Making Strides Toward A More Walkable North Park

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March 2006

Enhancing Walkability in North Park

Introduction

The City of San Diego neighborhood of North Park is one of the region's original "streetcar suburbs," established just after World War I. It was designed to be highly walkable, with short blocks, an easily navigated grid-street system, and wide sidewalks offset by a planting strip on both sides of the street. With the demise of streetcars in 1949, and catering to growing traffic, the neighborhood suffers today from dominance by automobile traffic. Over the last three years, Walk*SanDiego* has held three workshops in conjunction with the North Park Community Association to work towards improving the pedestrian environment. The City of San Diego Traffic Engineering Division is responsible for pedestrian safety throughout the city but does not have the resources to work with residents to determine the highest priority improvements. This report is intended to fill that gap for North Park.

The report documents the results of community outreach conducted by Walk*SanDiego* and the North Park Community Association at the three workshops, plus surveying of residents at the North Park Farmer's Market. The area for consideration is the North Park neighborhood except University Avenue, for which substantial pedestrian improvements are being planned by the city and North Park Main Street.

Who We Are

Walk*SanDiego* (www.walkSanDiego.org) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit membership organization dedicated to enhancing the livability of communities throughout the San Diego region by helping cities and neighborhoods make walking a safe and viable choice for people of all abilities. Walk*SanDiego* has approximately 150 members, a 10-member Board of Directors, and a 10-member Advisory Council of distinguished community leaders. Walk*SanDiego*'s work includes advocating policy change at the national, state, regional and city level, increasing funding for pedestrian improvements and traffic calming, and working with neighborhoods to identify the highest priority needs for pedestrian safety improvements.

Acknowledgments

The Making Strides project and this report were funded by contributions from San Diego National Bank, Union Bank of California, The Otay Ranch Company, and Quarry Falls by Sudberry Properties. Donations were also provided by some North Park businesses: Hip Hair, RC Awards, the Oki Doky Boutique, Ebey's North Park Vacuum, Coldwell Banker, and the Caspian Café. Logistical and other support for the workshops, and outreach at the North Park Farmers Market were coordinated by Susan Riggs Tinsky and Omar Passons. This report was prepared with the assistance of the San Diego County Air Pollution Control District. Walk*SanDiego* and the North Park Community Association (NPCA) gratefully acknowledge the support of these organizations and dedicated residents.

Walkability Workshops

The three workshops held by Walk*SanDiego* and the NPCA were:

a. **October 2002** – At NPCA's monthly meeting, Walk*SanDiego* provided a Walkable Communities presentation and then asked residents to name "hotspots" they would like to see improved.

b. **July 2004** – National pedestrian expert Dan Burden provided was the speaker at a community forum at Claire de Lune Coffeehouse. Dan explained how to diagnose street design problems and helped residents identify North Park's problem areas and potential solutions.

c. **July 2005** – Walk*SanDiego* and NPCA held a final workshop at the North Park Community Park in which residents again identified pressing needs for pedestrian improvements.

Walking in North Park

Positive Walkability Features of North Park

The workshops and surveys brought out ways in which North Park is a very walkable community:

1. The neighborhood is compact, densely settled, with many walking-distance destinations.
2. Blocks are short, arranged in a grid pattern, and easily navigated on foot or by bicycle.
3. Commercial and residential buildings have shallow or zero setback from the front property line. This provides interest for walkers, helps maintain "eyes on the street" for crime prevention, and slows traffic somewhat.
4. Historic bungalow architecture provides interest to walkers.
5. Many children in the neighborhood walk to school, alone or accompanied by parents.
6. The area is well-served by frequent bus service that reaches nearby neighborhoods, Balboa Park, and downtown San Diego within minutes.

Why and How Much North Parkers Walk

Based on surveys conducted at the North Park Farmers Market in 2003 and 2004, residents, merchants, and visitors to North Park indicated the following reasons for walking (most respondents indicated more than one purpose):

- 38 walk for exercise or relaxation
- 29 walk to shop
- 17 walk to visit friends
- 10 walk a dog
- 7 walk to the bus stop
- 4 walk a child to school or to the school bus
- 3 walk to commute to work or school
- 2 walk to the library
- 2 walk to a park

Respondents indicated they walk the following number of hours per week:

- 8 walk less than 1 hour
- 13 walk 1-3 hours
- 13 walk 3-6 hours
- 11 walk more than 6 hours

These survey results support the observation that North Park is a good place to walk, and many people take advantage of its walkability. For that reason, pedestrian improvements in this neighborhood will serve a large number of people, making walking trips for a variety of reasons.

A young resident and his companions navigate a residential street.

