



Madison Parks Division

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Date: December 4, 2020

To: Board of Park Commissioners

From: Eric Knepp, Parks Superintendent

CC: Alder Tag Evers, District 13
Yang Tao, City Traffic Engineer

Re: Shared Streets Program -Vilas Park Drive

The City of Madison Traffic Engineering Division (TE) implemented the Shared Streets program during the early stages of the pandemic to accommodate physical distancing for walkers and bikers. The program included eight streets and Vilas Park Drive. TE closed the Drive from the western bridge (near Edgewood) to the beach area on the east end by placing traffic barricades. The Drive remained closed for most of the summer and fall, with the exception of three weekends to accommodate shelter reservations and Democracy in the Park. While Parks Division staff were notified of this temporary closure in early April, there was not significant dialogue with Parks staff regarding this specific change in access or alternative plans made to accommodate park users. Parks was supportive of what was anticipated to be a short term closure that would have minimal impacts on park amenities due to public health restrictions at the time. The Board of Park Commissioners did not approve the closure, though it was reviewed and approved by the Transportation Commission (TC). During the summer there were multiple explorations into what could be done to provide improved access to the park amenities. However, no clear path forward was identified that addressed the concerns of all interested stakeholders. A significant constraint in solving this issue has been scarce resources in 2020, both from a staff and funding perspective.

TE proposed, and the TC approved, the suspension of the Shared Streets program for the winter with the exception of Vilas Park Drive. The suspension for the program was due to challenges plowing the streets and anticipated decreased use by people walking and biking during the winter months. The plan was to open Vilas Park Drive as well, however, due to concerns from members of the public and Alder, the Drive remains closed at this time. At the October 28, 2020 Transportation Commission meeting, Commission members recognized that Vilas Park Drive is a park road and is not in TE's jurisdiction. Thus, they made a motion asking the BPC to consider keeping the Drive closed even with the suspension of the Shared Streets program. The approved motion states:

“The Transportation Commission recommends that the Board of Park Commissioners evaluate maintaining the motor vehicle traffic restriction on Vilas Park Drive and weigh the pros and cons prior to opening it to motor vehicles, including exploring options that prevent through traffic.”

It is important to note that Vilas Park Drive has functioned as designed in the existing master plan for over 50 years and it serves to provide access to the various park amenities. During the current ongoing Vilas Park master planning process, the consultant team and TE conducted traffic studies to evaluate vehicle movements in the park. The Attachments A, B and C provide summary data from the studies.

It is important to consider the following when determining the status of the Drive:

- The traffic studies revealed that the Drive carries between 1,400 and 1,500 cars per day, compared to 4,000 per day on Drake Street. The average speed of drivers is about 25 mph. Without speed limit signs most people assume the speed limit is 25 mph. While the data seems to support that there is some degree of through commuter traffic, it is not possible to determine the purpose of the trip based on tube counter or camera data alone. It is important to recognize that some people still use the Drive as it was originally designed as a pleasure drive. While the Drive functions relatively safely, staff recognizes that the Drive is not designed to today's street standards, in terms of pavement width, pavement marking and the accommodation of cars, parking, bike traffic and pedestrians.
- The park use this year was significantly different than in normal years, so the true effects of its complete closure are unknown. Nearly all shelter reservations were cancelled, there were no large events in the park and fewer people gathered at the beach. I did notice a decrease in shoreline fishing from what I have seen in the past, but there were certainly significant numbers of people walking and biking on the Drive as well. The Henry Vilas Zoo was closed much of the summer and did not open to full capacity at any point this year, including for field trips.
- While the pending Master Plan does propose removing through-traffic from the park drive, it also calls for a complete re-design of the Drive from the east to provide safe vehicle, bicycle and pedestrian access throughout the park.
- Parks is committed to working with TE on an interim solution that will better meet the needs of all park users. TE has worked to put together alternatives that need to be further evaluated and funding identified to implement. Despite discussions of a winter solution for this year, there are not sufficient resources available to fund and implement the improvements recommended by TE.
- If the Drive is closed as-is for the coming winter months, Parks does not have the resources to implement an alternative plowing plan for the park that can assure high quality snow removal. There will likely be a reduction in snow removal service due to access limitations associated with the closure as the resources for additional work to maintain current standards are not available. It is important to note here that the Shared Streets program was ended on City Streets, at least in part, for reasons related to the ability to maintain the area during a Wisconsin winter.
- Vilas Park is one of the most popular places to ice skate in our system, second only to Tenney Park. With the Drive closure, people wishing to skate will have to walk from the parking lot north and west of the bridge, or the lot just east of the beach. If those lots are full, they will have even further to walk. While some comments from Transportation Commission indicated that a one quarter of a mile distance was still "walkable", Parks staff believe, that if the Drive remains fully closed, Vilas will see significantly less use as a skating destination during a pandemic winter where we expect larger than normal demands on the system.

