

TRAFFIC CALMING FOR CRIME REDUCTION & NEIGHBORHOOD REVITALIZATION

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Abstract

The City of West Palm Beach is implementing innovative transportation planning and land use planning, with an emphasis on New Urbanist principles and traffic calming, with the intent of reducing crime and revitalizing the downtown, commercial corridors and inner-city neighborhoods. As a result, areas that were once being rapidly deserted are beginning to thrive. The basic premise of the planning changes is a refocus of energy and public investment into the largest part of the public realm, the street, which has also stimulated private investment of large proportions. Initially, the impetus of the traffic calming projects was to reduce the amount of cut-through motor vehicle traffic and speeding within certain commercial corridors and residential areas. Since the first traffic calming project's completion, the City has witnessed additional benefits of crime reduction, areawide revitalization and increased community pride. Today, the additional benefits are the force behind traffic calming in the City of West Palm Beach.

1. INTRODUCTION

The City of West Palm Beach (population 80,000) is the center of Palm Beach County (population 1,004,000) on the east coast of the State of Florida. The City is 56 square miles (143 square kilometers) in area, with the western 50% designated as a wetland conservation area. The City has approximately 10 miles (16 km) of waterfront (Intracoastal Waterway) on its eastern boundary. The Downtown and older parts of the City extend inland approximately one mile (1.6 km) from the waterfront. In addition to City government, the City is home to the County Seat of Government; many regional services; recreational and cultural attractions; twenty-five percent of the County's jobs; and, consequently, a concentrated share of the region's motor vehicle traffic. The City's daytime population triples to approximately 240,000. The majority of these visitors and their motor vehicles move within the Downtown, commercial corridors and through the older neighborhoods from surrounding areas.

For 40 years prior, the Downtown and older commercial corridors and residential areas were deteriorating from a number of factors. Part of the decline was due to the fact that the streets were planned and incrementally transformed to cater only to the mobility/level of service of motor vehicle users, most of which had moved out to the suburbs. The idea was to provide easy mobility to and from the City for those outside of the older areas. Businesses, residents, pedestrians, and the urban environment suffered as a result. The Downtown and the older neighborhoods were increasingly perceived as dangerous, dirty,

and often empty. People sought the safety of their cars and cocooned themselves in their houses, eroding the sense of community and leaving the streets available for criminals. The streets provided an environment suitable for prostitution and illegal drugs. Many people with a choice and the financial ability had already migrated to the suburbs or refused to locate within the urban areas, further exacerbating the problems. The City attributes the majority of this decline to poor transportation and land use planning. Fortunately, the City recognized the deficiencies of past planning practices and changed to the course of its own destiny.

West Palm Beach's traffic calming and New Urbanist approach to planning revived its almost dead Downtown, even though the efforts are only in their first stages of implementation. Traffic calming has gone beyond the usual speeding, cut-through, and safety benefits by increasing inner city neighborhood pride, attracting private investment, supporting other programs involving home ownership and historic preservation, and helping Downtown businesses. It has changed the transportation focus from mobility to access, and motor vehicle users are expected to behave differently than before, creating a better urban environment.

2. TOOLS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

It would be misleading to claim that the combination of New Urbanism and traffic calming is solely responsible for the renaissance of the City. There are many other contributing factors that range from home-ownership programs, to new approaches to policing, to the generally healthy economy of the Country. However, of paramount importance are the commitment and leadership of the Mayor and the City Commission. To a great extent, developers and investors are attracted to the City due to the political will to make the City better. In addition, the City has been extremely aggressive in attracting professionals with a similar vision and drive to make West Palm Beach a great city.

The Mayor's and City Commission's commitment and leadership have lead to the development of several community redevelopment areas (CRAs). The first was within the Downtown, centered by Clematis Street and the second was in the Northwood neighborhood in the northern part of the City. These areas correspond with its own CRA agency which acts as a separate legal entity functioning under the local government authority approving all plans before action can be taken. The CRA is a vehicle for implementation. It has the ability to focus on the challenges of a given geographic area and propose specific solutions. Most important, the CRA has the ability to assist in financing projects.

Typically, the process begins with the "Finding of Necessity," such as the conditions of "blight." The city then creates or establishes a community redevelopment area and agency to coordinate the redevelopment process. The CRA conducts several meetings and prepares the "redevelopment plan" stating the redevelopment strategies. Finally, the agency establishes financing through various grants, tax increment financing or other assessments and then begins to implement the plan.

