

A Case for Traffic Calming: Protecting Lives in Our Neighborhoods

Our community recently experienced a devastating tragedy that demands our immediate attention and thoughtful response. On February 6, 2026, Alexander (Sasha) Rosen, a 17-year-old West High School student, was struck and killed by a vehicle while crossing South Park Street in a marked crosswalk on their way to school.¹ This heartbreaking loss is not an isolated incident—it reflects a deeper pattern of dangerous traffic conditions throughout Madison's neighborhoods, including the Johnson and Gorham Street corridors where similar risks threaten the safety of residents, students, and families every day.

We write to advocate for evidence-based solutions that have proven successful in communities across the nation. The goal is to redirect through-traffic from neighborhood streets like Johnson and Gorham to East Washington Avenue, the federal highway that bisects our neighborhood and is designed to handle high-volume traffic, while implementing natural traffic calming measures that protect vulnerable road users without relying on police enforcement.

The Growing Crisis: Pedestrian Safety in Madison

Alexander Rosen was doing everything right—crossing in a marked crosswalk, on their way to school in broad daylight. Yet they became one of ten pedestrian fatalities in Dane County during the first three months of 2026¹, part of an alarming trend.² These are not merely statistics—they represent people: neighbors, students, parents, and friends whose lives were forever lost, and their loved ones lives changed by preventable crashes.

The Problem: Streets Built Like Highways

The urban planning organization Strong Towns has extensively documented a fundamental design flaw in American communities: the creation of 'stroads'—hybrid corridors that attempt to function as both streets (places for community interaction and local access) and roads (high-speed connectors between places).³ Strong Towns founder Charles Marohn describes stroads as 'the futon of transportation'—uncomfortable couches that also serve as uncomfortable beds—because they fail at both purposes.

Johnson and Gorham Streets exemplify this problem, and it has grown worse due to traffic from the John Nolen redesign that has been redirected to these neighborhood streets. Rather than sending a massive slew of cars, frequently moving at high speed, down residential neighborhood streets - streets that make it hard for children to walk to

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<https://wisconsin.gov/Pages/about-wisdot/newsroom/statistics/countyfatality.aspx#:~:text=The%20figures%20below%20represent%20final%20year%2Dend%20total,preliminary%20figures%20represent%20fatalities%20that%20had%20been>

the park in their neighborhood, or elders to walk to the grocery store a few blocks away, this excess traffic should be routed to East Washington Avenue—a federal highway (US Highway 151) specifically designed and funded for high-volume, longer-distance travel. As Strong Towns research demonstrates, *when residential streets are built with wide lanes and highway-like features, drivers instinctively travel at highway speeds regardless of posted speed limits.*⁶ The street design itself—not driver negligence or inadequate enforcement—becomes the primary factor determining whether people drive safely.

This misalignment between street design and street function has profound consequences. A landmark 1972 study found that residents living on busy, high-speed roads were significantly less likely to leave their houses, know their neighbors, or feel ownership of their street compared to those on calmer thoroughfares.⁷ Recent research confirms that living near highly trafficked roads leads to increased social isolation, loneliness, and psychological distress—contributing to what many recognize as a growing loneliness epidemic.⁸

The Solution: Natural Traffic Calming and Proper Street Hierarchy

The most effective traffic calming measures don't rely primarily on speed limit signs, police enforcement, or driver education. Instead, they use **street design itself to make slow speeds feel natural and safe to drivers.**⁹ Strong Towns research and successful implementation in cities nationwide point to several proven approaches:

- 1. Narrower Travel Lanes:** Wide lanes signal to drivers that high speeds are safe and appropriate. Reducing lane width creates a sense of enclosure that naturally encourages slower speeds. Pittsburgh's Department of Mobility and Infrastructure documented average speed reductions of 6 mph across nearly all their traffic calming interventions using this principle.¹⁰
- 2. Chicanes and Visual Narrowing:** Offset curb extensions or planted areas that create gentle curves in the roadway force drivers to slow down and pay attention. On Pittsburgh's Termon Avenue, chicanes lowered vehicle speeds from 37 mph to 27 mph, bringing traffic closer to the posted 25 mph limit.¹¹
- 3. Speed Cushions and Raised Crosswalks:** Physical vertical elements in the roadway create unavoidable feedback that encourages speed reduction. In Pittsburgh, speed cushions on Seagirt Street reduced average speeds by 13 mph—from 36 to 23 mph—on a residential street adjacent to an early childhood center.¹²
- 4. Intrigue and Uncertainty:** Contrary to conventional traffic engineering, research by David Engwicht and documented by Strong Towns shows that some visual complexity and 'constructive ambiguity' in street design causes drivers to slow down and pay closer attention. This includes elements like varied building setbacks, street trees, on-street parking, and active street life.¹³

5. Converting Stroads to Proper Streets: Lancaster, California invested \$11 million to transform nine blocks of 'The BLVD' from a four-lane, car-dominated corridor into a two-lane, pedestrian-friendly street with center-of-street parking, public plazas, and street trees. The transformation took only eight months and dramatically improved both safety and economic activity.¹⁴

Importantly, these interventions can be implemented at relatively low cost. Pittsburgh's program is explicitly described as 'low-cost' and 'community-driven,' with many improvements achievable through paint, planters, and strategic placement of inexpensive materials.¹⁵ The city meticulously documents results, building trust with residents who see quick, effective action addressing their safety concerns.

