



10 Dexter Street, Newburyport, MA 01950  
<https://newburyportlivablestreets.org>

July 15, 2024

Newburyport City Council  
City Hall  
Newburyport, MA 01950

RE: COMM00561\_06\_24\_2024 – Request to increase speed limits on Graf Rd (to 35 mph), Hale St (30 mph), Parker St (35 mph), and portions of High St and Merrimac St (30 mph)

Dear Council President Cameron and Members of the City Council:

Communication 561 requests the City Council to “take whatever action necessary to restore pre-2017 speed limits” on five city streets, raising the limits from 25 mph to 30 or 35 mph, depending on the street. Newburyport Livable Streets is opposed to this request, and to raising the speed limits on any local street in the City.

#### Impacts of Increased Vehicle Speed on Risks to Vulnerable Users

Raising the speed limit has real and significant risks. A pedestrian who is struck by a driver doing 20 mph has an 18 percent chance of being killed. Increasing the vehicle speed to 30 mph increases the chance of a fatality to 50 percent. As we all know, many drivers on our local streets routinely exceed the 25 mph speed limit, so the existing risk is already much higher than suggested by this comparison.

This increase in the risks to pedestrians and bicyclists is further exacerbated by the fact that many drivers are still not respecting the Massachusetts Vulnerable Users Law that took effect in April 2023. That law requires drivers to give a safe passing distance of at least 4 feet, regardless of the vehicle speed or the road characteristics.

#### Conflict with City Policies to Improve Safety

Newburyport’s Mayor, City Council and departments have been working for several years to calm traffic, slow down vehicles and enhance pedestrian and bicycle safety along the streets cited in the request:

- On High Street, these efforts include the Safe Routes to School project between Johnson and Tyng Streets, the traffic safety modifications at March’s Hill, the placement of a pedestrian-activated crossing signal at the entrance to the Senior Community Center, the new curb

extensions and crosswalk in front of Olive's, and the planned traffic calming work between the Three Roads intersection and Upland Road.

- On Merrimac Street, the City Council has adopted a 20 mph Safety Zone between Moulton Street and Plummer Avenue to protect children and families who recreate at Pioneer Field and Lower Atkinson Common.
- On Hale Street, the City has engaged a consulting team to prepare a design to provide safer walking and biking infrastructure to make it possible for kids to get safely from the Turkey Hill Road neighborhoods to schools and recreation facilities on Low Street.
- On Parker Street, the City is close to completing the off-road multiuse trail connection east of State Street from Kelly's Hardware to the rail trail trailhead. And the City Council is planning to rezone several lots on Parker Street west of Boston Road for multifamily residences.

**Enacting special speed regulations to designate higher allowable speeds along these streets would run directly counter to the City's past and ongoing actions to make our streets safer and more comfortable for people walking and cycling.**

#### Time Savings from Increasing Speed Limits

Raising the speed limit on city streets from 25 mph to 30 mph would not result in any meaningful increase in "efficiency" or time savings for drivers:

- The entire length of High Street from the Three Roads intersection to Marlboro Street is 2.4 miles. Assuming that there are no impediments to a nonstop trip along the street (such as traffic lights or turning vehicles), this trip would take about 4.8 minutes at 30 mph and 5.8 minutes at 25 mph – a difference of only one minute. In reality, conditions on High Street interrupt the continuous traffic flow and slow speeds so that the time savings would be less than a minute. In addition to the traffic signals at State Street, High Street has 7 pedestrian-activated crossing signals. There are also places along High Street where traveling 30 mph, or even 25 mph, is sometimes not safe or possible due to congestion.
- For Merrimac Street between the roundabout and Route 1, a distance of about 2.1 miles, the unobstructed travel time would be 4.1 minutes at 30 mph and 5.0 minutes at 25 mph – a difference of 50 seconds. However, the City Council has designated a 20 mph safety zone in the middle of this stretch, which the 30 mph increase would not supersede. As a result, the time savings would be less than 45 seconds.
- And for Hale Street from Turkey Hill Road to Low Street, a distance of 1.75 miles, the travel time savings that would result from increasing the legal speed from 25 to 30 mph would be only 42 seconds.
- Parker Street has three distinct segments which are even shorter than the above streets: from Scotland Road at the Newbury line to the Graf Road traffic signal is 0.5 mile; from the signal to Route 1 is 0.4 mile; and from State Street to the Newbury line is only about 0.2 mile. None of these distances is enough for a 5 mph increase in speed to be at all significant. And even

combining the first Parker Street segment with Graf Road is only a total of a mile, so a driver might be able to save 24 seconds if both traffic lights were green.

**Clearly, any advantage to increasing the speed limits on these streets based on “inefficiency” or delays to travel is minimal at best.**

#### City-Wide Safe Speed Limit vs. “Selective” Regulations

In 2017 Newburyport opted in to MGL c. 90 § 17C, which allows communities to reduce the statutory speed limit from 30 mph to 25 mph in “thickly settled or business districts.” The letter requesting the increased speed limits states, “With little consideration given to the differing purposes and geometric characteristics of Newburyport streets, a simplistic one-size-fits-all approach to municipal speed limits was implemented.” It argues that Newburyport should have been “selective” in adopting the lower statutory speed limit.

However, the objection that a blanket speed limit should not apply to the entire city is explicitly contradicted by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, which states on its website “MassDOT recommends that if a municipality opts-in to MGL c. 90 § 17C, that it does so on a city- or town-wide basis to avoid potential confusion for drivers.” Of the 82 municipalities that have opted in to this statute to date, 67 (82%) have followed MassDOT’s recommendation and have done so on a city- or town-wide basis. In Essex County these include Amesbury, Ipswich, Beverly, Salem, Marblehead and Swampscott. Only 15 communities statewide have been “selective” in opting in to the statute, and only two of those (Billerica and Danvers) are in Essex County.

#### The 85<sup>th</sup> Percentile Rule

It used to be accepted by traffic engineers that speed limits should be set on the basis of how fast the majority of drivers are going. This was translated into a “rule” that set speed limits based on the actual 85<sup>th</sup> percentile speed. The 85<sup>th</sup> percentile rule reflects the attitude that the correct speed is the one that most people are doing on their own. While this might be appropriate on the open road, it doesn’t make sense in populated areas with parked cars, intersecting streets, and the need to share the street with people walking and cycling.

**We urge you not to enact new regulations that would increase the legal speed limits on any local streets, and instead to maintain the City’s existing ordinance establishing a 25 mph statutory speed limit on all City streets.**

Very truly yours,

**NEWBURYPORT LIVABLE STREETS**

Alden Clark	Sheila Taintor
Ben Iacono	Eric Tracey
Bonnie Sontag	Judy Tymon
Rick Taintor	Juliet Walker