

# COLUMBUS AVENUE STREET REDESIGN

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*Recommendations for Mitigating Unintended Impacts*

**February 2011**

Report by:

**Columbus Avenue Working Group**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) is a national leader in rethinking street designs to enhance public safety and reflect the wide variety of non-vehicular activities appropriate for thriving city streets. The City's expansion of bicycle lanes and the development of pedestrian plazas and pop-up cafés are just a few examples of creative steps taken by DOT to reclaim street space for non-vehicular uses. In some cases, such as the newly redesigned section of Columbus Avenue between West 77<sup>th</sup> and 96<sup>th</sup> Streets, businesses, residents and pedestrians have weighed in on these street reclamation projects, raising concerns that they would like to see addressed.

The Columbus Avenue Working Group (CAWG) was formed to address issues that materialized with the implementation of the new street redesign by working collaboratively to find comprehensive solutions. The working group conducted a block-by-block analysis using a questionnaire to gather input from business owners and managers on the street redesign. Local business owners guided the group's goals and helped formulate the assessment tool.

The purpose of this report is to provide suggestions from the Columbus Avenue business community to help mitigate certain negative impacts of the street redesign on small businesses without compromising the safety or effectiveness of the initiative.

In response to merchant concerns, the CAWG proposes the following recommendations to DOT:

1. Investigate shortening all mixing and turning lanes to increase metered parking.
2. Consider balancing local merchant needs for loading and parking zones by regulating different use of curbside space during different times of day, in cooperation and consultation with the CAWG.
3. Reprogram muni-meters to not issue permits during prohibited hours.
4. Streamline signage to reduce confusion.
5. Work with the New York City Fire Department (FDNY) to coordinate street use by (a) allowing parking in front of certain fire hydrants, and (b) relying on the bike path for fire truck access rather than adjacent parking spaces.
6. Work with the New York Police Department (NYPD) to enhance enforcement of the following violations: (a) misuse of the new loading zone, (b) illegal double parking and (c) misuse of city-issued parking placards, particularly in loading zones.
7. Work with Department of Sanitation and Department of Parks and Recreation to coordinate: (a) snow removal on the bike lane and (b) the maintenance of pedestrian refuge planters.
8. Work with the NYPD to enforce yielding on bike path.
9. Conduct a study of placard distribution and use.
10. Build on this model of stakeholder consultation in future street redesign.

## INTRODUCTION

In fall 2010, DOT implemented a new street redesign along the eastern side of Columbus Avenue between West 77<sup>th</sup> Street and West 96<sup>th</sup> Street. The street redesign included a protected bicycle lane, a floating parking lane, pedestrian refuges (small islands installed at intersections to reduce crossing length), narrower traffic lanes, left turn lanes, mixing lanes, installation of muni-meters (a centralized parking meter system), and a buffer zone. The purpose of the redesign was to increase safety and mobility for cyclists, pedestrians, and vehicular traffic. The redesign garnered support from elected officials, Community Board 7, residents, and businesses.

As the changes to the street design became operational, some Columbus Avenue merchants began to raise concerns, such as a loss of customer parking space and uncertainty about the new loading zones. Additionally, certain design changes relevant to these concerns were not presented to the community, specifically the inclusion of twenty-eight (28) pedestrian refuges (when the initial approved project included only six (6) pedestrian refuges), which further reduced the amount of space previously available for parking.

In an effort to better understand the Columbus Avenue business community's specific concerns about the DOT street redesign, the Columbus Avenue Working Group (CAWG) developed a brief, open-ended questionnaire that was distributed to all businesses on the east side of Columbus Avenue between West 77<sup>th</sup> Street and West 96<sup>th</sup> Street.

CAWG limited distribution of the questionnaire to businesses on the east side of the street, adjacent to the newly installed protected bike lane. Sixty five (65) businesses were approached and asked to participate in the study. Of those businesses, thirty six (36) completed the questionnaire – a 55 percent response rate. The questionnaire was provided to store owners and managers, and CAWG members conducted in-person follow up over several days.

