

ROAD RAGE

One Small City's Fight over Complete Streets

David Shorr
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CITY OF STEVENS POINT, WISCONSIN

PROJECT: STANLEY STREET ROAD DIET
IN: STANLEY STREET
FROM: 200 WEST OF MICHIGAN AVE. TO: 400 EAST OF EAST MARIA DR.

DESIGNED BY: JMS DATE: 06-18
DRAWN BY: JMS DATE: 06-18
REVISIONS BY: VER: N/A
SCALE: HOR: 1"=40'
VER: N/A
PROJECT: XX-



Introduction

The coauthors of this paper are evaluation consultants who specialize in assessing nonprofits' advocacy and policy change work. One of them (David Shorr) also serves as an alderperson on the city council in Stevens Point, Wisconsin and was at the center of a rancorous road diet battle for his first two years in office.

By the mid-2010s the Central Wisconsin community of Stevens Point seemed poised to become much more bike- and pedestrian-friendly. Shortly after his election in 2016, Alderperson Shorr and other local officials welcomed a visit by a representative of the League of American Bicyclists (LAB). City leaders were proud of having bronze status as a bicycle-friendly community and aspired to silver status. The LAB representative told the group what it would take to raise the community's bike-friendliness game. The key point: bike trails for recreation are one thing, and bike lanes for transportation are another. In particular, the area's 27-mile Green Circle Trail is a real treasure and a lure to tourists, but not much use for doing errands or commuting to work on bicycle. Bottom line: to get silver status there would need to be much more bicycle transportation infrastructure.

A lot of the groundwork had been laid. The community also had a detailed county bike and pedestrian plan; a declared commitment to Vision Zero; a modest set of street shoulders marked for bicycle use; and an approved \$400,000 TAP grant for 13 miles of new bicycle infrastructure street markings. What the community had not yet done, though, was to redraw the lanes of a heavily used arterial street.

As a new city councilmember, David championed a four-to-three conversion for Stanley Street (which runs through his council district and three others) thinking it was a natural follow-through on previous solid commitments. But as it became clear, the county plan,

Vision Zero resolution, and TAP grant represented merely a declaratory policy of bike- and pedestrian-friendliness. They didn't really mean that the community was committed to divvying up the public right of way and forcing cars to share the road (though the changes in the TAP grant represented more of a commitment than many realized). The debate over Stanley Street brought these tradeoffs on the design and use of the streets to the fore. Stevens Point had talked the talk, but was it ready (so to speak) to walk the walk?

The coauthors' professional role as evaluators—and earlier careers as advocates—make us keenly interested in how advocates and organizers can achieve change when the politics become tangled. As we examined the Stanley Street road diet case, it seemed important to look squarely at the reasons local transportation equity fights get so messy and how to deal with that messiness. The context of a small city of 26,000 with a part-time city council also brought in a number of interesting constraints and considerations.



Photo of League of American Bicyclists visit courtesy of Pokey Pedal Stevens Point

As the coauthors did background research on local government decision-making and road diet controversies generally, we observed that many writers avoided focusing on the political and cultural battle lines that shape the debate. In this paper, though, we argue the need to treat the conflict as a political obstacle to be overcome, rather than a set of substantive concerns that can be assuaged with more public engagement and bridge-building. This led us to the literature on counter-advocacy and strong practices for how to deal with opponents.¹

¹ "Dealing with the Opposition" in D.G. Altman, F.E. Balcazar, S.B. Fawcett, T. Seekins, J.Q. Young, *Public Health Advocacy: Creating Community Change to Improve Health*, Stanford Center for Disease Prevention Research, 1994. Also Chris Hampton, Jenette Nagy, Eric Wadud, Aimee Whitman, "[How to Respond to Opposition Tactics](#)," in University of Kansas Center for Community Health and Development Community Tool Box.

The record as we read it indicates that bikelash is a determined foe in the contested public right of way. The fiercest opponents of infrastructure for bicycle commuters and pedestrians are highly unlikely to be persuaded or mollified. Therefore advocates' only option is to build a persuasive enough case and the policy momentum necessary to prevail. Think of it as achieving policy change through perseverance and pushing through resistance all the way to the finish line.²

The Players and the Drama

In the coauthors' evaluation consulting work, the projects nearly always look at issues and policy debates where all the decision-makers and most of the advocates are full-time professionals. So it was fascinating to examine a case in which all the advocates and even most of the decision-makers are part-time (the salary for a Stevens Point alderperson is \$5,300).

