

Why Speed Kills Cities

U.S. cities are dropping urban speed limits in an effort to boost safety and lower crash rates. But the benefits of less-rapid urban mobility don't end there.

By [Andrew Small](#)

August 8, 2019, 7:31 AM EDT



Slow and steady wins the urban mobility race. *Madison Johnson/CityLab*

“Slow the hell down.” That’s the message New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio delivered on [Twitter](#) as he announced the revival of the city’s [speed camera program](#). The cameras went live in July with expanded hours, issuing hefty

tickets to any driver who creeps above 36 miles per hour—that’s 11 mph above the city’s 25 mph posted limit—in 750 school zones throughout the city’s five boroughs.

New York City, which has been struggling to get its Vision Zero safe-streets program back on track after a 2019 surge in cyclist deaths, has also been the most prominent American city to test the idea of a “neighborhood slow zone”—a relatively infrastructure-light path to safer streets that drops speed limits to 20 mph on interior roads in residential areas. It will soon be joined by Philadelphia, where the inaugural designation of two slow-speed corridors, modeled after the New York City program, was overwhelmed with more than two dozen applications.

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Elsewhere in the U.S., urban speed limits are tumbling. Portland, Oregon, just wrapped up a campaign installing more than 2,000 new signs to bring residential streets down to 20 mph, along with educational “20 is plenty” signs. After lowering its default speed about two years ago to 25 mph, Boston wants to go further down to 20 mph; Washington, D.C., could follow suit. Imposing tighter limits on leadfoots is a key part of the Vision Zero campaign for reducing traffic deaths and injuries, because of the dramatic safety benefits associated with reducing vehicle velocity.

Does this add up to evidence that fast-paced Americans are ready to embrace the virtues of city life in the slow lane? The case for a fundamentally slower city has gained traction recently, especially in places where the rise of micromobility, the promise of autonomous vehicles, and the very-much-already-here problem of road congestion have converged, slowing drivers to a furious crawl. (The average car in Midtown Manhattan goes 4.7 miles per hour.)

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Seeing cities scramble to accommodate shared electric scooters on conventional streets, Gabe Klein, the author of *Start Up City*, advocated for the idea of urban “slow lanes” in *Forbes*—non-

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separated but narrower travel lanes with a 15 mph speed limits that would prioritize non-cars. New York's Financial District Neighborhood Association suggested the idea of creating an entire Euro-style "slow streets district" in a big chunk of Lower Manhattan, full of wide sidewalks and Dutch-style *woonerfs*, or shared streets. Others have suggested a wholesale *woonerf*-ization of the whole Manhattan street grid.

That might sound suspiciously European for a nation that has spent the last half-century-plus plowing high-speed thoroughfares into and around its metro regions. Nationwide, highway speed limits have grown dramatically since OPEC-era federal speed controls—bowing to cheaper gas, pressure from driver lobbying groups, and Sammy Hagar—were fully lifted in 1995. And many big-ticket urban transportation projects are hyped on the promise of trimming travel time, often for a relatively elite class of users: Elon Musk's "Express Loop" project would hurtle riders under Chicago at 150 mph (and cost \$1 billion) to shave 30 minutes off a downtown-to-airport run, while "flying taxi" promoters can't stop touting the eye-popping travel times available to future riders of their nonexistent vehicles.

But when the most exciting urban transportation innovation of the decade is cheap little rented vehicle that struggles to hit 15 mph, perhaps it's time to admit that urban mobility solutions don't necessarily involve flying taxis or Teslas-in-tubes. The tortoise can win this race.



The most obvious immediate benefit to a fundamentally slower city is the safety boost it delivers. Reducing speeds is the best, easiest, and fastest way to quickly radically improve safety, for both drivers and anyone in front of them. A recent report from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety estimates that rising speed limits in the United States have led to an additional estimated 37,000 deaths over the past 25 years. "We know that very small changes in speed can have big consequences for pedestrians," says Jessica Cicchino, the vice president of research at IIHS. "A pedestrian struck at 25 miles per hour has 25 percent chance of being seriously injured—but that climbs to a 50 percent chance at 33 miles per hour." Importantly, lower speed limits also reduce the number of crashes, as an IIHS study found last year in Boston after it lowered its default speed in 2017.