Findings and Recommendations

Following is a combined summary of community members' issues and solutions, as well as Walk*SanDiego*'s recommendations for improvements.

"Do Everywhere" Improvements

Walking improvements should be incorporated gradually wherever possible including the following:

1. Crosswalks – In addition to providing a safer space for pedestrians to cross streets, crosswalks remind drivers to watch for pedestrians when entering an intersection and encourage calmer driving speeds. Zebra or ladder-style striping provides greater visibility than the standard, two parallel lines.
2. Bulb-outs – Curb extensions at the corners of blocks decrease crossing distance and improve visibility of pedestrians.
3. Lane width reductions – Narrower lanes calm traffic, especially when combined with street trees, diagonal parking, and/or curb extensions.

Zebra or ladder-style striping would make this crosswalk more visible to motorists and help keep vehicles from encroaching over the line.

4. Corner curb ramps – Two curb ramps per corner should be installed, each leading directly into the crosswalk.
5. Diagonal parking – This arrangement provides two improvements to walkability: reducing street widths and introducing greater "side friction" to increase driver caution, while also providing additional parking.
6. Reduced perceived pavement width – Install shoulder stripes or possibly bike lanes where there is excessive street width.
7. Street lighting – Improved lighting reduces nighttime pedestrian collisions and may induce more walking at night and use of transit.
8. Lead pedestrian indicator – LPI's provide a 3-second head start for crossing pedestrians while traffic remains stopped. LPI's are particularly helpful near bus stops.
9. Art in infrastructure – Public art should be included in infrastructure and redevelopment projects. A good example is the art panels on the new North Park Parking Garage. The unique character and surroundings of North Park Way makes it a very promising street for unique art treatments.

Top Priority Areas

Workshop attendees indicated a number of areas where pedestrian safety improvements are needed. The ten that rose to the top are indicated below. It should be kept in mind that University Avenue was the top priority corridor but was not included since the University Avenue Mobility Project, already underway by the city and North Park Main Street, is pursuing a comprehensive redesign which will address this important street. Many of the priority streets are of strikingly similar character: commercial, mixed use, three lanes with center turn lane, and vehicle volumes are between 12,000 and 14,000 vehicles per day. Most are traditional commercial streets with many pedestrians but few safe crossing opportunities. The business climate in these corridors could be significantly enhanced by making them more pedestrian-friendly.

1 North Park Way between Utah Street and 32nd Street

Characteristics: Local, neighborhood, and regional traffic, although light in volume. Two lanes with no turning lanes or turning pockets. Frequent pedestrians walking along and crossing the street, but very limited pedestrian crossing facilities. Land uses are commercial, civic, cultural, and residential.

Approximate Average Daily Traffic:

2,000 – Utah Street to 30th Street
7,000 – 30th Street to 32nd Street

Issues: North Park Way parallels University Avenue but is underutilized as a collector. However, the narrow profile, frequent stops, and drainage dips keep traffic speeds down. The pedestrian could benefit still further with better crosswalks.

Solutions: With visible crosswalks at the intersections and perhaps public art in a few locations, North Park Way could be a very pleasant, interesting street for pedestrians, reflecting the proximity of arts businesses, the North Park Theatre, and the existing and future North Park Library. The crosswalks themselves could be conceived as works of art to compliment the monthly Ray at Night art celebration that centers in part on North Park Way and Ray Street.

North Park Way at Ray Street is a focal point for North Park's growing art scene.

2 30th Street between Upas Street and University Avenue

Characteristics: Regional and local traffic, rarely congested. Three lanes, including a two-way center turn-lane. Sidewalks of five feet or wider, with a landscaped buffer between the sidewalk and street. Frequent pedestrians walking along and crossing the street, but very limited crossing facilities. Multiple bus stops.

Approximate Average Daily Traffic: 12,000

Recommendations

Issues: The entirety of 30th Street through North Park is a pedestrian-oriented commercial corridor that developed as a 1920's streetcar line. Adjacent uses in this particular segment includes is dominated by single-story businesses but also includes churches, a school, several apartment and office buildings, and a limited number of single-family residences. Businesses can be readily accessed by residents from east and west, making this a potentially significant walking destination for nearby residents. This corridor is used to access freeways and regional arterials.

Several factors reduce the perceived "friendliness" to pedestrians:

- Vehicles exceeding the speed limit
- Lack of safe crossing opportunities
- Absence of stop controls for most of this stretch of 30th Street
- Utility lines and poles
- Little or no landscaping
- Poorly maintained sidewalks and curbs
- Aging storefronts

Solutions: 30th Street has the potential to return to being an important walkable commercial street, but it will succeed only with attractive land uses, a welcoming sidewalk environment, and frequent, safe crossings. The median turn lane provides an opportunity to installed strategically-place raised median islands. Islands, rather than a continuous median, can limit costs while providing safer crossing opportunities. These islands should be used in combination with or complementing corner curb extensions (or "bulb-outs"). Highly visible painted crosswalks should also be added in numerous locations to allow safer crossing, particularly if used in combination with refuge islands.

