



Department of Transportation

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To: Transportation Commission

From: Thomas W. Lynch – Director of Transportation
Yang Tao – City Traffic Engineer

Re: Vision Zero and Laser Detection Equipment

This memo requests reconsideration of the purchase of laser speed detection equipment in the support of Vision Zero efforts. Vision Zero seeks to focus on eliminating fatalities and high injury crashes through education, behaviors, policies, and low cost improvements to the street environment. Environmental to the roadway environment have a significant effect on the level of comfort for speeds dangerous to all street users.

However, in the wake of the pandemic, traffic, bike, and pedestrian fatalities have increased substantially. There are several theories on what is contributing to the rise, including increasing rage as well as emptier roads. One factor is a growing prevalence of reckless driving. Reckless driving is generally defined as “driving a vehicle with willful or wanton disregard for the safety of persons or property.” Examples are found throughout the United States. In Colorado, incidents of excessive speeding – going 40 mph over the limit – shot up by 48%¹. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has cited risky driving behavior as a factor in the increasing fatalities during the pandemic². A review of Madison’s 2021 crashes found that speeding was a factor in 41 percent of fatal and injury crashes, up from a historical average of 23 percent. We have measured speeds of over 90 mph on East Washington Ave. Excessive speed is contributor of at least two fatality crashes in the last 6 months. Changing the street environment is effective for reducing mean speeds, 85 percentile speeds, and even 99 percentile speeds. With reckless drivers traveling up to 50 mph beyond the limit, environmental countermeasures do not appear to be a strong deterrent.

With the pandemic “cruising” has experienced a resurgence on Madison’s arterials. It is most problematic on East Washington Ave, yet also occurs on University Ave and Mineral Point Road. Most prominent from Thursdays through Saturdays, cruisers drag race and perform exhibitionist behavior leading to considerable traffic noise and dangerous street conditions. MPD officers interacting with these drivers indicate that the number of vehicles can approach 100, with drivers coming from both within and outside of the Madison area. This behavior has led to considerable number of complaints from adjacent neighborhoods and decreased safety even further on one of Madison’s most dangerous arterials.

The behavior led a staff task force to develop counter measures in 2021, which included increased enforcement, messaging, and capacity reductions to manage the nuisance and dangerous behaviors. MPD used grant monies to patrol these corridors numerous times in 2021, seeking to reduce and/or stop the behavior with some success.

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/19/us/pandemic-increased-fatal-crashes-trnd/index.html>

² https://rosap.nhtl.bts.gov/view/dot/58456/dot_58456_DS1.pdf

As spring approaches, cruising has resumed on East Washington Ave. Without a greater concerted effort to address the issue, it is likely cruising will continue and perhaps grow. Enforcement can and has played a role in reducing cruising. MPD is implementing policies that address dangerous behaviors without unfairly burdening marginalized populations. Chief Barnes has made traffic safety one of MPD's strategic initiatives for the year, allocating resources to address what is becoming a city as well as national epidemic. Laser Speed detection tools assist MPD in providing easier and quicker speed detection that does not require ancillary calculations. With street segments that alternate between speeding and slowing, such as East Washington, laser detection provides instantaneous speed readings. Laser detection is also more defensible in court when challenged.

MPD could and has sought to obtain laser speed detection equipment within their Capital Budget request. However, this process would delay purchase until next year – and there is likely critical need this spring. MPD capital requests are highly scrutinized during the Budget process, with multiple concerns regarding enforcement entering the deliberations. Traffic safety equipment is difficult to get approved, even with the merits it brings.

Transportation staff therefore request that the Transportation Commission consider the funding request for laser speed detection equipment. It provides a tool that addresses one challenge we are facing on East Washington Ave, University Ave, and Mineral Point Rd.

Sincerely,



Thomas W. Lynch PE PTOE PTP AICP
Director of Transportation



Yang Tao, PhD, PE
City Traffic Engineer