

WGBA and the Road Diet

The Willow Glen Business Association (WGBA) has voted against the Lincoln Avenue Road Diet.

In my opinion,

Just as I said last month that it was unfair to both the WG Neighborhood Association (WGNA) and to the community for the City of San José (Council and Department Staff) to have put WGNA in a position where they had a veto on whether or not the Road Diet were to be made permanent, I feel it is likewise unfair to WGBA and the community for it also to have been put in such a position. As before, the issue is larger than the association; and, as before, the Business Association can help by informing its members, collecting opinions and hard data, and sharing reports with the Council and Staff. But neither the Neighborhood Association nor the Business Association should have an absolute veto on a matter that affects hundreds of businesses and tens of thousands of residents in Willow Glen and across San José.

I believe that the Road Diet will be good for both the Willow Glen business community and for the residents: it is something for which we have been striving, literally, for decades. While the Road Diet is not perfect, various improvements have been made (e.g., the restriping to allow left-turns into the B of A lot, and some minor red-curbings to clear right-turners away from through traffic), other improvements can be tried (e.g., retiming the signals at Willow, reconfiguring Lincoln south of Minnesota, and the striping of a right-turn lane on Willow), and additional area traffic-calming measures can be suggested. The current Lincoln Avenue configuration has been scheduled to remain (hopefully with a few minor improvements) until the street is resurfaced: the Business Association could have waited until near the end of the experiment before weighing in.

I am having a strong attack of déjà vu:

Thirty-some years ago, Willow Glen was also considering a transformational change to Lincoln Avenue, and again the business community tried to rush a decision to maintain the status quo. Back then, Lincoln Avenue carried more traffic (29,000 cars a day), there were no street trees and few pedestrians, and “[t]he Willow Glen commercial area [was] not the destination point for the majority of the vehicles.” The Avenue was not an attraction: it had six second-hand stores (and more were planned!), and, as I recall, the shop-windows were plastered with fluorescent orange and green promotional signs.

The Councilmember at the time, Nancy Ianni, found a small block-grant to fund a study. Representatives of the businesses and members of the community (including yours truly) were selected to serve on a task force and to work with consultants hired to help plan the project. I vividly recall the first action at the first meeting: some members of the business community tried to disband the taskforce before it could even begin its work! And throughout the process, they fought change: they wanted Lincoln Avenue to remain a major thoroughfare with nothing that might slow down traffic; they didn’t want any trees along the street as they might block the view of their signs; they didn’t want to work together with other businesses as a District – they only cared about their own individual and immediate wellbeing. Fortunately, others in the business community and the residents persevered and prevailed, and as a result Lincoln Avenue was quite positively transformed.

The Lincoln Avenue report of 1984 remains an interesting and relevant document. (It’s online at http://www.wgbackfence.net/Linc_1984/LincolnAveStudy_1984.pdf .)

- A number of its proposals have been implemented, such as the improvements to the crosswalks, the planting of street trees, and the hiring of a manager to coordinate districtwide events (e.g., “Dancin’ on the Avenue”).

- We tried back then (and repeatedly thereafter!) to get the various businesses to work together to share their parking lots: if they could have been joined, then traffic flow could have been improved, additional spaces provided, and customer experience enhanced. Alas! – thirty years of trying without success!
- And we wanted the roadway itself to be improved. Quoting from that 1984 report on future possibilities:
“Construction of the Guadalupe Corridor [Freeway 87] theoretically would reduce the volume of traffic along Lincoln Avenue. If it does, then other street improvements could be considered, such as widened sidewalks; reduced traffic lanes; left turn lanes; and a landscaped median strip.”

For many years, we in the community have waited for the “[c]ompletion of the Guadalupe Corridor [to] take some of the traffic volume off of Lincoln Avenue and make [these] streetscape improvements feasible.”

When 87 was finally built, it immediately was congested, and we were told we would have to wait for the construction of a carpool lane.

When the carpool lane was finally done, we were then told that there was no funding for a traffic study. When I and others again raised the issue at the Envision 2040 Task Force, we almost got it on the list of streets to be prioritized for study.

Thanks to the Road Diet experiment, we’ve now finally gotten to actually try it out. (Many thanks, Councilmember Oliverio and the Road Diet Working Group!)

The process has not been ideal: a more open and transparent process could have alleviated some concerns, and more public participation might have avoided some of the early missteps – like that no-left-turn into the B of A parking lot!

Nonetheless, we can finally begin to see the potential of the Road Diet: traffic flows relatively smoothly (and some simple modifications may improve it significantly); bicyclists are beginning to discover that they can access this wonderful business district; and the pedestrian street-life definitely appears to have improved.

I’m sorry that business may be down at a few shops: could it be that business had been going down even before the diet, or that perhaps some snazzier restaurant has now opened up just down the block? Business at other shops has improved. And businesses do change over time: going back to a four-lane configuration wouldn’t bring back BlockBusters.

The question for all of us is: what do we want Lincoln Avenue to become?

- Do we go back to the 1980s: the barren treeless expressway with second-hand shops and windows plastered with fluorescent-green signs?
- Keep what we recently have had: the four lanes of traffic and numerous nail-salons?
- Or look forward to what might be: a far more walkable and bike-friendly district with new and attractive businesses and services for our community?

I for one want to look forward to the future – I’ve been waiting for it now for over thirty years! I hope that the San José Council and City Staff will consider all the data and all the comments, and I hope that the City will decide to make the Road Diet permanent.

~Larry Ames, member of the Lincoln Avenue Study Task Force, 1984.

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