



Why One Florida City Reversed Its Road Diet

Eric Jaffe * Jan 9, 2015

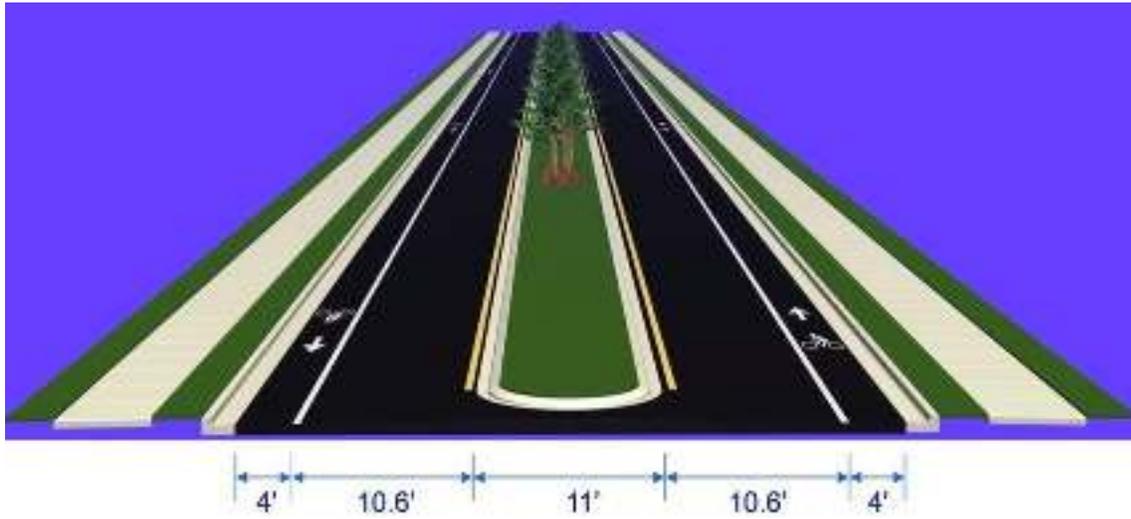
As Gainesville returns bike lanes to cars, the decision reflects a broader debate over removing traffic lanes.

In mid-2013, a mile-long stretch of 8th Avenue in Gainesville, Florida, went on a road diet. Four vehicle lanes became two for cars and two for cyclists (as shown in the rendering above). Pedestrians on adjacent sidewalks gained a bit more separation from moving traffic. A painted median reserved road space for a pleasantly landscaped version to come.

The hope was that the design trial would convince local officials to adopt a permanent two-lane multimodal street. Those hopes ended in December 2014.

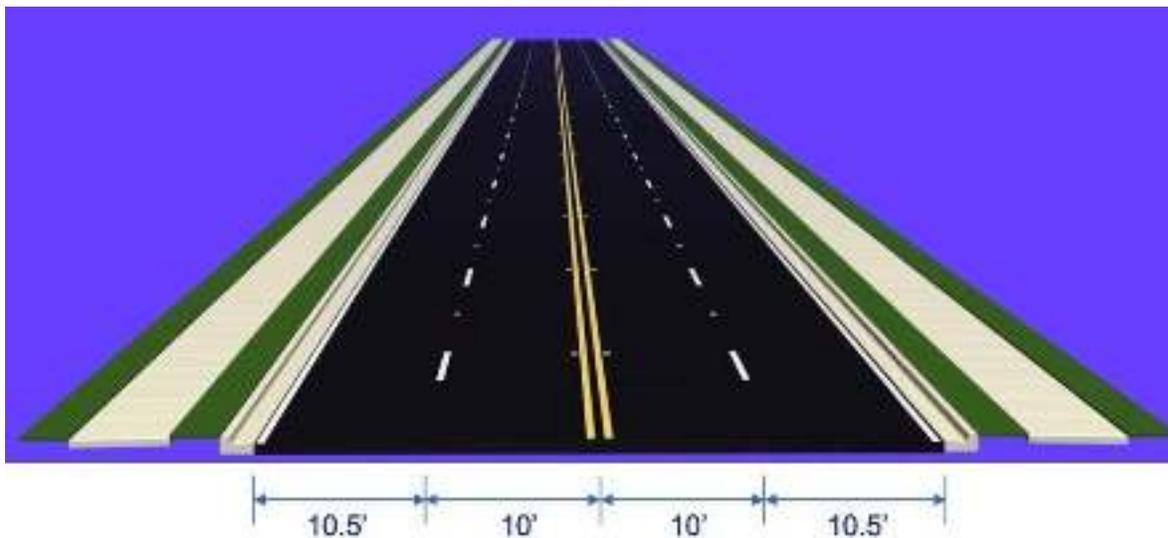
After a lengthy public hearing, the city commission voted 4-to-3 to reverse the road diet and revert 8th Avenue to its original form. That meant re-striping for four car lanes, nudging cyclists back onto the sidewalks, and reducing the median to a mere double yellow line. Public works crews finished the job last weekend.

