

## History

**M**enlo Park recently installed Phase I of the Willows Neighborhood Traffic Plan — 20 "experimental" traffic obstacles. This is the result of years of lobbying by members of the Willows Working Group (WWG), a small group of Willows residents obsessed with traffic on their streets. Aided by two consultants paid by the city, they devised a plan using obstacles to reduce traffic volume throughout the Willows, without regard to local conditions or the will of local residents.



Their plan complete, the WWG circulated a petition seeking neighborhood support for a "one year experimental program to limit through traffic." To influence opinion, they invoked the specters of crime and falling property values, using East Palo Alto's tragic crime wave of 1992 to scare us. By these means, they obtained approximately 800 signatures, less than 20% of the population affected. No court was made of the opposition.

In March 1993, the WWG asked the City Council to approve their plan. The cost estimated by the city engineer was \$516,000 for the experimental and permanent installations. In spite of vocal opposition from Willows residents, the Council approved the plan. The City Council created the Willows Traffic Committee, controlled by WWG members, to supervise the installation and evaluation of the obstacles. In eight months, the Committee managed only to 1) organize themselves, 2) make slight modifications to the WWG set of obstacles, 3) instruct the city engineer to design and install obstacles and, finally, 4) change their goals. "The goal is to increase the safety and suburban character of streets by installing traffic control devices... designed to reduce speed." When installation began in January 1994, they had set no criteria for measuring results.

Willows residents concerned about the Committee's goals have studied the city's traffic counts and accident statistics. We have concluded that there is no justification for spending city funds on these traffic obstacles. The Committee acknowledges that, whether traffic counts can be reduced or not, the Willows Traffic Plan is "a political solution, not a technical solution."

Spending tax dollars without insisting on measurable results is irresponsible. Willows accident rates have dropped steadily over the last three years, without the installation of a single obstacle. At the seven locations with the highest collision rates, the average number of accidents declined from 2.9 in 1991 to 0.6 in 1993.

## What we stand for — Safe Open Streets

**SOS** developed as a forum for Willows residents, whom we believe will oppose the Willows Traffic Plan when they know the extent of the incompetence which conceived and directs it. We believe in open, free access to public streets. We believe that no traffic control device should be installed which is not requested by 60% of the local residents and which is not warranted by accident, speed and volume statistics. The traffic program in Seattle is cited by the Willows Traffic Committee to justify its actions, but the Committee has ignored Seattle's insistence on public support. In Seattle a petition must be signed by 60% of the households in each block adjoining a requested traffic circle before it can be considered. Then accident, speed and volume statistics are checked to see if a circle is warranted.



◆ **Is this plan an effective use of tax dollars?**  
The city's estimate for the cost of one permanent circle is \$12,000. A four-way stop costs about \$800. Seattle found that even YIELD signs "produced about the same reduction in intersection collisions as traffic circles."

◆ **Are the obstacles themselves hazardous?**  
The Institute of Transportation Engineers says, "They present an increased hazard to pedestrians... automobiles can impinge on a bicyclist's path... vehicles passing to the left of a circle... each of these is an unsafe action which can be attributed to the circle itself."

◆ **Will obstacles divert traffic to other streets?**  
The goal of this "plan," until the Committee changed goals in December '93, was to divert cut-through traffic. Now the goal is to decrease speed... but the obstacles are unchanged. Of course they will divert traffic, including local traffic, onto adjacent, unobstructed streets.

◆ **Are the obstacles really "enhancements to the streetscape" or are they just plain ugly?**  
Denying the obvious, the Committee says they're "not just landscaped obstructions." In fact, there is no plan for landscaping in the one year trial period, or for maintaining the landscaping of the permanent installation. (In Seattle, maintenance is done by volunteers, or the soil is paved over.)

◆ **Is traffic volume excessive on Willows streets?**  
The city's data shows that the daily number of trips into and out of the Willows is normal residential traffic volume. It's not likely that obstacles, however numerous, will reduce the number of trips we make.

◆ **Can't speed be controlled more effectively by other means such as enforcement of existing laws?**  
How about posting speed limits? A traffic officer costs the city about \$74,000 per year. If the original estimated cost of \$516,000 for obstacles could be spent instead for law enforcement, we could have a half-time traffic officer for 14 years. The officer could be shared with other areas such as West Menlo.

◆ **Does the Willows Traffic Committee represent the neighborhood?**  
Six of the seven members of the Committee were WWG members. One dissenting WWG member described the organization like this: "The City of Menlo Park was an unwitting participant in the creation of an unaccountable lobby which claimed to represent residents... but failed to provide them with an opportunity to participate."

◆ **Is the petition, used by the WWG to justify this plan to the city, a valid indicator of neighborhood will?**  
Another dissenting WWG member stated, "A true consensus has not been arrived at. How can we as a group represent the community when we know that only half the truth has been given to them?"

## What we can do

Eventually the Willows Traffic Committee will survey neighborhood opinion. Why wait for them to permit us to speak? If we don't speak out now, Phase II (summer '94) will be much worse. The Willows Traffic Committee states that Phase I is a "soft" first step; in Phase II they intend to "over-install." Phase II may involve a total of 38 devices. We suggest a drive around the neighborhood to see how "soft" Phase I is.

To help save our community from this steamroller, SOS has created a petition, combined with a survey to determine your concerns. SOS is the only forum for opposition at this time. Please help us spread the word. The neighborhood needs your participation.

## SOS

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## NOW IS THE TIME TO HELP PROMOTE SAFE OPEN STREETS

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