

SPEED LIMIT CONSIDERATIONS ON NE KNOTT STREET

Studies have shown that there is a 5% risk of fatality when a vehicle travelling at 20mph collides with a pedestrian. The fatality rate increases to 40% when the vehicle is travelling at 30mph. At 40mph the fatality rate approaches 95%.

With the recent death of a 4 year old child struck by a vehicle while crossing SE 136th Avenue on March 1, 2013, renewed attention have been given to traffic calming measures to make our community and our streets safer.

NE Knott street between NE 15th Ave and NE 33rd avenue is a residential street with homes, driveways, trees, sidewalks, children and families, and heavy bicycle traffic. The Oregon statutory speed limit for residential areas is 25mph (ORS 8111.111). There is no compelling reason for the speed limit on this stretch of Knott Street to be set at 30mph, but there are ample reasons to reset the speed limit to 25mph to reflect its residential character.

1. Increasing the speed limit on NE Knott street from 25mph to 30mph adds no appreciable commuting value. The average amount of time saved in a daily commute by increasing the speed limit on the stretch of this road from 25mph to 30mph is 15-20 seconds. And yet, as the statistics show, the danger posed to residents of the street, bicyclists, students walking home from school, families with children is increased dramatically with the higher speed limit.
2. The ODOT has established a process whereby engineering studies are undertaken as part of the process of restating speed limits. The reason for these studies is ostensibly to set the speed limit at the speed at which drivers are driving. The conceptual basis behind this is based upon research showing drivers on higher speed highways will, within certain limitations, drive at the highest speed they feel appropriate. These studies have been done on higher speed highways, however, and it is obvious that this laissez faire approach breaks down with lower speed roadways in residential and business areas. This is why the ODOT publishes statutory speed limits, this is why there are many and all variety of traffic calming devices all over the city, and this is why highway speed zones are often heavily patrolled to remind drivers that the speed limits are decreased.

Such engineering studies have confirmed that vehicles are travelling at higher speeds on NE Knott Street. There are no stop signs or other traffic calming devices on the entire stretch of NE Knott between NE 24th Ave and NE 33rd Ave. Speeds over 50mph have been documented on this stretch of street. I witness daily high speed driving on NE Knott street, I have had one near death experience, and I documented one truly astonishing display of extremely high speed in a highly modified vehicle.

The problems with simply allowing cars to drive at whatever speed they feel appropriate on NE Knott street are many. To begin with, since the speed is already posted prominently at 30mph, we have a classic "chicken and egg" situation, in which there is no incentive for drivers to

proceed slower than 30mph. Any engineering results will be distorted, if not rendered useless by this signage.

Most drivers recognize a 25mph speed limit as indicative of a residential area, and posting a higher speed limit encourages drivers to ignore the residential character of the area. It encourages a culture of lawlessness as I can attest from my own observations. This is in contradistinction to the character of the street, which is decidedly not a high speed highway.

Additionally the ODOT makes it very clear that pedestrian and bicycle movements, multiple access points and public testimony must be taken into consideration when setting speed limits on any stretch of roadway. The character of the street as a major east-west bicycle route is clear to anyone living along the road. Every day throngs of students can be seen crossing and walking along the street to and from Grant High. Families live on the street and walk along it, as well as joggers, children, children on bicycles, pedestrians with pets. There are innumerable driveway cuts along the entire length of the street.

3. There is ample precedent for the establishment of speed limits in the city to reflect safety concerns rather than the impartial data of speed studies. Oregon law recognizes the city government as the road authority of all highways, streets, roads, alleys within its boundaries (ORS 810.010). The city recently decreased the speed limit on NE Belmont Street from 30mph to 25mph, despite traffic engineering studies showing vehicles travelled at or near 30mph. This was due to a citizen complaint regarding unsafe conditions on that street with the higher, 30pmh speed limit.

The speed limit on NE Knott east of 33rd Ave was decreased to 25 mph for the same reasons.

The Oregonian recently reported the city is considering taking jurisdiction of a portion of 82nd avenue from the state in order to be able to set the speed limit at a level it deems appropriate for safety concerns.

Speed studies demonstrate multiple areas in the city in which average speeds exceed 25mph and yet, in the interests of safety, the city has not posted speed limit signs to reflect those higher average speeds. These include locally NE wisteria, NE Alameda, NE 47th, and NE Williams (average speeds on this road are flagrantly higher than the posted limit).

4. Traffic calming measures are in place all over the city to nudge down average speeds and increase safety. This directly contradicts the idea that automobiles must be free to travel at whatever speed they feel appropriate.

Klickitat street between NE 7th Ave and NE 33rd ave was converted to a Neighborhood Green Way. The stop signs were removed and, due to fears that vehicles would travel at higher speeds on that long stretch of street, speed humps were installed. As Eileen Dent indicated to me

“speed humps mitigate the effects of stop signs—stop signs were there for safety at every other intersection”. Obviously, in this situation, the natural driving tendencies of vehicles—to speed up on a long straight stretch of road—were deemed secondary to safety considerations of a residential area. These natural driving tendencies were then quashed with speed bumps. As someone who bicycles daily to work I can also confirm that very few bicycles use that stretch of Klickitat despite the “Greenway” designation. Almost all bicycles travel east-west along NE Knott street.

Recently Speed Humps were installed on Wisteria to slow traffic and to otherwise thwart the natural tendencies of drivers to travel faster on that stretch of road (this was done after concerns were expressed by the neighborhood association, and were instituted despite a citywide discontinuation of the speed hump program which was already in place at that time).

Traffic calming devices are present on NE 15th street, NE 21st street, NE 24th street—all higher volume streets, but all streets in which it was felt safety considerations trumped any other concerns.

5. Despite declarations by traffic engineers that speed limit signs do not work, there is ample evidence that speed limits are used to increase safety and when properly applied, they do work. The Oregonian recently reported that the Oregon Legislature approved photo radar to patrol highway work zones—and speeding fell 23%. There are often compelling reasons—almost always related to safety--to limit drivers to speeds at which they may not otherwise naturally drive.
6. At multiple points in the Grant Park/Irvington area, actual barriers stopping all traffic have been installed at the request of neighborhood groups. Such drastic actions, always undertaken to increase safety (barriers are the ultimate “traffic calming” device), completely contravene any speed study considerations, any considerations regarding convenience for commuters and any vehicle pollution and fuel efficiency considerations. Again, more evidence that safety considerations can reign primary in road design and road use.

04/06/2013