

Notes From Riverside Park Neighborhood Meeting to Discuss the Status of Street Closures

PREFACE

On March 24 at the Riverside Market, Jeff Moos, in association with the Board of Directors of the R.P.R.A., hosted a meeting to gather residents' input regarding the status of street closures that were temporarily removed to accommodate the recent sewer installation project.

During the time that the streets were open, some residents observed what they consider to be positive effects, while others observed what they consider to be negative effects.

A primary purpose of the meeting was to provide an initial forum for residents to voice their observations and opinions regarding the status of those street closures, as well as to record the comments of those in attendance as a starting place for further discussion. Another purpose was to solicit volunteers to participate in a committee that will schedule further opportunities for resident input, do additional research, organize the process of moving forward on this issue and develop a consensus regarding what method will be used to conduct a final vote on the proposals that may emerge.

This discussion identified five street closures about which attendees expressed an interest. Residents voiced their opinions regarding crime, fire/emergency response time, police response and pursuit, traffic flow, speed, fair distribution and shortcutting, pedestrian safety, and the safety of children playing near and in the subject streets. Those opinions are detailed in these notes.

It was reported for the record that all street closures that were temporarily opened are scheduled (and funded) for restoration to their original, closed configurations in accordance with existing City of Fort Lauderdale policy and contracts. Thus, the subject streets will retain their closed status unless and until the neighborhood requests that the City re-open them. Even then, as it was reported, there is no guarantee of City support or funding for whatever reconfiguration we may request. These facts were acknowledged by the attendees of the meeting.

Also noted was the comment, made by the police officer who was present, that there are advantages and disadvantages to closed streets. Either way, the police will work with whatever street configuration our neighborhood supports.

MEETING NOTES

The meeting was convened with an opportunity for everyone in attendance to introduce themselves and state their opinions about which street closure they were interested in or affected by. A map was provided for reference. The comments were recorded on large note pages by the facilitator, Tom Andrew. This accounting is based on those notes.

During the group's discussion, the following street closures were identified for consideration:

SW 18th Avenue at SW 11th Court
(South of Stranahan High School)

SW 9th Street at SW 15th Avenue

SW 5th Court at SW 15th Avenue

SW 16th Avenue at SW 5th Place
(Grouping of two closures)

SW 18th Avenue at SW 5th Place
(Immediately north of Stranahan High School)

Following are the specific comments that were made regarding each of them:

SW 18th Avenue at SW 11th Court
(South of Stranahan High School)

In favor of re-opening this street closure, the following opinions were voiced:

1. When this street closure is in place it is difficult to get into and out of the Sherwood Forest section of the neighborhood, especially during the hours when Stranahan High School buses are present on SW 9th Street and SW 15th Avenue. However, while this intersection was open, it was much easier for residents to get to and from their homes. Thus, re-opening the street closure would improve resident access and egress, and traffic flow in general.

2. When this street closure is in place it adds response time to police and fire/emergency vehicles. Re-opening it would reduce emergency response time.
3. When this street closure is in place it interferes with the ability of the police to pursue criminals by car. Re-opening it would facilitate police vehicle pursuit of criminals.
4. When this street closure is in place, loiterers (including presumed drug dealers) hang around on the railings there. Re-opening that closure would eliminate such loitering and discourage crime by providing more eyes on the area from resident motorists.

NOTE: There was significant support for re-opening this street closure.

In opposition to re-opening this street closure, the following opinions were voiced:

1. The original intent of this street closure was to limit easy access and quick getaways by criminals, including gangs, who were committing burglary, robbery, drug dealing and vandalism in the Sherwood Forest section of the Riverside Park neighborhood. It is feared that re-opening this closure will enable the return of these criminals and their activities.
2. It is feared if traffic flow is opened at this location, school buses and shortcutting motorists will overrun the Sherwood Forest area.
3. Limited access was cited as a generally desirable attribute of a neighborhood (or neighborhood subsection). The design of new developments that purposefully limit access was cited as an affirmation of this principle.

NOTE: There was significant opposition to re-opening this street closure.

