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What Doesn't Work

From Roadblocks to Road Rage **Lessons on neighborhood cooperation** **from a neighborhood torn apart**

By Jocelyn Dong

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what doesn't work

Learning from Mistakes



COMMUNITY ACTION

From Roadblocks to Road Rage

Lessons on neighborhood cooperation from a neighborhood torn apart by *Jocelyn Dong*

Last November, a standing-room-only crowd packed a meeting hall in affluent Palo Alto, Calif., to alternately praise and condemn roadblocks erected by the city as a “traffic-calming” measure. A few months earlier, city officials had put up seven barriers to discourage cars from cutting through a residential neighborhood adjacent to Palo Alto’s popular downtown entertainment district.

As the hearing unfolded, a neighborhood resident stood up to extol the roadblocks. She finally felt the streets were

safe enough, she told the crowd, to let her child bike to school. Even though the barriers created what some motorists described as a frustrating “mazelike” grid of streets, the mother praised them for restoring a bucolic sense of community.

But as she spoke, a man sitting a few rows away jumped up. An opponent of the traffic barriers, he could listen no longer. “You’re selfish!” he yelled.

Amid the shocked silence that followed, a quick-witted neighbor piped up from the back of the room: “We’re all selfish.”

The outburst wasn’t the first the roadblocks had triggered. Since the previous June, residents who reveled in the new-found peace and quiet the blockades created had been arguing with those who found them inconvenient, confusing, and possibly dangerous.

The intensity of the bickering stunned even seasoned community leaders in the progressive, highly educated suburb. Home to Stanford University and an intellectual hub of Silicon Valley, Palo Alto is a mix of wealth and social conscience, a place where people live in two-bedroom, million-dollar homes and get out on the weekends to help clean up local wetlands.

The area where the roadblocks were installed, Downtown North, is filled with families, students, young professionals, and retired folk alike. Its 33 leafy blocks nestle between two major thoroughfares that channel thousands of commuters into and out of the city each day from a nearby freeway.

The barrier project was not controversial when it began in 1998. A small advisory committee of neighbors, city staffers, and consultants convened to study Downtown North’s traffic problems. Vehicles were counted, residents surveyed, and possible traffic controls suggested.

In 2000, the committee proposed that roadblocks – generally considered the most extreme traffic measure available – be put in. Typical of the Palo Alto aesthetic, the barriers were designed to look like white picket fences atop asphalt

berms. More moderate means, such as signs, speed bumps, and traffic circles, were rejected as ineffective against short-cut-loving drivers.

The city then asked Downtown North residents to vote by postcard on the barrier idea. Sixteen percent of them favored the proposal, while 10 percent either supported or opposed another plan. An ominously large 74 percent did not respond.

In 2001, the City Council approved the roadblocks, though it wasn’t until two years later that they were actually installed on a six-month trial basis. But then all hell broke loose in Downtown North.

Traffic was indeed reduced on some streets, but on others it increased as drivers found new routes. Surprised and

upset, residents barraged local newspapers with letters to the editor. A group opposing the roadblocks sprang up. In December 2003, the city scrapped a follow-up survey of residents when two sparring neighborhood groups couldn’t agree on exactly who should be included.

Blame has been cast all around in this saga, but at the heart of the imbroglio was a simple mistake – the failure to forecast, accept, and proactively manage differing opinions. Interviews with participants and other community leaders have yielded four key strategies that could help a neighborhood – or any grassroots organization – arrive at a more peaceable outcome.

Get participation from all stakeholders. Two factors limited participation in the planning for the Downtown North

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Picket fence-style traffic barriers touched off a neighborhood war in otherwise tranquil Palo Alto, Calif.

project. First, the neighbors serving on the advisory committee had a bias toward strong measures for eliminating traffic. Neighbors who held differing opinions were not involved, in part because they themselves didn't see the need to participate.

Committee member Michael Griffin, a sales manager for a construction equipment firm, recalled raising the issue of wider participation, but said other members felt that seeking out opponents early on would be counterproductive. "Why stir up the masses earlier than necessary?" was the prevailing attitude, he said.

Second, despite a neighborhood association's diligent efforts to solicit input during the planning phase (including delivering fliers door-to-door), only a handful of Downtown North's 2,000 residents showed up at meetings.

