

# Neighborhoods declare war on traffic

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SARASOTA, Fla.

Tired of stop-and-go traffic, the time-pressed commuter tries a short cut through neighborhoods on streets that aren't as busy.

Big mistake.

Shade Avenue's first speed hump rises just north of Hibiscus amid a sea of brake lights. Slosh goes the coffee. Six more car-jarring humps follow in just the next mile. Doughnuts thump to the floor.

Fleeing onto Hyde Park Street, the driver finds a side-jutting concrete islet that narrows the street and forces cars to pass one by one. Next, cars are diverted around two center medians before encountering a final, maddening islet.

Welcome to the Florida Gulf Coast city that is ground zero in a national battle pitting testy commuters and increasingly aggressive drivers against residents who want slower traffic on safer, more walkable neighborhood streets. From Sarasota to Seattle, cities are touting "traffic calming" as a way to end the mad rush of cars racing 40 mph and faster down residential streets. As stressed-out commuters and combative drivers roar through the neighborhoods to avoid clogged main roads, residents are taking up the fight.

Call it the biggest change in suburban driving since cul-de-sacs came in vogue in 1929. Streets once designed to move cars in and out of neighborhoods as quickly as possible are being redesigned today so they can be shared by pedestrians, bicycles and pets.

"It's a whole change in mindset. We thought bigger was better, and faster was better, and now we don't," says Reid Ewing, an urban planning professor at Florida International University in Miami.

## U-turn in philosophy

Transportation experts see traffic calming as a U-turn in engineering philosophy. The basic theory is to change straight streets into obstacle courses that dramatically slow traffic.

Speed humps and elevated speed tables force cars to slow or suffer abrupt jolts. Traffic circles at intersections impede straight and quick throughways. Curbs and sidewalks that jut into streets force motorists to yield to each other and pass one at a time.

"We're trying to undo the traffic chaos created in the 1960s, when engineers were transforming every city street into a mass arterial roadway with no parking," Milwaukee Mayor John Nordquist says.

Long popular in Europe, traffic calming in this country sprouted on the West Coast and is spreading eastward rapidly. The momentum stems from 6,000 pedestrian traffic fatalities a year. Fifty-five percent take place in neighborhoods.

Just look around:

- Seattle may have more miniature traffic circles, at least 610, than any other city. Seventy more go in this year. City officials say the circles have reduced traffic accidents by more than 90% where they have been built. One review of 30 circles found 50 accidents before installation in 1991 and only two accidents after. Seattle also has built deceptive "chicanes" on a dozen busy streets. Twelve more are going in this year. Chicanes alternate parking and landscaping from one side of the street to the other, so drivers see a zigzagged road rather than a clear, straight path.
- Portland, Ore., residents are clamoring for traffic circles, speed humps and curb extensions. The waiting list is 500 streets long. Transportation planners say the most effective use of traffic calmers is to place them areawide. Otherwise, speeding problems are just diverted from one street to another.
- Austin, Texas, officials brought in Florida transportation engineer Michael Wallwork to redesign four-lane streets that border neighborhoods. Wallwork's philosophy: Narrow the intersections so drivers have to reduce speeds. Traffic calmers may be an "annoyance, but when your child gets killed, you're going to demand the city do something," Wallwork says.
- Engineers in Cambridge, Mass., are reducing a mile of busy Massachusetts Avenue from four lanes to three by widening sidewalks, installing bike lanes and extending curbs. This spring, the city will spend \$250,000 to build raised crosswalks and landscaped traffic islands that divert traffic and slow it down.

Here in Sarasota, engineers can barely keep up with demand for traffic calmers. Thirty-five thousand motorists a day travel to jobs downtown. To shave five to 10 minutes off trips, drivers cut through neighborhoods of multimillion dollar Mediterranean homes with bayfront views.

As a result, harried homeowners have fought to have as many as 80 traffic calmers built in their beach resort town since 1990. Twenty-four more will go in this year.

Speed humps are the traffic calmners, most in demand here, as they are across the nation. Not as teeth-rattling as speed bumps found in parking lots, humps rise 3-4 inches above street level and typically are 12 feet long.

Carol Ostling waged a three-year battle to get humps installed on her street after speeding cars killed the family's two cats and nearly plowed down her husband, Robert. He was in his own front yard when a driver sailed onto the lawn, braking just inches from him.

"It was an absolute nightmare," Carol Ostling recalls. "Every other week there was a fender bender. Something had to be done." At times, she says, she felt like screaming, "Don't drive like it's the Indy 500!"

The Ostlings attended endless meetings, made phone calls and circulated petitions because 60% of their neighbors had to agree to the humps.

Since the humps were installed in 1994, traffic has dropped by nearly 50%, to 3,700 cars a day. Speeds have fallen about 10 mph, to 28 mph. The posted speed is 25 mph.

## Speed Bump Capital

But the transition isn't always smooth. Last fall, hundreds of frustrated drivers responded when radio station WSRZ-FM organized a "Honk if You Hate Speed Humps," campaign and awarded free front-end alignments to winners in call-in contests.

"We had a lot of fun with it: Sarasota, the Speed Bump Capital of the World," says disc jockey David Jones.

Sarasota Fire Capt. Chuck Johnston feared that tragic obstacles would add critical delay to fire and rescue response.

"For somebody who is having a heart attack, we need to be there by four to six minutes," Johnston says. But officials have found that rescues take only a few seconds more even when the route has traffic calmers.

Government officials also needn't have feared that traffic calmers might somehow contribute to injuries to motorists or pedestrians and result in a slew of lawsuits.

Studies show that pedestrians have an 85% chance of surviving if they're hit by a car going under 18 mph. They have the same chance of being killed if the car is traveling at speeds above 35 mph. Severe injury is unlikely in between.

"If we could put up a sign that said 'Please respect our neighborhood and drive slowly,' we wouldn't have to install any devices at all," former Sarasota mayor Mollie Cardamone says. She lost two dogs to speeders. "But the reality is people have become more and more uncivil."

Humps, bends and barriers are being built on neighborhood streets across the USA to slow or reduce traffic flow. The devices vary in type, size and shape.

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