The Parks Division recognizes that the Drive, like many aspects of Vilas Park and the park system, would never be built in its current configuration today and measures should be taken to improve its use and safety. While the closure met the need of walkers and bikers during the pandemic, it likely doesn't accurately take into consideration the impact to park use during non-COVID times. Parks is confident that the pending master plan will address these issues, however, implementation of the master plan improvements will not begin for several years. In the meantime, a well-thought-out collaborative solution needs to be developed

that can be sustained and maintained until the master plan improvements can move forward.¹ Though there are many permutations and modifications that can be made to each of the options below, I think there are three basic options for how to operate and maintain Vilas Park Drive for this winter.

Option 1 – Keep the Drive closed as is now, with a report back date.

The ability to maintain the Drive and rink would be more difficult. This would require increased resources or lowered standards of maintenance. The lowered standard of maintenance is concerning given this is one of the better attended skating facilities in the system. The facilities have better than average lighting and more space than almost all of the rinks in the system. Access concerns also exist regarding those coming to Vilas via automobile. If closed for the winter, parks staff would work with TE to report back to the BPC with options for improving access for the Summer 2021.

Option 2 – Open the Drive, with a report back date on an intermediate term solution.

Open the Drive to vehicular traffic on 12/19/20. Install signage that posts the speed limit at 15 MPH as well as signage that indicates the Drive is for park/shelter users only. The Drive would be closed as it is currently at the end of the skating season or until the BPC acts on an intermediate solution. Work with TE to develop at least two options for an intermediate solution for the Drive that include at least one option with no ability to Drive through the park. Bring the options to the BPC by the April meeting. No resources are specifically budgeted for this work, but parks will work with TE and the Alder to identify options. From a maintenance perspective, this is a known situation and one that staff is confident can be maintained at standard even during a winter where we expect to continue experiencing staff shortages due to the pandemic.