Members of the city council are in a particularly odd position. On nearly all matters, Wisconsin statutes give city councils ultimate authority over municipal affairs. But decision-making authority is one thing, and knowing how to use the levers of power is another. Unless they come from a professional background in local government, council representatives confront a broad range of subjects, a steep learning curve, and limited capacity to move up the curve. The constraints on councilmembers' time and attention was a structural reality of local government that weighed heavily in the Stanley Street case. Later in this paper, we also explore the ways that especially contentious issues can distort local government's division of roles and deliberative processes. With all these players in mind, first we need to review how the controversy played out.³

² It must be noted that it is easier to opt out of conciliation and battle local forces of reaction when there aren't gentrification issues at play. Demographically Stevens Point is 88 per cent white. But instead of having voracious urban pioneers colonizing neighborhoods of color, Stevens Point wrestles with a different set of challenges: inducing enough young people to reside in the city to keep replenishing the workforce and keep the average age from creeping upward.

³ For this study the authors interviewed five current or former Stevens Point elected officials who served during the Stanley Street controversy, a pair of longtime bike/ped advocates in the community, and one Wisconsin state government official.

The stage for this drama was set in the 2015 and 2016 spring elections, which remade the Stevens Point city council with a new progressive majority, many of whom were committed to smart growth and walkability. In fact, one notable sign of the power shift had to do with sidewalks. For many years the local pedestrian infrastructure has been riddled with gaps of random homes or entire blocks without sidewalks, something the staff professionals viewed as giving the community a sloppy look.

But because property owners have been responsible for the cost of installing sidewalks—the same as owners who paid for those sidewalks that have been in place for decades—it has entailed a special tax assessment that earlier councils shied away from. With the council’s new political orientation, the staff instituted a sidewalk continuation program with Alder Shorr’s district and one other as test cases. Yet despite councilmembers and staff



The first “unofficial / official” public meeting about Stanley Street

being in alignment about sidewalks, the program got off to an awkward start. David first learned about the new initiative when staff showed up in front of some constituents’ homes on a bright April morning to take measurements.

This problem of synchronizing councilmembers’ appetite for change and staff expertise was an important thread of the Stanley Street case. The narrative arc

starts out with new councilmembers (David in particular) fumbling the launch of the debate and underestimating the vetting process for street redesign. By the end of the episode, though, road diet champions on the council had learned their lessons and the shoe was on the other foot.

The Stanley Street saga is actually a tale of four public meetings. Public debate of the issue essentially was launched at a **September 2016 meeting** convened by David together with

two council colleagues. The councilmembers drew sharp criticism for hosting a session under supposedly false pretenses as an “official City meeting” (for one local reporter, the meeting marked the first in a series of supposed mini-scandals). The criticism was certainly valid in one sense, since the session didn’t follow the usual pattern of public information meetings (PIMs) convened by the executive branch. That said, it could hardly be improper for councilmembers who are the ultimate deciders to convene a discussion—particularly under the strictures of Wisconsin’s open meeting laws requiring that nearly all discussions of pending decision items be public. But regardless, David has openly admitted that the meeting wasn’t well conceived or planned.

For reasons that weren’t clear, more than a year passed before the mayor convened the **second meeting in December 2017**. This session was conducted in the usual PIM format with senior staff and citywide elected officials and comments from members of the public,



To hear David’s April 2018 remarks, click on the image and then click on agenda item #4

so it did represent a step forward in the normal vetting process. The meeting also gave the first glimpse of the opposition’s heavy-handed approach. In one of the most memorable public comments of the entire battle, a Stanley Street resident said he dreaded the safety nightmares the lane conversion was bound to cause and the inevitable day he’d have to clean the blood of bike-users off his curb.

The drama’s major plot twist came at the second PIM / **third public meeting in March 2018**, just weeks before the council made its decision. That’s when the mayor and public works director tried short-circuiting the previous year and a half of deliberation with an alternative proposal. David was out of town that evening but caught a live Facebook stream and thus got to watch the mayor blindside him in real time.

Even so, the elements of the mayor's proposal made for a clear contrast and a good foil: three lanes at one end of Stanley where it already felt safe without any lane markings (and still does); sharrow markings along the length of Stanley (to cue drivers to share the road despite it's being tailored to them); and an RRFB beacon that would enable pedestrians to stop traffic at Stanley's most potentially walkable intersection. In response David insisted that despite the mayor's attempt to shift the Stanley Street agenda, the road diet was still the question on the table. By calling the mayor out, Alder Shorr was following the advocacy strong practice of not only rebutting opponents' arguments but highlighting the underlying maneuver they're using to try getting the upper hand.



For his part, while Alder Shorr may have been a newbie politician and recent Urbanist convert, he was also a career-long advocate who honed his polemical skills on progressive blogs. Throughout the controversy, David put himself in

the middle of a rancorous fight—publishing columns and Facebook posts, speaking with local reporters, fielding calls and emails from random opponents. There was also a calculation behind this: maybe if he took on the role of scrapper, other councilmembers could lie low until decision time.

After the mayor's gambit, David flipped the script on what counted as an "official" meeting or proposal. With some of the media coverage of the March PIM portraying the mayor's plan as an "official" proposal, David made sure to set the record straight. In a set of remarks at the April council meeting, he reminded everyone which official views really mattered: the eleven alders.