The responses to the questionnaire revealed that the top concerns of Columbus Avenue merchants were the lack of space for parking and/or loading, issues receiving deliveries, increases in parking tickets received by vendors and customers, increases in traffic and congestion and loss of business due to decreased availability of customer parking spaces. None of the merchants indicated that the bike path itself had negatively impacted their business. Further, because the questionnaire focused on merchants' business operations, the feedback did not touch on the public safety elements of the redesign, namely, the expected reduction in collisions and injury rates which have accompanied similar street redesigns in the city and which benefit the community as a whole.

## METHODOLOGY

To obtain information from businesses, the CAWG formulated a written questionnaire with guidance from local business owners that asked respondents the following questions:

1. Has the new street redesign had a positive, negative or neutral effect on your business? If positive or negative, please elaborate.
2. Has the new street redesign impacted your ability to receive deliveries? What has been the effect?
3. Are there specific changes to the configuration of the bike lane on your block that you believe would either (a) enhance the positive impact that the bike lane has had on your business, OR (b) mitigate the negative impact that the bike lane has had on your business (i.e., installing a loading zone, parking needs, hydrant issues, etc.)?
4. Have you ever attempted to contact City Government to provide feedback on the new street redesign? If so, who did you contact and was this experience helpful?
5. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about the Columbus Avenue street redesign that you believe would be useful to the working group?

The questionnaire was distributed in person to store owners and managers for each business by members of the CAWG. The merchants had the option to complete the questionnaire on paper or to use an online version.

The CAWG chose to limit the study area to the businesses most affected by the redesign - the east side of Columbus Avenue between West 77<sup>th</sup> Street and West 96<sup>th</sup> Street. The responses were gathered during a one-month period, December 14, 2010 through January 14, 2011, between the hours of 2:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m.

While the CAWG contacted all business owners/managers in the study area, it was difficult to obtain responses from all businesses, perhaps because many were not able to take time away from the daily operations of their business to complete the questionnaire. In particular, several restaurants in the study area with bike delivery operations did not complete a questionnaire. The CAWG recognizes this limitation, but insofar as its efforts were focused on identifying and addressing merchant concerns, no further effort was made to solicit feedback from these businesses.

