

Dear Planning Commissioners,

Due to recent rumblings, it seems like another good time to share a bit of Sebastopol history. Many people don't know that all of the streets downtown were two-way until 1985, and that changing them to one-way streets created a very long and bitter fight that caused painful rifts among neighbors and friends.

I became curious about the original decision, and before I knew it, became immersed, spending many hours researching the topic through old Sonoma West newspapers.

Before we consider opening a colossal can of worms and spend a bunch of money examining the possibility of switching back to a two-way street system, let's understand how we got to where we are today.

City Council members have heard complaints about traffic in Sebastopol since before the 1950's. All the streets in town were two-way and congestion and safety were increasing concerns.

From an article in Sonoma West, Feb. 24, 1977:

"The city's increasingly heavy traffic congestion results in an accident/injury rate above the state average for similar sized cities. More than 30% of all accidents occur within a block of the intersecting state routes." (Hwy. 12 & Hwy. 116)

From an article in Sonoma West, April 6, 1978:

"Traffic congestion is often said to be Sebastopol's biggest problem." This concern prompted many protracted and costly studies that have been done through the years for a bypass around town, but that is a story for another day.

From an article in Sonoma West, June 3rd, 1983:

"The change to one-way traffic on Main st. was first recommended in 1958."

The debate about one-way vs. two-way continued to build through the years and was emotionally charged, as an avalanche of letters to the editors show.

Finally, in 1984, the city council members put the "creation of a one way couplet" to a vote. This led to a blitz of efforts to win hearts and minds. Yard signs, car windows, buttons on clothing all divided up the people into two competing camps. Many people remember this as a painful period for Sebastopol, and the newspaper certainly shows this. It was "us against them" all over town.

The Arguments **Against** One-Way:

- *Northbound traffic (and customers) would miss seeing the Main St. shops, hurting sales.
- *Cars would speed through town.
- *Sebastopol's charm and "small-town feel" would be lost.

The Arguments **in Favor** of One-Way:

- *With no oncoming traffic, vehicles would be able to make left-hand and right hand turns without causing back-up.
- *Many people avoided coming to Sebastopol because of the gridlock traffic.
- *Businesses were moving away from Main St. because of gridlock. Redwood Market Place was built as a response to shoppers wanting to avoid Main St.
- *Residents of alternative route streets were concerned and tired of people speeding through their neighborhoods to avoid the congestion.
- *Bike riders on side streets were impacted by more traffic because drivers were using side streets to avoid getting stuck on Main St.
- *The constant cars, idling going both directions, were polluting the air and making it unpleasant for pedestrians.
- *Some drivers got so frustrated that they would "gun it" as soon as they could, often onto side streets.

*People were just sick of the gridlock.

*Safety was a big concern. Many accidents, including many serious ones involving pedestrians, had occurred for years, especially in the intersection of Main St. and Hwy 12. If pedestrians only had to worry about cars coming from one direction instead of from two directions it would be safer to cross the streets.

When the votes were counted in the June election of 1984 the results were:

931 in favor of one-way

887 against one-way

The merchants were also surveyed. Just over half of them voted in favor of one-way.

On June 17th, 1985 the one-way system became reality. Naturally, people's reactions were mixed, although an increasing number of merchants including Copperfield's (June 27, 1985), which had been opposed, expressed that the new system was better than they expected and did not result in a decrease in sales as they had feared it might.

From an article in Sonoma West, April 3, 1986:

"Sebastopol police Lt. Dwight Crandall said police studies taken six months before and six months after one-way streets came to Sebastopol show a decline in traffic accidents."

(This trend continued. From Sonoma West, June 4, 1987: With the increased population, vehicles moving through town has increased 7.9% from two years ago, but the accident rate has actually decreased by 37% since the introduction of one-way streets.)

From Sonoma West, Sept.10, 1986:

"A majority of Sebastopol residents and City Council (4 to1) members voted to adopt the one-way street system two years ago. Since then, many of the people who initially opposed the idea have conceded that it has indeed helped, but not completely solved, local traffic congestion problems. They also agree that the one way traffic system has enhanced the safety factor for motorists and pedestrians alike, a fact

attested to by virtually all local public safety and traffic officials." Speeding had actually decreased, not increased as feared.

From an article in Sonoma West, Feb. 19, 1987:

City traffic engineer Walter Laabs noted that vehicle counts on Main St. were **14,000 a day in 1986**. *"Traffic was flowing well. A year earlier, before the change to one-way, gridlock had been the norm."*

We now have over 38,000 vehicles a day. This count was from 2011, so it it's likely to be well over this now.

We have traffic problems now, but it's almost hard to imagine how much worse it could become if we were to go back to a two-way system.

Two way systems require more lanes in order to flow, especially for cars turning left against oncoming traffic. Fewer lanes, better flow. That is the benefit of the one-way system.

Between a half and a third of cars traveling south on Main St. turn left at the main intersection, heading east onto Hwy.12. That's a lot of cars turning left.

About a sixth of the cars traveling south on Main St. turn right onto Bodega, heading west. These vehicles turning right often have to wait for the pedestrians to cross before they can make their right turn. Fortunately, with the center lane, cars heading south can keep moving through and not get stuck behind those turning left or right.

If, by some unlikely miracle, a bypass around town could be accomplished some day, that would be a dream come true.

Unfortunately, as history shows us, there are huge obstacles with this option, which has been extensively studied and worked on repeatedly through the years.

Widening the sidewalks on Main St. and adding large planters would make walking along Main St. more inviting and comfortable. Perhaps the right traffic lane could be removed from the The Cookie Company to Copperfield's, creating a long and wide bump-out with trees, benches and a bike rack. Another crosswalk could be added in front of Copperfield's. After Copperfield's, the right turn lane could start. These

types of changes alone could make downtown much more pedestrian friendly without creating the gridlock of a two-way street.

Please, leaders, make sure you take the time to understand why and how things evolved. Unfortunately, Sebastopol developed right at the intersection of two highways. The needs of the people who have to get through town should be considered.

One more historical item: After the change to our one-way system, there was a vocal group calling for a return to the old two-way system. This was put on the ballot (Measure A) and put to a vote on June 2nd, 1987. The result was 1,600 (76%) of voters being in favor of keeping the one-way system, and 387 (24%) voting to return to the two-way system.

Thank you for listening.

Lisa [REDACTED]