



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

July 6, 2026

Mayor Sean Reardon
City of Newburyport
60 Pleasant Street
Newburyport, MA 01950

RE: Low Street Speed Limits

Dear Mayor Reardon:

Newburyport Livable Streets requests that the City of Newburyport take two actions in order to revert the speed limit on Low Street to the city-wide statutory speed limit of 25 miles per hour:

- Rescind Special Speed Regulation #7927;
- Amend the City Ordinance by deleting sections 13-187 and 13-188.

Background

In 2014 the City petitioned the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) to establish a special speed regulation for Low Street. The City was required to provide engineering studies and documentation in support of that request. On the basis of that information, MassDOT approved Special Speed Regulation #7927, setting the speed limits at 30 mph for the westerly 0.29 miles and 35 mph for the easterly 1.62 miles. On August 11, 2014, the City Council amended the City Ordinance by adding sections 13-187 (Thirty miles per hour) and 13-188 (Thirty-five miles per hour).

Although the culture is changing, engineering studies have typically recommended speed limits based on the observed 85th percentile speed, i.e., the speed which only 15% of drivers exceed. As noted in our Low Street Bike Audit report, the current 85th percentile speeds along Low Street range from 35 to 39 miles per hour, with median speeds between 29 and 34 mph.

For the past several years there have been discussions as to whether these higher speed limits still make sense for Low Street. The corridor provides direct or indirect access to many facilities that attract or serve vulnerable populations. These include:

Schools

- Francis T. Bresnahan Elementary School (via Murphy Ave and North Atkinson St)
- Edward G. Molin Upper Elementary School
- Rupert A. Nock Middle School
- River Valley Charter School

Day Care Facilities

- Bright Horizons at Newburyport
- Newburyport KinderCare

Recreation

- Clipper City Rail Trail
- Henry Graf Jr. Memorial Skating Rink
- Bradley Fuller Park
- Newburyport Recreation and Youth Center

Senior Housing

- Heritage House
- Horton Terrace (via North Atkinson St)

While most of these facilities are located along the eastern portion of Low Street, the western portion is largely residential, with single-family homes, front lawns and driveways. In addition, two new residential neighborhoods have developed adjacent to Low Street on Colby Farm Lane, and the City recently approved the Plaza Landings multifamily housing development on the former K-Mart site. These developments are bringing new residents, including many children, who walk and cycle along and across Low Street, where sidewalks only exist on one side of the street and dedicated bike facilities are nonexistent.

In the past three years, Newburyport Livable Streets has organized and led several community “audits” of walking and cycling safety conditions on Low Street:

- Walk audit on Low Street from Toppans Lane to Route One, December 2023
- Walk audit on Low Street from Storey Avenue to Port Plaza, June 2024
- Bike audit on Low Street from Storey Avenue to Route One, September 2025

A common theme running through the results of these audits is the lack of robust walking and cycling infrastructure on a road with high traffic volumes and vehicle speeds. The first recommendation of the Low Street Bike Audit was to lower the speed limit along the corridor to 25 miles per hour.

Procedure

According to MassDOT's "Procedures for Speed Zoning on State Highways and Municipal Roads", the process for rescinding a Special Speed Regulation is simple:

A municipality may decide to rescind an existing Special Speed Regulation on a municipal way. Doing so should only take place after careful consideration, as rescinding a Special Speed Regulation will change the speed laws, including enforcement methods, that govern the street will from MGL c. 90 § 18 to MGL c. 90 §§ 17 or 17C (as described in Part 2) and any regulatory speed limit signs will have to be removed.

If a city or town moves to rescind a Special Speed Regulation on a municipal way, it should specifically reference the regulation number and whether the rescission is for all or a portion of the regulation. If only a portion of the regulation is to be rescinded, it should clearly be noted in the action made by the body that governs the municipal traffic code. Upon approval by the municipality, a certified copy of the action shall be sent to:

State Traffic Engineer
Attention: Regulations Engineer
MassDOT Highway Division
10 Park Plaza, 7th Floor
Boston, MA 02116

Upon notification of the rescission, MassDOT will prepare a modified or rescinded Special Speed Regulation, depending upon the action taken by the municipality. Similar to the creation of a new Special Speed Regulation, this document will be signed by the Registrar of Motor Vehicles and the State Traffic Engineer, and copies will be supplied to the District Office and the municipality. At this time the municipality shall remove the regulatory speed limit signs and the speed enforcement of the road will revert to MGL c. 90 §§ 17 or 17C. Any new speed signage shall conform to the standards shown in Part 10 and the MUTCD.

Locally, the process would involve two separate actions:

1. Notification to MassDOT (presumably by the Mayor) that the City is rescinding all of Special Speed Regulation #7927 (i.e., for the entire length of Low Street); and
2. Approval by the City Council of an ordinance deleting sections 13-187 and 13-188 of the City Code.

In order to coordinate these two actions, it might make sense for the City Council to receive the proposed ordinance, refer it to committee, and at least pass first reading before submitting the rescission notice to MassDOT.

We look forward to discussing this proposal with the Administration and City Council.

Changing the speed limit will be an important step, but will not fully address existing safety issues along Low Street. Additional improvements will still be needed to help address driver behavior and improve conditions for people walking, biking, and crossing. Our Low Street Bike Audit report outlines some initial recommended measures, and previous studies and plans by the City and NLS (cited in our report) provide more extensive recommendations. We are encouraged that the approved Capital Improvement Plan now includes a Low Street corridor design study which will recommend specific improvements to enhance safety along the corridor.

Sincerely,



Rick Taintor, President

copy: Kim Turner, Director of Public Services
Brian Callahan, City Councilor, Ward 3
Beth Trach, City Councilor, Ward 4
Lisa Medina Smith, City Councilor, Ward 5