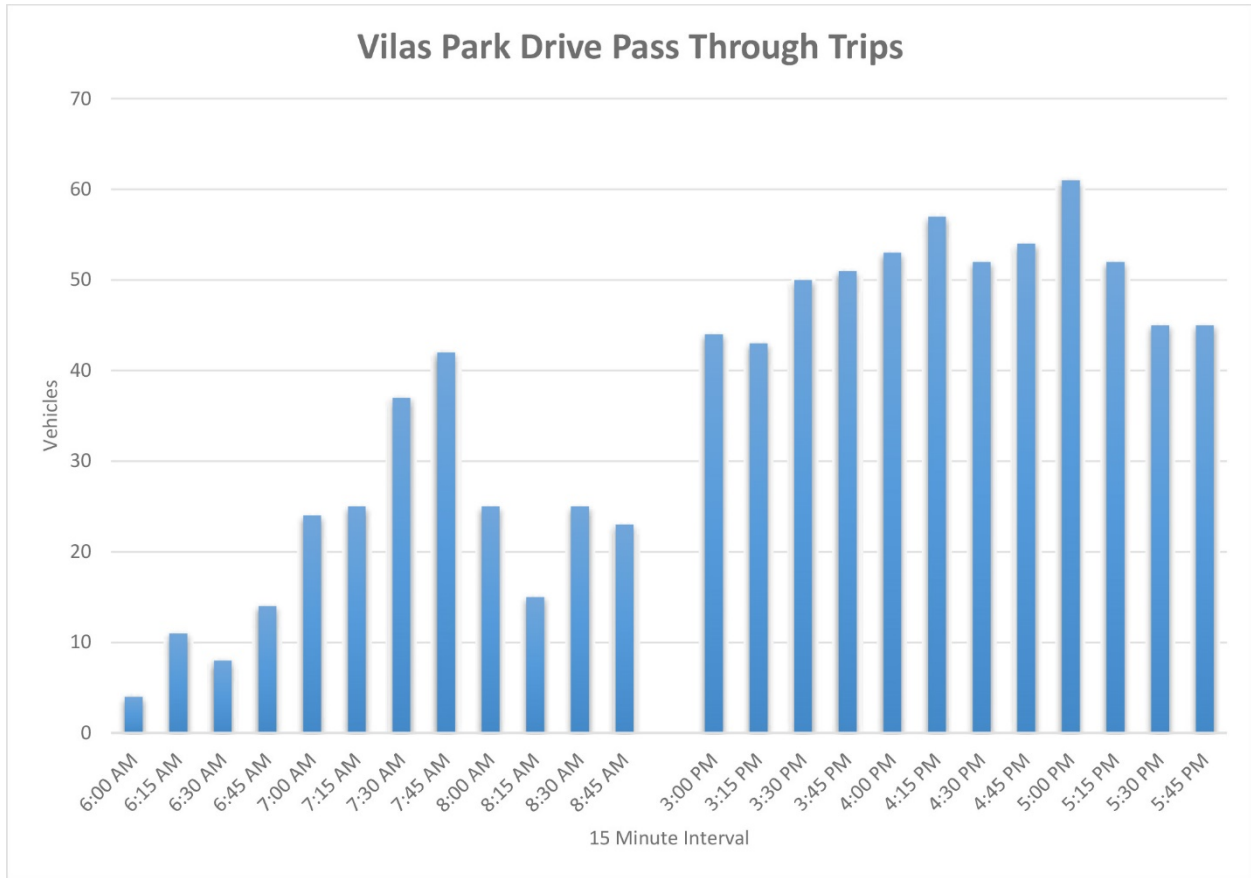
Option 3 – Implement a two way traffic to the shelter lot from the east as expeditiously as possible.

Change the existing operational plan of the Drive to two-way access from the east to the shelter lot. Other options regarding the length of the two-way access may be considered with further evaluation. This option would provide access to the shelter and skating facilities, though staff would need to work to address 3rd party mapping software issues with accessing from the east. Additional signage and traffic safety measures would be needed. Staff would work with TE to evaluate if an option were available to make this occur safely this winter. There are increased cost in maintain a portion of the Drive as a ped/bike path during the winter. Though this is more marginal in resource intensity than Option 1.

Though I understand the value added by having the Drive closed this year, and very much understand the desire from community members to keep it such, I cannot recommend Option 1, the current method of closure, as a viable short or intermediate term solution for the park as it is currently built. The impacts on events, shelter users, and those trying to access the shoreline is significant and I do not think can be mitigated in a satisfactory manner. It is also unfortunate that despite efforts from engaged residents, TE staff, and Parks staff, I do not believe Option 3 is actually viable to be completed safely and with appropriate reviews prior to the coming winter season. I regret that we did not have sufficient time earlier in the year to work out all of the details, but it is my recommendation that the Commission not make determinations about the intermediate term without further work. Given the limitations, including timing, I would recommend that Option 2 be the course of action for the coming challenging winter. Parks would work with TE and Alder Evers to develop a work group to ensure plans are provided to the BPC in an expedient manner that provides the at least two safe methods of providing access to the park's central amenities.

