

Open Streets: A Case Study on San Francisco

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Introduction & Background

As the COVID-19 pandemic enters a second year, we can examine how city life has adapted to the social distant realities. Urban spaces face unique circumstances as stay at home orders confined people indoors and traffic steadily dwindled. At the same time, issues related to sustainability and climate change flared up in new ways as urban land use involving streets got called into question like never before.

San Francisco, CA as the main case study, Sunday Streets was the first program that San Francisco rolled out in order to promote bicycling within the ethnic minority and lower-income residents as a way to promote route development and increase social cohesion (Chaudhuri et. al., 2015). San Francisco now has in place the Slow Streets initiative, a program designed to limit certain residential streets and allow those streets to be used as shared streets and a way to support the local economy (Barnett, 2021). This program has affected change across the city as streets found new life as revamped, car-free community spaces geared toward facilitating pedestrian and cyclist access to essential services around the community.

With dozens of streets currently slowed, we ask what comes next for San Francisco's Slow Streets? How have the involved communities reacted to this program and what is the potential for programs like this to be made permanent as cities continue to grapple with ongoing climate realities? Where do Slow Streets and other active streets programs fit into an ongoing sustainability discourse increasingly focused on cutting back emissions and transforming land uses while mitigating displacement and dispossession?

San Francisco's Slow Streets Program offers a unique perspective in the search for sustainable solutions as a robust body of local reporting has made certain analysis possible in assessing sentiment toward the program among both individual neighborhoods and city leadership. Using Discourse Network Analysis (DNA), we seek to gauge support and opposition to the Slow Streets initiative and the proposition of Slow Street permanency.