A few days before the March PIM, David spoke with the mayor to put a **special council meeting on the calendar for May 15**. Even if the opponents' conspicuous presence at the earlier meetings didn't prove their claims to represent majority opinion, it gave the road diet the appearance of unpopularity and began to make this a tough vote for some councilmembers. So it would have been advocacy malpractice to remain passive for that fourth and decisive meeting. David and the council's other two road diet champions, Council President Meleesa Johnson and Alder Tori Jennings, thus made a push to turn out supporters. Fortunately the supporters came through, delivering an impressive set of statements that pro-road diet leaders collected into [a highlight reel](#). Most important, the proposal garnered the eight of eleven votes needed to avoid a veto by the mayor.



With that supermajority coalition having gelled, it still had to hold together one last time to allocate the funds for the restriping. Biting the bullet of a price that had meanwhile spiked significantly, the same councilmembers okayed an over-budget contract bid. Within hours of that vote, though, the streets superintendant raised the option of buying a road marking machine—which then prompted the mayor to contact David and suggest a formal motion to reconsider accepting the contract bid. The result was the purchase of Stevens Point's very own EZ Stripe PA-AL110 Wind Runner (pictured), not only bringing the cost into line with the budget but also enabling the streets department to DIY other striping projects.

Analyzing the Politics and Government

Politics, Policy, and Populism

We argue that Stanley Street was more about politics and culture than misunderstanding or difference of opinion about bike-ped friendliness. With so much national commentary

focused on the need to convince road diet skeptics—as well as an idealistic image of local government as a less partisan arena—our argument runs somewhat against the grain.

And it must be acknowledged that the Stanley Street road diet did scramble the political/partisan divide the same way local issues often do. All told, the councilmembers heard skeptical views from left, right, and center. Within that coalition, though, was a subset of especially strident opponents whose voices drowned out the others. Alder Shorr had extensive interaction with opponents, mostly in an agree-to-disagree spirit he greatly appreciated. Others however, saw the road diet as wild-eyed and patently unjustifiable. These opponents were more typical of the public counter-advocacy.

On that score, the Stevens Point experience seems well within the norm. In an extensive 2017 study of bikelash, a group of New Zealand scholars described the political fault lines this way (see original for citations):

Objections to bike lanes tend to be divided along political lines, with conservative voters more likely to be opposed to new cycling infrastructure. Conservative bikelash is often described as particularly 'angry' in tone, and tends to exhibit the heightened emphasis on external threat and violation common within conservative discourses. Cyclists are commonly portrayed as threatening 'outsiders' who seek to 'invade' or 'rob us' of a way of life we hold dear. In general, the angry tone of much conservative bikelash is consistent with a range of research that shows that conservative voters are particularly likely to express angry public opposition to redistributive policies (such as road reallocation) as a form of 'theft' of their existing entitlements.⁴

Indeed, the loudest opponents resisted the Stanley Street road diet as an intrusion on the domain of cars and trucks—with arguments heavier on symbol than evidence. Prominently featured were the trucks that take harvested timber to area paper mills, a legacy industry in the region that's been pummeled by economic forces.

⁴ Kirsty Wild, Alistair Woodward, Adrian Field & Alex Macmillan, "Beyond 'bikelash': engaging with community opposition to cycle lanes," *Mobilities*, 2017, p. 5.

But there's more to it than angry tone. Looking to the literature on counter-advocacy, the taxonomy of 'Ten Ds' gives a framework to identify the opposition's key strategies. It is a catalog of all the ways opponents can try undercutting advocacy efforts, two of which matched up with the Stanley Street counter-advocacy. The **deny** strategy focuses on rejecting advocates' claim of a problem that needs to be remedied. And when opponents use the **discredit** strategy, they try to sow doubts about advocates' motives or interests.

The counter-advocacy's echoes of the populism of recent times were also noteworthy. Most telling was their claim that the issue didn't even need to be debated. As the battle dragged on, the opposition criticized road diet supporters for continuing to push the proposal. The idea was that advocates should have dropped the issue because of the supposed overwhelming public opposition. Because road diet opponents made more statements at public meetings, collected more petition signatures, and had more Facebook commenters, they saw the matter as 'case closed.' We delve more deeply into how this played out further down in the paper. Meanwhile the point is that claiming to speak on behalf of "The People" represents not only an attempt to prevail in a debate without actually winning the argument, but also a bald assertion of power based solely on the word of those who assert it. Not unlike the claim of just knowing you won an election.

Racial Reckoning, Transportation Equity, and the Defense of Privilege

Given the aggressive populism of the opposition's most passionate and prominent segment—a style similar to the most extreme supporters of former President Trump—did this give the Stanley Street controversy an overlay of racial equity issues? The short answer is that we can't be certain and need to keep sight of the opposition's politically diverse character. But that is an incomplete answer.