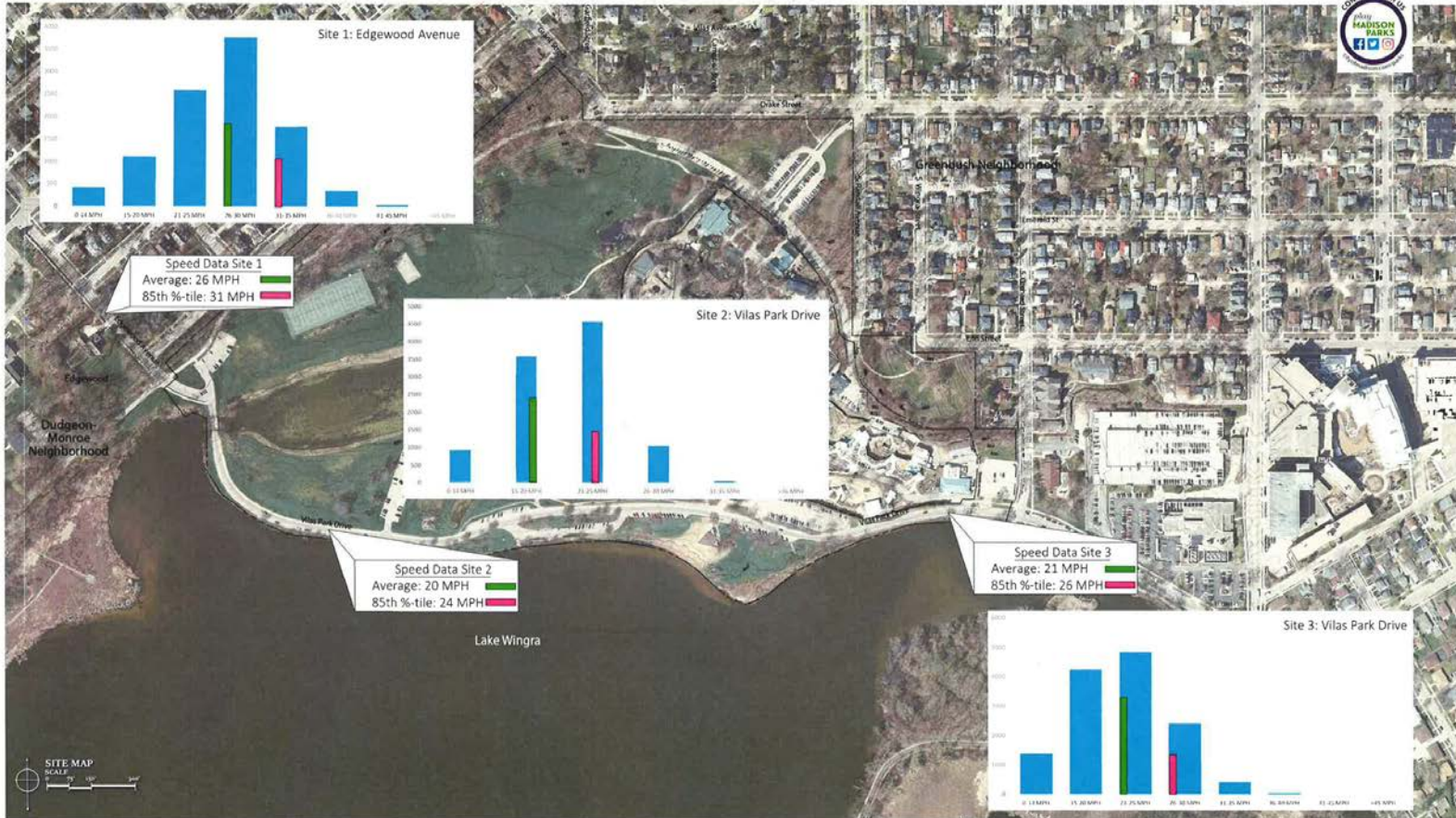
¹ The Master Plan is currently in draft status and has not been approved by the Board of Park Commissioners. Staff and significant public input seems to indicate broad support for the closure of the Drive and I am being presumptive of the inclusion of that element in the final plan that will be adopted by the BPC.

