

Urban Trail Trial Hindenburg?: Testy Tempers on Hope Street

Is a small group of radical environmentalists really seeking to undermine the rule of well-to-do senior citizens and their liberal neighbors? With all the NIMBY controversy surrounding the upcoming “Hope Street Temporary Trail,” you’d think they were constructing a prison.

From October 1-8, a temporary, two-way “Urban Trail” will be constructed on the east side of Hope Street from Tortilla Flats to Frog and Toad. Parking will be removed, pylons will be installed, and residents will get a taste of what the future may bring. At the end of the trial, the pylons will be removed and the parking reinstalled.

“We’re sick of plans sitting on the shelf as they tend to do,” said **Liza Burkin**, lead organizer of the Providence Streets Coalition (PSC). “We fight for or against mobility projects and make sure that the community knows about them.”

Founded in 2019 under the fiscal umbrella of GrowSmartRI, PSC has become the research and evangelical wing of outgoing mayor **Jorge Elorza’s** Great Streets Initiative.

Who could possibly be opposed to reshaping streets with goals like “Safety for all people, Clean, green and sustainable... Vibrant and prosperous”?

Turns out that a wide swath of neighbors and local businesses are. At a recent meeting in the Rochambeau Library more residents showed up than at a City Council debate.

Using a slide show, Burkin explained that traffic studies had been made, public meetings had been held, and that while the temporary trail was scheduled, there were neither funds nor plans for a permanent installation.

Concerns were raised about parking for businesses and density of traffic, especially north of Rochambeau Ave. What happens at 10am on a Thursday, when a truck is unloading, a RIPTA bus is going south and an ambulance is speeding to Miriam Hospital?

The answer? Essentially: We’ll see how it plays out during the trial.

What do the Hope Street businesses think?

More than two dozen Hope Street merchants sent a letter to the mayor on August 22 asking for the test to be abandoned, questioning the data and citing safety concerns.

But, on Instagram, one café owner wrote, “Not all business[es] oppose the bike lane test... Real cities have roads built for everyone, not just drivers.” The post, which has since been removed, then descended into irritation and expletive-laced accusation.

We interviewed several business owners, who argued for a calm discussion, but didn’t want their names used because of all the anger.

“Hope street is a narrow, congested commercial district,” said a shopkeeper. “We host city buses and school buses and we have countless delivery vehicles all day like beer trucks and food trucks. There are parallel streets, why do you pick the busiest street?”

Motif posted a request for comments on the local nextdoor, and got a deluge of vigorous (and sometimes vitriolic) opinions. Within a day, more than 200 comments had piled up.

“I believe it is misguided to fit a bike path through a small section of businesses that are so close together and reliant upon street parking,” wrote author **Robert Geake**. “Bikers may have asked for this but they are not thinking of these small community needs. More bike traffic would also curb pedestrian traffic, especially among the older in our community.”

To which **miko z** replied, “The density of people and businesses and people is precisely why a design like this is being proposed. It’s an ‘Urban Trail’ so it’s meant for more than bikes. It [is] for non-car traffic. The Hope St. sidewalk is very narrow in some places, and this is currently quite dangerous.”

The designation of the test as an “Urban Trail” actually helped it get funding from AARP, which sees it as a potential walking path for seniors (as well as bikes and scooters).

Seniors in the neighborhood, however, expressed their desire to drive and park their cars on Hope Street, while trail advocates expressed a belief that cars are on the way out, and the seniors were out of step with the times.

The anti-trail-trial folk countered, “...they want to kick us over to the side so they can have it all themselves. Why can’t they gentrify their own neighborhood and leave us alone?”

From both sides came reasoned arguments and impassioned rhetoric. So much kerfuffle over an eight-day test!

Burkin at PSC sees the trail trial as the physical embodiment of neighborhood outreach: “Every single time the city does some kind of street improvement project, people always say that they weren’t consulted and didn’t know it was happening. This is the most intensive community engagement that you can do... All we ask is that people be open to trying it out, not accepting or rejecting it based on their preconceived results.”

Form your own opinion. Visit Hope Street from October 1 through 8, and be sure to give your feedback. PSC says that volunteers will be on Hope Street during the trial, and there will be fliers with a web link and QR Codes for an online survey.

Note: Other funders for the test include 3M, which is providing signage, and Spin bikes.