Redirecting Traffic: The Role of Federal Highways

A critical component of any comprehensive solution involves properly utilizing existing infrastructure designed for through traffic. East Washington Avenue functions as US Highway 151, a federal highway built to federal standards with federal funding specifically intended to move traffic efficiently between destinations.¹⁶ This is precisely the type of road that should carry the through traffic currently burdening neighborhood streets like Johnson and Gorham.

The concept of appropriate street hierarchy is fundamental to safe, functional communities. As Strong Towns articulates, roads are meant to be 'efficient connections between two places' with limited access and highway geometries, while streets create 'platforms for capturing value' where auto traffic moves slowly and shares space with pedestrians, cyclists, and transit users.¹⁷ When we force neighborhood streets to carry road-level traffic volumes and speeds, we create dangerous conditions while simultaneously failing to move traffic efficiently.

The historical context matters here. The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 created the interstate system and established federal funding mechanisms that prioritized highway construction—often through the hearts of neighborhoods, devastating communities in the process.¹⁸ More than 475,000 households and over one million people were displaced nationwide. While Madison's isthmus was spared interstate bisection, the legacy of prioritizing high-speed vehicle movement over neighborhood integrity persists in how traffic is routed through residential areas today.

Recent Strong Towns analysis demonstrates that federal funding mechanisms continue to undermine local Complete Streets initiatives by imposing design standards that prioritize vehicle throughput over human safety.¹⁹ Projects intended to enhance walkability end up with 12-foot travel lanes (appropriate for highways, not neighborhood streets) and highway-style 'forgiving design' that encourages high speeds. The solution is to intentionally separate functions: direct through traffic to roads built for that purpose (like East Washington Avenue) while allowing neighborhood streets to function as true streets—safe, slow, and community-oriented. White someday we would love to make

East Washington Ave a safer and slower street, right now our focus is on building in traffic calming measures on Johnson and Gorham.

A Path Forward: Community-Centered Implementation

We propose a phased approach that learns from successful implementations in peer cities:

Phase 1: Quick-Build Pilot Projects (0-6 months): Implement low-cost, reversible traffic calming measures on Johnson and Gorham Streets using paint, planters, and flexible bollards, including *immediately removing the signs redirecting John Nolen construction traffic to East Washington Ave*, and away from Johnson and Gorham. Pittsburgh's model shows these interventions can be installed quickly while data is collected on speed reductions and community response. Simultaneously, work with navigation apps and signage to encourage through traffic to use East Washington Avenue.

Phase 2: Data Collection and Community Engagement (6-12 months): Follow Pittsburgh's example of meticulously documenting speed changes, crash reductions, and community feedback. Engage residents, business owners, and institutions (including UW-Madison) in refining designs. This transparency builds trust and demonstrates responsiveness.

Phase 3: Permanent Infrastructure (12-24 months): Based on pilot results, implement permanent traffic calming infrastructure including raised crosswalks, curb extensions, reduced lane widths, and protected bike lanes. Apply lessons learned from Lancaster's BLVD transformation and similar projects.

Phase 4: Network-Wide Principles (Ongoing): Establish design standards that prevent future stroad creation and systematically convert existing stroads into either proper streets (neighborhood-oriented, slow) or proper roads (limited access, efficient for through traffic). Ensure East Washington Avenue and other federal highways are optimized for their intended function, reducing pressure on neighborhood streets.

Conclusion: Learning from Tragedy, Building for Safety

Alexander Rosen's death should not have happened. They was in a crosswalk. They were following the rules. But street design that encourages high speeds in pedestrian-rich environments creates conditions where tragic outcomes become not just possible but *predictable*.²⁰

Our neighborhood has already dealt with multiple times cars have run off our neighborhood roads, into people's homes, gardens, and parked cars. We want to avoid human injury and fatalities. We have the knowledge, the tools, and proven models to do better. Cities like Pittsburgh are demonstrating that community-driven, low-cost traffic calming works—reducing speeds by an average of 6 mph and creating environments where people feel safe walking, biking, and letting their children play outside. Organizations like Strong Towns have documented both the problems and solutions

with extensive research. Federal highways like East Washington Avenue exist specifically to handle through-traffic.

What we need now is the will to act, with evidence-based solutions implemented thoughtfully and transparently. Every week we delay, more families face the risk of experiencing the devastating loss that Alexander Rosen's family, friends, and community now endure.

We can act now to ensure that Johnson, Gorham, and other neighborhood streets in Madison become places where crossing to get to school, walking to visit a neighbor or go to the park, or biking to work are safe, pleasant experiences rather than life-threatening gambles. We urge the city to remove the signs redirecting John Nolen overflow traffic onto residential streets in the Tenney Lapham Neighborhood, and begin implementing low-cost, temporary measures in the built environment to calm traffic and make our community a safe and flourishing place to live.

Respectfully submitted,

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(This article was sent to the City of Madison Transportation Commission

Cc: Alder Davy Mayer and Tom Mohr, City of Madison Traffic Engineering.)

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