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gone wrong—the city wasn't working.

Speed kills in a more abstract sense, too. Building urban roads that can handle a large number of vehicles traveling at 35 miles per hour and up means making them wider, with fewer curves. High-speed highways and street-level limited-access urban thoroughfares famously do a host of bad things to those who live nearby or underneath these big hostile barriers. What's less discussed is what they're doing to the people inside the cars. In his recent book *Building and Dwelling*, the planner and urban scholar Richard Sennett writes about how going faster in cities has lead urbanites to value "space" over "place."

"You move through a space and you dwell in a place," Sennett told CityLab's Ian Klaus last year. "It's a distinction for me that has to do with speed and automobiles. When people start driving at a certain speed, they lose awareness of where they are. ... Where this gets reflected in urbanism is the more we create spaces where people move fast, the less they understand about what those spaces are. At about 28 or 30 mph people, moving through an urban environment stop being in a place and are in space instead."

The time benefits one gets from boosting speeds in urban areas can end up being surprisingly modest: In downtown streets, the difference between a 25 mph commute and 45 mph commute is roughly an additional 48 seconds for every three-quarters of a mile traveled, according to Nelson\Nygaard. It's also worth remembering that even urban "rapid transit" often isn't really all that fast. (The New York City subway averages 17 miles per hour.)

When human- or animal-powered urban movement was the norm, there was much less anxiety about losing time in traffic jams, Sennett writes; in the twisted streets of old cities, congestion was accepted as just an fact of life. Only when cities like Paris transitioned from narrow lanes to wide Haussmann-style boulevards did urbanites began to associate speed with freedom of movement—witness reports of widespread road rage that sprouted up in Paris in the 1870s and early 1880s. Urban traffic jams today are a visceral sign that something has gone wrong—the city wasn't working. Like not being physically touched in public, the desire to move freely—and not be stuck in traffic—is a sensation we take for granted as natural. But it's a historical construction of our auto-centric sensibilities.

In his prescient 1973 essay, "The Social Ideology of the Motorcar," André Gorz makes a similar point about how private cars turned speed into a commodity that, when introduced into the city, created havoc: "When everyone claims the right to drive at the privileged speed of the bourgeoisie," he wrote, "everything comes to a halt, and the speed of city

traffic plummets.”

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Sennett also uses traffic flows to show the problem of scaling from the local to the urban—a theme in the debate to how to create an “open city.” He compares Lewis Mumford’s top-down garden city urbanism with Jane Jacobs’s bottom-up street-ballet localism. Both Mumford and Jacobs famously loathed the impact of the automobile, but Mumford argues that you can’t build infrastructure bit-by-bit, the way Jacobs sees the urban fabric: When you’re engineering how to circulate millions of vehicle trips, you have to plan at a bigger scale. By that logic, perhaps urbanists shouldn’t demand slow lanes or slow neighborhoods: They should ask for a slow city.



To get one, simply dropping speed limits isn’t the answer; street design itself—not enforcement or signage—is the most powerful governor of driver behavior. When Streetsblog compared studies looking at neighborhood slow zones in New York and London, the Big Apple didn’t see a significant drop in injuries, but London enjoyed benefits because they implemented serious traffic-calming infrastructure changes, such as raised crosswalks and street-narrowing curb extensions.

A lot of bike and pedestrian advocates will also argue that Americans are just doing speed limits wrong. Most state DOTs typically follow a rough measure known as the 85th percentile rule. Traffic engineers conduct studies measuring the average speed of drivers on a road, then they set speed limits so that 85 percent of those drivers would be traveling under the speed limit. That idea, as FiveThirtyEight detailed in 2015, effectively sets a *minimum* speed rather than a maximum. In 2017, the National Transportation Safety Board recommended that the Federal Highway Administration scrap the guideline in favor of other road factors like crash history or pedestrian counts.

