

Achieving Support for Traffic Mitigation from Elected Officials and Emergency Services

Randy A. Dittberner, P.E.

The success of a Neighborhood Traffic Management Program hinges on support from much more than just neighborhood residents. Ideally, support from many other groups, including elected officials and emergency service providers, should be earned. Before discussing techniques for achieving such support, this paper will provide a brief introduction to Phoenix and a description of Phoenix's Neighborhood Traffic Management Program.

The City of Phoenix

Phoenix, Arizona is the sixth-largest city by population in the United States, with approximately 1.3 million residents. The Phoenix metropolitan area is home to about 2.6 million [4], and the rate of population growth in the area is tremendous.

Phoenix is a large city not only in population, but also in land area. Phoenix's city limits encompass nearly 500 square miles [4], and most residents live in low-density housing dispersed all across the city. The bulk of the city was developed and annexed in the last 50 years, long after the onset of the automobile. Phoenix's infrastructure is thus ideally suited for high-speed, efficient automobile transportation. Streets are neatly spaced in a near-perfect grid pattern, with wide arterial streets every mile and collector streets spaced halfway between arterials.

Compared with other metropolitan areas its size, Phoenix has a small transit system. Phoenix is the largest city in the U.S. without a tax dedicated for transit. Because of the small transit network, an overwhelming proportion of trips are made by car.

Phoenix's Neighborhood Traffic Management Program

Since automobile trips are so common and growth so rapid, Phoenix residents are increasingly concerned about traffic intruding into their neighborhoods. To address these concerns, the City Council authorized the formation of a Neighborhood Traffic Management Program (NTMP) in 1989 [1]. Since then, the program has worked with hundreds of neighborhoods to help identify, quantify, and solve traffic problems.

The NTMP's process encourages a strong resident partnership. Phoenix has thousands of miles of local neighborhood streets, and some speeding likely occurs on all of them at some time. The city has found that the best way to use its scarce resources is to ask residents to take initiative and work together with city staff.

Once alerted to a concern, staff sends the concerned residents information about the NTMP and immediately asks for their participation. Residents must complete and return a “Neighborhood Traffic Action Request Form.” The form asks for the location of the concern and requires signatures from residents of ten households in the neighborhood. It allows the city to ensure some level of neighborhood-wide concern before expending significant resources.

When the form is returned, the city conducts a traffic study in the neighborhood, using automatic traffic counters to measure the number of vehicles traveling in each direction and their speeds. The NTMP is only authorized to work with neighborhoods that suffer from unusually high volumes of traffic. If the study shows that traffic exceeds either the daily or peak-hour traffic thresholds shown in table 1, the neighborhood is eligible to continue with the NTMP.

If traffic volume exceeds the thresholds, residents are invited to arrange a neighborhood meeting. At the meeting, staff presents a slide show giving an overview of the NTMP and suggesting several traffic mitigation options designed specifically for the neighborhood.

After the meeting, residents are again put in control of the process. They are asked to review the options available to them and select a traffic mitigation plan they like. They must then show support from at least 70% of affected residents by circulating a petition.

If residents are successful in generating a 70% consensus, the city installs the traffic mitigation plan for a 90-day test period. Temporary traffic control devices are used to mimic the effects of permanent devices, such as curbs. During the test, the city logs all comments received about the test. The city solicits comments from groups whose operations the plan may affect, such as police, fire, sanitation, transit and school bus operators.

If the test involves physical devices, such as diverters, the temporary devices are removed after the 90-day test, whether or not they are effective. A newsletter is sent to the entire neighborhood to document the effects of the test, usually including results of “before-and-after” traffic studies.

Staff then meets with residents to discuss what steps to take next. If the test consisted of exclusively passive devices, such as turn restrictions, residents choose whether to keep the plan in place. If residents choose to remove the plan, they are free to test any other plan, either passive or physical, for which they can show 70% consensus.

Table 1: NTMP Threshold Traffic Levels

Street Classification		Vehicles per	
		Day	Peak Hour
Local Street	Low Density*	1000	100
	High Density*	2000	200
Collector Street		8000	800

*Low-density streets have predominantly single-family homes. High density streets have predominantly multi-family dwellings, such as apartment complexes. [1]

If the test included any physical devices, such as diverters, residents have three options:

- Do nothing, keeping the neighborhood in pre-test conditions.
- Pursue a test of another mitigation plan, either passive or physical, by attempting to show 70% consensus.
- Pursue a permanent installation of the tested mitigation plan.

