

My View: Paseo de Peralta — complete the street

By Tim Rogers | Posted: Saturday, October 1, 2016 7:00 pm

The City Council's rejection of a proposed study to reduce traffic lanes on Paseo de Peralta reveals a bias toward higher-speed travel for motor vehicles that has compromised the safety and comfort of urban streets around the nation since at least the 1950s ("Council kills study on cutting road lanes," Sept. 1). Detractors of the proposal only envision a "traffic nightmare," but ignore the facts that multiple travel lanes and higher speeds on our urban streets are not critical to reducing traffic congestion, and they come at a huge social cost.

Roads built for speed are largely responsible for the fact that we as a nation quietly tolerate nearly 40,000 deaths on our roadways each year. They also serve to intimidate and endanger law-abiding motorists, bicyclists and pedestrians.

The four-lane section of Paseo de Peralta between Guadalupe and East Alameda streets can hardly be described as a "complete street" — serving the needs of users of various travel modes, ages and abilities. It would be more accurate to call it a "mean street," where motorists routinely travel near double the speed limit and make repeated lane changes just to try to beat other travelers to the next traffic light.

This one-mile stretch connects the Railyard to the Roundhouse, Canyon Road and the Santa Fe River area, with shopping centers, offices, galleries and neighborhoods all along the way. At each end, it transitions to two-lane sections serving similarly dense parts of downtown Santa Fe. How can detractors of the proposal claim, in the same breath, that this short stretch of four-lane roadway is a "major connecting artery" for local and visiting motorists, but a "road to nowhere" for bicyclists and pedestrians?

Recent reconstruction by the state of a similar stretch of Paseo de Peralta between Grant Avenue and Washington Avenue was disappointing in that the generous number and widths of lanes available to motorists were fully retained, while benefits for nonmotorized users were limited to those required by law under the Americans with Disabilities Act. That stretch of road, once part of a horse-racing track, continues to encourage aggressive motorists to jockey for position, at the expense of other road users.

A few blocks away, the mayor's highly successful initiative to limit motor vehicle traffic around the Plaza, which drew similar fear-mongering from apprehensive motorists and shopkeepers, shows that the city of Santa Fe can do much better than this. So does city engineers' own laudable — but largely unnoticed — work to "complete" parts of Cordova Road and Siler Road by reducing four-lane "race-tracks" to a far more user-friendly cross section of two travel lanes with a center turn lane, along with new striped shoulders that serve as bike lanes and establish critical buffer areas between sidewalks and motor vehicle traffic. Pedestrians and cyclists now travel along and across these streets with an unprecedented level of safety and comfort.

National studies find that these lane reductions, known as "road diets," reduce conflicts and improve safety for all road users — including motorists, who can no longer treat these stretches of road like a raceway, but

can still make it to that next traffic signal anyway.

The stakes are indeed high for a Paseo de Peralta “road diet.” Everyone seems to want “walkability,” at least downtown, but when our engineers pursue proven ways to make it happen, they are second-guessed and attacked by fear-mongers, and left at the mercy of waning political will among our elected officials. Local and national efforts show that “taming” urban arterials is precisely how “walkability” and “bike-ability” is achieved. Let’s step aside and let our engineers pursue real solutions to our society’s real traffic problems.

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