



Mike McGinn, Mayor
City of Seattle

April 22, 2011

Last month the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) Director Peter Hahn recommended changing Northeast 125th Street to create three lanes of automobile traffic - two through lanes and one center turn lane - and construct other improvements to make the street safer for walkers and bikers, support buses, and make traffic flow more smoothly. Like some similar projects, the proposal drew public scrutiny and comment. I encouraged members of the public to contact me and personally met with opponents. I heard a broad range of viewpoints, both pro and con. I received 414 calls, letters and petitions opposing the project, and received 992 calls, letters and petition signatures supporting the recommended rechannelization.

As has been true with other similar projects throughout the city, opponents and proponents were both passionate in their positions.

Here is a sample of the comments I received, opponents first:

"The traffic on this major east-west corridor would come to a standstill" wrote one resident, a common theme in the calls and letters that came to my office. One person wrote me to express her concern that "cars will divert through the neighborhood as 125th is a main thoroughfare." One of the points raised in the petition was that "the more reasonable means of slowing down the traffic would be to place police patrols in the area to hand out tickets." A group of opponents who met with me worried that the tolling of the SR-520 bridge, slated to begin in June, might divert more traffic onto Northeast 125th Street and cause gridlock.

Supporters focused on safety. One resident wrote that "I have been fearful every time I walk or bike along 125th." "Turning left in a car, as I often do, is a challenging task on NE 125th," another resident wrote. "Sometimes the car in the nearest lane will stop, but one cannot see the further lane and so it is not safe to turn under these circumstances. Conversion to a center turn lane would make turning a lot safer." One couple wrote that "I will never forget hearing one morning the crunching cannon-shot of a cyclist hitting a car that turned in front of her as she was coming down the hill. She was badly mangled and bloodied, and I have no doubt she required months of difficult rehab that could have been saved by a better road design."

Dr. David Fleming, who heads Public Health-Seattle & King County, wrote that "this type of center turn lane project generally improves road safety, prevents injuries caused by crashes, and improves the health and quality of life of roadway users and neighborhood residents."

Here's how this issue came up in the first place: The Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) started looking at rechannelizing 125th street during the Nickels administration. This was pursuant to the Bicycle Master Plan that had been approved by the City Council. After looking at accident data, SDOT concluded that the road had serious safety issues that required attention, regardless of bicycling.

SDOT's data showed that a high percentage of collisions (51%) on this section of Northeast 125th Street resulted in injury, compared to only 33% on similar roads in Seattle. These are accidents between automobiles, as well as accidents involving pedestrians.

SDOT believed that high speeds, as well as roadway design, were key contributing factors to the accident and injury rates. The speeds at which drivers were comfortable driving on 125th were averaging 10 miles per hour above the posted speed limit. These speeds reduce driver awareness, and create more dangerous collisions. For example, if a vehicle hits a pedestrian while going 40 miles per hour — a typical speed for Northeast 125th Street — the pedestrian has an 85% chance of dying. If a vehicle hits a pedestrian while going 30 miles per hour, they have a 45% chance of dying from impact. Risk of a fatality goes down to 5% at speeds of 20 miles per hour.

The two lane each way (without turn lanes) configuration also increases the risk of accidents. Drivers will switch lanes at high speeds to avoid left turning or right turning vehicles. By adding a center turn lane, and providing more room on the shoulders for right turning vehicles, high speed lane changing is reduced. A recent national study found that rechannelizations typically result in a 19% decrease in collisions.

The addition of a center turn lane eliminates one of the most dangerous situations - when a car stops in the outside lane for a pedestrian, the pedestrian crosses that lane, and is then struck by a speeding car in the inside lane unaware of the pedestrian. Oftentimes, the car hitting the pedestrian moved to the inside lane to pass the car stopped for the pedestrian.

While the safety aspects of rechannelizations are well proven, the concerns about mobility have not to date materialized on streets where traffic volumes are sufficiently low.

This project would be the 30th street rechannelization that has been done in Seattle since 1972. Data from previous projects indicates that safety has been improved while maintaining capacity. After rechannelizing Stone Way, SDOT found that the number of motor vehicles exceeding the speed limit by 10 miles per hour or more dropped approximately 75%, and total collisions declined by 14%. The number of cars using Stone Way declined by 6%. While that sounds negative, driving overall in Seattle has declined 7%, so the reduction on Stone Way corresponds to the overall decline in traffic around Seattle. SDOT did not find that traffic had been diverted to side streets.

SDOT projects that the Northeast 125th Street project would cause between four and 25 seconds delay, depending on the time of day. In part, this is because vehicles should be driving closer to the speed limit. SDOT has also found that rechannelizations can improve traffic flow by moving vehicles that are turning right or left out of the travel lane - making it safer for all drivers.

In response to the proposal to increase enforcement as the solution to speeding, the Seattle Police Department (SPD) reported that there is already a lot of enforcement activity in this corridor. SPD is well aware of the speeding on 125th and regularly assigns traffic enforcement officers to the corridor. SPD does not believe that additional enforcement will provide a sustainable solution to speeding.

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I also asked SDOT to examine the impact of tolling on the SR-520 bridge on Northeast 125th Street. They found that only 1 percent of traffic on the bridge is likely to be diverted to SR-522 (Lake City Way) as a result of tolling. Even if every car that was projected to divert from SR-520 ended up on Northeast 125th Street, the resulting average daily traffic volume would not exceed the capacity of the road.

In reviewing the public comments, the data presented by SDOT, and the history of prior projects, I have decided to accept the recommendation to move forward with the rechannelization project on Northeast 125th Street. Pavement repair and then restriping will take place in the coming weeks.

I understand the concern that these changes will harm mobility or cause cut-through traffic. But the evidence from prior projects demonstrate that on a street like this, the capacity should be sufficient to handle the projected traffic without significant impacts on mobility or cut-through traffic. It also shows that the safety issues are real and substantial, and the proposed changes will help. For this street, the changes make sense.

SDOT will monitor the project's impact on safety and traffic. If the rechannelized road is not performing as anticipated, we will revisit the project. After all, it's only paint. If we can improve safety by changing the way we paint lines on a particular street without causing serious traffic problems, I believe we should do so. The Northeast 125th Street project is intended to achieve these goals, and I look forward to reviewing the outcomes.

Thank you for contacting me. Please feel free to write again on any issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mike McGinn". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mike McGinn
Mayor of Seattle