If residents choose to install the mitigation plan permanently, staff will design the physical improvements and give residents a cost estimate. If funds are available, the city can pay up to half the cost of improvements, but residents must find funding to pay the balance. There is no cost to residents for options that only involve signing and pavement marking [1].

Support from other departments

The NTMP process is designed to give residents considerable latitude in selecting options that staff can support. The city's role is limited to identifying the pros and cons of each option and providing residents with the information they need to decide which option to pursue. The program has been highly successful, but staff is careful to involve other groups whenever possible to ensure a successful program.

Elected Officials

Phoenix's city council consists of its mayor and eight council members, with each council member elected from a geographic district within the city. This format makes coordination with the council easier than in cities where council members are elected from the city at large. In Phoenix, each neighborhood has a designated council member and staff's coordination efforts are targeted to that member. In Phoenix's Council-Manager form of government, the council sets the policies, and the city manager (and city staff) carry out the policies.

Achieving support from city council members in Phoenix has generally been successful and uncontroversial. A critical part of that success comes from a knowledge of the council's goals, so that interaction with the council can support these goals, instead of opposing them.

Council members are truly interested in making improvements to the city. The council's primary goals are responding to constituents and making the city a better place to live and work. A history of responsiveness can also help a council person in future elections. Council members are eager to support neighborhood traffic management projects because these projects have proven to be effective mechanisms to respond to citizens' concerns. These are a few techniques that have worked in Phoenix to retain council support and cooperation:

Make sure the Council knows what's going on. When residents call to complain, they call their council member just as often as they call the traffic department. The

council members' staffs need to know how to respond to those calls, so they need to be fully aware of the neighborhood's activities. The council is almost always supportive of a neighborhood's traffic mitigation plan when they know that the neighborhood experiences excessive traffic volumes and that the vast majority of the neighborhood supports the plan.

Before any traffic changes are made, and before any mass mailings are sent out, staff often schedules a brief meeting to update the appropriate council member. Council members' calendars are usually packed, so finding time for a meeting can be difficult. However, the value of such a briefing usually outweighs any inconvenience.

Staff also works carefully with newly-elected council members. Staff makes a brief presentation to each new council member about the process and success of the NTMP and provides an update on any active neighborhood projects in that council district.

Give the Council an opportunity to take credit. Taking credit for a neighborhood improvement is one of the best ways the council can remain popular with constituents. In Phoenix, the appropriate council member has an opportunity to comment on every newsletter sent to residents. Associating a council member's name with a successful project is an excellent way to put his or her name in a positive light with a large group of voters. The council member is usually eager to provide comments. A sample council comment is shown in Box 1.

Box 1: Sample Council Comment

Dear Residents:

Congratulations! Your efforts to end cut-through traffic in your neighborhood is perhaps one of the most significant steps toward neighborhood preservation you can take. Minimizing intruder traffic can have a positive impact on crime, property degradation, noise abatement, and pedestrian safety. I want to commend all of you for your spirit of cooperation and sense of community.

[3]

Shield the Council from blame. Not every project is a huge success. Many projects are fraught with controversy and disagreement among neighbors. In these cases, it is best to keep the council member informed, but out of the controversy as much as possible. The council offices are advised to forward citizen inquiries to the traffic department for a response. The council will appreciate staff's willingness to stay involved and take the heat if needed.

When staff can keep the council informed, the council can become one of staff's greatest supporters. It is the council that can approve additional funding and new employees, so gaining support from the council can be lucrative in more than one way.

Emergency Services

It can be much more challenging to find support from emergency service providers than from elected officials. However, the two groups are similar in that the best way to

generate support is to be aware of their goals.

When it comes to transportation, the goal of most emergency service providers is to get to calls as quickly as possible. The Phoenix Fire Department, for instance, boasts an average response time of just over four minutes. The department is proud of its quick response times, but it is always striving for more responsive service. Unfortunately, this goal of the Fire Department is often in conflict with the main goal of traffic calming. If traffic calming devices are to successfully slow traffic, the Fire Department can usually foresee increases in response times. Reaching a compromise between these two goals is never an easy task, but it is one many cities struggle to do. This paper does not profess to have the perfect compromise, but instead attempts to provide a few suggestions that may help agencies reach a compromise.

