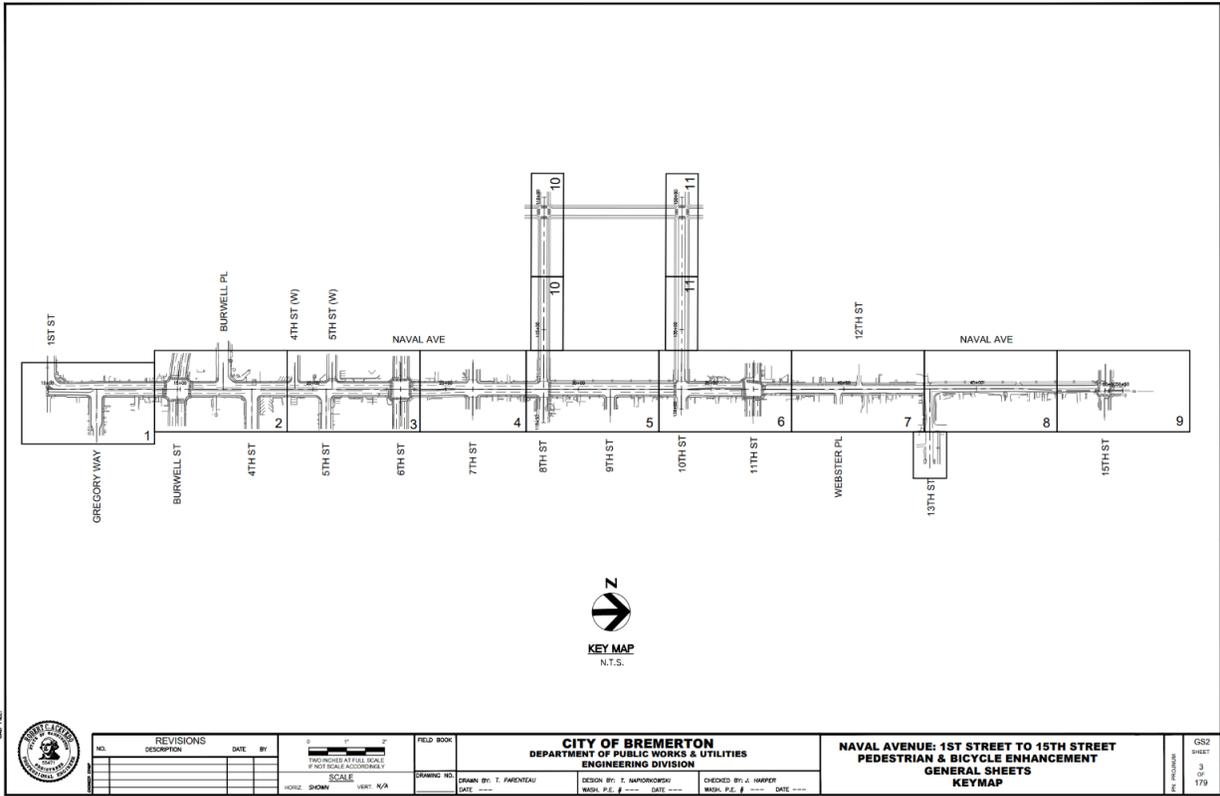


Prioritize Child Safety on Naval Avenue

Kitsap Sun Op-Ed

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Seven years ago, Bremerton’s Public Works championed a great idea: apply for grants to widen sidewalks and create bike lanes to protect kids walking and biking to and from Naval Avenue Elementary school. The project would wrap around Naval Avenue Elementary and improve pedestrian and bicycle safety along Naval Avenue from the shipyard’s gate to 15th Street. Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) awarded two grants.



The project seemed to have children in mind, but many would benefit from improved crosswalks and ADA ramps at intersections. People in wheelchairs and scooters would be liberated to access an important spine of the city. Parents pushing strollers would have a great new route that didn’t involve jostling pavement or curb-jumps. Shipyard workers would have a new bike-ped expressway into the shipyard. Drivers wouldn’t have to deal with bikes in the road. But most importantly, the project would give children more space on the sidewalk and put a buffer between children and cars.

It would calm traffic in a residential neighborhood as well. Naval gate used to be the shipyard's main gate, but now that the Charleston gate serves that function, Naval Avenue's four car lanes are overkill for less than 10,000 average daily trips. I used to cross this street taking my daughter in her stroller to Naval Elementary's park regularly. Naval Avenue is a wide open, empty stretch of road that invites speeding and reckless driving right next to a school.



It seemed like a win-win. Here's a wide road underutilized by cars, but a major route kids take to school. Just take that unused car space and give it to the children, right?

Public comment was taken when the project was 30% designed, 60% designed, and now 90% designed. On January 15, Public Works asked city council for the final piece of the puzzle for its latest design: approval to use eminent domain to purchase private property for public Right-of-Way (ROW) to widen the road.

If that last bit caught you by surprise, you aren't the only one. There was a massive public outcry. Why is a road DIET using eminent domain to expand the ROW? Isn't slimming things down and making better use of existing ROW the whole point?

Public Works wants to expand Naval because there isn't room for bike lanes AND a center turn lane - but at under 10,000 ADT, a center turn lane is unnecessary. What's more, the proposed bike lanes to/from Naval Ave Elementary were just paint - no solid barriers to protect kids from cars.

It amounts to compromising on the core premise of the project in order to solve a problem that doesn't really exist.