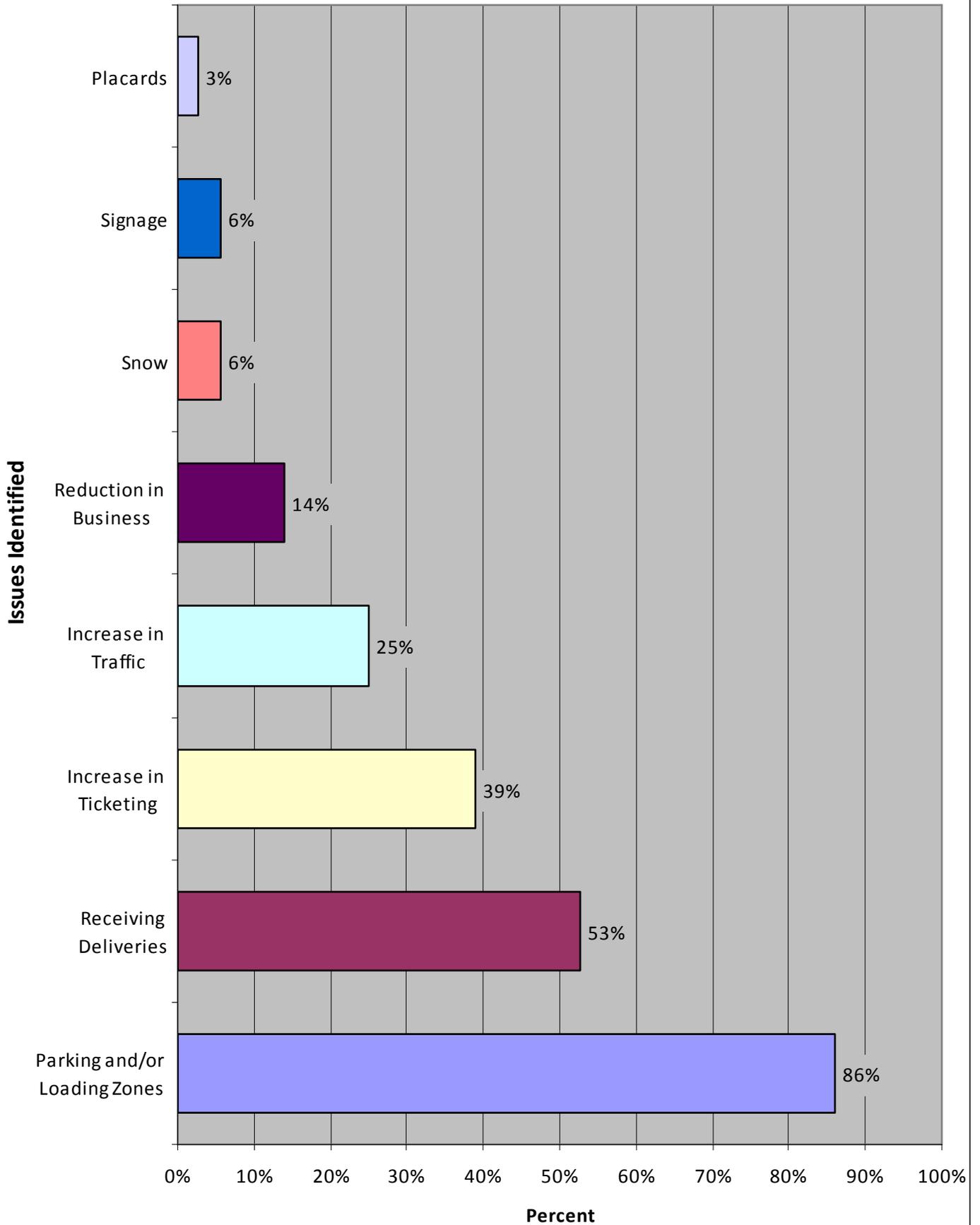
## FINDINGS

Of the 36 respondents, 72 percent responded they believe the street redesign had a negative impact on their business, compared to only 8 percent who said it had a positive impact (see Figure 1). The merchants were not asked to consider effects of the street redesign such as reduced crash and injury rates, or improved pedestrian mobility and safety along the corridor in general as it relates to their business operations. The respondents who indicated a negative effect on their business identified the following concerns:

- **Lack of space for parking and/or loading** – 86 percent, or 31 respondents, cited the reduction of space for parking and/or loading immediately in front of their business as their major concern.
- **Issues receiving deliveries** – 53 percent, or 19 respondents, stated that they have had difficulties receiving deliveries since the implementation of the new street redesign because of the lack of available space for vendors to unload merchandise. During the study period, it became clear that many of the new loading zones were being improperly blocked by vehicles not actively loading or unloading, which is an enforcement issue rather than a design issue.
- **Increase in tickets received** – 39 percent, or 14 respondents, indicated that the new street configuration was accompanied by an increase in parking citations, whereas before the redesign, vehicles routinely double-parked but were not regularly ticketed.
- **Increase in traffic/congestion** – 25 percent, or 9 respondents, indicated they had experienced an increase of traffic/congestion along the corridor. Inaccessible loading zones exacerbated double parking which slows traffic on Columbus Avenue.
- **Reduction in business** – 14 percent, or 5 respondents, indicated that the loss of space for customer parking has reduced their business. However, the questionnaire did not ask merchants to quantify the impact of the street redesign to their business.
- **Other issues identified:**
  - **Snow removal** – Two respondents indicated concern about the coordination of snow removal on the bike path.
  - **Signage** – Two respondents cited confusing or unclear signage along the corridor.
  - **Placard misuse** – One respondent, as well as CAWG members, observed vehicles with city-issued placards parking in loading zones or metered parking areas for long periods of time.

# Issues Identified by Columbus Avenue Merchants by Category

Columbus Avenue Working Group  
December 14, 2010 - January 14, 2011



## GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the responses received from the businesses, the Columbus Avenue Working Group (CAWG) makes the following recommendations to the New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) and other relevant city agencies:

