

Observations and Recommendations from Seniors' and People with Disabilities' Experiences of San Francisco Slow Streets

The Senior & Disability Pedestrian Safety Workgroup of the Vision Zero Coalition (SDWG) is a group of community-based organizations focused on people over 65 and people with disabilities, collaborating with City agencies to improve traffic safety for some of the people most unsafe on our city's streets.

Over the past year, new COVID-specific temporary street changes like Slow Streets have been a topic of much discussion within senior and disability communities. After the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) shared plans in January 2021 to evaluate the Slow Streets program and outlined the process in making Slow Streets permanent, the Senior & Disability Workgroup spent the last six months surveying and analyzing findings to better understand how seniors and people with disability currently experience Slow Streets - and how these car-light spaces could be improved for older adults and people with disabilities.

This work was led by Senior & Disability Pedestrian Safety Workgroup member organizations, including Senior & Disability Action, the Arc of San Francisco, Independent Living Resource Center, and Walk San Francisco, with support from the Department of Public Health, SFMTA Accessible Services, and technical support and consultation from the Mayor's Office on Disability.

Summary of Outreach

The Workgroup engaged in outreach targeted to seniors and people with disabilities through both virtual and in-person options. We started with a survey, available in English, Chinese, and Spanish, that through about 15 questions, asked participants about their experiences with Slow Streets: their awareness of them as well as how they experienced getting to, from, and through them. We heard from 121 respondents and responses were wide-ranging, but included a few themes, described below.

In virtual listening sessions - one session in English, one session in Chinese, and one session specifically for Deaf and hard of hearing community members - 46 participants joined us to hear about what was learned in the survey, dive deeper into issues raised, and share feedback in breakout groups.

As COVID-19 conditions changed and in-person outreach became possible, we hosted four 'walk audits,' where 31 participants walked Slow Streets corridors and shared feedback on the experience. Walk audits were conducted in the Mission (Shotwell Slow Street), Excelsior (Excelsior Slow Street), Richmond (23rd Avenue Slow Street), and Haight-Ashbury (Page Slow Street), and were hosted by Senior & Disability Action, the Arc, Self-Help for the Elderly, and

Walk San Francisco, with support by the Department of Public Health, and attendance from SFMTA Slow Streets staff at select audits. Walk audits were conducted in English and, on 23rd Avenue, with Chinese interpretation.

Overall experience of Slow Streets

Many aspects of Slow Streets are appreciated. Participants who had visited Slow Streets - or who joined us on walk audits - expressed appreciation for Slow Streets because of what it did for safety and community. People feel safer on the street because of less traffic. They enjoy the outdoor space that draws more people of all ages without being crowded. Others noted that the slower and quieter streets allowed them to enjoy sights and sounds of the street. Additionally, people noted that Slow Streets don't affect Muni routes, parking supply, or access to any individual streets which add to their value to the community.

But Slow Streets were not popular with all. Participants noted they limit driving routes and are confusing to drivers who arrive at Slow Street and don't know the best alternate route. Others noted that they can't use Slow Streets, they prefer to walk on busier streets for personal safety, their neighborhood has no Slow Streets, or they don't address their traffic safety issues. Deaf and hard of hearing participants, in particular, noted that because the streets still have drivers and bicyclists mixing, they are not safe for them. 11% of survey respondents shared that fewer or no Slow Streets would be better when asked about accessibility. And 19% of respondents shared that nothing was better about Slow Streets in response to a question on what they liked most about the Slow Street they visited.

Observations and Recommendations

Traffic is calmed, but traffic dangers remain. Survey respondents reflected what we observed on walk audits: vehicle traffic is lessened on these streets, but driver behavior is mixed. In fact, in response to the questions on what could make Slow Streets more comfortable or accessible, the second and third most common responses were more ways of slowing driving and restricting traffic further, respectively. We observed and heard from participants that mid-block speeding as well as drivers continuing to drive on Slow Streets for multiple blocks is frequent. Additionally, while many intersections on these largely residential streets are four-way stops, two-way stops (e.g. 16th and Shotwell) leave walkers with the tough choice of risking an uncontrolled crossing or walking further and out of the way to use a controlled crossing.

Recommendations:

- Slow Streets should be candidates for additional speed management devices like raised crosswalks or mid-block treatments like speed tables or mid-block chicanes.
- Add additional safety improvements where Slow Streets intersect in major streets at two-way stops.

Participants had a mixed level of familiarity with Slow Streets. While most survey respondents had visited a Slow Street previously, many listening session and walk audit participants had not visited a Slow Street over the past year. Others who had visited one Slow Street weren't aware of others in their neighborhood or the larger network of Slow Streets. Given the higher risk that seniors and people with disabilities have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, some participants shared that walking outside has not been possible or safe until very recently.

Recommendations:

- Do more outreach specifically with senior and disability-focused housing centers, organizations, neighborhood groups, and media to share updated information on Slow Streets routes and rules.
- Continue to share information on Slow Streets rules with businesses and organizations with many drivers to make clear that pickups, drop-offs, and deliveries are allowed, but through-traffic is not.

Current signage is inadequate to define space and explain use. Existing signage - both the original "Road Closed to Through Traffic" signage and the newer flexible posts with purple multilingual Slow Streets signage - varied in placement and depended on the SFMTA's maintenance capacity as well as neighborhood help. On walk audits, the Page Slow Street diverters had unique, neighbor-made signage at most intersections, but the Excelsior Slow Street was missing signage for the first three western blocks. Regardless of its presence, signage didn't make clear to participants the rules of the road by mode or that this street was an improved walking route. As a result, participants did not always learn the full benefits of a Slow Streets, and saw drivers not following rules.

