A buzz word among transportation professionals today is “diet,” specifically the “road diet.” It has become an increasingly popular strategy to increase multi-modal road use and improve safety in urban areas, and it is starting to get some traction in small and rural communities. This article addresses pros and cons of road diet projects, feasibility, and community benefits to give local governments the necessary information to determine if road diets, or the underlying concepts, have a place in their communities.

What is a Road Diet?

Roadways without medians or other separation between opposing lanes of traffic often experience a relatively high number of crashes, especially between high-speed through-traffic, left-turning vehicles, and other road users. One safety countermeasure is the road diet, which typically involves removing or narrowing vehicle lanes and utilizing the space for other uses, such as a two-way left-turn lane, bike lanes, or parking.

Figure 1 shows the addition of a center two-way left-turn lane and wider shoulders.

Fact or Myth: Road Diets Make Traffic Worse

There is a common misconception that reducing the number of through-lanes on a multi-lane roadway (as when implementing a road diet) will cause congestion. This is not true when road diets are utilized strategically in the proper location and with the correct application. To determine if a road diet makes sense for a specific area, consider the following:

- Is the four-lane roadway already operating like a three-lane road (i.e. heavy left-turn movements)?

- Are the traffic volumes sufficiently low for a road diet to be implemented successfully, without lowering vehicular Level-of-Service (LOS)?

(Fspecific traffic volume thresholds are detailed in the next section.)

- Do controlled intersections along the road determine the effective capacity of the roadway (e.g. signalized intersections or stop signs)?

- Can a road diet help overall LOS? LOS measurements should account for all road users, not just motorists (e.g. bicyclists and pedestrians). Trading off a little vehicular capacity to benefit other road users may be well worth it in terms of safety and connectivity.

When is a Road Diet Appropriate?

Several transportation agencies, along with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), have developed traffic volume guidelines for assessing road diet viability and minimizing traffic disruption. Traffic volume thresholds for a 4-lane undivided roadway are:
Less than 10,000 ADT (Average Daily Traffic): Great candidate in most cases; capacity will most likely not be affected.

10,000 – 15,000 ADT: Good candidate in many cases. Conduct intersection analysis and consider signal retiming to determine any effect on capacity.

15,000 – 20,000 ADT: Good candidate in some cases. Conduct a corridor analysis. Capacity may be affected depending on the “before” condition.

Greater than 20,000 ADT: Complete a feasibility study to determine whether this is a good candidate. There are some examples nationwide that road diets have been successful with ADTs as high as 26,000. Capacity may be affected.

Also consider that some local roads were constructed prior to the completion of the Interstate Highway System and may no longer need to be as large as they are.

Some other types of data that may be useful in a road diet feasibility study include: lane width, speed limit, crash data, land use, number of access points, and road surface type.

**Factors to Consider**

**LOS** is one measure of road diet suitability, but the overall considerations, as with any road project, are safety, cost efficiency, and quality of life.

**Safety** – Road diets can make the roadway environment safer for all users by reducing the number of conflict points, potentially reducing crash frequency. Figure 2 identifies conflict points before and after a road diet.

**Cost efficiency** – Road diets make efficient use of the existing roadway cross-section, accommodating other modes (sidewalks, bike lanes) without having to acquire additional right-of-way. They can be implemented in conjunction with planned reconstruction or overlay projects to maximize safety and operational benefits, often at only the cost of restriping. A roadway repaving project can offer an opportunity to do a Road Diet.

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### Road Diet Pros

- **Slows Traffic:** Road diets can eliminate speeding and merge-and-weave driving. Slower traffic in downtown areas encourages shopping/economic development and cautious driving.

- **Improves Safety:** Crashes due to left-turning movements from through-travel lanes are reduced because movements have been moved to the center turn lane.

- **Complete Street:** Existing right-of-way width can be utilized for other uses, such as bicycle lanes, parking or streetscape enhancements.

- **Cost-Effective:** Diets are an inexpensive roadway fix, especially when part of an existing repaving project.

- **Lane Improvement:** By reducing the number of lanes, lane width can be improved to standard 12 feet in areas where lanes may be too narrow and not meeting standards.

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### Road Diet Cons

- **Slows Traffic:** All through-traffic in one direction must travel in one lane instead of two and is therefore limited by the speed of the slowest driver.

- **Difficult Entry:** Cars may have difficulty pulling onto the roadway from driveways or side streets if traffic volumes are high (above 15,000 vehicles per day) due to lack of gaps in the travel lane, especially during peak hours.

- **Level-of-Service:** Slightly reduces roadway capacity due to loss of a through-lane in each direction.

- **Sharing the Road:** If a bus runs on the road, after a road diet, all traffic will stop when bus stops for passengers because cars cannot pass bus in a second through-lane.

- **Driver Expectations:** Motorists accustomed to 4 lanes on the road will have to adjust to the 3-lane configuration.
Quality of Life – Road diets make wide streets more livable and easier to cross when on foot, providing a complete street environment.

Safety Benefits of Road Diets

One of the most important benefits of a road diet is improved safety for all road users. There are safety advantages to a 4-to-3 lane road reconfiguration, as seen in Figure 2. The National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP) reported crash reduction rates of 19 to 47 percent in a study of 4-to-3 lane reconfigurations with a center two-way left-turn lane.