- 1. Investigate shortening all mixing and turning lanes to increase metered parking.** Along the twenty blocks investigated, there are nine (9) blocks that include a mixing or turning lane which captures valuable space that could be used for customer parking and/or commercial loading zones. If these lanes can be shortened, within safety guidelines, it would add a significant amount of space for potential parking and/or loading options for those nine blocks.
- 2. Consider balancing local merchant needs for loading and parking zones by regulating different use of curbside space during different times of day, in cooperation and consultation with the CAWG.** The majority of the respondents stated the lack of loading space and parking availability as their main issues with the street redesign. While there was a clear consensus among respondents that new measures should be taken to address parking and loading, no clear remedy was articulated by respondents that could be consistently applied across Columbus Avenue. Thus, CAWG and DOT should conduct additional study and structure new weekday regulations grounded in specific feedback from business owners to address the lack of space for parking and/or loading and issues receiving deliveries.
- 3. Reprogram muni-meters to not issue permits during prohibited hours.** Muni-meters issue parking permits even when the local parking regulations are restricted to trucks loading and unloading. This conflict confuses both drivers and enforcement officers.
- 4. Streamline signage to reduce confusion.** The CAWG investigation revealed conflicting and/or confusing DOT signage. Various parking regulation signs posted on the sidewalk are eleven feet away from the floating parking lane, causing confusion for drivers to determine whether or not a parking space is legal. On Ninth Avenue where similar street treatments have been introduced, such parking signs have been relocated from the curb to the floating parking lane.
- 5. Work with the New York City Fire Department (FDNY) to coordinate street use by:**
  - a. Allowing parking in front of certain fire hydrants –** On Columbus Avenue between West 84<sup>th</sup> and 85<sup>th</sup> Streets there are two (2) active fire hydrants on one block, which eliminates sixty (60) feet of potential parking/loading space. DOT, in coordination with FDNY, should investigate the possibility of removing or allowing parking in front of one (1) fire hydrant.

**b. Investigate using the bike path for fire truck access instead of nearby parking spaces** – The protected bike path and buffer zone is eleven (11) feet wide. This width is sufficient to allow for clearance for Fire and Sanitation Department apparatuses. DOT and FDNY should study whether the bike path can be used for emergencies and make space available in the floating lane adjacent to hydrants for potential parking and/or loading.

**6. Work with the New York Police Department (NYPD) to enhance enforcement of the following violations:**

**a. Misuse of the new loading zone** – Respondents cited commercial vehicles using loading zones as parking spaces rather than for business, or vehicles blocking the loading areas without any active loading or unloading.

**b. Illegal double parking** – 22 percent of respondents indicated traffic and congestion as an issue with the new street redesign. Multiple members of the CAWG and merchants observed that much of the congestion on the street stems from double parked commercial vehicles. Accordingly, Traffic Enforcement should be educated on the new regulations concerning parking and loading in the study area and ticket vehicles not in compliance with the law.

**c. Misuse of city-issued parking placards, particularly in loading zones** – Merchants indicated that vehicles with city-issued parking placards take up potential customer parking spaces and loading areas, and have been parked in other no-parking or buffer areas. In one instance, there was an inoperable vehicle with a city-issued placard and one flat tire that appeared to be parked in the same location for several days. Parking placard holders should be more sensitive to the parking needs of the business community and their customers, and should not park in areas not designed for vehicle parking.

**7. Work with Department of Sanitation and Department of Parks and Recreation to coordinate:**

**a. Snow removal on the bike lane** – The bike lane and pedestrian refuges should be cleared of snow in a timely fashion to ensure that both pedestrians and cyclists can safely use the street.

**b. The maintenance of pedestrian refuge planters** – The pedestrian refuges include planters that must be properly maintained (planted, watered, cleared of debris, etc.).

**8. Work with the NYPD to enforce yielding on bike path.** The purpose of this study was to identify unintended effects of the street redesign on businesses along the corridor. However, merchants also noted concerns about cyclist behavior. Eleven percent of the respondents commented on the lack of NYPD enforcement on cyclists who do not yield to pedestrians, run red lights, or travel the wrong direction on the path. Where these