SW 9th Street at SW 15th Avenue

In favor of re-opening this street closure, the following opinions were voiced:

1. During the time this street closure was opened to facilitate sewer construction and ameliorate the impact of the 11th Avenue Bridge closing, SW 9th Street offered a convenient alternative for getting into and out of Eastern Riverside Park.
2. While this street closure was down, it greatly improved access from Davie Boulevard to the business district of our neighborhood. These businesses serve the Riverside Park neighborhood, but also aspire to serve a larger community of patrons from outside the neighborhood. Therefore, re-opening SW 9 Street would be good for the financial health of our business district.
3. When this street closure was in place it was an impediment to vehicular pursuit of criminals by the police.
4. When this street closure was in place it funneled all eastern Riverside Park traffic onto SW 7th Street. If SW 9th Street were re-opened, traffic would be more evenly (and therefore more fairly) distributed.
5. As a variation of re-opening SW 9th Street outright, the possibility of a one-way pairing of SW 9th Street and SW 7th Street was proposed. Again, the idea would be to more fairly distribute eastern Riverside Park traffic.
6. When this street closure was in place, it was poorly maintained and was a dumping ground for trash and yard waste. Eliminating the closure would also eliminate the unsightly accumulation of trash and debris there.
7. When this street closure was in place it was a hangout for loiterers. Re-opening it would eliminate loitering and provide more eyes on the area from resident motorists.

NOTE: There was significant support for re-opening this street closure.

In opposition to re-opening this street closure, the following opinions were voiced:

1. While this street closure was temporarily opened, traffic volume and speed increased on SW 9th Street and SW 12th Avenue, endangering children playing in that area.
2. The original intent of this street closure was to interfere with the well-entrenched shortcut through our neighborhood to and from Davie and Broward Boulevards. A copy of a 1988 Dolph's Broward County road map showing Broward County's major thoroughfares was distributed to illustrate that point. The map showed the shortcut between Davie and Broward Boulevards, through Riverside Park, with as bold a line as Broward County's other major north/south thoroughfares such as Federal Highway and State Road 7. This map was presented to demonstrate that if SW 9th Street were re-opened (along with the 11th Avenue Bridge re-opening), non-neighborhood cars and trucks will undoubtedly return to exploiting our neighborhood as a north/south shortcut.
3. Regarding that shortcut being restored for cars and trucks if SW 9th Street is re-opened, there was speculation as to the weight limit of the repaired 11th Avenue Bridge. If the weight limit is increased it will accommodate even larger shortcutting trucks, but if it is not increased it will be hard on the bridge and/or enforcement efforts. Neither of these possibilities is desirable.
4. Regarding the concerns of SW 7th Street and business district property owners, it was noted that anyone who invested in their property while the SW 9th Street closure was in place did so in full awareness of its affect on traffic.
5. Regarding the concern about fair distribution of traffic between SW 9th Street and SW 7th Street, the presumption was made by some that there is a finite sum of vehicles that would use either or both of these streets. However, it was noted that the number of vehicles entering and exiting eastern Riverside Park is not necessarily a constant. The desirability of eastern Riverside as a shortcut, for instance, would increase the overall number of vehicles in the area. This was demonstrated by pre-street closure traffic studies showing that 2 out of every 3 cars going through eastern Riverside (either via SW 9th Street, SW 8th Court, SW 5th Place or SW 7th Street) were cutting through. Thus, even if SW 9th Street were to be re-opened, SW 7th Street may not get any actual relief; the result may simply be two stressed-out streets instead of one.

NOTE: There was significant opposition to opening this street closure.

SW 5th Court at SW 15th Avenue

In favor of re-opening this street closure, the following opinions were voiced:

If this street were re-opened, it would more fairly distribute traffic into and out of eastern Riverside Park while increasing access to the business district.

In opposition to re-opening this street closure, the following opinions were voiced:

This is an immutably closed street; the land has been vacated. Therefore this street closure is not eligible for reconsideration.

NOTE: There was little support for opening this street closure.

SW 16th Avenue at SW 5th Place

(Grouping of two closures)

In favor of re-opening these street closures, the following opinions were voiced:

1. While these street closures were opened, they offered an alternative route to and from Broward Boulevard.
2. These street closures are an impediment to vehicular pursuit of criminals by the police.
3. When this street closure was in place, it was poorly maintained and was a dumping ground for trash and yard waste. Eliminating the closure would eliminate the unsightly accumulation of trash and debris there.
4. When this street closure was in place it was a hangout for loiterers. Re-opening it would eliminate loitering and provide more eyes on the area from resident motorists.
5. Opening these streets might create a climate for redevelopment of the existing multi-unit housing.