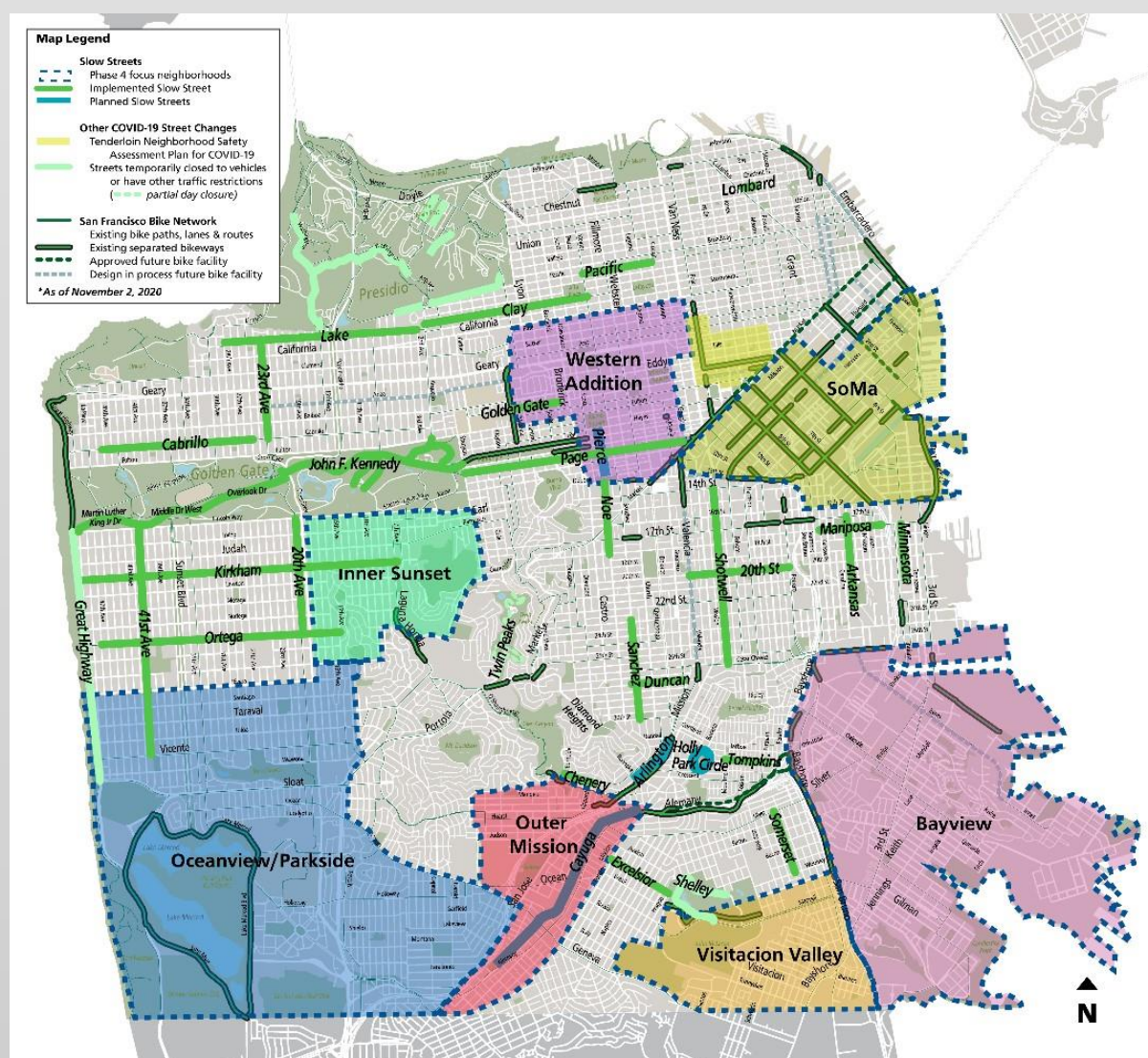


Figure 1. Map of Slow Streets showing the seven neighborhoods where conversations with residents will determine if there is interest and support for Slow Streets corridors there.

Methods

To dive into the Slow Streets program, it began with collecting news articles published in a variety of local publications. The group imported 40 total articles into the DNA software suite and coded the articles to reflect the quoted statements of local figures ranging from city officials to pandemic-affected business owners to residents sharing their experience on the "slowed" streets.

Further, including articles spanning the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, March 2020 to March 2021, allowed for the DNA software's resulting network graphic to account for phenomena including Slow Streets program rollout delays, localized news featuring specific Slow Streets communities (or omitted communities), and now, possibilities and realities around extending the program into a post-pandemic future.

The DNA software and coding work output contextualized the broader discourse around sustainable city planning, how that might be quantified, and the larger public reaction to the Slow Streets movement.

Results

After collecting and analyzing the reporting from March 2020 – March 2021, key themes, people, and organizations do emerge. While numerous SF city officials gave quotes to the press through this period, SFMTA Director Jeffrey Tumlin rises above all others in terms of media presence and promotion of the possibilities of Slow Streets permanency. Tumlin reliably cites positive user cases and public input via recurring survey work conducted by SFMTA staff. Such user cases are abundant and well-reported, including media writers themselves and a range of residents varying in age, transit modality, and Slow Streets use cases. Tumlin is also supported by other SFMTA staff including relevant program managers and spokespersons.

The SF County Board of Supervisors held up their obligation to the public, and while certain district representatives proved more vocal or quotable, the Board did well to work past some onerous legal appeals lodged by two particular citizens who were previously known around city hall. 3rd District Supervisor Aaron Peskin raised equity concerns early on, noting that certain streets were located in some less dense areas of the city. More streets would be added to the program to address equity concerns. The Tenderloin district surfaced as a space that did not fit the slow streets model and required particular attention, something 6th District Supervisor Matt Haney vocalized. The Tenderloin ended up being served by similar interventions, more suited to the area's higher vehicle traffic.

Outside of the government actors, Jodie Medeiros, executive director of Walk SF, was frequently quoted addressing a wide variety of issues. These include equity for different modalities, the permanency of Slow Streets infrastructure, and the urgency around facilitating relief for the Tenderloin district.

