



TRAFFIC COMMISSION

City Hall—Council Chambers, 590 40th Ave NE

Tuesday, February 15, 2022

6:00 PM

UNAPPROVED MINUTES

CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL

The meeting was called to order by Chairperson Schluender at 6:00 p.m.

Members present: Commissioners Ciesynski, Davis, Finkelson, Schluender

Members absent: Commissioner Nekora

Staff present: Kathy Young, Assistant City Engineer
Captain Markham, Police

Council Liaison: Amáda Márquez Simula (via Zoom)

GUEST SPEAKER

Ethan Fawley, Vision Zero Program Coordinator, City of Minneapolis

Mr. Fawley gave a presentation regarding Vision Zero followed by a question and answer period.

Finkelson asked if reducing the speed limit without any other changes has an impact. Mr. Fawley advised that research from multiple larger cities similar to Minneapolis has found a benefit from just reducing the speed limit, especially for higher speeds. In our driving culture most people feel comfortable going 10 mph over the speed limit, so if you drop the speed limit down to 20 or 25 mph on streets where appropriate, the threshold is reduced significantly.

Minneapolis will be studying their speed limit change starting this year. Other cities have shown there can be an immediate value. Minneapolis wants to set their speed limit at a target speed and then plans to support this over time with other investments that help reinforce that speed limit. They've also set their speed limits at a reasonable level, keeping pretty much in line with the average speed they were seeing out on the streets, while emphasizing safety in the decision-making process. This is a little different method than the traditional approach to setting speed limits. They plan to see more value long-term as they reinforce this with traffic safety improvements and potentially speed safety cameras. Lowering the speed limit alone is not going to get them to Vision Zero but it's an essential step in the process.

Schluender stated one issue the Traffic Commission runs into is the need to rely on the MUTCD for highway speed design. Asked if there are resources that Minneapolis uses that he could recommend for us to use as a smaller city. Columbia Heights does not have the means to create guidelines on our own but needs something authoritative to utilize in decision-making. Following the MUTCD does not seem to address some of the issues we have as a smaller city. Mr. Fawley advised Minneapolis has a Street Design Guide which we can take a look at and see if it's helpful. They used the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO) guidance and added a lot of details for winter conditions. He recommends NACTO and advised they are constantly updating it. Overall the MUTCD is the manual for signs and pavement markings and things like that. It does restrict them on some things but they have a lot of flexibility within it to do what they think is best at the local level. He does not know of any specific

guidelines for local communities but feels there are items in their design guide that would apply directly to Columbia Heights. There are also elements in the NACTO guide that may apply.

Davis asked Mr. Fawley to expound on poverty areas having more fatal crashes. Research has found the largest disparity for traffic deaths in low income communities is based on differences in street designs and volume of traffic. He feels some of this applies in Minneapolis. The wealthiest portion of the city has had one traffic death in the last two years and very few fatal crashes, whereas there has been a surge of traffic deaths in north Minneapolis with the same population. Last year they had 10 traffic deaths. The reality is that lower income neighborhoods are more likely to have busier streets. Also, if there are people out walking then there are more likely to be pedestrian crashes. Therefore we cannot have the speed limits set too high and need systems in place that are safe and supporting so pedestrians can cross the street and interact with turning vehicles, etc.

Davis asked about the Johnson Street reconstruction project that was recently completed and the upcoming 37th Avenue joint project with Columbia Heights. He understands the intent to make Johnson Street more pedestrian friendly. However, this is also a local artery so basically serves a dual purpose. When he was driving on Johnson St the other day, due to the narrowing road and snow bank, a truck from the other direction went over the yellow line leaving him nowhere to go. He would like to balance this out on the 37th Avenue project. 37th Avenue is mostly residential but it's also a main artery to the west and a truck route to 35W. Mr. Fawley advised Minneapolis wants to recognize and support truck needs but they also look at the pedestrian needs. They realize there will be ice and snow buildup in the winter but if there's only one truck a day they cannot build the streets for that one truck. They try to balance this out as much as possible. It's tricky with our winter climate. They want to try to make more space for pedestrians but are not narrowing the streets as much as cities that do not have snow. They have had success with narrower streets. There may be a few times where there is friction with this but their biggest challenge is actually in summertime not the winter. In the summer the roads are wide open and having a little bit of friction is helpful for safety overall.

Davis also questioned the parking that was removed on Johnson St. Mr. Fawley advised they will be doing further evaluation on Johnson St. They are trying to right-sized the amount of parking. There's still parking, they just reduced it to the amount that was being utilized and devoted the remaining space to other issues to meet city goals. In their corridors about 30% of their crashes involve parked cars. Minneapolis tried to get in more greening and a bicycle connection on Johnson St. They ended up with a shared use path for biking on one side of the street. Some people would have preferred a different bike situation, but their approach going forward is they're not doing painted bike lanes in street reconstruction projects. They've had challenges with this encouraging speeding and not creating an environment where people want to bike and feel safe in. They are balancing for greenery and trees, which are helpful for safety too, especially long term when the canopy builds up.

Ciesynski asked if pedestrians were included in the fatal crash percentages in Minneapolis. Fawley advised that 16% of injuries and deaths are people biking, 29% are people walking, and 55% of fatal crashes are people in cars. This does not include freeway crashes. Columbia Heights has a similar percentage and not that different of a mix.