The NCHRP study also reported fewer rear-end and left-turn crashes by using the two-way left-turn lane and fewer right-angle crashes with side street motorists, as they only need to cross three lanes of traffic instead of four. A reconfigured road also simplifies road scanning and gap selection for motorists making left-turns from side streets onto the mainline.

One effect of a road diet can be slower traffic, which can be both an asset and a disadvantage, as seen in the pro-con list in Figure 3. With only one through-lane each way, traffic tends to slow down. The reduced speed differential means fewer and less severe crashes.

Road dieting can also provide opportunities to install bike lanes within the existing cross section and allocate “leftover” roadway width for on-street parking, transit stops, or other functions.

Road Diets in Small and Rural Communities

There are no comprehensive studies of the effectiveness of road diets in rural or small communities compared to urban ones. Jack Messer, director of planning and development for the City of Overland Park, Kansas said it is difficult to generalize road diets as particularly good or bad for smaller communities. “It’s important to understand the context of the environment and the specific issue to be resolved,” he said.

Messer went on to explain the various reasons for considering a road diet, including: addressing a perceived or real speeding issue, providing space within the right-of-way for other uses, designing roads that take pedestrians and bicyclists into consideration, enhancing road aesthetics, and developing parking.

“As you can see, any or all of these things are potentially relevant discussion points and would apply regardless of the size of cities,” Messer said.

With the growing popularity of road diets, several studies have been conducted to further examine their effectiveness in general. A study in Michigan assessed crash data to pinpoint roads that would benefit from a road diet. Rural communities like Storm Lake, Iowa have also had good experiences with road dieting.

Genesee County, Michigan

After the Michigan state legislature passed a measure to encourage the development of Complete Streets in 2010, the Michigan Department of Transportation adopted a statewide policy and many municipalities followed suit. The Genesee County Planning Commission published a technical report exploring the use of road diets to achieve Complete Street goals.

According to the report, all types of crashes have declined on roads that were narrowed in recent years. Average annual reductions after conversions from four to three lanes were 31.8 percent for head-on crashes, 35.3 percent for rear-end crashes, and 32.8 percent for same-
side, side-swipe crashes. County planners have been suggesting several existing four-lane roads as candidates for road diets because they currently carry less traffic than they were initially designed to handle.

Some roads, like King Boulevard from Fifth Avenue to Welch Boulevard in Flint, MI, have already been narrowed, with wider shoulders or parking added with the extra right-of-way space.

Storm Lake and Muscatine, Iowa

Two cities in Iowa have also had positive experiences with the conversion of four-lane undivided roadways to a three-lane cross section. In 1996, the city of Storm Lake, Iowa converted a portion of Flindt Drive. This roadway was 40 feet wide and had an ADT of 8,500 VPD (Vehicles Per Day). No formal before-and-after analysis has been done, but there was a generally positive public response to the conversion. City officials are also pleased with the traffic flow and increased safety on the roadway.

The city of Muscatine, Iowa had a similar experience with the conversion of Clay Street. City engineer Ray Childs reported a large reduction in accidents due to the conversion. In general, the Iowa Department of Transportation has started encouraging the conversion of four-lane undivided roadways to three-lane cross sections where safety is an issue.

Road Diet Options

There are many options for using the space made available by removing lanes of through-traffic with a road diet. Popular uses for the space include: center two-way left-turn lane, street parking, bike lanes, and wider paved shoulders. Below are diagrams showing how space can be allocated in road diets.
While this is an urban area, commercial districts in rural areas have a similar look and a similar need for parking. Street parking was retained in this reconfigured road.

### East Hartford, Connecticut

The State of Connecticut Department of Transportation (CTDOT) recently performed a Road Diet on Burnside Avenue in the Town of East Hartford, Connecticut. Burnside Avenue was originally four lanes of through traffic, two in each direction, that were reduced to one through lane with dedicated bike lanes and parallel parking on both sides of the street.

#### Conclusion

Road dieting, or road reconstruction, is one of the twenty proven safety countermeasures recommended by the Federal Highway Administration under the “intersection and corridor” focus area. It is also an FHWA Every Day Counts initiative. A number of communities are coming onboard to use this concept as a tool to create complete streets that are friendly and safe to all road users, including pedestrians and bicyclists. Although the concept is not yet widely used in small and rural communities, it can be viable as an effective low-cost safety countermeasure in areas where conditions are suitable.

This article was adapted with permission from the Kansas Local Technical Assistance Program, at the University of Kansas.

### ADDITIONAL ROAD DIET RESOURCES

- Federal Highway Administration’s “Road Diet Informational Guide” (Report No. FHWA-SA-14-028)
- Road Diet Case Studies (Report No. FHWA SA-15-052)
- “Every Day Counts” (EDC), workshops and webinars through FHWA: [https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/innovation/everydaycounts/](https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/innovation/everydaycounts/)
- Speeds, Travel Times, Delays on US 75 4/3 Lane Conversion Through Sioux Center, Iowa (1999). Knapp and Giese. Iowa State University Center for Transportation Research and Education.

### References:

5. FHWA Road Diet Mythbusters. See Reference 3.
9. Email correspondence with Jack Messer, Director of Planning and Development for the City of Overland Park, KS. June 2016.
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