“It’s speed and uncertainty that requires such wide roads for human-operated cars.”

Advances in technology might prove to be a key that unlocks the city-healing powers of pokiness. The micromobility revolution not only highlights a burgeoning need for more slow lanes: It can vividly illustrate the people-moving power of very modest speeds. When a dude on a electric scooter that rarely goes over 10 mph handily beats a BMW across town at rush hour, it's easier to see how the scale of cities supports more-but-slower vehicles.

Another argument for slowness: It could allow autonomous vehicles to actually work without killing us all. If we can reconceptualize autonomous vehicles as low-speed machines trundling around downtown rather than interstate-eating robots tasked with making complex split-second driving decisions at highway velocities, everything gets less difficult. In a way, the robo-shuttles in action in places like Las Vegas and Brooklyn, which operate at speeds under 25 mph, are low-key Trojan Horses for traffic calming. "A lot of the roads where we operate already are in congested places where traffic speeds are already slow," says Alisyn Malek, the chief operating officer and co-founder of May Mobility, which is operating shuttles in Detroit and Columbus. "If we can use the curiosity and excitement with autonomy to drive goals about pedestrian safety and bike lanes to make cities AV-ready when the time comes, that's great for everyone."

Billy Riggs, an assistant professor at the University of San Francisco School of Management and a planner who consults on the future of transportation, says autonomous vehicles, and lower speeds, could allow cities to devote less room to cars by redesigning street infrastructure. "It's speed and uncertainty that requires such wide roads for human-operated cars," says Riggs. AV-optimized streets would require fewer signals and intersections—and fewer conflict points between different travel modes. "If city traffic travels slow enough, you could imagine a yielding pocket for vehicles to engage with smoother and operating on much less roadway. A gracious road for pedestrians and cyclists is promising as a feature for autonomous vehicles."

In other words, it's like that old Navy Seal adage: Slow is smooth, smooth is fast. That's also the idea behind "green wave" signal timing, which is now getting a pilot in New York City. Traffic flowing at 15 mph allows for fewer red lights.

The most stubborn barrier to slowing down the city may be the psychological one: It involves changing user expectations for how roads are supposed to operate. Some states have what are called level of service standards, which require roads to carry a certain number of vehicles per hour, or they place restrictions on cities from lowering speed limits. Riggs says that means city leaders need to expend political capital to fight for those changes. "If you talk at any public meeting about slowing streets, you have citizens who are going to be asking if they going to be delayed. There's going to be friction as we apportion our street in a way that facilitates the future of traveling."

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That friction has been something Riggs has run into firsthand on the streets of Palo Alto, where Waymo's autonomous vehicles have been testing. "I was behind an autonomous car on my drive back from the hardware store, and I was so frustrated. Why? Because it was obeying the law. I wanted to go 40 mph, but it was a 30 mph street."

When he finally passed the AI-driven car, Riggs raised his hand to make a familiar gesture of human impatience. But it was a futile one.

"There was no one paying attention in that seat," he says. "There is a tendency to want to travel faster than we should, and in unsafe ways. Hopefully, we're going to be able to engineer out that risky behavior."

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* Existing Ordinance *

Town of Bethany Beach, DE
Thursday, July 8, 2021

Chapter 282. Peace and Good Order

Article X. Juvenile Curfew

§ 282-17. Policy.

Between May 1 to September 30, inclusive, of each year, it shall be unlawful for any person 17 years or less of age (under 18) to be or remain in or upon a public place within the Town of Bethany Beach during the period beginning at 1:00 a.m. and ending at 5:00 a.m.

§ 282-18. Exceptions.

