the trailer back this month, and Hinshaw spent three hours sitting in her car watching the numbers. In that time, she saw 216 drivers pass the trailer above the speed limit, including 31 that were going at least 45 mph.

The Hinshaws and DeCain are frustrated being surrounded by the city but not able to take advantage of the traffic-calming efforts available to its residents.

“NCDOT is not interested in doing anything to help us. Not sure where we go from here,” Hinshaw wrote in a recent email. “Hard to think about the fact that if Howard Road was in the city limits, we would have a better chance for governmental help in addressing this issue.”

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