NOTE: There was moderate support for re-opening this street closure.

In opposition to re-opening these street closures, the following opinions were voiced:

1. The original intent of this street closure was to limit easy access by drug dealers conducting business between the multi-unit buildings there and the criminal elements entrenched north of Broward Boulevard. It is feared that re-opening this closure will enable the return of this drug dealing connection.
2. It is feared if traffic flow is opened at this location, shortcutting will return. It was noted though, that with the street closure at SW 5th Place and SW 18th Avenue still in place, it would not be a particularly convenient short cut.
3. It is feared that if this street is re-opened, Stranahan High School will seize the opportunity to use more of our neighborhood for their bus traffic. It is also a concern that opening these streets may enable the school, in ways yet unforeseen, to develop their stadium plans, the scale and lighting aspects of which the neighborhood is on record as opposing.

NOTE: There was moderate opposition to re-opening this street closure.

SW 5th Court at SW 18th Avenue

In favor of re-opening this street closure, the following opinions were voiced:

Re-opening this street would be improve inter-neighborhood access.

NOTE: There was little support for re-opening this street closure.

In opposition to re-opening this street closure, the following opinions were voiced:

1. This street closure protects the Gill Isles section of Riverside Park from school traffic congestion, including buses. School traffic is still a problem, even with this closure, but it would be catastrophic if this street were re-opened.
2. The residents of the Gill Isles have already expressed their passionate and repeated support for this street closure.

NOTE: There was significant opposition to re-opening this street closure.

OTHER NOTES

1. At this initial meeting, several other traffic management options, aside from street closures, were proposed and discussed as methods to slow or deter traffic while improving resident and pedestrian safety. They included speed humps, sidewalks, additional stop signs, bike lanes, making streets one-way, and installing gate houses. The committee may further explore any or all of these options but it should be noted, as would be the case with any proposal to re-open a street, that these traffic management strategies would require political support and funding from the City Commission, neither of which are guaranteed.

2. Any traffic management option, including the reconfiguration of street closures, will need to be reconciled with the Riverside Park Neighborhood Master Plan's principle of preserving and encouraging pedestrian access wherever possible..

COMMITTEE MISSION

During the discussion of developing a committee to move this issue forward, several actions were identified that will require further research and development. They included:

1. Schedule and publicize additional meetings for residents to provide continuing input.
2. In preparation for future meetings, further research and develop the following:
 - a. Recommend which of the locations listed above deserve further consideration based on the levels of neighborhood interest.
 - b. Identify which, if any, are not eligible due to vacating of the street.
 - c. Review the opinions expressed above. Include and clarify additional opinions and perspectives, pro and con, as they are voiced.
 - d. Research crime statistics before and after the temporary re-openings. Look for changes or trends that may reveal an effect on crime while a street was open or closed

- e. Research fire/emergency response times with streets opened vs. closed. Explore designs that, if streets eventually do remained closed, allow for emergency access while impeding other vehicles.
- f. Research the weight limitation that will be in place when the 11th Avenue Bridge is re-opened.
- g. Explore the other traffic management options that were proposed as alternatives to (or in conjunction with) re-opening streets. Identify the practicality and costs of these proposed traffic management strategies. Recommend those that are practical, effective and fundable.
- h. Research the likelihood of school bus traffic traversing any streets that are re-opened.
- i. Consider what ways, if any, opening streets might enable Staranahan High School to embolden their plans to construct a large, Klieg lighted stadium.
- j. Explore alternatives to existing street closure designs that discourage littering and loitering as while improving the aesthetics, including landscaping.
- k. Develop a voting system to determine a consensus as to whether any subject street closure should be re-opened.
 - 1. Recommend a percentage of voters that will constitute a consensus.
 - 2. Recommend a system for voting
 - a. Physical ballots at monitored location
 - b. Petition voting
 - c. Online voting
 - 3. Recommend eligibility of voters
 - a. All residents of all areas voting on each subject street closure
 - b. Only residents of affected areas vote. if so, define "affected".
 - 4. Recommend system for publicizing the vote.