Instead of getting a street like this:



(City of Gainesville)

The city got something closer to this:

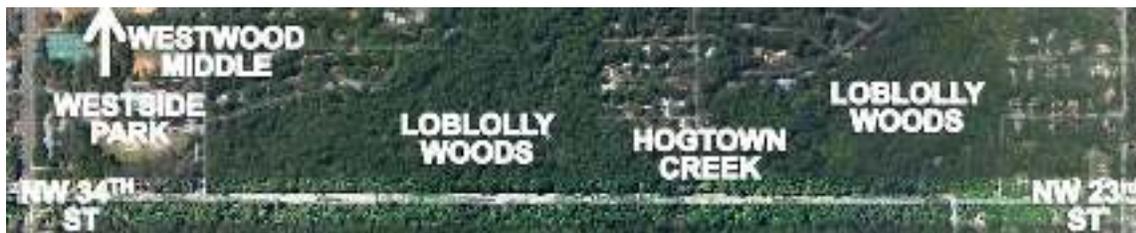


(City of Gainesville)

The life and death of the Gainesville road diet reflects the broader tension and debate that comes with removing traffic lanes on urban streets. On one hand, road diets have been called "one of the transportation safety field's greatest success stories," and often make a road better for all users without a measurable impact on traffic flow. On the other hand, drivers tend to oppose them out of a fear, real or perceived, that fewer lanes will mean greater congestion and delay.

"Depending on who you ask in town, they might say it was the greatest thing in the world, they might say it was the worst thing in the world," says Stefan Broadus, an engineer with the city and project manager for the 8th Avenue work. "Or anywhere in between."

Eighth Avenue in Gainesville is a major travel corridor just north of the University of Florida campus. The stretch that received the short-lived road diet trial, running between 23rd and 31st streets, slices through a 159-acre green space called Loblolly Woods (below). The western end of this segment serves a more residential part of the city, says Broadus, while the east end puts travelers closer to the historic part of town.



(City of Gainesville)

Gainesville has targeted 8th Avenue for improvements since the mid-1990s, but it wasn't until May 2013 that officials approved the lane reduction on a trial basis. The backlash didn't take long to emerge. By the end of 2013, the city had received 215 public comments opposing the road diet plan and just 53 favoring it. Still, that December, the committee voted 4-to-3 to keep the diet in place.

The opposition only grew louder in 2014. Broadus says the biggest point of contention was a tricky merge area, at 31st Street, where eastbound traffic went from two lanes down to one. Though pre-trial traffic simulations predicted no problems with the merge, actual traffic flows showed drivers struggling with the change, leading to a bottleneck at times that rippled congestion throughout the road system.

In November, Gainesville Mayor Ed Braddy raised the stakes with an editorial in the *Gainesville Sun* opposing the lane reduction as misguided "road diet ideology." Citing a low count of cyclists using the street bike lanes compared with those still riding on the sidewalk, Braddy said the 8th Avenue project failed in its goal of growing the city's "burgeoning bicycling community." He called for a return to four car lanes on 8th and the possible development of a nearby cycle track:

Shouldn't that be the goal for Gainesville? Or is it more important to promote road diet doctrine that inconveniences people in cars but only marginally affects bicycling?

Other statistics presented to the commission paint a slightly different picture of cyclist use. In 2011, before the road diet trial began, one daily cyclist count tallied 126 riders on the sidewalk and five in the street, for 131 in all. Those numbers were eclipsed at three counts that occurred during the trial itself, with total riders ranging between 137 and 168 riders, and around 40 riders using the street lanes each time—an eightfold jump in bike lane use.

And encouraging cycling was only one of the city's many stated goals for the 8th Avenue project. The Gainesville comprehensive plan aims to "meet the needs" of all travelers in the transportation system—in line with the metro area's broader push toward a stronger multimodal network by 2035. (It's worth noting that in September of 2014, as the design trial was still in progress, the Florida Department of Transportation adopted a similar "complete streets" policy for the entire state.)

The trial could also be viewed as a success on car-safety grounds. In 2012, before the road diet, there were 18 crashes on this stretch of 8th Avenue, resulting in 15 "incapacitating" injuries and an estimated total damage of roughly \$80,000. In 2013-14, with the road diet in effect, crashes didn't change much (there were 16), but only two resulted in serious injury and total damage was valued at \$36,000—possible signs that lower speeds had reduced crash severity.

Many locals ultimately came around on the project, too. In a signed petition submitted to the commission at the December 2014 public meeting, 20 area residents said that they'd gone from divided on the issue to "very supportive and enthusiastic" about the road diet's approval, largely because it had improved their daily lives:

There have been many benefits and none of the negative consequences originally projected. Traveling this wooded stretch of road more slowly and casually multiple times each day has resulted in cumulative quality of life enhancement that is particularly worthy of mention.

The fate of 8th Avenue's design isn't sealed just yet. But for now, it looks to be heading back toward its traditional four-lane car configuration, with a sidewalk expansion that provides room for cyclists and pedestrians alike—something similar to the rendering below. Broadus says a full cycle track with a physical separation for cyclists will also be considered among the alternatives he plans to present to the commission in February.



A potential alternative design for 8th Avenue. (City of Gainesville)

As for the bigger picture, Broadus doesn't think the 8th Avenue road diet should serve as a case study for other cities considering lane reductions. The situation was just too unique, he says, especially since the road in question ran through a wooded area and not a more typical urban corridor. He doesn't even think the outcome will prevent Gainesville—which did successfully reduce lanes on Main Street years back—from trying more road diets in the future.

"I haven't really made up my mind on what the exact outcome of it was," he says. "I don't want to say it didn't work. What was 'work'? How do you define success? You could ask a lot of people who live there, and they would say it was very successful."