

# RETHINKING ROADS

## Debate rages over moves to cut traffic lanes

By Jim Benning ♦ Photograph by David Ricks

As she stood in her Long Beach boutique, Merry Colvin gestured out the front door toward Broadway and shook her head. Before the city reduced car lanes from four to two, added bike lanes, and reconfigured parking on a 2-mile stretch of Broadway last May, plenty of people would stop in on a typical weekend afternoon to shop for saris from India, beaded necklaces from Kenya, and other items, she said. But on a recent Sunday, Colvin's store, Merry's, was empty, and she blamed the changes on the street. "There's no parking and it's dangerous," she said. "The lanes are too narrow. There's no visibility. It's bad for everybody."

But Thomas Gaebel of nearby Signal Hill, who was cycling down one of the new bike lanes on a different day, paused long enough to say he loved the new design. "It's a safe and easy way to get across town," he said. "I suppose for drivers it's a bitter pill to swallow."

Debates are roiling across Southern California and the nation these days as cities aiming to slow traffic and make streets safer have cut automobile lanes on key streets—while often adding turn lanes, bike lanes, bus lanes, or new pedestrian zones to promote other ways of getting around. Transportation planners call these reductions in car lanes "road diets."

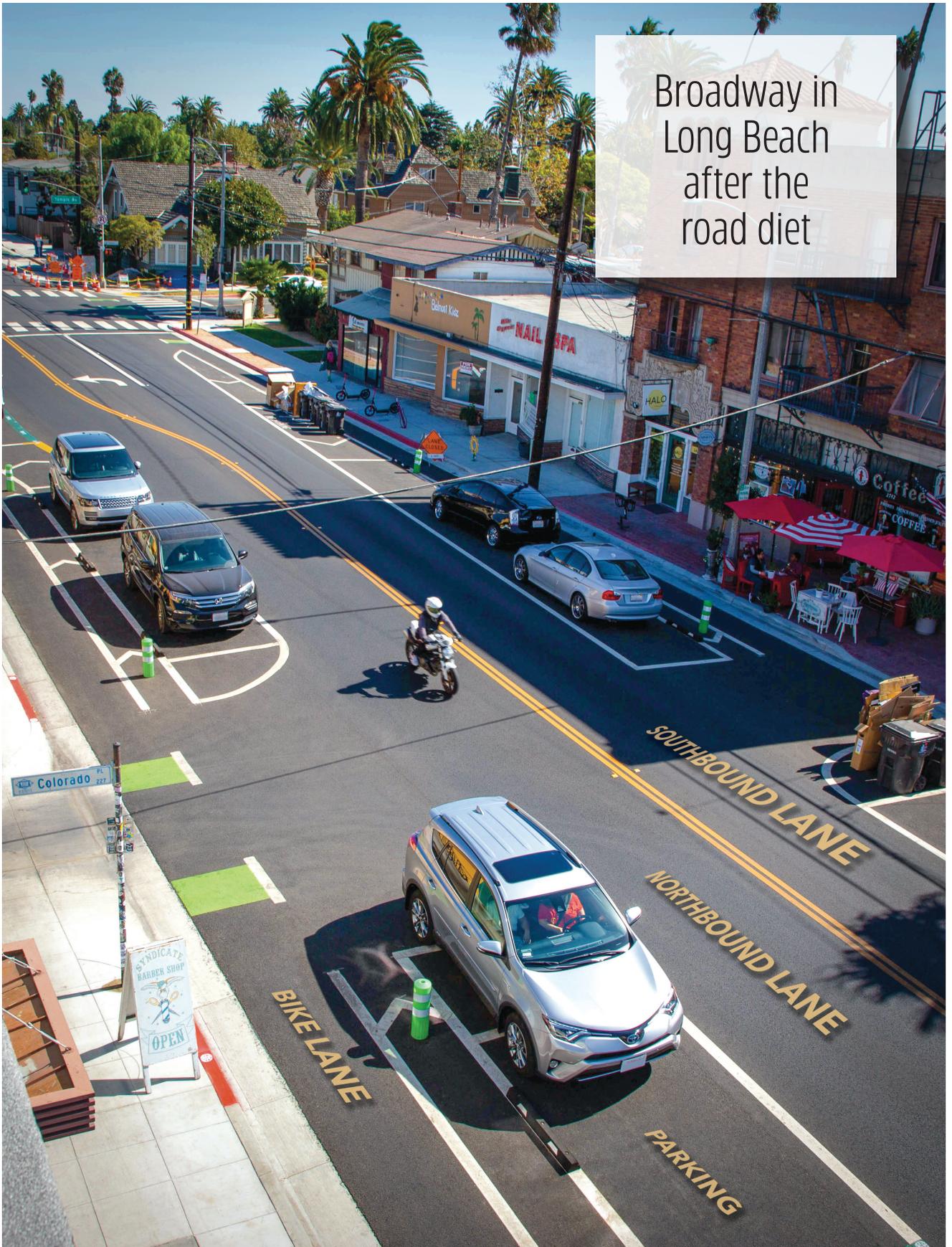
The approach dates back at least 40 years. As traffic in many U.S. cities increased in the 1950s and '60s, transportation officials responded by expanding the number of lanes on busy