For instance, we have to note pickup trucks' role as the extreme right's intimidation instrument of choice. Recall the caravan of Trump supporters in 2020 trying to run a Biden-Harris campaign bus off a Texas highway. To be sure, not all drivers of pickup trucks are white supremacists. But in Central Wisconsin, most shows of force by white supremacists have taken the form of aggressive pickup truck driving. When counter-protesters showed up at the local Black Lives Matter rally, they came in

pickups and conferred with local police from behind the wheel before driving off. If one thing's clear, it's that some populists puff themselves up with V8 hunks of steel to literally throw their weight around—asserting privilege as 'real' Americans rather than voters like any other.

As a second question, what should we do about the racial inequity of the country's massive investment in highways and disinvestment in transit? Issues of transportation equity, like all issues of equity in America, are also about anti-Black racism. Federal transportation investment has been massively skewed to the auto drivers of the suburbs and rural communities and away from public transit that provides diverse city-dwellers more mobility to get to and from work. Just like with home ownership and education, white privilege is baked into the system.

Of course these things are the big-picture context—the background rather than the particulars of the Stanley Street debate. But then, that's what a racial reckoning demands: taking a good look at these contexts and the consequences.

Local Legislators – Proper Roles and Processes

The literature on local government—for instance the resources published in the form of operator manual-style handbooks—offers very little guidance on handling sharp differences over policy. In that literature, other sources of dysfunction such as personality clashes or miscommunication seem to be more comfortable subjects.

As it happens, one of these resources gave an example with an eerie parallel to the present case.⁵

The scenario involved a new councilmember going to see the public works department to tell them what street improvements the councilmember wanted, having campaigned on the issue. The point of the paper was pretty basic: it's inappropriate for councilmembers to give directives to city



White supremacist counterprotesters roll up to Stevens Point's local BLM rally

⁵ "Everyday Ethics for Local Officials: Elected Official Directive to Staff," Institute for Local Government, December 2004

staff because the power of a local legislature is exercised as a body collectively, not individually.

Aldersperson Shorr similarly met with the director of public works in his first months in office to discuss road diets. Unlike the new councilmember in the scenario, though, David certainly understood that street improvement budgets are decided by the council as a whole. And he also had an inkling that prioritizing which streets will be improved wasn't typically a political-level decision. What he failed to grasp was just how much of an encroachment on annual plans to resurface streets this represented. The obvious answer was to add the re-striping to the budget as its own line item. Moreover, changing traffic patterns on an arterial street couldn't be handled purely as a budgetary question. To a more seasoned councilmember, these things are rudimentary. For whatever reason, the director declined to straighten David out on either score.

Based on anonymized interviews with Stevens Point city officials, further below we offer ideas on synchronizing the priorities of elected officials (aka *electeds*) and staff experts. What David's meeting with the public works director—as well as the example of the sidewalk continuation project—indicate is that this question is broader and more complex than just the inappropriateness of giving directives to staff members.

Analyzing the Strategy

A Marathon, Not a Sprint

Ultimately, the loudest opponents' posturing as self-appointed spokespeople for the majority was exposed as hollow. Not one of the anti-road diet candidates running for city council and challenging incumbents won at the ballot box. The opposition's bark was worse than their bite, and they were only able to inflict temporary political pain. Until all of this played out, though, David and the other road diet proponents couldn't be certain about the opposition's weak position. But their advocacy certainly was staked on that wager.

From this vantage, road diet advocacy was a matter of endurance rather than a courageous defiance of the majority. Under the circumstances, the opposition naturally would do better to cut debate short instead of facing a test of strength later on when the council votes. Don't forget that at the start of the controversy, the opposition cried 'foul' and insisted there be proper vetting and public input. But later on they changed their tune and argued that since the public had said its piece against the road diet, then proponents should surrender instead of playing the process all the way out.

Policy change through perseverance is a strategy of pushing through all the nasty rancor,

Misogyny politico

BY B.C. KOWALSKI

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RSS Print

(First published in the February 7, 2019 issue of City Pages)

"Gynocracy" and "whiney bitches" are just some of the insults local women lawmakers have to endure



keeping the conversation going, and reaching the finish line. One reason Alder Shorr willingly took the role of lightning rod was to try keeping his council colleagues from being ground down by all the discord. (Women on the council had already dealt with a lot of very ugly feedback overall, which itself became a story in the regional media.⁶) He hoped that drawing the hostility toward himself would minimize how much perseverance would be required of the others.

Of course reaching the finish line meant not only keeping the issue alive in the public square but also putting the road diet proposal through all the needed steps for approval. Despite getting off to a bumpy start, Alder Shorr and the mayor at least coordinated on that front. In fact, keeping the vetting / decisionmaking process moving forward was David's main advocacy 'ask' of the mayor. As a member of the council David didn't need the mayor's assent, but his message basically was that in the face of all the opposition, "Yes, I really want to keep pressing this question."

