Will converting St. Paul and Calvert Streets into Two-Way Streets make them twice as fun? Urban planners and local advocacy groups say Yes!

On October 28 at SS. Philip & James Church, the Baltimore City Department of Transportation (DOT) held a public meeting to discuss Two-Way Traffic Conversion on St. Paul and Calvert Streets. DOT will study whether to turn Calvert and Saint Paul Streets from parallel one-way streets into two 2-way streets.

Baltimore has done some small scale conversions in the past that have gone smoothly. In 2005, Lombard and Pratt streets were converted to two-way traffic for a section starting at Broadway and ending at Patterson Park. On the west side, Lombard has an additional two-way section from Fulton Avenue to Penn Street, near the University of Maryland Baltimore campus.

And though it may come as a surprise to motorists who live in perpetual fear of getting stuck in traffic, urban planners and local advocacy groups have long advocated for two-way traffic along the North/South corridors in the area covered by the new DOT study. Though previously studied for two-way, Charles Street has been left off the table for the new study. The idea to make Charles Street two-way dates back to (at least) the 1980s when Stanton Eckstut, a New York architect was hired by Baltimore City to create a plan for reinvigorating the thoroughfare. Along with other ideas, he suggested a two-way conversion. As late as July 7, 2003, Eckstut was still a proponent of the idea when he told the Baltimore Sun, “I think Charles Street should be a place you go to, not through.”

In a nutshell, that’s the argument for two-way streets. While some argue that the faster moving one-way streets also allow for efficient transportation into an urban area and not just out, there is no denying that one way streets came to the fore in the early 60s when the thinking was that cities...
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would function mainly as a workspace and the goal was to get people into work, and back to the suburbs, as quickly as possible, without stopping anywhere in between. Though, according to John Norquist, a former Milwaukee Mayor and early advocate for two-way conversion, the origin of one-way traffic grids is even more disturbing. In a USA Today piece from December 20, 2006, he opined, “the boom in one-way streets began with the Cold War in the 1950s, when cities planned quick routes out of town for evacuation in case of nuclear attack.”

But whatever the reasons for creating one-way streets to get out of town, most organizations dedicated to making Baltimore City a place you wouldn’t ever want to leave are excited by the prospect of the DOT’s new study. In October, the Mount Vernon Belvedere Association held a general membership meeting to discuss the study. The Central Baltimore Partnership also devoted a Partners Meeting to the topic. More than a decade ago, the Midtown Community Benefits District’s Midtown Community Plan, 2000, made this flat statement: “all streets within neighborhoods should be two-way.”

Our partner Jubilee Baltimore Inc., an organization that develops both market rate and affordable housing and works with various communities as a “one-stop shop for better neighborhoods,” has also been a forceful advocate. Its President, Charlie Duff, in a commentary in the Baltimore Sun, wrote, “Two-way streets calm traffic. They are safer for drivers, cyclists and pedestrians. They limit noise pollution and positively impact property values. They eventually reduce travel distance while bringing attention to local businesses. Finally, they go hand in hand with the fantastic movement of revitalization that many urban neighborhoods are currently witnessing after decades of disinvestment.”

At the Central Baltimore Partnership, we agree with the mainstream of the development and urban planning communities that two-way throughfares are an integral part of developing strong communities as part of an overarching strategy known as “complete streets.” As defined by neighborhood advocacy organization Smart Growth America—complete streets are “designed and operated to enable safe access for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders of all ages and abilities.”

This is important stuff. So, though we are still in the process of creating a formal position with our partners about the conversion of St. Paul and Calvert Streets, we devoted a public CBP Partners Meeting to the subject. Guest Speaker Sallye Perrin, Senior Vice President, Parsons Brinckerhoff, a multinational engineering and design firm, and Bolton Hill resident, made a presentation on the benefits of two-way conversion, citing:

- Enhanced pedestrian safety and comfort
- Improved navigation and accessibility
- Increased access to businesses and economic development
- Reduced car speeds and greater pedestrian and bike mode-share
- Increased property values
- Reduced pollution
- Decreased Vehicle Miles Traveled
- Crime reduction


With those goals in mind, several urban areas have made the switch in recent years. CBP has compiled a list of 20 cities with 100,000+ population that have taken the plunge. The cities encompass every geographical region in the U.S. and include every type of urban area from New York to Tampa.

But of all the cities on the list, none has had more dramatic results than Louisville, Kentucky. According to University of Louisville Professor, John Gilderbloom, who supervised a study, “two streets (Brook and First) that were converted nearly three years ago from multi-lane freeway-like to slow and sane streets for everyone,” writing in the Louisville Courier Journal, March 26, 2014. “The results were stunning... with a significant reduction in crime, accidents and an increase in property values, business profits, bike and pedestrian traffic. Million dollars spent on outside consultants never predicted this. The neighborhood is being reborn. Property improvements on the two-way streets have nearly doubled.”

One can only wish the same for St. Paul and Calvert Streets. If you were not able to make the DOT meetings or CBP’s Partners meeting, please consider contacting your community association and/or councilperson for more information or to share your position. Go to www.centralbaltimore.org if you’re interested in participating in the CBP Corridor Study Working Group.

—Joseph B. McNeely, Executive Director, Central Baltimore Partnership