thoroughfares—frequently from two to four. But in 1979, Billings, Montana, implemented one of the first known road diets, transforming a four-lane undivided highway to three lanes, including a two-way-turn lane in the middle. The change reportedly led to a drop in crashes, and over the coming decades, other cities experimented with road diets of their own.

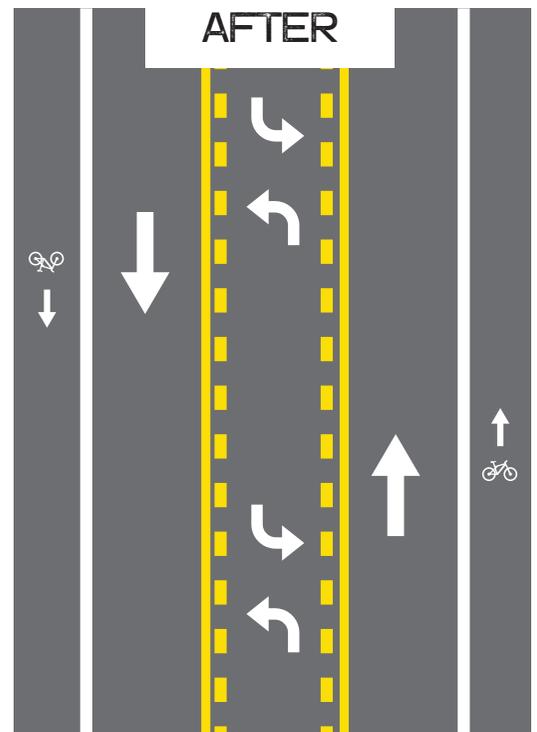
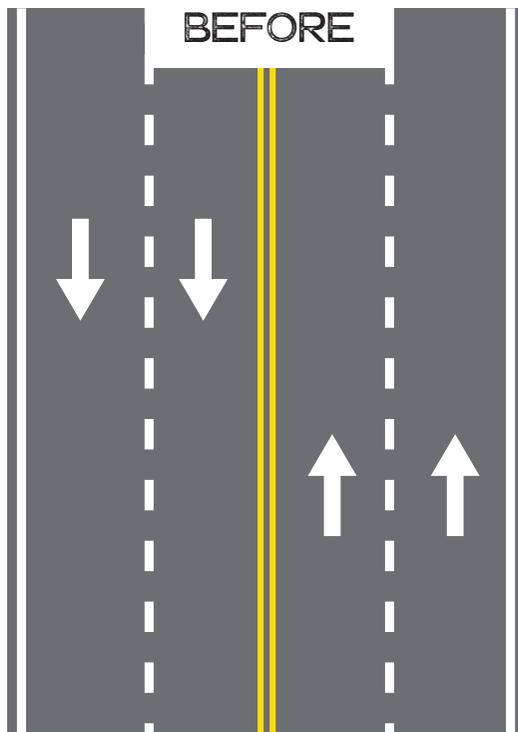
When done right, supporters say, road diets slow speeding cars and save lives. Proponents point to a 2011 study by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety that found that pedestrians struck by an automobile traveling 50 mph have about a 10 percent chance of survival, while those struck by a car going 23 mph have about an 80 percent chance. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, implementing road diets on undivided four-lane highways is a proven way to cut fatalities and injuries. For cities that have adopted Vision Zero—the Swedish-born, statistics-driven strategy to eliminate deadly traffic crashes—road diets are often seen as a useful tool for achieving safer roads.

