

Environmental Watch

Examining Environmental Claims and Their Costs • September 2008

Car-Free Days are Seattle's latest eco-fad, but are there any real benefits?

by Brandon Houskeeper

Policy Analyst, WPC's Center for the Environment

Claim

"Three Streets are being opened up on three Sundays to pedestrians and cyclists as part of Mayor Greg Nickels' campaign to combat global warming by encouraging residents to drive their cars 1,000 miles less a year."

Seattle Department of Transportation - Car-free Days website www.seattle.wa.gov/transportation/carfreedays.htm, accessed September 25, 2008.

"Neighbors will have three to six hours to experience our streets in a new way and to see how livable a city can be when people drive less," Nickels said. "This is our chance to experiment and to evaluate how these events work for people. And we'll be fighting global warming at the same time."

"Seattle opens up streets for people as part of 'Give Your Car the Summer Off,'" press release, City of Seattle, May 21, 2008.

Facts

Once again, Seattle officials have jumped on the eco-fads bandwagon, following other cities around the country in temporarily closing off streets to normal traffic, a practice known as Car-Free Days. This is part of a long standing effort by local governments to make people get out of their cars. Some environmental activists believe this represents an effective way to reduce global warming.

Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels announced early this summer the closure of three streets, which took place on Sunday's in August and September. The street closures are the latest steps in the Mayor's Climate Action Now campaign, which tries to get residents to reduce their personal contributions to climate change.¹

The Mayor is urging Seattle residents to reduce their annual miles driven by one thousand miles. This goal would require each citizen to drive on average about twenty miles less per week, compared to current miles traveled. The Mayor says citizens should do this to help the city reach its official global warming reduction goal.

No data is available

Now that the street closures have come and gone, Washington Policy Center staff set out to see whether the Mayor's Car-Free Days program had accomplished some of its goals, such as reducing the number of miles driven and reducing greenhouse gases.

¹ "Seattle opens up streets for people as part of 'Give Your Car the Summer Off,'" Press Release, City of Seattle, May 21, 2008.



Brandon Houskeeper
Policy Analyst
PO Box 3643
Seattle, WA 98124

bhouskeeper@washingtonpolicy.org
www.washingtonpolicy.org

We asked the city two questions. First, what data does the city have showing how many fewer miles were driven by Seattle residents because of Car-Free Days? Second, what was the total number of pounds of carbon pollution reduced as a result of this program?

City officials responded that they did not measure the effect of Car-Free Days, and they have no plans to do so in the future. In an e-mail, the city Department of Transportation said:

“I don’t have information on the reduction of miles and reduced carbon output based on the events, as they were intended to promote awareness of global warming, encourage people to drive 1,000 miles fewer a year and experience first hand what our streets could be like if Seattleites drove less.”²

With no data to show whether Car-Free Days made any difference, it is impossible to know what the value of future similar events would be. This has not prevented Seattle officials from dubbing the promotional events a success and announcing they plan similar one-day street closures in 2009.³

The Cost to Taxpayers

Seattle officials say they have not tallied the costs to the taxpayers of Car-Free Days. There is anecdotal evidence, however, that the cost to the public may be substantial.⁴

The largest cost is for labor. In order to close the streets, city workers needed to do hours of preparation work days in advance, posting signs along the closure routes and distributing notices to area residents.

Additional labor was needed the day of the street closure, putting up and taking down the temporary signs and installing traffic safety measures. Because these events were held on weekends, the extra labor would have been at a higher cost than if the events were held on a weekday. Also, at each closure, city police devoted extra hours to enforce the new rules of the road for that day.

A further cost to the public was the result of poor communication between city officials and residents living near the streets closed for Car-Free Days. City parking enforcement issued a number of citations and in some cases vehicles were towed at the owner’s expense. According to the city, 21 people were cited for parking violations, and 13 people had their cars towed away during the first street closure on that took place on Sunday, August 24th, on Capitol Hill.⁵

In response to the resulting public outcry, the city announced that

“Department of Transportation will reimburse towing charges on a case-by-case basis, contacting people and giving them the benefit of the doubt.”⁶

² E-mail communication from Dawn Schellenberg, Strategic Advisor, Department of Transportation, City of Seattle, September 11, 2008, A copy is available on request.

³ “Car Free Days come to Seattle: A fun, affordable, healthy way to enjoy our streets,” Seattle Department of Transportation, www.seattle.gov/transportation/carfreedays.htm, accessed September 26, 2008.

⁴ E-mail communication from Dawn Schellenberg, Strategic Advisor, Department of Transportation, City of Seattle, September 11, 2008, A copy is available on request.

⁵ “City to reimburse those towed on car-free Sunday,” by Noelene Clark, The Seattle Times, August 27, 2008.

⁶ Ibid, quoting Rick Sheridan of the Seattle Department of Transportation.

The cost to taxpayers is not the only expense that resulted from Car-Free Days. Ordinary citizens and businesses also paid a price. Cameron Duncan, manager of Duke's Chowder House on Alki told *The Seattle Times*,

“Alki is a destination. And on a beautiful sunny afternoon, we've made it very difficult for people to get here.”⁷

The *Times* reported Duncan sent some restaurant workers home early and told other employees not to come to work because of the slow lunchtime business that day.⁸ Workers in the Alki and Capitol Hill neighborhoods who experience shorter hours and slow business bore a direct personal cost for the Mayor's decision to close certain city streets.

City officials should include lost wages and reduced business activity if and when they complete their assessment of the public costs of temporary street closures.

Conclusion

Although city officials did not measure results, Car-Free Days probably did little or nothing to reduce the number of cars on the road during any of the three one-day events. There is also no evidence they had any effect in changing the daily driving habits of Seattle residents. There is also no indication that Car-Free Days have reduced miles driven in Seattle by 1,000 miles a year.

The lack of results, or even effort to measure results, indicates the Car-Free Days program is more about symbolism than substance. Like other eco-fads, the idea's primary benefit appears to be making Seattle leaders look like they are doing something about global warming, whether or not their program has any actual effect. When politicians grab onto trendy ideas, they conveniently forget that eco-fads often do more damage than good.

At the same time, Seattle leaders ignore advances that are creating real improvements in protecting our natural environment. Everywhere we look market-based environmental solutions that harness market creativity and incentives are improving the way we use the earth's resources. A good example is aluminum cans, which use 35 percent less aluminum today than in 1972.

The same spirit of innovation is improving the efficiency of cars, reducing energy use and producing technologies that use resources more sparingly. Better technology and improved fuel economy, not arbitrarily limiting people's ability to travel, is the real way to reduce the impact of driving on the environment.

⁷ “Car-free Sunday at Alki Beach gets mixed reviews,” by Lornet Turnbull, *The Seattle Times*, September 8, 2008.

⁸ *Ibid.*