⁶ B.C. Kowalski, "Gynocracy' and 'whiney bitches' are just some of the insults local women lawmakers have to endure," Wausau City Pages, February 7, 2019.

Who Speaks for the People?

Except for the climactic fourth public meeting, road diet proponents made no effort to generate visible displays of public support. On that front, it left things one-sided and set up a mini-debate over the opposition's claim to speak for a majority. Of course the only way to really know public sentiment would be through opinion research with a large sample size and a price tag far beyond what anyone would pay, a point Alder Shorr made regularly.

This raises a natural question about road diet proponents' choice to opt out of the mobilization game and not even try balancing the counter-advocacy. Why not match the opposition's petitions, impassioned testimony, and yard signs with their own petitions, testimony, and signs? That would've visibly demonstrated at least some level of public support.

Our analysis points toward a strategy that could help not only to win road diet battles against bikelash but also prevail over the proverbial Citizens Against Virtually Everything on a variety of local issues.

Instinctively the context of a smaller-scale community and issue didn't seem to call for that kind of effort. It seemed wiser to reject the premise that the number of yard signs, signatures, or Facebook group members were accurate gauges of public sentiment. And as advocates heard more and more about supporters who held their tongues due to some opponents' aggressiveness, it grew clear that along with the inflated perceptions of disapproval there was also an underestimation of road diet support. Looking back, some of the community's leading bike-ped advocates confirmed in our interviews that not trying to match the counter-advocacy was the right call. One advocate told of another local group—pushing for snow clearance of walkways in a centrally located park—that had just recently decided on the basis of cost versus benefit against circulating petitions.

Contesting the Narrative Frame and Definition of the Problem

When proponents of change can define the terms of debate, the policy battle is partly won. For instance “safety” can be an especially persuasive framing. There are many communities where pedestrian-hostile street design has tragic consequences for pedestrians (as detailed in Angie Schmitt’s excellent *Right of Way* book).⁷ Advocates in those communities have the “advantage” of being able to argue that existing streets are patently dangerous.

Stanley Street, though, did not have a record of being especially hazardous. In light of that, complete streets advocates in Stevens Point were careful not to overplay safety concerns.

Crash History



Clearly this didn’t stop road diet opponents from hyping imaginary future problems—for instance the infamous Stanley Street resident and his prediction of bicyclist blood on his front curb.

With the “safety” rationale largely unavailable, advocates faced the challenge of promoting broader

frameworks like walkability, bicycle commuting, and transportation equity. Although the three-lane configuration with a turning lane had long been proven as more safe, redesigning the arterial for all users had multiple aims: improved infrastructure for those who commute by bicycle, an easier crossing for pedestrians, and more walk-in customers for shops and restaurants.

Despite this challenge, advocates successfully pushed a narrative couching the issue in terms of whether to view Stanley as a highway or a neighborhood street. Supporters made

⁷ Angie Schmitt, *Right of Way Race, Class, and the Silent Epidemic of Pedestrian Deaths in America*, Island Press, 2020.

a strong case that the experience of living, walking, and shopping in the neighborhood was more important than the ability to drive through as fast as possible. Nothing against people who drove through the area on their way somewhere, but many residents wanted to make the street work better for its neighbors—less like a highway and more like a street where residents could conveniently shop, dine, and see one another.

Analyzing the Tactics

Picking Your Moment for Efficient Advocacy

Policy agendas can take a while to gain traction in a small city where councilmembers are part-time without any staff of their own. The policy work of community member advocates can be particularly crucial in identifying issues, keeping them in the public eye, and getting ready for the right moment to push across the finish line.

Indeed local advocates played a seminal role in bringing issues of walkability and livability to the fore in Stevens Point. In the 2010s two community members who would later be elected to the council, Tori Jennings and Garrett Ryan, cofounded the group Revisioning Point to build local support for smart growth (Tori was also coauthor the TAP grant proposal along with bike-ped advocate

Trevor Roark). While the group's activities did not result in immediate policy change, the council's recent emphasis on placemaking, density, and land use that builds economic vibrancy is a testament

Advocates successfully set up a contest of narratives on whether Stanley should be viewed as a highway or a neighborhood street

to their agenda-setting impact. Alder Shorr considers himself very much a poster child. Even without having been involved in Revisioning Point, he took important cues from them and views them as instrumental in prompting his bike-ped orientation.

In the above discussion of mobilization, we couched the decision not to circulate petitions or print up yard signs as a matter of right-sizing the advocacy effort. As a practical matter, it was also the most efficient way to use advocates' and supporters' time and energy. The

calculation of the perseverance strategy is that even without a sustained mobilization effort, a more subdued approach of media work and one-to-one conversations can ultimately build a solid base of support and a cohort of road diet proponents who'll show up when it's needed most. The calculation here turned out to be correct. As one of the advocates we interviewed put it,

When that final Stanley Street meeting was held for the council vote, tons of people came out of the woodwork in support of the road diet . . . [P]eople I didn't know. People I hadn't even heard of. Some people I did know but didn't know they were very adamant about getting a road diet.