Davis asked how bike lanes on the roads can encourage speeding. Mr. Fawley advised it depends on the set up of the street. Minneapolis adds a lot of painted bike lanes as part of paint projects and these do add value. However, for street reconstruction projects, when it comes to choosing between a shared use

path on one side of the street to accommodate biking versus a bike lane in the street, they are choosing to construct some type of protected bikeway. As an example, 42nd Avenue N. was reconstructed a couple years ago with a painted bike lane and it feels wide open and they receive a lot of complaints about speeding.

Ciesynski asked about red light cameras. Cities hire an outside contractor to monitor the cameras and issue the citations and then the city receives a share. This is revenue based. Minneapolis is not going this route; their motivation is improving traffic safety. The goal is to change drivers' behavior, not issue citations. It's very important to structure the system so there's no profit motivator and have the goal be changing driver behavior. Fines and fees should be set closer to a parking ticket rather than a typical speeding ticket. This has been shown to be effective in changing behavior. There are many factors involved for a successful traffic safety camera program. One is not having tickets go on the driver record but instead to provide options like taking a driver safety class in lieu of one fine. Legislation needs to change to authorize the use of traffic safety cameras. The current legislation does not allow cities to issue a ticket to the owner of a vehicle for speeding or a red light running violation. There are also privacy considerations. There is currently a bill about to be introduced regarding highway work zone safety and another that will give local communities the option for a pilot program focused on speed safety cameras at high crash locations nearer to schools. This takes legislative change and it's complicated. Traffic safety cameras are for red light and speeding violators. Minneapolis will focus on speed safety cameras for their pilot program because that's where they are seeing challenges statewide.

Captain Markham asked if the City of Minneapolis will be asking to give citations based on ordinance violation. Mr. Fawley advised they will continue to process citations through the traditional criminal system, just like parking tickets, but these would not go on the driving record, they would be owner or lessee liability. Currently there are provisions that allow some administrative processing of tickets. Minneapolis would be open to that long-term, but for a pilot program it requires creating a whole new system. They want to work with an existing system for the pilot program. Their bill will require a local agency to sign off and send the ticket. It cannot be sent by a third party vendor.

Finkelson asked about public requests for traffic calming and their system for prioritizing. Is there criterion available somewhere? Minneapolis released a draft for public comments in November which ended in January. They will be making some adjustments based on feedback. They will be finalizing that this spring and starting the process of having it in place. He can share the draft version or put a link in the chat box. Need to try to balance how much you are responding to community feedback versus data while not putting too much of a strain on staff resources. It's a rather tricky balance but it gives people a firm understanding of how and why decisions are being made.

Mr. Fawley advised he can answer any follow up questions later if needed and to feel free to reach out.

APPROVE MINUTES

1. Motioned by Davis, seconded by Ciesynski, to approve the minutes of January 18, 2022 as presented. Motion passed unanimously.

OLD BUSINESS

None

NEW BUSINESS

None

REPORTS

City Engineer

APPOINTMENT OF NEW CHAIRPERSON

Schluender advised he will be stepping down as chairperson. Traffic Commission members serve a three year term from April 1st to March 31st. To coincide with this term, chairs are appointed at the meeting in April (or later, if April meeting is cancelled). A new chairperson will be elected at the April meeting, or later if the meeting is cancelled.

Police Chief

None

Commissioners

Finkelson submitted a data request to MnDOT for all crashes from 2011 - 2021. He received the information on February 4th and emailed it to commission members. The data included a one-half mile buffer zone around Columbia Heights. He would like to put together some maps at the next meeting and break this information down.

Finkelson asked Captain Markham if he has any updates on the MnDOT meeting. Mayor Simula advised it will be in April. It's currently scheduled as a work session but the agenda is not finalized. Staff was talking about holding a separate meeting with MnDOT along with the Traffic Commission, but that has now been moved to the work session. Young will notify everyone when she has more information.

Finkelson would like to discuss the Vision Zero presentation, data requests, and community feedback at the next meeting. Captain Markham advised MnDOT has a similar program called Safe Systems and thinks they will be discussing this at their presentation. Finkelson stated that since most major roads in Columbia Heights belong to the state and county, if we have a plan and goals in mind along with consensus in the city, we could influence the state and the county.

Commissioners feel they should meet in March to discuss other options besides stop signs to slow traffic in preparation for the meeting in April. Mayor Simula advised that the council is discussing the request for stop signs at 46th Ave and 4th St by Mr. Ali. She agrees with Finkelson, all residents ask about stop signs. Are there ways to give them another solution versus a stop sign. One option is the small gardens in the middle of an intersection to slow traffic. Perhaps there are other creative solutions to slow traffic on not so busy streets. This is something the Traffic Commission needs to look at to perhaps provide more alternatives other than stop signs.

Schluender advised more funds are becoming available but you need to have a plan in place. This would benefit us. Finkelson stated the 2040 comp plan mentions that the city engineer will perform a biannual traffic assessment. Asked if this is being done and if it is, can he access that information. Young will check.

ADJOURNMENT

Motioned by Schluender, seconded by Ciesynski to adjourn the meeting at 7:25 p.m. Motion passed unanimously.