Newspaper Title	Newspaper Source	Quotation or Attributed Paraphrase	Person's name	Organization	Concept	Agree/Disagree
Three Slow Streets could become Permanent	The San Francisco Examiner (Online), San Francisco Media Company, Feb. 1, 2021.	Page, Sanchez and Showell streets have met the resident support needed to vote on these three Slow Streets becoming permanently closed to motor vehicles.	Director Jeffrey Tumlin	Municipal Transportation Agency - San Francisco CA	Keeping streets open for pedestrian traffic	Agree
SF could make Page, Showell, Sanchez slow	San Francisco Chronicle: Web Edition Articles (CA) - January 20, 2021.	"Because we've heard overwhelming support from the communities, we want to see if some elements of the program should extend beyond the emergency."	Shannon Haik		Should open streets continue after the pandemic	Agree
Schools are about to reopen, but how will students get there?	San Francisco Examiner (CA) March 13, 2021.	"School reopenings, as well as any other example of city reopening, is all factored into our 'Transportation Recovery Plan.'"	Spokeswoman Erica Kato	The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA)		Unknown
City working on making 3 Slow Streets	San Francisco Chronicle (CA) February 3, 2021	Survey shows Slow Street support; supervisor seeks sympathy for excess volume of vehicles	Supervisor Gordon Mar	San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency	Expressed concern over exposure to increased neighboring traffic.	Disagree
SF's Slow Streets program adds 14 more	San Francisco Chronicle: Web Edition Articles (CA) - July 16, 2020	"rather than merely being a place to exercise, it's time to pull our Slow Streets together into a network that allows most San Franciscans to be able to access essential services and employment without being reliant on either a car or MUNI."	Muni Spokeswoman Erica Kato	The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA)	The Slow Streets movement is driving traffic out of town.	Agree
'Slow streets' to stay beyond	San Francisco Chronicle (CA) - May 15, 2020	"It's becoming increasingly clear that crisis recovery is a slow road." "Slow streets will be in place for as long as they're needed."	Director Jamie Parks	The Livable Streets program at The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency	Slow Streets are needed for a slow recovery	Agree

Figure 2. Chart showing different quotes and/or attributed paraphrases about the Slow Streets Program. Also shows the stances that are taken (agree/disagree) to continue the Slow Streets Program.