The following shall constitute valid exceptions to the operation of this article:

- A. Accompanied by parent. When a juvenile is accompanied by a parent of such juvenile.
- B. Accompanied by authorized adult. When a juvenile is accompanied by an adult authorized by a parent of such juvenile to take said parent's place in accompanying said juvenile for a designated period of time and purpose within a specified area.
- C. Errand directed by parent. When the juvenile is on an errand as directed by his/her parent.
- D. Emergency. When a juvenile is involved in or assisting in an emergency, including, by way of example and not in limitation, responding as a member of a volunteer fire company to a fire company or paramedic call.
- E. First Amendment rights. When a juvenile is exercising First Amendment rights protected by the United States Constitution, such as the free exercise of religion, freedom of speech and the right of assembly.
- F. Reasonable necessity. In case of reasonable necessity for the juvenile remaining in a public place but only after the juvenile's parent has communicated to the Chief of Police or the person designated by the Chief of Police to receive such notifications the facts establishing the reasonable necessity relating to a specified public place at a designated time for a described purpose, including points of origin and destination. A copy of the communication, or of the police record thereof, duly certified by the Chief of Police to be correct, with an appropriate notation of the time it was received and of the names and addresses of the parent and juvenile shall be admissible evidence.

- G. On own or neighbor's property. When a juvenile is on the sidewalk or property where the juvenile resides or on either side of or across the street from the place where the juvenile resides and the adult owner or resident of that property has given permission for the juvenile to be there.
- H. Attending and returning home within one hour of official activity. When a juvenile is attending or is returning home by a direct route (without any unnecessary stop or detour) from and within one hour of any religious, recreational or other organized activity supervised by adults, sponsored by the Town, a recognized charitable, benevolent or civic association or a similar entity that takes responsibility for the minor.
- I. Employment necessity. When the juvenile is legally employed, going to or returning home from employment.
- J. Interstate or intrastate travel. When the juvenile is, with parental consent, in a motor vehicle, engaged in normal interstate or intrastate travel through the Town or originating or terminating in the Town.
- K. Married. When the juvenile is married or has been married pursuant to state law.

§ 282-19. Town responsibility limited; parental responsibilities.

- A. The foregoing exceptions to the operation of this article shall act only to create a waiver of enforcement and affirmative defense(s) to such enforcement. By authorizing such exceptions, neither the Town nor any member of the Police Department shall assume any affirmative obligation or duty to supervise the well-being of any juvenile acting pursuant to such authorized exception.
- B. It shall be unlawful for a parent having legal custody of a juvenile knowingly to permit or by inefficient control to allow the juvenile to remain in any Town public place under circumstances not constituting an exception to, or otherwise beyond the scope of, this article. The term "knowingly" includes knowledge that a parent should reasonably be expected to have concerning the whereabouts of a juvenile in that parent's legal custody. This requirement is intended to hold a neglectful or careless parent up to a reasonable community standard of parental responsibility through an objective test. It shall, therefore, be no defense that a parent was completely indifferent to the activities or conduct or whereabouts of such juvenile.
- C. It shall be unlawful for any parent to "knowingly" (as defined above) provide any false authorization, information or certification, written or verbal, to the Town Police Department in order to obtain an exception to the operation of this article under § 282-18 hereof.

§ 282-20. Enforcement procedures.

- A. If a police officer reasonably believes that a juvenile is in a public place in violation of this article, the officer shall require the juvenile to provide his or her name, address and telephone number and how to contact his or her parent or guardian. No juvenile shall be issued a citation or taken into custody for a violation of this article unless the police officer first affords that minor an

opportunity to explain his or her conduct. In determining the age of the juvenile and in the absence of convincing evidence such as a birth certificate or driver's license, a police officer shall use his or her best judgment in determining age.

