

An (unplanned) downtown traffic prototype

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

By **Corey DiRutigliano**

Right now, there's an experiment happening in downtown Fairbanks.

Two weeks ago, an errant driver took out the signal control box at Cushman Street and First Avenue, disabling the power and consequently its illuminated signal lights. The city of Fairbanks, in the absence of immediate replacement equipment, has placed temporary stop signs at each corner of the intersection. I've been watching this experiment play out just below my Cushman Street office window for the past week and have some observations to share. For context, this is the first time that Cushman Street has had stop signs in years, and since the Complete Streets renovation in 2015, the stoplights at Gaffney Road and 10th, Fifth, Fourth, Third, Second and First avenues, have been coordinated and timed to improve the "flow" of traffic through downtown and north toward Illinois Street. For the two-lane, one-way northbound traffic on Cushman, the lights turn from green to yellow and red in a cascading manner from Fifth, north to First.

While this may help flush vehicles out of the downtown core faster, it also acts like a particle accelerator for drivers looking to make it onto the Cushman Street bridge before they get stopped at the northernmost, and final, red light. This also means that vehicles making this dash reach velocities more than the 25 mph speed limit as they cross the intersection at First Avenue. This is particularly dangerous for pedestrians (pedestrians are, for the car-centric audience, "Drivers On Foot") because as you approach First, the Key Bank Building and Springhill Suites create a narrow line-of-sight problem and gives little reaction time for all users; worth noting is that this intersection also had a severe pedestrian accident just this past summer. The fact that we don't have more injuries in our community should be seen as a blessing rather than an entitlement, as our country experiences an epidemic of pedestrian fatalities; contributing factors to this include excessive vehicle speeds (the Daily Podcast, tinyurl.com/5n-7nryyv).

Today, while the traffic signals are dark, these temporary stop signs have had some interesting effects on behavior. First, each direction of travel must come to a complete stop before proceeding through the intersection. Second, this brings everyone down to a speed where they can make eye contact before crossing through the intersection; this ultimately makes you more aware of your surroundings. These low speeds also ensure short stopping distances, which reduces the risk of accidents. However, if there is an accident, the reduced amounts of force transferred in a collision reduce damage and improve the likelihoods of survival. These slow rates of travel are conducive to more enjoyable public spaces, pedestrian life, and higher levels of safety for all road users. Statistics show pedestrians hit by drivers at 40 mph are 65% likely to be killed, and the percentages only climb as speed increases.

This past summer I used my Wiffle Ball leagues' speed gun at the intersection and clocked numerous northbound vehicles on Cushman at 45 mph or more.

Being a neighbor to this experiment, I can attest that I have heard a complete drop off in vehicles speeding past my window and a notable slowing of traffic along the Cushman Street corridor. There has been a drop in honking and aggressive driving and it seems that when we see one another as people, instead of large faceless blocks of metal and plastic, it's easier to give some grace. What I've observed is akin to an awkward middle school dance, with some false starts due to the new nature of the signaling and the double oneway lanes on Cushman.

Across the board, all users, including drivers, now proceed through the intersection slowly and cautiously and as one community member I spoke to put it, "It's pretty simple once you get the rhythm of 'you go, I go.'" I think this experiment actively shows us the world doesn't implode when we slow vehicles down, in fact I've heard of numerous people (both pedestrians and drivers) saying they like the change and are waiting less at the light, compared to when it's an illuminated sign. This slowing has tangible impacts on the safety of all users and helps make everyone feel seen when navigating our small downtown grid. It also quietly says that we care enough about all users, regardless of wheels, feet or mobility aid, that we care enough about their well-being to slow down a bit. Who knows, perhaps this accidental prototype could have wider reaching benefits and be applied intentionally to other areas. Ultimately, I'm a proponent of a slow, safe, enjoyable downtown which supports the health, safety and welfare of all community members. I feel this is one example of a happy accident and a chance to learn from the mistakes of the past, but if you don't take my word for it, come see for yourself before the city "fixes" it.

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He focuses on community improvement projects and can regularly be found photographing obscure pieces of architecture and infrastructure in Fairbanks, Alaska.



A power outage knocked out the traffic signals at the Cushman Street and First Avenue intersection in downtown Fairbanks. The stop lights have been replaced with stop signs for the time being.

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