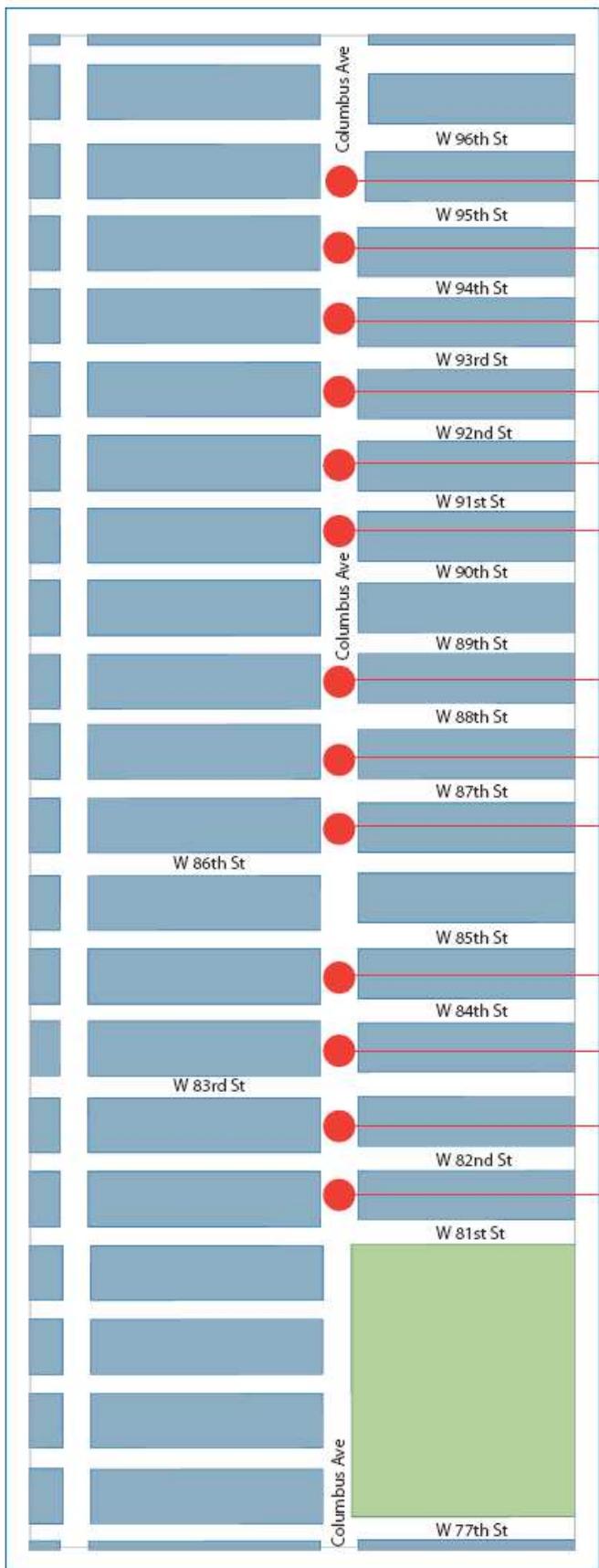
violations endanger public safety or interfere with others' right of way, the CAWG supports targeted enforcement.

- 9. Conduct study of placard distribution and use.** In the course of the study, the CAWG found that vehicles with city-issued parking placards appropriated parking spaces for entire blocks, prevented proper use of designated loading zones, and limited parking turnover. DOT should conduct a study on the use and distribution of the city-issued parking placards to deter this behavior in the future.
  
- 10. Build on this model of stakeholder consultation in future street redesign.** The best way to implement changes along multi-use corridors is to engage in a consultative process with stakeholders to resolve potential issues. DOT conducted significant outreach prior to the implementation of the project, but its public outreach during and after implementation was more limited. Both DOT and the community could have benefited from a more structured process for information exchange.

Finally, these are recommendations for mitigations. The CAWG urges the DOT to study the feasibility of these recommendations and suggest alternative mitigations if these solutions are not deemed appropriate.

## BLOCK BY BLOCK RECOMMENDATIONS

The Columbus Avenue Working Group puts forth the following block by block recommendations to the Department of Transportation.



Consult with businesses on loading and parking needs

Investigate reducing the mixing lane



Consult with businesses on loading and parking needs  
Add "No Idling" street sign in front of 689 Columbus Avenue

Investigate reducing the mixing lane

Consult with businesses on loading and parking needs

Investigate reducing the mixing lane



Consult with businesses on loading and parking needs  
Investigate reducing the mixing lane  
Replace "No Standing" with an "Ambulette Only" sign



Consult with businesses on loading and parking needs

Investigate reducing the turning lane  
Consult with businesses on loading and parking needs



Investigate removing or allowing parking in front of 1 fire hydrant



Consult with businesses on loading and parking needs

Investigate reducing the mixing lane

Investigate reducing the turning lane  
Enforce city-issued parking placard misuse



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