In both the Downtown and Northwood neighborhood CRAs, the traffic calming and streetscaping projects were and are an important part of the redevelopment plans. Financing was paid through a combination of City financing, a special assessment to the property owners and financed by tax increment financing. The effect of the CRA, and indirectly the traffic calming projects, has been an increase in private investment which typically surpasses the public investment by 10 to 30 times. In fact, private investment began in anticipation of the traffic calming.

The City's politicians and staff do not plan on coasting now that the City is on the right track; they are committed to acquire and share more information, experiment, and make changes to policies and practices to keep City advancing toward its goals.

3. TRAFFIC CALMING AN COMMUNITY GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

When one hears the words "traffic calming," especially in North America, there are three community goals that typically spring to mind: 1) slowing down motor vehicles; 2) reducing collision rates and severities; and in some cases, 3) reducing the volume of drivers cutting through sensitive areas such as residential streets.

Traffic calming has the potential to do much more than the three goals above. Traffic calming involves changing the design and the role of the street to reduce the negative social and environmental effects of motor vehicles on individuals and on the community in general. Traffic calming promotes many other community goals such as: increasing the quality of life; incorporating the preferences and requirements of the people using the area (e.g., working, playing, residing) along the street(s), or at the intersection(s); creating safe and attractive streets; helping reduce the negative effects of motor vehicles on the environment (e.g., pollution, sprawl); and promoting pedestrian, cycle and transit use. Traffic calming also helps achieve many community objectives such as: achieving slow speeds for motor vehicles; reducing collision frequency and severity; increasing the safety and the perception of safety for non-motorized users of the street(s); reducing the need for police enforcement of motorists; enhancing the street environment (e.g., streetscaping); encouraging water infiltration into the ground; increasing access for all modes of transportation; and reducing cut-through motor vehicle traffic. (1)

The lists of community goals and objectives that are served by traffic calming makes it a powerful tool, especially when considered along with the other policies, codes, and plans. For example, in one city, reducing speeding may be the key objective, while in another it may be increasing access to land. Another city may be concerned about neighborhood revitalization, and aesthetics. In the case of West Palm Beach, all of these objectives are important, but especially neighborhood revitalization, increased aesthetics, and increased perceptions of safety by non-motorized users.

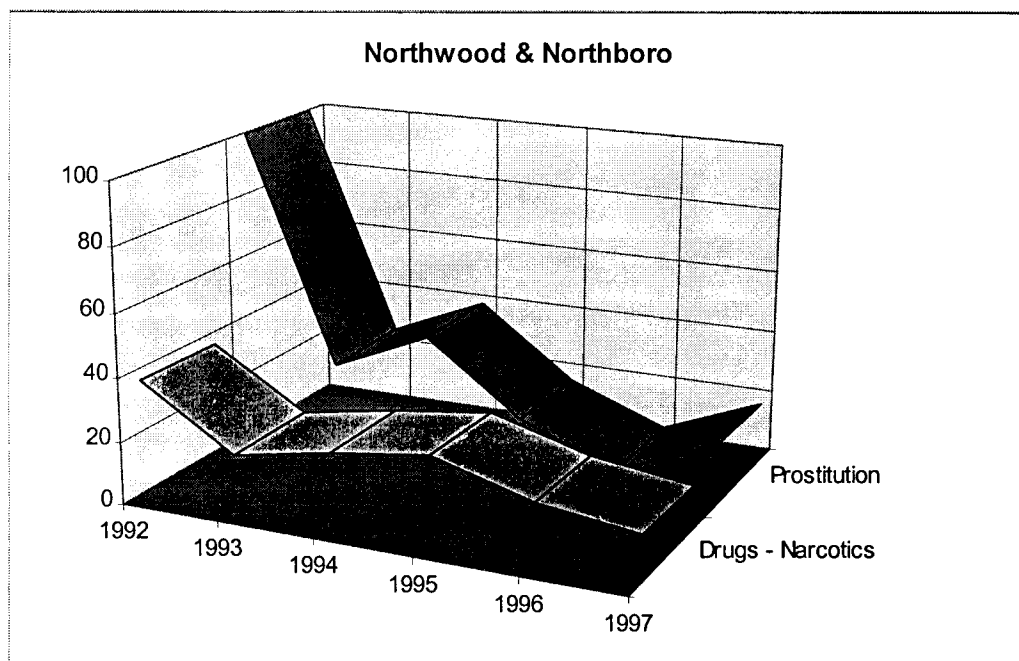
4. EFFECTS ON CRIME

Traffic calming in West Palm Beach was initially used as a response to resident complaints

of motor vehicle speeding, cut-through motor vehicle traffic, and the overall negative perception of drivers' behavior within their neighborhoods. The City soon found that the traffic calming projects had additional external benefits. One of which was a reduction in crimes related to poor street environments (e.g., prostitution and drugs).

