

From the Ending Racism Task Force

When Roads Divide Communities

By Stan Horwitz

Transportation is a racial-justice issue. Starting in the 1950s, the construction of interstate highways uprooted or bisected Black towns and neighborhoods. Housing for under-resourced people often is located near airports, with associated noise and traffic problems. Areas with large populations of color may lack bridges and safe pedestrian and biking infrastructure. President Biden's infrastructure law admirably aims to address some of that injustice.

A local situation illustrates the importance of balancing transportation-planning and racial-justice concerns. Philadelphia has the **highest rate** of automobile fatalities of any county in Pennsylvania (14%), and Washington Avenue is among the city's most dangerous thoroughfares. In September 2020, Philadelphia announced it would put Washington Avenue on a "road diet" to discourage aggressive driving. The final design reduced the number of motor vehicle lanes from five to three and added protected bike lanes, safer boarding for bus passengers, and safer crossings for pedestrians. The projected increase in walking and biking had positive environmental implications.

In March, Philadelphia's Office of Transportation, Infrastructure, and Sustainability (OTIS) hosted a public meeting to discuss the project. Several hundred people attended

from councilmanic Districts 1 and 2, which Washington Avenue traverses. I was there as well. Although I live in District 5, I often ride my bike on Washington Avenue.

At that point, the road diet was widely considered a done deal. However, powerful opposition arose in that meeting. Both districts have many residents of color. White residents from District 1 largely supported the project. Virtually every Black attendee from District 2 argued passionately against it. Their objections spanned the kinds of concerns that often accompany transportation projects in or close to underserved neighborhoods. Among them:

Fear of further gentrification. Over the last decade, the neighborhood's Black population has declined and the white population has grown. Home values have risen more than the city average. The revamp of Washington Avenue, opponents contended, would hurt existing small businesses and affordable housing.

Loss of a major route for evacuations and first responders. It's been just three years since the explosion and subsequent shuttering of the Philadelphia Energy Solutions refinery. Washington Avenue also is a snow emergency route.

Diversion of traffic into neighborhoods. Residents worried that trucks and other traffic would shift to the narrower streets south of Washington, creating congestion and endangering children.

Advocates for the road-diet plan have countered some of these arguments and presented a case built around the primacy of safety and environmental benefits. It is not the purpose of this article to explore the relative merits of each side.

What seems clear, though, is that the city did not solicit and consider the views of enough residents of color when forging its plan. According to **WHYY**, OTIS acknowledged that its survey about the project—launched online, at the start of the pandemic—failed to adequately represent that population. Mike Carroll, the head of OTIS, talked to WHYY about the agency’s outreach. “People who are Black and brown, people who are in lower-income situations—there’s a pattern in transportation—only get asked or spoken to after decisions are made,” Carroll said.

The upshot: Washington Avenue is being put on a road diet, but only east of Broad Street. Will this prevent the west side from becoming safer and environmentally cleaner? Is there still a chance Philadelphia can do more to improve safety, reduce pollution, and at the same time address the concerns of those neighbors most affected by any changes? Perhaps. But only if the city respects those communities: consulting and collaborating with them from day one.

Stan Horwitz is a member of the Ending Racism Task Force.

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https://www.penndot.pa.gov/TravelInPA/Safety/Documents/2020_CFB_linked.pdf

WHYY:

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