

TO: All Boulder City Council Members  
FROM: All Boulder Transportation Advisory Board Members (TAB)  
DATE: September 14, 2022  
SUBJECT: TAB Recommends Not To Open West Pearl to Cars

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Dear City Council Members,

Staff made recommendations on West Pearl Street in its September 12, 2022 memo to TAB, [West Pearl Update](#). The memo suggests reopening West Pearl to cars. We agree with memo's sentiment about looking towards a more multimodal orientation downtown long-term, and towards that, believe an alternate course would serve the city better in the near term. We offer a few observations and three recommendations for your consideration.

**Observation: The data provided does not make the case for returning cars to West Pearl.**

From the survey of local businesses sent by email from Cris Jones to Hotline on September 12, 2022, we learned:

- **More than 60% of all businesses want some form of vehicle closure** on the west end, and 44% want it to be permanent
- **More than 50% of West End businesses want some form of closure** on the west end
- **About 65% said not to open to vehicles now**; either leave streets closed until a final decision is made or until Oct 31

Of the 60 written comments, about 25 are favorable to keeping West Pearl closed to cars, while 20 were supportive of reopening to cars. Around 15 were not decisive.

The sales tax revenue data shared with TAB did not demonstrate any relationship between car access and sales tax revenue along Pearl Street. We do not know how West Pearl compares to "like" streets which also previously had cars, we do not know the sample size of the study nor the composition of the businesses analyzed, and the study does not control for the exodus of workers in local buildings (e.g. changes with the Daily Camera). Furthermore, the sales tax data conflicts with the survey data showing increased sales.

We *do* know from data that Community Vitality shared with TAB in April that downtown Boulder has an oversupply of parking, with some public garages sitting more than half-empty. That study ranked private vehicle storage as the least desired use of curbspace downtown in public feedback. When considered alongside national studies that show businesses can benefit by being more accessible to people walking and bicycling, the local data fails to justify reopening West Pearl to cars.

**Observation: The proposed decision to return cars to West Pearl moves the city's stated transportation goals further out of reach.**

The main reason cited in staff's memo to return cars to West Pearl is perceived negative impact on business revenue, which is not demonstrated by the data. (It also includes matters that could be resolved through tactical improvements such as more permanent infrastructure to accommodate emergency vehicle access, access for people with ability impairments, parking for low-wage workers, and traffic operations, but these are imminently workable.)

Regardless, business revenue should not be the controlling consideration: It is relevant, but it needs to be weighed against other factors. According to Boulder's Transportation Master Plan (TMP), "Improving transportation safety is a top priority of the City of Boulder," a statement reinforced by the Council's prior commitment to Vision Zero. West Pearl will be **less safe** with cars returned, and will not meet national best practices for multimodal street design based on factors like car volume and curbside activity. Returning cars to West Pearl will not support any other TMP goals either—it will not ensure equity for people who do not drive, it will not prioritize the pedestrian, it will not reduce emissions or reduce congestion, and it won't bring new or innovative transportation options to downtown.

The car-free space of West Pearl is implicitly associated with the Connected Arterial Network (CAN), a Council priority initiated in December 2021 when it told staff to "be bold" and expect Council support. Removing car-free spaces that symbolize a renewed commitment to Vision Zero, mode shift, and climate action risks reverting to a prior way of planning and executing transportation projects that have left Boulder behind the pace needed to achieve our 2030 goals.

**Observation: West Pearl has sparked a new conversation around the untapped potential for our public streets and spaces.**

While the vehicle closure was originally prompted by an emergency order, the public space of West Pearl has since become a significant feature of Boulder's transportation system and culture. It is a community gathering place that supports the city's movement towards modal shift, reducing vehicle miles traveled, improving safety, and propelling climate action through building a wider ecosystem and culture of car-lite living. And it is a space that invites people of many demographics--shoppers and otherwise--to enjoy a wider public sphere where human interactions replace car congestion.

We have heard overwhelmingly in public comments that car-free West Pearl is a breath of life for Boulder and residents hope the city will further develop such spaces. More broadly, car-free West Pearl has created citywide expectations about what Boulder can and should do with its public spaces, a conversation TAB is excited to continue to engage in alongside council and staff.

**SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

While the decision to sunset the emergency order has been made, we have options for managing the transition. Options include keeping the space car-free and in a consistent form unless a holistic, evidence-based decision is made pointing to an alternative. This option has support from businesses, it averts the risk of bringing cars back only to reverse the decision following more comprehensive analysis, and agrees with survey data. TAB supports this option because it continues forward momentum, creates the most flexibility, and takes the city towards its goals.

Missing from the proposal is discussion on crucial considerations such as interpretation of equity, scope of TMP priorities, and weight given to feedback from the community at large versus a subset of local businesses. These considerations concern values of the kind Council should guide.

TAB proposes the following:

**#1. Do not open West Pearl to cars until we have clear direction about our plan for car-free spaces in the downtown core.** When Council adopted CAN as a work item, Council discussed the need to provide a steadier signal regarding the future of our multimodal system. After the past two tumultuous years of the pandemic, reintroducing cars while leaving uncertainty about the street's future threatens to create whiplash for West Pearl businesses and the wider community. Returning to business stakeholders in the future to propose yet another major change with traffic operations would be even more difficult and place staff in an impossible position. As such, bringing back cars now needs to be understood as a decision that brings weighty finality, not a simple product of administrative pre-programming set two years ago. Given the project's broad public support and safety benefits, the best investment is to continue providing a car-free space until future plans for the downtown are clear.

**#2. Use this opportunity to recommit to more car-free and car-lite spaces in Boulder.** There is resounding public support for more car-lite and car-free neighborhoods. Meet this demand by encouraging the city to invest even more in ways to cultivate multimodal travel options, while scrutinizing how we subsidize driving through our parking and other policies. We should take advantage of what we've learned and how we can apply it more broadly, in both the town core and other neighborhoods throughout Boulder. COVID gave us the chance to be nimble and try things we had been wanting to do for years, let's not squander that opportunity which peer cities are taking advantage of.

**#3. Encourage all of the city's departments that make transportation policy, especially Community Vitality, to meaningfully include TAB in decisions that concern parking and transportation matters, per [city code section 2-3-14. - Transportation Advisory Board](#).** The decision about West Pearl Street bears on several matters within TAB's purview including parking, neighborhood traffic mitigation, the city's modal shift goal, and the Transportation Master Plan, yet TAB has struggled to find opportunities to give input on West Pearl. TAB supports implementing people-centric streets throughout the city and produced a separate report to Council in June 2020, which ultimately was not put to use yet could have helpfully informed this situation. As city code directs TAB to advise City Council, the city manager, and Planning Board on parking and related transportation matters, we recommend that Council provide enhanced direction about its desired involvement by TAB in the proceedings of Community Vitality and other departments that make parking and other transportation policy going forward.

We stand ready to work with you and City staff to continue to make West Pearl, the wider town core, and all of Boulder the best they can be through strategic and thoughtful use of our shared public streets.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Davies, Transportation Advisory Board  
Tila Duhaime, Transportation Advisory Board  
Ryan Schuchard, Transportation Advisory Board  
Alex Weinheimer, Transportation Advisory Board  
Triny Willerton, Transportation Advisory Board