The point about unfamiliar faces at the final public meeting is worth highlighting. It indicates that the public debate was reaching and resonating with supporters in the community to the degree that some came to the meeting without being contacted by the advocates. It should also be noted that even when advocates weren't mobilizing other community members, they were of course keeping up on the issue and discussing it with friends and neighbors.

Countering Red Herring Arguments

While advocates should respond to and refute their opponents at every turn, that doesn't mean having to accept the other side's terms of debate. Take the example of one road diet opponent, a local accountant with an office on Stanley Street who tried using the definition of the safety problem as a cudgel against Alder Shorr. The accountant emailed David to ask for data on crashes on Stanley Street. After David replied that those statistics were irrelevant to his proposal, the accountant publicly recounted the exchange for months—as if it represented a scandalous gotcha. The way David saw it, though, he was under no obligation to supply evidence for an argument he wasn't making.

One person who served on the city council shared an exasperated recollection of the kinds of appeals to fear often used by those—as the New Zealand scholars might put it—whose

longstanding sense of entitlement to public services are being challenged for the first time:

Unfortunately, the discussion about traffic calming, safety and, the factual information about people who live on that corridor actually being able to more easily back out of their own driveways. That was all lost when the anti-bike lane folks started coming out and saying "We're spending all of this money for bicycles that don't even pay gasoline tax." And "Bicycles are just being used by college kids, and they don't pay taxes here." And it just kept growing. And so we would hear about the bike lane issue and the bicyclist, who we hate because it's a communist conspiracy to take away our cars or whatever. But we also heard these stories, "The ambulance is not going to be able to get through on time. There's not enough space for the fire truck."

The last points about emergency vehicles show, yet again, the asymmetry of debating with opponents who throw around wild claims and scenarios. Just as one would sensibly expect, the city's first responders had of course reviewed the road proposal, and they didn't see it as hindering their work. This was simply the opposition's attempt to pad their case by trying

to associate themselves with the police and fire departments—another appeal based on symbolism.

In all the tangle of issues and arguments, there was one topic on which the two sides actually did engage one another directly: the question of bikes on sidewalks, where opponents say they belong. On that front,



Before Stanley Street was four lanes, it was two.

the community has indeed had a safety issue of driver – bike-rider conflict when the latter come into the intersection from the sidewalk. With a bike-rider coming into drivers' view so suddenly, it's a recipe for crashes. There is also a very similar angle-of-sight problem with drivers backing out of driveways not seeing cyclists till it's too late (not to mention bike riders hitting pedestrians). In fact a small business manager on Stanley Street, who parks

behind his store, told David of a longtime fear of hitting a bike rider on the sidewalk when coming out of the alley from his parking spot.

But here again is the asymmetry. The opponents' position flies in the face of long-established wisdom—echoed by laws and transportation departments across the country—about bikes being safer on the street. Also note how, from a Ten Ds perspective, their defense of the bikes-on-sidewalks status quo fits with a *Deny* strategy.

The proponents' rebuttal about streets being a safer place for bike riders was offered by a former Stevens Point police officer, one of several instances of road diet supporters who made key points based on first-hand knowledge:

- A constituent of David's—a mother of young children who herself grew up in the neighborhood—attested that kids used to go back and forth across Stanley very easily but no longer do.
- The owner of a chain of convenience stores confirmed the rule of thumb that the slower that people pass in front of businesses, the more they spend.
- The CEO of one of the area's large employers (the book printing company Worzalla) testified at the final meeting that bike- and pedestrian-friendliness is important to the NextGen workforce.

And while the Stanley Street debate was conducted within the overall frame of transportation equity and designing streets for all users, another equity point was raised regarding those who use bicycles because they can't afford cars or legally aren't allowed to drive. In fact, this was a key point for one of the councilmembers who voted for the road diet.

Guarding Against Local Government Dysfunction

The final tactical element is less about winning the road diet battle and more about keeping the acrimony from undermining local good government. The most basic rule for elected-staff relations is a matter of basic decency and respect: Don't to put staff in the middle of

political or personal disputes. It's a good rule, of course, but not very helpful as a guide to the complex challenges of managing political pressures and sensitivities.

In the League of California Cities' handbook on the roles of elected officials and staff, the author gives a nod to the problem of "the policy/administration dichotomy (the separation of these responsibilities)—which, oftentimes, has a good deal of 'gray' on the boundaries."⁸ Other than councilmembers with a background of having been local government staff, everyone else turns to city staff on matters of implementation, practicality, legal constraints, prior history, and/or relevant data.⁹ When the elected officials are part-time—with limited ability to delve into issues and climb the learning curve—this reliance is only heightened. From the other side, if staff are helping elected develop potentially controversial agenda items, then it's the politicians' job to deal with the politics and keep staff out of it.