Some of the storefronts along 30th Street have been rebuilt completely or revitalized, and more improvements are planned. Where significant renovations are permitted by the Development Services Department, owners should be required to repair the adjacent sidewalk and ensure compliance with disability requirements such as curb ramps and driveway cross-slopes. This includes condominium conversions.

3 30th Street between University Avenue and El Cajon Boulevard

Characteristics: Similar to Priority Area 1. This is the commercial center of the community, with significant redevelopment ongoing. Substantially higher pedestrian volumes occur here, with still higher levels expected as development continues.

Approximate Average Daily Traffic: 13,000

Issues: Similar to Priority Area 1. Mid-block crossing is observed frequently.

Solutions: Similar to Priority Area 1. Raised medians and properly designed mid-block crosswalks could be very effective at reducing the danger to mid-block crossers.

North Park's revitalized commerical center attracts increasing numbers of pedestrians.

4 30th Street between El Cajon Boulevard and Adams Avenue

Characteristics: Similar to Priority Area 1. With the completion of the Renaissance residential and retail development, many additional vehicle and pedestrian trips are expected to be generated in this area.

Approximate Average Daily Traffic: 9,000

Issues: Similar to Priority Area 1.

Solutions: Similar to Priority Area 1.

5 Texas Street from Upas Street to El Cajon Boulevard

Characteristics: Two lane collector with no turn lanes. Regional and local traffic. Primarily residential in character. Pedestrians walking along and crossing the street, but very limited pedestrian crossing facilities.

Approximate Average Daily Traffic:

4,000 — Upas Street to University Avenue
9,000-12,000 — University Avenue to El Cajon Boulevard

Issues: Texas Street is a local street which due to its location also serves as an important neighborhood and regional collector.

Solutions: As with most sidewalks in North Park, sidewalks on Texas Street are buffered by a planting strip and on-street parking. However, more marked crosswalks are warranted, perhaps enhanced by corner bulb-outs. This treatment is especially needed at Upas Street, where Texas Street leads into Balboa Park's Morley Field sports complex.

6 Upas Street between Texas Street and 30th Street

Characteristics: Neighborhood and regional collector through a primarily residential area on the north side, and, west of Pershing, Balboa Park on the south side.

Approximate Average Daily Traffic:

8,000 — Alabama Street to Pershing Street
12,000 — Pershing Street to Utah Street
8,000 — Utah Street to 30th Street (West)
14,000 — 30th Street (West) to 30th Street (East)

Issues: Despite serving as the local community's neighborhood park, Morley Field has no pedestrian facilities linking this key resource to surrounding residential streets. Upas Street is increasingly utilized by commuters to Downtown San Diego.

Solutions: Sidewalks on the Balboa Park side of the street are needed, perhaps of a porous aggregate rather than impervious concrete. Also needed are visible marked crosswalks at high-volume pedestrian locations. These include Texas Street, Jacaranda, Pershing Drive (crossing to a tot lot), 28th Street, Utah Street, and 30th Street. Corner bulb-outs should be considered at each of these locations. Between 28th and 30th Streets, the existing middle turn lane provides an opportunity to install median islands to improve crossing safety in key locations.

Recommendations

7 Pershing Drive at Redwood Street

Characteristics: Pershing Drive is a high-speed arterial connecting Downtown to North Park and Morley Field, but with light volume for a 4-lane road (south of Redwood). Redwood Street is a neighborhood collector, and also a residential street. It serves both regional and local traffic. Frequent pedestrians walking or running along and crossing the street, but very limited pedestrian facilities. Occasional bicyclists, using the inadequate bike lanes.

Approximate Average Daily Traffic:

14,000 — Pershing Drive from Redwood Street to Florida Street
7,000 — Redwood Street from Pershing Drive to 30th Street

Issues: Across Pershing Drive from Redwood Street is a popular frisbee golf course with limited parking. Customers frequently park on the opposite side of Pershing and dodge traffic crossing to the frisbee course. This is a dangerous condition, mixing high-speed traffic with pedestrians. The profile of the road invites speeding. Bike lanes are provided on both sides, but speeding traffic makes these lanes feel unsafe. Overgrown vegetation and debris in the bike lane also sometimes forces bicyclists into the travel lane.