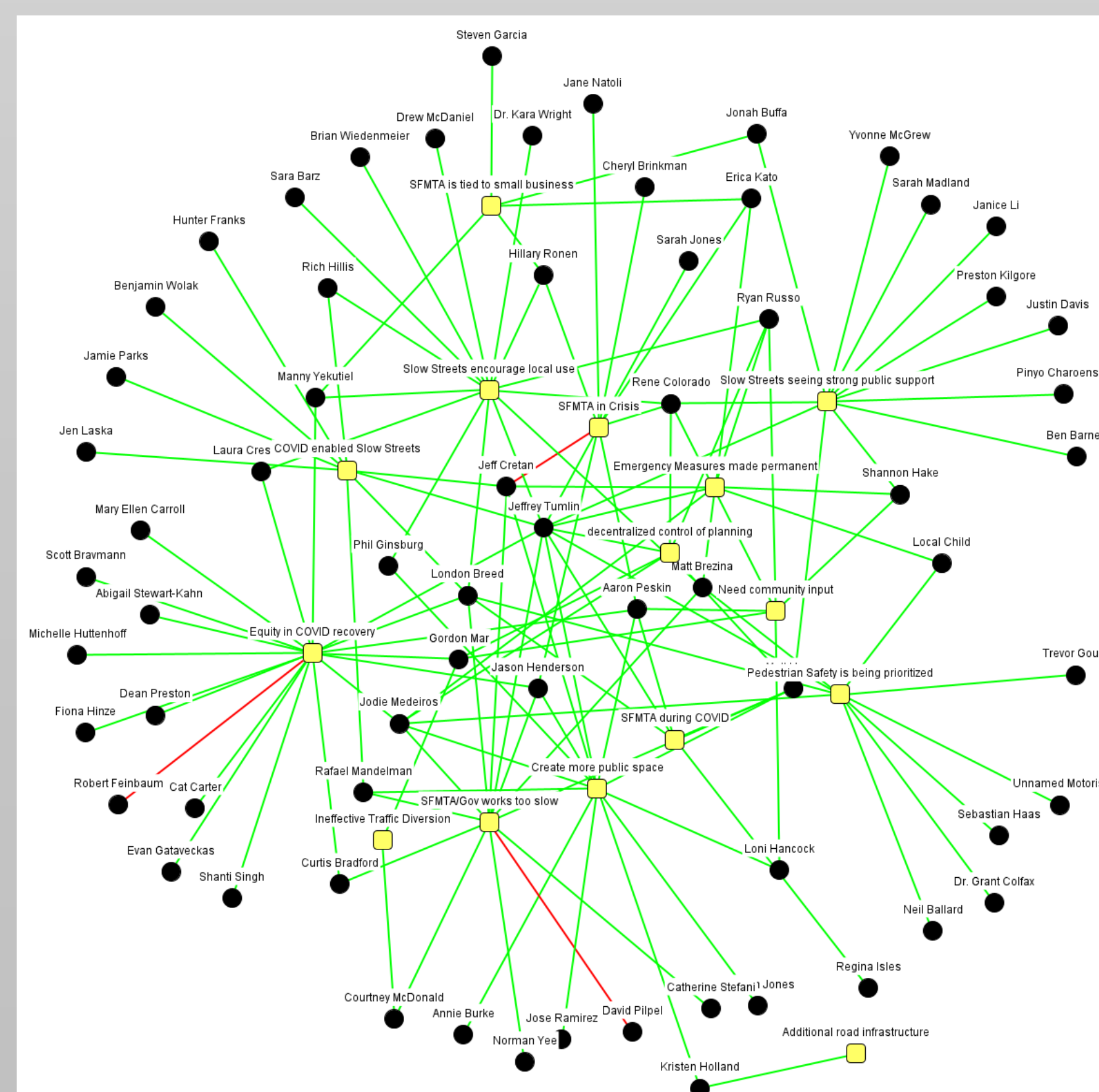


Figure 3. Discourse Network produced from Visone.

Discussion

Goals that the Slow Streets program aimed to achieve were to encourage safety, accessibility, equity, economy, and quality of life and public health (CalTrans, 2020). However, many residents mentioned concerns relating back to equity in the program. The program strived to eliminate transportation burdens for low-income communities, people of color, people with disabilities, and other disadvantaged groups, but results in the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) Report Card showed that almost 50% of the streets within the program need improvement in its equity category. This may be due to concerns on what Slow Streets may bring to the community and the uneven geography on which streets are a part of the Slow Street program. Some equity issues that arose were that Slow Streets will make the neighborhood more valuable in the market and potentially displace current residents as well may cause gentrification in lower-income communities. There is also uneven geography as there currently are areas in San Francisco where Slow Streets would be best placed but are not, some of these spaces being near Lake Merced and by 3rd Street.

Even with these pitfalls, Sunday Streets has had a positive impact on businesses along the route and raised questions about the potential of the positive spillover (Chaudhuri et. al., 2015). It has been shown in the results that there is widespread support for the Slow Streets initiative. With the growing rise in popularity there are some challenges that San Francisco will face, two main challenges will be the need of consistent funding and the actual implementation of the program (Hipp et. al., 2017). These two challenges can be overcome from the support that San Francisco residents may contribute by assisting the upkeep of streets from pollution and having their voices heard when it comes to policy changes in the Slow Street initiative. Overall, the support of residents will be the main driving factor that San Francisco will draw back on when deciding whether the Slow Streets program is to continue after the pandemic or not.

Conclusions/Recommendations

Out of 6,208 respondents, 78% of the respondents support the Slow Streets program and there has been a shown a growth of support over time with 22% of these respondents wanting for Slow Streets to take place in their own neighborhood (SFMTA, 2020). With a large support and popularity growth for the Slow Streets program, San Francisco should continue forward with its endeavors with its Slow Streets program.

This relates to sustainability as Slow Streets has the potential to cover the 3 E's of Sustainability: economy, equity, and environment. If Slow Streets are to continue, then it will lead to the prosperity of local businesses as stated by Chaudhuri et. al. (2015) as well have there already been results showing for a sense of community within the areas Slow Streets are being used. Environmentally, Slow Streets draw back to greenhouse gas emissions and the program's ability to reduce emissions generated by motor vehicles as residents in the community are encouraged to bike and walk to nearby locations.

San Francisco should continue with this momentum and create plans on how to execute the Slow Street program in different neighborhoods as well as improve on current signage and accessibility efforts being used. If San Francisco is to continue the Slow Streets program after the pandemic, the City should consider keeping Slow Streets in residential areas. This is so that there are no major conflicts on modes of transportation on major streets, highways, and freeways. Instead, San Francisco should consider the incorporation of Sunday Streets into the Slow Streets program by having the annual events of Sunday Streets be once every two weeks on major roads.

Since the initial newspaper study, recent reports show the SFMTA Board of Directors is considering nine additional Slow Street corridors. Equity issues linger as essential workers reports the original 26 Slow Streets fall into more affluent neighborhoods. Casting a net across the city to bring in a broader range of perspectives.

For more information

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