Traffic calming caused several phases of the revitalization cycle to occur which resulted in a reduction in the aforementioned crimes and the rejuvenation of depressed commercial corridors and inner-city neighborhoods. First, the projects physically altered driver behavior, leading to slower, more respectful motorists and reduced the amount of cut-through or non-neighborhood traffic within the older inner-city neighborhoods. The reduction in speeds and the perceived dangers of the vehicles lead to increased natural surveillance through the presence of more pedestrians, cyclists, and in-line skaters. Existing residents and businesses invested in renovations and property improvements. The increase in neighborhood pride and the increase of natural surveillance led to the return of more businesses and residents. All of which continues to snowball and contribute to the reduction in street crime within the areas of study.

For example, within the Old Northwood and Northboro neighborhoods, the number of



arrests for prostitution dropped from 100 arrests in 1992 to less than 20 in 1997, a decrease of approximately 80 percent. In the same area, the incidents involving drugs and narcotics dropped from approximately 38 incidents in 1992 to less than 15 incidents in 1997, a decrease of approximately 60 percent (See graph above).

These areas have witnessed a decrease in street crime due to increased neighborhood and civic pride and increase natural surveillance as a result traffic calming. This change

has occurred in a short period of time. It is important to indicate that these areas are still within a larger geographic area that is depressed. Therefore, the areas have not reached their greatest potential for crime reduction. At such a time that the City of West Palm Beach can implement traffic calming and revitalization projects throughout the City, the results will likely be even more positive.

The most important result is that traffic calming can have a direct impact on crime patterns and can work in conjunction with other crime prevention programs such as CPTED (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design)(3) but without street closures, diverters, semi-diverters, or one-way streets. These "route modification" strategies are typically controversial and are unnecessary with a well-conceived traffic calming plan. Consequently, changing the street environment and design can be a major step in reclaiming inner-city neighborhoods and commercial corridors from criminals.

5. EFFECTS ON NEIGHBORHOOD/DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION

The general approach to traffic calming in West Palm Beach is to conduct area-wide projects. The City has finished four projects, with six projects under construction, and approximately 50 projects at various stages of planning and design. Each project involves between one and 14 streets and tackles a challenging part of the neighborhood, district, or corridor. Later, subsequent area-wide projects will be added, until the entire urban area is affected with appropriate levels of traffic calming on all the various types of streets. The ultimate goal is to make West Palm Beach unique, liveable, sustainable, walkable, and the model for cities throughout the Country. Interesting aspects of four projects were selected for specific discussion.

- A) The heart of the City's Downtown is **Clematis Street**, a 4,500 foot (1,400 m) street anchored by a plaza, library, and the waterfront on the east end and a historic train station on the west end. Historically, Clematis Street was a thriving main street, but decades of highway projects, suburban sprawl, regional shopping mall construction, and over development of offices took their toll. In 1993, the street was a one-way street with only 30% of the building space occupied. Property values along the street ranged between \$_{US}10 and \$_{US}40 per square foot (0.09 m²). Commercial space rented for \$_{US}6 per square foot (0.09 m²). The Downtown was perceived as dangerous and undesirable.

In 1993, the City (through the CRA) initiated a traffic calming and streetscaping plan along Clematis Street and the streets around the plaza and library. Clematis Street was converted to a two-way street and the traffic calming measures included narrowings, raised intersections, and lateral shifts. The plaza was rebuilt with pedestrian amenities, an interactive fountain, and event spaces. Soft and colorful materials were used for the project with great attention paid to urban design. In addition, the City financially assisted the restoration of some key historic buildings in the area and the library itself. The City invested approximately \$_{US}10,000,000 in the area.

Today, the area is perceived as safe. Children play in the fountain; families feel comfortable Downtown. Restaurants are busy and more are opening. There are weekly street parties that attract three to five thousand people. Property values along the street have more than doubled, ranging between \$_{US}50 and \$_{US}100 per square foot (0.09 m²). Commercial space rents are now \$_{US}30 per square foot (0.09 m²). More than 80% of the building space is now occupied. Since 1993, private investment along the street is estimated at more than \$_{US}350,000,000.

Motor vehicle traffic volumes on Clematis Street have been maintained at approximately 2,500 vehicles per day, before and after the traffic calming.