"It just seemed that the neighborhood group wasn't able to get the type of participation that was representative of opinion that was in the neighborhood," said Maryanne Welton, a Palo Alto community leader and project manager for an architectural firm. "The key to getting public input is to try every method you can."

Sending announcements home with school kids, putting up posters throughout the area, holding meetings at different times of the week, and providing childcare all could have boosted residents' involvement, Welton said.

Plan to compromise. A willingness to compromise is critical when an issue affects a large number of people, even if it takes longer to achieve agreement. In Downtown North, the seeds of polarization were sown when the advisory commit-

tee chose to install road barriers – an inherently controversial decision.

"Leaping ahead to the most draconian form of traffic diversion was a mistake, in retrospect," said Karen White, a leader of a nearby neighborhood that's had its own traffic issues. "Introducing traffic measures incrementally would have gained more support."

Moreover, public meetings, although democratic, aren't the best way to achieve consensus, said Welton, a longtime Palo Alto activist.

Consensus, she said, can be achieved through the use of "breakout" groups of six to 10 stakeholders with differing views. Each group brainstorms a specific subtopic related to the overall issue. For example, a subcommittee might examine the question of what can be done to make it safe for kids to cross a certain street to the local park. With the help of a neutral facilitator, people air their ideas – and more importantly, their underlying reasons and assumptions. At the end of the session, each breakout group reports on its discussion.

At public meetings, on the other hand, people feel compelled to debate rather than listen.

"People are either jeering or cheering," said Welton. "You get this mob mentality and rude behavior. That doesn't show up when you're talking at the table. People are more honest in their dialogue. It's not a chance to grandstand."

Implement a decided-upon plan quickly. Losing momentum can ruin a project. It took two years for Palo Alto's government to find funding for the road barriers. During that time, residents familiar with the plan moved out, while new residents unaware of the project moved in. The churn only added to the eventual sense of disenfranchisement.

"That engendered the feeling [among residents that] they'd been sandbagged," Griffin said. "That was our worst fear when we started off on this thing – people would wake up, see the things, and feel they were not properly involved."

Also, because of the delay, residents who'd spent years planning the project grew all the more anxious to see the problem resolved, and more apt to view opponents as Johnny-come-latelies. When protests materialized at the first neighborhood meeting held after the roadblocks' installation, some of the more established residents questioned why dissenters hadn't spoken up earlier or contributed to the planning.

Indeed, even traffic patterns in Downtown North – the heart of the issue – had changed between 2001 and 2003, with the dot-com bust cutting the number of commuters. The reduced inflow of cars led opponents to question the

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need for any traffic-calming measures. They called for the project to be started all over again.

Honor the plan. Nothing fosters distrust more than promising one thing and doing another – and that happened twice with Downtown North. First, the roadblocks were put up with the promise that problems would be remedied as the six-month trial progressed. The expected flexibility was enough to mollify some critics while assuring proponents that they had accommodated their less-enthused neighbors.

As it turned out, however, no barriers were removed or realigned during the trial period. Griffin believes the city “didn’t have the money to do the tweaking they thought they were going to do.” Not only that, but the polarized atmosphere made modifications politically difficult as well, he said.

The city’s cancellation of the follow-up survey, though, upset barrier opponents the most. Resident Jane Stern was surprised when the roadblocks suddenly materialized, but when she heard there’d be a vote on the matter in six months, she agreed to wait and see.

“That was enough for me,” said Stern. “We’ll try it and see how it goes.” When the poll was canceled, however, she felt angry that her voice would go unheard.

The Downtown North traffic project involved a number of thorny issues – from philosophies on traffic control to prioritizing how tax dollars are spent. Even so, the fundamental conflict turned out to be an interpersonal one. In this case, “what doesn’t work” had little to do with skirting the rules, and everything to do with a series of decisions and circumstances that resulted in community members feeling – and being – left out of the loop.

In the end, it fell to the City Council to find a way of ending the fiasco. Last March, in a decision that amazed both sides in the controversy, councilmembers voted to take down all but one of the barriers – and install more moderate speed bumps and traffic circles that some residents said should have been the solution in the first place.

In large part, the council seemed to recognize promises had been made and broken and that the process, in the words of one councilwoman, was a failure.

The story is not over, however. City Hall’s new plan is a one-year test. Next spring, the city’s transportation staff will have to determine if the latest traffic-calming experiment worked – and if not, how to fix it. □