- B. If the police officer reasonably concludes that the juvenile is in violation of this article, the officer may, depending upon the circumstances (e.g., age of the juvenile, hour of night, juvenile's means of transportation, juvenile's physical condition and whether parents could be reached) take the juvenile into custody pursuant to 10 Del. C. § 1004 or issue the juvenile a citation charging him or her with a violation of this article and order the juvenile to go promptly home. If the juvenile is issued a citation, the Chief of Police shall send the parent or guardian of the juvenile written notice of the violation as set out in Subsection E hereof.
- C. Notwithstanding Subsection B of this section, when a police officer has reasonable grounds to believe that the juvenile has engaged in delinquent conduct, the procedure shall then be to take the juvenile to the police station, where a parent or guardian shall immediately be notified to come for the juvenile, whereupon the parent or guardian and the juvenile shall be questioned. This is intended to permit ascertainment, under constitutional safeguards, of relevant facts and to centralize responsibility in the person designated there and then on duty for accurate, effective, fair, impartial and uniform enforcement and recording, thus making available experienced personnel and access to information and records.
- D. When a parent or guardian, immediately called, has come to take charge of the juvenile, and the appropriate information has been recorded, the juvenile shall be released to the custody of such parent. If the parent cannot be located or fails to take charge of the juvenile, then the juvenile shall be released to the juvenile authorities, except to the extent that in accordance with police regulations, approved in advance by juvenile authorities, the juvenile may temporarily be entrusted to an adult, neighbor or other person who will on behalf of a parent or guardian assume the responsibility of caring for the juvenile pending the availability or arrival of a parent or guardian.
- E. In the case of a first violation of this article by a juvenile, the Chief of Police shall cause notice to be given to the parent of such minor. Such notice shall be given by either personal delivery thereof to the parent or by deposit of such notice in the United States mail in an envelope with postage prepaid addressed to such parent at his or her address as shown by records of the Police Department, including information obtained from the Delaware State Motor Vehicle Division. The giving of notice by mail is complete upon the expiration of four days after such deposit of such notice. Proof of the giving of notice by personal delivery or by mail may be made by the certificate of any officer or employee of the Police Department or by affidavit of any person over the age of 18 years naming the person to whom such notice was given and specifying the time, place and manner of the giving of such notice. Such notice shall contain a warning that any subsequent violation of this article by the minor will result in full enforcement of this article, including enforcement of parental responsibility and of applicable penalties.

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First Reading: _____

Second Reading: _____

**AN ORDINANCE TO AMEND SECTION 282-17 OF THE BETHANY BEACH CODE TO
CHANGE THE JUVENILE CURFEW HOURS OF ENFORCEMENT TO 11:00PM AND END AT 5:00AM**

Whereas, the Town Council of the Town of Bethany Beach desires to modify its juvenile curfew hours of enforcement to begin at 11:00PM and end at 5:00AM.

Whereas, the Town Council believes that the new hours will address the inordinate number of unsupervised juveniles that remain in or upon public places within the Town of Bethany Beach.

BE IT HEREBY ENACTED by the Town Council of the Town of Bethany Beach, a majority thereof concurring in Council duly met, that the Town Code be and hereby is amended as follows:

Section 1. Amend Article X, Juvenile Curfew [Adopted 6-21-1996 by Ord. #308 (ch. 15, Art.X of the 1992 code)] section 282-17 Policy (Between May 1 to September 30, inclusive, of each year, it shall be unlawful for any person 17 years or less of age (under 18) to be or remain in or upon a public place within the Town of Bethany Beach during the period beginning at 11:00 p.m. and ending at 5:00 a.m.)

Synopsis

This ordinance amends Article X Juvenile Curfew section 282-17 by changing the enforcement hours to begin 11:00PM and run until 5:00AM. As a result, frequent complaints and observation there are an inordinate number of unsupervised juveniles congregating at the various public places in Bethany Beach causing concern for mischief and the general concern for the health, safety and security of the Town of Bethany Beach, its visitors and residents, curfew hours are a reasonable component to peaceful quiet enjoyment.

This shall certify that this is a true and correct copy of the ordinance duly adopted by the Town Council of the Town of Bethany Beach at a duly-noticed and convened meeting at which a quorum was present on _____, 2021.

Attest: _____

Town Clerk

Mayor

This shall certify that the title and synopsis of the foregoing ordinance was posted at the Town Hall on _____, 2021 and published in _____
on _____, 2021.

So Certifies:

Date

Town Clerk