Solutions: Plans are already prepared for installing a roundabout in this intersection. However, the roadway itself needs to be narrowed in one of several possible ways to reduce traffic speeds. Potential solutions are narrowing the travel lanes, reducing the number of lanes to one in each direction, installing a median, or altering the curb alignment to narrow the roadbed itself. The bike lanes should be painted wider to allow a greater buffer with traffic.

A roundabout is a raised circular island in a major intersection with deflector islands to slow approaching vehicles and provide crossing area.

8 30th Street between Switzer Canyon and Upas Street

Characteristics: Regional and local traffic. Frequent pedestrians walking or running along and crossing the street, but very limited crossing opportunities. Occasional bicyclists, but no bike lanes.

Approximate Average Daily Traffic:

11,000 — Juniper Street to Redwood Street
10,000 — Redwood Street to Upas

Issues: Pedestrians frequently use 30th Street to travel between North Park and South Park. Yet, there are no safe crossing areas for a significant distance. Speeds are usually higher than the posted 25 mph.

Solutions: Bulb-outs could be used to define the parking lane and help reduce speeds without reducing the road's capacity. This would increase the visibility of pedestrians trying to cross, and improve sightlines for motorists from side streets by removing parked cars close to corners. Potential sites for crosswalks should also be investigated.

9 Adams Avenue between 30th Street and Arizona Street

Characteristics: Similar to Priority Area 1.

Approximate Average Daily Traffic: 12,000

Issues: Similar to Priority Area 1.

Solutions: Similar to Priority Area 1.

10 Park Boulevard at El Cajon Boulevard/Washington Street

Characteristics: High-volume, high-speed traffic, and frequent pedestrians.

Approximate Average Daily Traffic:

23,000 — El Cajon Boulevard between Park Boulevard and Florida Street
16,000 — Park Boulevard between El Cajon Boulevard and Meade Avenue

Issues: This intersection is very wide, dominated by inter-neighborhood vehicle traffic, and unwelcoming to pedestrians. It poses a significant barrier to pedestrians. Both the west south legs are blocked to pedestrians, with no warning as they approach from these sides.

Solutions: A comprehensive redesign of the intersection is warranted. Redevelopment on any of the surrounding corners could provide funding for a dramatic solution, possibly including undergrounding of east-west traffic. Undergrounding concepts have been developed by students at San Diego's New School of Architecture. In the short-term, the city should consider ways to reopen the closed legs and utilize more visible crosswalk designs.

Appendix A

Community Comments

Other Issues Identified by the Public

- Better bike facilities could helpreduce the number of people riding bikes on sidewalks
- Pedestrian-oriented signage is needed in commercial areas
- Awnings would provide more shade
- Wayfinding signs to parking lots would help reduce traffic searching for parking
- More landscaping is needed in the right-of-way
- There should be signs indicating where traffic calming treatments have been installed
- Sidewalk maintenance badly needed in most areas
- Development Services Department should impose permit conditions to require sidewalk maintenance, ADA corrections, and off-site improvements which have a nexus to the permitted project

Specific Areas Needing Attention

- 30th and Lincoln – lots of pedestrians, need bulb-outs or median to increase safety and reduce speeding
- 30th at Upas in front of Jack in the Box – Roundabout?
- Adams Avenue needs crosswalks and possibly a raised median
- El Cajon/Washington at Park Boulevard – reduce crossing distance and vulnerability of pedestrians
- El Cajon Boulevard – crossing opportunities at more intersections
- Jacaranda through Morley Field (yield at Jacaranda) – striping/control is confusing
- Landis and Utah Streets, Jefferson Elementary – behind barrier is gravel. Make nicer; perhaps installing a pocket park
- Lincoln Street – as development occurs, require sidewalk improvements plus bulb-outs.
- North Park Way between 32nd and Pershing – sidewalk maintenance, crosswalks
- North Park Way (light at Boundary, North Park Way off-ramp) – relieve backup by striping for two lanes on the freeway off-ramp
- Park Boulevard at Robinson Avene
- Pershing and Redwood – pedestrians and bikes crossing
- Pershing at University
- Between University and El Cajon – residential streets need bulb-outs
- Texas Street – nonsignalized intersections, imbedded crosswalk lights
- Texas at University
- Texas Street – walkway from Meade to Mission Valley
- Texas Street everywhere needs safer crossing
- Texas Street, University to Adams - fast traffic, make safer for crossing
- University at Boundary – confusing for turns, lanes, nothing for pedestrians
- Upas at Pershing – crossing to tot lot
- Upas at Pershing – need clearer stop controls (“all-way” stop signs?)
- Upas fronting Balboa Park, Alabama to Pershing – no sidewalks in park, no curb ramps
- Upas Street generally
- Upas at Grim – drainage an issue during rains