- B) The streets in two adjacent neighborhoods in the northern part of the City, **Northboro Park** and **Old Northwood**, were recently traffic calmed. The early street modifications included only street closures but, due to problems with them, a street closure moratorium was enacted. The City then switched to traffic calming measures, including mini-traffic circles, narrowings, and speed humps.

In addition to the reductions in poor driver behavior, the project impacted the area in other ways. Social links between neighbors have increased. There are street parties and newly formed recreation and social groups. There is a sense of pride and ownership in the neighborhood. The streets are very attractive, the neighbors maintain the traffic calming measures, to the point where they plant flowers and decorate them for events and holidays.

The demand to live in the two neighborhoods is rising, people with choice are moving back, and property values are appreciating. Between 1994 and 1997 the average sale price for houses in the two neighborhoods increased from \$_{US}65,000 to \$_{US}106,000. A spokesperson for the real estate firm that sells most of the homes in the area recalls that, a couple of years ago, potential home buyers would hang up the telephone when the suggestion was made to consider buying a house in the area. Today, the firm has a waiting list to buy in the area.

Traffic volumes on the residential streets of Old Northwood and Northboro Park are approximately 500 vehicles per day. 36th Street, the busiest street in the area, within Northboro Park handles approximately 7,500 vehicles per day.

- C) The **Northwest Neighborhood** is one of the most challenged in the City and is located immediately northwest of the Downtown. It is known for its boarded up houses, vacant lots, disrepair, and criminal activity. A telling sign of the lack of neighborhood pride is the large quantities of trash that are regularly discarded throughout.

However, Division Street is the exception. It was reconstructed recently to be narrow, nicely landscaped, and at a pedestrian scale. It stands out in the neighborhood because the street is clean and so are the properties along it. The

residents throughout the neighborhood like and respect Division Street and, consequently, they do not dump their garbage nor litter on it. They want more streets in the area to look and operate like Division Street and the City is responding by traffic calming three other significant streets in the neighborhood.

Traffic volumes on Division Street are approximately 500 vehicles per day.

- D) **Northwood Road** is the historic, commercial, main street of the northern part of the City despite its short length of 1,500 feet (460 m). The street declined for the same reasons as Clematis Street. However, the street was reconstructed as a traffic calmed street by the City (through the CRA), using narrowings, raised pedestrian crossings, and a variety of streetscaping features. Based on other traffic calming projects in the City, investors and businesses are concluding that the Northwood Road area is worth investing in as well. In fact, the reinvestment in the area actually began in anticipation of the traffic calming project.

Northwood Road is maintaining approximately 8,000 vehicles per day.

6. THE CONTRIBUTION OF NEW URBANISM

The benefits due to the traffic calming projects have occurred quickly because the streets transform in a only period of weeks (i.e., the length of the construction period). However, the effects of the City's New Urbanist approach to planning are incremental because most of its effects depend on individual properties redeveloping over time. However, newly adopted New Urbanist policies have provided developers and property owners with confidence to invest in their projects and properties because they know that neighboring projects will be affected by the same rules and design guidelines. They know their projects will be compatible with the area and vice versa.

The City of West Palm Beach has benefitted more quickly than one would normally expect by adopting a New Urbanist approach to land use planning and implementing its vision. In the 1980s, a private developer managed to aggregate and clear more than 77 acres (31 hectares) of Downtown property, and then went bankrupt. The City bought the land and has worked with the private sector to develop a \$_{US}475,000,000 project consisting of approximately 2,000,000 square feet (186,000 m²) of retail, office, and cultural land uses as well as hotels (800 rooms) and approximately 600 residential units. The project follows New Urbanism principles and is combined with an unparalleled level of urban design for the City. The project broke ground on May 1, 1998. In addition, two other projects will share the 77 acres (31 hectares); a convention center and a large corporate headquarters.

7. CONCLUSIONS

1. The decline of West Palm Beach was, to a large extent, due to poor land use and transportation planning which caused its streets to be incrementally transformed to cater only to the mobility of motor vehicles.

2. Traffic calming has many benefits besides reducing speeding and collisions. It results in streets that feel safe; it attracts investment and new businesses; it improves social links; and it raises property values.
3. Traffic calming techniques can have a direct impact on crime patterns and can be used alone or in conjunction with other crime prevention programs such as CPTED.
4. Traffic calming projects can attract investment and redevelopment even before they are implemented. Done well, traffic calming results in aesthetically beautiful streets.
5. Community redevelopment areas are a useful tool to finance projects and redirect tax money into revitalizing an area.
6. Besides New Urbanism and traffic calming, West Palm Beach's successes have several other key factors, ranging from ownership programs to political commitment and leadership.

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