Besides the example given above of Alder Shorr's initial meeting with the public works director, the Stanley Street drama had numerous subplots that went crosswise to the policy/administration dichotomy. For instance when the restriping was about to be carried out, the successor public works director raised the issue that one end of the lane conversion was oddly placed. They were right about that, and there was a political reason behind it. Even with his strategy of facing



Click on the image to see a published critique of the professional ethics of the public works director in a transportation engineering journal.

⁸ Duggan, p. 1. See also John Nalbandian, "Reflections of a Pracademic on the Logic of Politics and Administration," *Public Administration Review*, November-December 1994, pp. 531-536, and Judy Nadler and Miriam Schulman, "[Relationships Between Elected Officials and Staff](#)," Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University.

⁹ At an annual meeting of representatives from Green Tier Legacy Communities from round Wisconsin, David was seated next to the now-mayor of Madison, who'd gone through a road diet fight over Sherman Avenue in her district. While it was nice to benefit from her experience, it was clear simply from [the analysis produced for Sherman Avenue](#) the difference it makes not only to work cooperatively with Public Works but the sheer time and attention the issue could receive in a city ten times Stevens Point's size.

down the opposition, Alder Shorr at one point yielded to the pressure slightly by offering the concession of a moderately shorter road diet. It was a consciously political move disconnected from proper engineering and anything the staff would recommend.

If he and the director were more closely coordinated, David might not have proposed the shortened lane conversion. But remember, Alder Shorr was essentially left to his own devices when the director joined the mayor in opposing the road diet. So when Public Works expressed concern about the weird end of the lane conversion, David thought it was only fair for staff to be the ones requesting a return to the full-length plan.



Not that advocates made their closing arguments without any expert advice. By happenstance linked to Stevens Point’s annual World’s Largest Trivia Contest, road diet-supporter Alderperson Mary McComb made a connection with a highly credentialed transportation engineer who grew up in town. The engineer had been following press coverage from Indiana and became an invaluable source for proponents.¹⁰ But as a further sign of a counter-advocacy that threw anything and everything against the wall, the transportation engineer himself was made a

subject of controversy. As one of their talking points, the opposition started asking “What does someone in Indiana know about our situation in Stevens Point?”—a line echoed by the mayor himself. First off, this raises the broader problem of the rejection of expertise. Local opponents of change often argue that the experiences of other communities don’t apply to theirs. In this case though, the expert being rejected knew everything about Stanley Street, having grown up a few blocks away. (Once again, this strain of argument falls under the Ten Ds category of ‘discredit.’)

¹⁰ As part of his involvement in his professional association’s committee on ethics, later he actually wrote a column about Stanley Street for the association’s journal that criticized Public Works’ handling of the matter. Committee for the Ethical Forum, [“Ethics Forum: Road Diet Rookie,”](#) *ITE Journal*, July 2019, pp. 16-17.

When we discussed the policy/administration dichotomy with several Stevens Point city officials, they remarked that the ideal of staff as “honest broker” is just that, an ideal. Even so, the interviewees’ reflections also gave the basis for a few guidelines that could help electeds and staff stay in their respective lanes as much as possible:

- Distinguish between staff helping electeds flesh out their proposals and understand their ramifications, as opposed to helping achieve the policy outcome. Even if this doesn’t resolve all issues, it is the essence of the divide between policy and administration. Electeds can use it, therefore, as a simple test of what is appropriate to seek from staff.
- In public discussions of agenda items where opinion is divided, make note of information provided by staff and clarify parts of the discussion that are factual considerations versus arguments on behalf of a policy choice. Public meetings can offer chances to bring staff-elected interchange into full view, even if the staff support took place behind the scenes in between meetings. Reinforcing the norm against politicizing staff support by mentioning it intermittently could help reinforce politically safe space for staff. In addition, it could improve the quality of the policy / political debate by being more above-board and transparent—and less manipulative.
- In private staff-elected interactions, leave plenty of room for staff to give feedback. One key informant pointed out that a little humility on the part of local electeds can go a long way in avoiding problems of politicization. The idea here is for the politicians to regularly pause their conversations by saying “...do I have that right?” or “...am I making an assumption here?” or “...maybe I have that wrong.” By definition these relationships involve a power imbalance. For some staff, this doesn’t deter them from speaking their minds. But with staff who are more reticent, a good way to elicit the best information and avoid feelings of being pressured is to give them ample opportunity to correct misapprehensions and challenge assumptions.
- Be careful about weaponizing the information gathered during the process. Some of the information that staff helped provide or prepare is bound to end up in the elected official’s talking points. And the more heavily the councilmember rests their argument on that information, the more discomfort it could create for staff. Even recognizing that information from staff will often be grist for debate and that it won’t always be easy to depoliticize that information, electeds can at least avoid seeking excess advantage from particular bits of the case they make. For anyone championing legislation or policy change, the aim is to prevail in the debate. The problem comes from seeking shortcuts.