Attachment A: One-Day Camera Traffic Study (April 24, 2019)



Attachment B: Speed and Traffic Volume Study Summary Results (August 2019)

**MASTER PLAN
OF
HENRY VILAS PARK
MADISON, WISCONSIN**

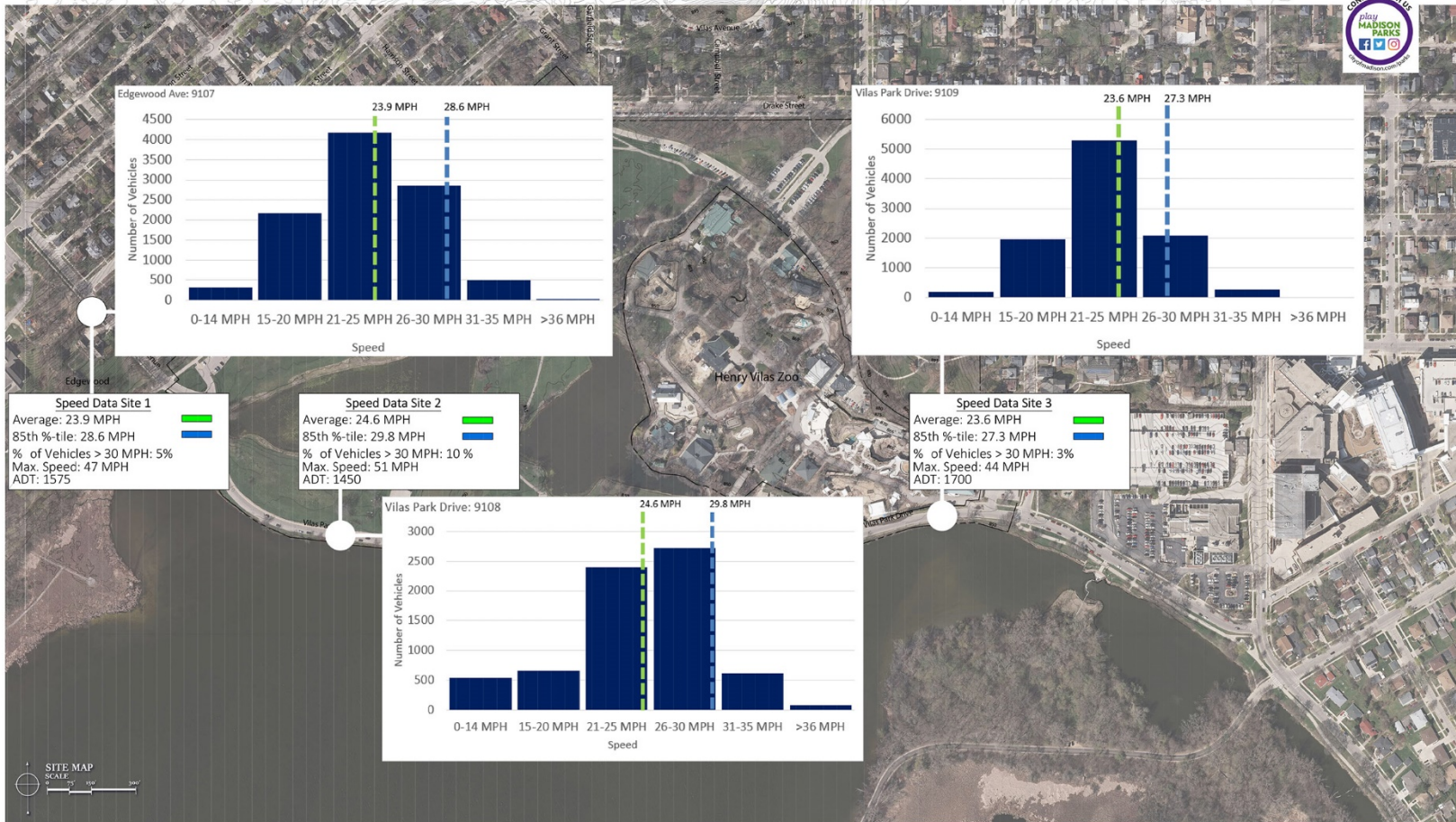


2019 Weekday Speed Study Results
Monday, August 12, 2019 - Friday, August 16, 2019



Attachment C: Speed and Traffic Volume Study Summary Results (November 2019)

MASTER PLAN
OF
HENRY VILAS PARK
MADISON, WISCONSIN



2019 Speed Study Results
Thursday November 7th - Friday November 15th