"One of the most dangerous things about the road, if not *the* most dangerous, is speed," said Michael Manville, an associate professor of urban planning at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs and a supporter of many road diets. "The most effective way to reduce speed is not through police enforcement, which is labor intensive. Police can't be everywhere." Rather, he believes in slowing traffic through design changes that encourage reduced speeds. When confronted with fewer

Broadway in  
Long Beach  
after the  
road diet



ALTHOUGH DESIGNS VARY, THIS EXAMPLE TYPIFIES HOW A ROAD DIET CAN REDUCE VEHICLE LANES, WHILE ADDING DESIGNATED LANES FOR ALTERNATE FORMS OF TRANSPORTATION.



lanes and more pedestrians and cyclists, he said, most drivers instinctively respond with caution: “Road diets interrupt drivers’ reverie.”

But critics say road diets can increase congestion, slow emergency vehicles, hurt businesses, and in some cases make roads more dangerous. Additionally, driving is central to life in Southern California, those critics argue. Road diets can increase drivers’ commute times, they say, and that reduces drivers’ quality of life.

Some road diets have been particularly controversial. Case in point: the road diet the city of Los Angeles implemented on Vista del Mar in Playa del Rey in 2017. After a motorist fatally struck a teenage girl as she crossed four lanes of traffic west of LAX near Dockweiler State Beach, the city sought to make the thoroughfare safer and reduce liability by removing a lane of traffic in each direction. The city also eliminated parking on the road’s east side to discourage pedestrians from darting across traffic.

The response from commuters was swift: Many were taken by surprise and said they hated the change because it led to greater congestion and longer commutes. Citizens complained to city officials, filed lawsuits, and launched a recall campaign targeting the city councilman who championed the project. Councilman Mike Bonin soon apologized to angry drivers, and, in short order, the city restored the lanes it had taken away. (Some safety improvements remained. For example, flashing beacon crosswalks on Vista del Mar at Culver Boulevard and Pershing Drive warn drivers of pedestrians crossing.)

The Los Angeles Department of Transportation remains committed to using road diets to reduce traffic fatalities. But the public outcry after the Vista del Mar redesign “underscores the importance of having a robust public engagement strategy when pursuing major changes to corridors,” said spokesman Colin Sweeney.

Meanwhile, in Long Beach, the debate over the Broadway road diet has raged. Colvin recently decided to permanently close her store, Merry’s, in January. A number of stores displayed signs in windows that declared: BROADWAY ROAD DIET ENDANGERS LIVES and “ROAD DIETS” = REDUCED PARKING & STARVED BUSINESSES. Robert Fox, one of several candidates for City Council, has been a vocal critic of the new design. He said crashes on the street were up since the road diet went into effect—an assertion city officials say is premature.

City Councilwoman Jeannine Pearce, who represents the neighborhood, conceded that the city could have done a better job of educating residents about the change. “The first week of implementation was chaos,” she said. As for the road diet’s effect on businesses, a number of shopkeepers on Broadway were happy with the change, she said. She contended that some merchants were already struggling and have unfairly blamed the road diet for their woes. The new design is a work in progress, she insisted, and will be fine-tuned over time. “Change is really hard,” she said.

**Jim Benning** is a features editor at *Westways*.