For confident cyclists, it's an improvement - but would your second grader bike to school if it meant being inches from a car lane? Given that many new pickup trucks now have large FRONT blind spots, I know I wouldn't be comfortable with that. At least two drunk drivers have run off the road causing major gas leaks in Bremerton recently. It seems there are regular deaths and injuries from street racing and DUIs in Bremerton. We should design Naval like children and drunk drivers are BOTH going to be using it, because they are.

Kids should be the point of this design. If the bike lane isn't protected with some sort of solid barrier, it isn't safe and kids aren't going to use it. And if kids aren't going to use it, why even bother?

During public comment, citizens eviscerated the plan for an hour for failing to prioritize children, pedestrians, cyclists, and residents. Council heard from Naval Avenue residents who didn't want their front yards taken for public ROW. Children attested to how scary it is to walk and bike along Naval. Cyclists told of injuries and deaths due to poor bike lane designs. Some parents DRIVE their children two blocks to school just to avoid Naval. Concerns were raised about climate change. Neighborhood advocates gave specific examples of safety concerns being ignored. Multiple residents called out a lack of transparency and the perception that public input has been ignored. Over 75 pages of written public input was submitted, most of it critical of the latest design for failing to prioritize children, pedestrians, and cyclists.

Thankfully, Bremerton's City Council unanimously voted to send the design back to Public Works for revision - but Public Works continues to push back.

To give full credit to their argument, Public Works gave two main rebuttals.

- 1) If grant money isn't used, it's lost. Redesigns are expensive, and we don't know if the grant money will be there to redesign and build in the future. There's validity to this of course, but it isn't entirely compelling. There will probably be future grants. Councilmember Rebelowski cited a conversation with PSRC flatly contradicting this claim - PSRC appreciates efficiency in the use of grant funds, and if grant funds are unobligated (returned to PSRC), it actually helps an applicant's case for future grant

money because it shows the applicant is being responsible with funds. If the mayor and PW would've listened earlier, they wouldn't be in this situation. Either way, it isn't worth sacrificing child safety.

- 2) Public Works' problem with two lanes is that the bulk of Naval Ave's auto use comes at rush hour. For most of the day, Naval Avenue is as vacant as Olympic, Roosevelt, or Hewitt, but for two hours a day, it actually feels like a minor arterial. At two lanes, there would be some queuing at rush hour, so the city's solution is essentially to inconvenience the entire neighborhood 24 hours a day in order to not inconvenience commuters two hours a day. If only we treated the rush hour of children on foot as seriously as we did the rush hour of adults in cars! Instead, we tell the children to be cautious and patient so the adults in big machines don't have to be.
- 3) There were also questions about changing standards of best practices. There are very real engineering challenges that go with redesigning a road, but the core of the conflict is about priorities, not engineering. Are we willing to slow down cars to keep kids safe?

In fairness, the 90% design is a huge improvement over what we have now. 8-foot sidewalks with a 5-foot bike lane buffer will protect kids walking to school, while the bike lane itself will be useful to confident cyclists - but it's a shame this major route to Naval Ave Elementary isn't designed with elementary kids in mind. There aren't many places in Bremerton for a child to BECOME a confident bike rider.

Honestly, I feel bad for Public Works. I genuinely think they're doing their work in good faith - they're asked to do a lot, and it's impossible to get all of it exactly right, but child safety HAS to be done right. They started with a good idea, they've listened to public input up to a point, and they've proceeded as directed by their superiors. They had no idea what a conversation about safe streets for Naval Ave would unleash, but as a parent, you simply don't take your kids' safety lightly. I think PW is bearing the brunt of pent-up anger at years of administrations not taking safety and livability seriously. It turns out Bremerton's citizenry is positively ravenous for someone to finally prioritize the people of Bremerton over its commuters, and Public Works' perceived indifference to residents and over-sensitivity to commuters has struck a nerve.

Many of the people who spoke to council were rallied in a Facebook group called StreetSmart Bremerton. It's a loose alliance of people who don't like being hit by cars trying to improve Bremerton's streets. Here are four key points SSB has broad consensus on regarding Naval Ave, and I think Public Works and the mayor would do well to listen to them.

- 1) Naval should have two auto lanes instead of three. Especially north of 6th Street, there's simply no reason for a third, turning lane. Left turns are not difficult on this street.
- 2) Turn lanes and turn pockets are unnecessary. They make the distance children have to cross longer. They create conflict zones where cyclists and drivers have to cross each

other's paths. They make it easier to take corners FASTER, and that has no place at crosswalks children frequent.

- 3) Bike lanes for kids need to be PROTECTED. Full stop. Kids are shakier cyclists than adults. Their situational awareness isn't great. There needs to be bollards, concrete, or something hard to stop cars from running children over, or to stop kids from falling or swerving into traffic.
- 4) Corner bulb-outs to reduce the distance children have to scamper to cross the street. Again: design with elementary school cognition in mind.

The proposed middle lane is 11 feet wide. If removed, four feet of that would be used for bike lane protection. What could the other seven feet be used for? Street trees? Landscaping? Wider sidewalks? That 11 feet could tremendously beautify the city and improve the quality of life for its citizens.

If we make Naval safe for kids, we make it fun for everyone. We make it a source of joy and connection for a whole lot of people. I realize rework is expensive, but on behalf of StreetSmart Bremerton and parents everywhere, please: put children first.

Kevin Walthall is a long-time Bremertonian who now lives in Poulsbo. He is a father, an active member of StreetSmart Bremerton, and founder of the Facebook group Strong Towns Kitsap.