Recommendations:

- Continue to experiment with signage and traffic diverters tailored to both drivers (that make rules and alternate routes clear) and to pedestrians (that share rules and route information).
- Involve neighbors in the final design for signage and street treatments so that community identity and values are reflected.
- Consider wayfinding opportunities that display the length of the Slow Street route and nearby destinations.
- Consider other visual treatments, like painted sidewalks or street stencils, that visually distinguish Slow Streets from nearby streets, especially at intersections.
- Prioritize maintenance of signage along Slow Streets where there is less community-based signage and maintenance.
- Share alternate routes for those driving.

Sharing street space is more precarious. While some participants shared that they enjoy using the space for riding bikes, walk audit participants largely preferred walking on the sidewalk rather than in the street, echoing what we heard in the survey and listening sessions. For

example, on our 23rd Avenue Walk Audit, only one participant was interested in walking in the street, and quickly went back to walking on the sidewalk; on Excelsior, no one preferred walking in the street. In our session with Deaf and hard of hearing participants, no one shared they would feel safe walking in the street. Physical, visual and hearing impairments make it challenging to perceive and quickly move out of the way from a vehicle, bike or scooter approaching. Additionally, those that used the street space for walking noted that street etiquette is appreciated for people biking and scooting to share the space better by, for example, lowering speeds and calling out when passing.

Recommendations:

- Consider additional educational efforts for people bicycling and scooting to improve awareness that people of many abilities and disabilities are sharing this space and to improve etiquette.
- Ensure maintenance of street surfaces, as street crowning prevents a unique tipping hazard to people using wheelchairs
- Improve streets for those still walking on the sidewalks:
 - Improve maintenance of cracked sidewalks along Slow Street routes to minimize tripping and slipping hazards.
 - Prioritize Slow Street routes for curb ramp additions where they are missing (e.g. key crossings on Shotwell).

Additional amenities, like seating, could make Slow Streets more accessible. Providing spaces to rest allows participants another way to enjoy the Slow Street and, when provided regularly along a Slow Street, can make walking a Slow Street possible for those who otherwise would not be able to enjoy the space. In fact, 20% of survey respondents requested additional seating options along Slow Streets. Shade was the second most commonly cited need, among other improvements to the public realm.

Recommendations:

- Add seating along Slow Streets routes to improve accessibility.
- Identify opportunities for additional street trees and for the expansion of the Adaptive Bike Share program to popular Slow Streets.
- Consider the need for additional public trash cans along Slow Streets.
- Consider the need for improved lighting to keep streets welcoming at all hours.
- Support and allow neighbor- and community-based street art and murals along routes.

People had varying preferences for the level of activity. One of the most common survey responses on what people have enjoyed about Slow Streets was being able to see other people - from others jogging and walking to kids playing to occasionally community events - along the Slow Streets, made possible by people sharing both the street and sidewalk. Some noted that they appreciated that sidewalks were less busy than nearby main streets (e.g. Haight Street for the Page Slow Street), but others preferred walking on streets with more activity for personal safety. With less drivers, transit, and businesses along Slow Streets - given their largely

residential nature - some commented that they felt less safe should they experience harassment or violence while walking, especially given recent high-profile attacks on Asian seniors.

Recommendations:

- Support use of Slow Streets for community gatherings, events, and other formal or informal programming and uses and bring more people to Slow Streets.

Slow Streets are not evenly distributed across San Francisco and don't address some senior-specific safety concerns. Walking to Slow Streets was the most common way participants visited Slow Streets. The current network leaves out many who live in neighborhoods with no Slow Streets, like the Tenderloin, most of SoMa, Bayview Hunters Point, and Visitacion Valley - yet all these neighborhoods have large older adult populations that could benefit from Slow Streets. And these are also neighborhoods that experience the most traffic violence and are home to a higher percentage of people of color and low-income residents than the city average. These communities need and deserve streets that are safe for residents of all ages to walk safely.

Additionally, while Slow Streets address some traffic safety concerns, a common concern shared was that of personal safety to seniors walking alone. Some mentioned preferring to walk only in a group or the possibility of community ambassadors helping with both the perception of safety but also sharing information on how Slow Streets work to visitors.

Recommendations:

- Share a plan for addressing the neighborhood traffic-calming needs in communities that currently do not have Slow Streets.
- Evaluate and potentially expand neighborhood-specific street improvements like the Tenderloin Neighborhood Safety Assessment Plan for COVID-19 and related improvements like Jones Street Physical Distancing Lanes.
- Support resources for outreach and implementation of safety improvements along key neighborhood walking corridors in neighborhoods without Slow Streets (e.g. Bayview and Visitacion Valley).
- Consider collaboration with senior escort programs for Slow Streets routes.

Conclusion

The Workgroup was able to surface a number of themes and learnings ahead of the planned July 2021 SFMTA Board meeting on the future of Slow Streets, despite limitations due to COVID. We learned that Slow Streets provide benefits to many, but there are many ways that Slow Streets being considered for permanence could be improved to bring greater benefits to more San Francisco residents. Yet, even with suggested improvements, Slow Streets won't serve all seniors and people with disabilities, and other programs and improvements are needed to make pedestrian travel safe for them.

Given the limited nature of this outreach, the Workgroup encourages the SFMTA to engage seniors and people with disabilities further. Spanish-speaking residents specifically were underrepresented in our in-person outreach and should be heard on this topic, as should more seniors and people with disabilities of varying experiences with Slow Streets: from those who live near Slow Streets and use them regularly to those who aren't currently aware of Slow Streets to those who don't see any value in Slow Streets. The Workgroup remains willing to engage on this important topic.