In the Rearview Mirror

As noted, many road diet opponents have no qualms about pulling dire scenarios out of their ~~air~~ thin air. After the lane conversion was implemented, some of the more honest ones copped to their error. A councilmember we interviewed recounted a conversation they had with adamant opponent who later admitted that the three-lane version of Stanley Street didn't really hinder their driving around town:

"All right, it really didn't change the amount of time. I got through it. The traffic moves pretty quickly. But I still don't like the bike lanes." Then I'm like, "Why?" He goes, "I don't know, why can't they just use a sidewalk?" I said, "It's not a safe place to be in. The bike lane is a better place." And he goes, "Well, it's just a white stripe on the road." And I said, "Yeah, but really we have been conditioned as drivers to follow the white lanes or yellow lines." And I said, "Why? What's the real reason you don't like the bike lanes?" This is going back and forth over the course of minutes, and then he goes, "I just get confused sometimes. And I don't like being confused."¹¹

Similarly a councilmember we interviewed told us about a constituent who'd been relentless in criticizing them over the installation of sidewalks (which the alder had promoted). Several years later, the same constituent told the councilmember, "I love these sidewalks. You know, it really helps with the landscaping. And there's so many people walking through here."

The Perseverance Strategy

Despite some opponents' claims that the complete streets ideas adopted by countless other communities won't work in their town, most often they work exactly as intended. This should be a source of confidence for road diet advocates. If advocates push all the way through to the finish line, they have a good chance of not only reaching a favorable decision but also demonstrating the benefits of road diets. The political battle may be

¹¹ To address the common concern about navigating the new lane configurations, tactical urbanists have developed low-cost road marking techniques that temporarily try out restriping in a few spots to give drivers experience with the changes. One of the main innovators in this area has been the group [Street Plans](#).

asymmetric—pitting nightmare scenarios against proven experience—but the reality of an implemented lane conversion can set the record straight.

As the authors worked on the project, we started wondering if this type of opponent's inclination toward making fanciful claims hints at a vulnerability. Given their overconfidence in their rightness and preference for symbol over substance, do these represent handicaps in the debate arena? The literature on counter-advocacy tells advocates to make sure to counterpunch in response to opponents' arguments. Maybe the opponents have a blind spot about holding up their end of the debate. Does the bombastic style of counter-advocacy tend to neglect keeping their case freshened, contributing to their eventual defeat?

Either way, our analysis points toward a strategy that could help not only to overcome bikelash to road diets but also prevail on other issues where local-level advocates are pitted against the proverbial Citizens Against Virtually Everything. (A key caveat: issues of gentrification make for a very different road diet debate.)

The **perseverance strategy** seems well suited to dealing with road diet opponents and may be more broadly applicable to other local issues with the following elements:

1. Opponents who inflate their political strength through overblown critiques, a high profile, and bold claims about public sentiment.
2. A base of support visible and active enough to undercut opposition claims about the unpopularity of the proposed change and ready to mobilize for key deliberations and votes.
3. A solid core of advocates as well as elected decision-maker champions to press the case all the way through to conclusion. Committed proponents who will push back against the counter-advocacy and navigate the decision-making process are essential.
4. A strong substantive case to refute the counter-advocacy's caricature of what advocates are proposing.

Whenever an advocate picks which change in policy they want to pursue, they have to assess their chances of success and what they'd be up against. The strategy of perseverance offers an alternative political calculus for high-decibel opposition—refusing to take their determined resistance at face value. Under this strategy, boisterousness is a double-edged sword. With such opponents, the fight cannot be avoided, will almost certainly get ugly, and requires significant effort. On the other hand, it could be more winnable than it seems.

Coauthors

[Ald. David Shorr's](#) evaluation consulting practice draws on extensive experience shaping debate and decisions in settings from high-level diplomacy and presidential politics to local land-use. Previously David served in senior roles with an array of leading philanthropies, think tanks, and advocacy groups: William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Stanley Center, Human Rights First, Refugees International, Search for Common Ground, British American Security Information Council, Arms Control Association, Physicians for Social Responsibility, and NYPIRG. His formal training was in the Harvard Kennedy School's MPA program, on top of a BA in religious studies from Brown University.

Kathleen Sullivan is an evaluator and strategist who has worked throughout her career to make laws and policies more fair, equitable, and inclusive. Prior to establishing her evaluation consultancy [fine gauge strategies](#), Kathleen was a program manager for several human rights organizations. While at Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., she supported staff in seven offices across the country representing low-income children and asylum seekers in immigration detention. Earlier in her career, Kathleen was Counsel to the US Senate Immigration Subcommittee (chaired by Sen. Ted Kennedy), represented low-income workers and asylum seekers in immigration court proceedings, and taught as an adjunct at UC Hastings College of the Law. She has an AB in history from Brown University, and a JD from Columbia University School of Law.