Fortunately, emergency service providers are usually not concerned about all types of traffic mitigation. Passive devices, such as turn restriction signs, and some physical devices, such as semi-diverters, have little or no effect on response times, since emergency vehicles can violate the restrictions when necessary. The primary concerns usually focus on traffic calming devices, such as chicanes or speed humps, and on restrictive devices, such as diagonal diverters and street closures.

Involve emergency services early. The sooner a group is introduced to the goals of traffic calming, and the more opportunity the group has to participate, the better the chances of reaching a successful compromise. Occasionally, engineering staff is tempted to prepare a “draft policy” and circulate it to emergency service providers for review and comment. If the policy is controversial, these groups' comments may be defensive, attempting to keep from undermining their own broad goals. A much better technique is to invite all affected parties to an initial “kickoff” meeting to let them know that the policy can be designed with their own goals in mind.

This technique is important not only for emergency service providers, but for other groups as well, such as operators of sanitation vehicles, school buses, and public transit. A city's risk management section can also be a key player.

Develop guidelines that recognize the importance of emergency services. Once emergency service providers are included in the pre-planning stages, their goals must be heard and incorporated into the policy as much as possible. It can be frustrating for providers to participate in the preparation of a policy, only to find that their comments are ignored in the final version.

In Phoenix, a speed hump policy was developed about ten years ago with input from various agencies. Before that time, there had been no speed humps installed on public streets in Phoenix, but residents were clamoring for ways to slow traffic, so the need for a speed hump policy was evident. The policy contains several points designed to accommodate the needs of emergency service providers [2]:

- Speed humps are permitted only on local streets, not on collector streets or arterials. This allows emergency vehicles to use collectors and arterials without

concern for speed humps.

- Speed humps are not permitted on local streets if the streets are routinely used by emergency vehicles.
- To have speed humps installed, residents must pay all or part of the cost. This part of the policy was not solely designed to benefit emergency services, but it does benefit them indirectly. When residents must pay, the number of speed humps does not grow nearly as fast as when the humps are free to residents. Fewer humps means fewer concerns for emergency vehicles.

Requirements such as these were developed only after consultation with several groups. Each of these points in the policy has helped generate support from emergency service providers, and the compromise policy has remained virtually unchanged since its inception. This support continues despite the fact that most emergency service providers are opposed to speed humps.

Stick to the guidelines. City staff often endures considerable pressure from various sources to make exceptions to these carefully crafted policies. Management and elected officials, among others, should be educated about the completed policies so they know the reasons behind their points. This can help prevent requests for violations to the policy.

In Phoenix, there has been significant demand for speed humps on collector streets. With management and council support, staff has successfully denied each request, and no speed humps currently exist on collectors in Phoenix. When the integrity of the guidelines can be maintained, it certainly benefits emergency service providers, but it is also of tremendous benefit to staff in its future attempts to stick to the policy.

Conduct field tests of physical devices when necessary. Before considering a permanent physical device that could affect emergency vehicles, a field test is an excellent way to learn its impact. When designing traffic calming devices, it is often unclear how fast different types of vehicles can proceed through the devices. Rather than speculate with emergency service providers about how much speed reduction might occur, a field test can provide concrete answers. The size and shape of the devices can be modified to achieve the best compromise between allowing access for emergency vehicles and providing some speed reduction for other vehicles.

Conclusion

It is usually impossible to develop a traffic mitigation plan that is fully supported by all. However, support can be maximized when staff can recognize and support the goals of all affected parties, including elected officials, emergency services, and many others.

Randy A. Dittberner, P.E., is a Traffic Engineer III at the City of Phoenix, Arizona. He has been a member of Phoenix's Neighborhood Traffic Management Team for two

years. He received B.S.E. and M.S.E. degrees in civil engineering from Arizona State University. Dittberner is an associate member of ITE.

References

1. Policy to Reduce Neighborhood "Cut-Through" Traffic, City of Phoenix Street Transportation Department, c. 1989.
2. Procedure for Requesting Speed Humps, City of Phoenix Street Transportation Department, rev. March 1998.
3. Villa Verde Neighborhood Traffic Bulletin, City of Phoenix Neighborhood Traffic Management Program, August 1996.
4. *The World Almanac and Book of Facts: 1998*, Pharos Books, New York, New York, 1997.