



How to Respond When Citizens Claim Traffic from Your Development will Kill Their Kids

By Mike Spack, PE

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What are all of these kids doing at a public hearing? It is already 9:30 p.m. It has to be past their bed time. "Dad" parades all of the kids up in front of the City Council during the public comment period. He asks the Mayor which one of the kids the Council would like to have killed by traffic coming out of the proposed residential sub-division. This really happened and different variations on this theme routinely happen as neighbors try to stop development.

Most of us have attended public hearings for projects with citizen opposition. It is part of our job. As a consultant traffic engineer, I speak at many public hearings to help developers address traffic related opposition. While much of the resistance to new development and re-development projects boil down to resistance to change, local residents claiming that traffic will get worse with the new development is a common objection.

In this instance, parading the kids in front of the Council was over the top and the opposition lost all credibility, making it easier for the developer to get approval for the development from the Council. But, some opposition groups are savvier than others. Raising the traffic issue can be done by opposition groups in a much more effective, less belligerent way than parading out the kids. An emotionally charged and potentially more effective subset of this tactic is simply claiming that children are going to be killed or injured by the increased traffic. Developers need to always be prepared for this type of opposition.

The job of the developer and their consultants is to get project approval. This is best done by dealing with each objection using of facts. Many times we have to educate the Planning Commission or City Council. Most governing bodies make rational decisions when they are presented with all of the facts.

While there is a lot of grandstanding that happens when residents try to stop a development project, we can all respect a parent's instinct to protect their children. The best way to counter the traffic related objections is to:

1. have a logical, safe plan for the development
2. have the facts about pedestrian crashes

The Institute of Transportation Engineers has published many guides to help develop more effective roadway networks within developments along with connections to the exterior roadway system, including: *Neighborhood Street Design Guidelines*, *Transportation and Land Development*, and *Context Sensitive Solutions in Designing Major Urban Thoroughfares for Walkable Communities*. Your site designer should be familiar with these documents to help you develop a sound site plan. It is also helpful to involve a traffic engineer early in the process as you are laying out a site. There are occasionally elements put into site plans that unintentionally violate engineering standards and pose safety issues. It is better to catch these early in the design process so the developer won't lose credibility with the governing agencies.

After you have a safe roadway system planned for your development, having the correct statistics for pedestrian/vehicle crashes is the next step in diffusing the objections of the passionate neighbors.

Fatal crashes on Minnesota's roadways are a significant problem and should not be treated lightly. They are so serious that the Minnesota Department of Transportation, Minnesota Department of Public Safety, Minnesota State Patrol, Federal Highway Administration, and the Center for Transportation Studies at the University of Minnesota have banded together in a *Towards Zero Death* campaign. These organizations are cooperating to reduce the deaths on Minnesota roads through education, enforcement, and engineering measures. You have probably seen commercials and media articles related to this campaign.

The good news is that road deaths around the nation are declining. The number of deaths on the nation's roadways has dropped from 50,894 deaths in 1966 to 42,636 in 2004. This doesn't look like a big change, but it is if we look at the statistics in terms of how many miles Americans are driving. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the current fatality rate is 1.46 deaths per million vehicle miles traveled in the United States. In 1966 there were 5.5 deaths per million vehicle miles traveled. The almost 4 fold decrease in the fatality rate is due to things such as improved roadway design, traffic control standardization, crumple zones in vehicles, seat belts, air bags, faster emergency response, drunk driving enforcement, and a host of other measures. These initiatives by the car manufacturers, transportation engineers, and enforcement agencies have had a large composite effect. This is great news, but this data still won't calm down the parent who thinks their child is going to be killed by traffic from the next subdivision. We need to turn to fatal crash statistics within neighborhoods.

Within neighborhoods, pedestrian crashes are rare and don't follow a cause/effect pattern that can easily be identified or corrected. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration published a technical report in 2003 titled *Pedestrian Roadway Fatalities*. The report found that of the 18,118 pedestrians

killed by vehicles in the United States between 1998 and 2001, 2,580 (14%) of them occurred within urban neighborhoods. The rest of the fatalities occurred on higher function roadways outside of residential neighborhoods.

More encouraging is the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's *Traffic Safety Facts* (2003) report that found:

"In 1993, there were 768 pedestrian fatalities in the 0-14 year age group. From 1993 to 2003, the number of pedestrian fatalities in this age group decreased by 49 percent, with the 4-7 year age group showing the largest decrease."

Even though we are driving more and we are building more subdivisions, we are doing it in a safer manner.

According to Mn/DOT's crash data, there were approximately 275,000 vehicle crashes in Minnesota from 2002 to 2004. Of those 275,000 crashes, 3,772 (or 1.3%) involved pedestrians. Of those 3,772 crashes involving pedestrians, 843 occurred on local urban streets resulting in: 2 fatalities, 813 injuries and 28 incidences of property damage with no apparent pedestrian injury. The remaining 2,929 pedestrian related crashes occurred on higher order streets. This data reinforces the small number of vehicle/pedestrian crashes that occur in neighborhoods.

While development design which incorporates the latest traffic design standards at the outset can go a long way in diffusing safety concerns, it is often difficult to respond to emotionally charged accusations made at Public Hearings. It is important for everyone to understand that pedestrian fatalities within neighborhoods are very rare. I hope this information gives you a framework to better respond to concerned citizens and elected officials.