

DAILY BREEZE

‘Political knife fight’ erupts over Vista del Mar lane reductions



Manhattan Beach is considering taking legal action against the Los Angeles Department of Transportation over sudden lane reductions and parking reconfigurations on Vista Del Mar that have backed up traffic and irked commuters. Photo by Brad Graverson/The Daily Breeze/SCNG

By [Megan Barnes](#), Daily Breeze

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Karla Mendelson has become used to dealing with increasing traffic over the past 25 years she has lived in Manhattan Beach.

It usually takes her husband, Patrick, about an hour to get home from his advertising job in Santa Monica taking Vista del Mar, the coastal thoroughfare that runs along Dockweiler State Beach.

But ever since crews [took away one lane in each direction](#) earlier this month to make room for U-turn pockets and 400 reconfigured parking spaces, it sometimes takes him twice as long.

The sudden backup is just unacceptable, she said.

“It’s just beyond comprehension, it’s unbelievable,” said Mendelson, who remembers less populated days when the drive only took 25 minutes. “When you take into account the morning commute, I don’t know how people are going to manage.”

The “road diet” implemented by the Los Angeles Department of Transportation to slow motorists and prevent pedestrian deaths has sparked a torrent of backlash from South Bay residents like the Mendelsons, who rely on the artery daily to connect to the Westside.

City officials in Manhattan Beach are also frustrated. They say they were blindsided and excluded from a rushed decision-making process.

In a closed session this week, the City Council voted to explore taking legal action, solicit [public feedback](#), write a formal letter of opposition and form a special subcommittee.

“All of us are extremely sensitive to the fact of traffic fatalities, but there are other less extreme measures that could have been selected,” said Manhattan Beach Mayor David Lesser. “The way this was done, it appears the true goal is to deter traffic from traveling in Playa del Rey.”

On the other end of the street, Westside L.A. City Councilman Mike Bonin is doubling down on his criticism of irked commuters.

Too many pedestrians have died making the dangerous trip across Vista del Mar, he said, one that has been eliminated since parking is now prohibited on the east side of the street.

The changes came after the city agreed in April to pay \$9.5 million to the family of a 16-year-old girl who was struck and killed by a taxi when she crossed the street two years ago.

“I have received emails — mostly from the South Bay — describing collision victims as ‘ignorant’ and ‘too stupid to use a crosswalk,’ Bonin wrote in a [message to his constituents](#) Wednesday. “I’ve received social media comments from beach city residents suggesting periodic deaths and severe injuries are an acceptable cost of their unfettered commutes through Playa del Rey. I categorically reject those statements, and I think we can do better than this.”

The changes also came when stretches of Pershing Drive, Culver Boulevard and Jefferson Boulevard received similar restriping as part of a Safe Streets for Playa del Rey Initiative. But those changes are part of a pilot program and involved far more public outreach.

“With respect to our friends in the South Bay, many of whom have made clear they would rather see a four-lane highway traverse our neighborhood in Playa del Rey, I won’t solve their 405 traffic problem on the backs of the people I represent,” Bonin continued. “I will not risk the lives

of those who live in and visit our neighborhood in order to provide a convenient cut-through for their commute to Santa Monica or Marina del Rey.”

Mendelson and other residents opposed to the changes say they’re being inaccurately portrayed as whiney millionaires.

“We’re hearing from doctors who are unable to get to the hospital on time, patients unable to make their appointments and businesses in Playa del Rey seeing their numbers drop by 15 percent,” said Mendelson, a leader of a grass-roots group that has [raised more than \\$16,000](#) to mount their own legal challenge.

Members have gathered more than [6,000 online petition signatures](#) and filed an appeal to the Los Angeles City Council.

Their Facebook page, [Keep Vista Del Mar Open](#), has more than 1,500 likes.

Lyndsey Nolan, public policy and outreach coordinator at the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition, which supports the changes, believes the backlash will subside eventually.

“I think there’s a lot of misinformation and exaggeration and that’s normal any time there are changes to the layout of a street,” she said. “I think it’ll mellow out and you just have to stay engaged and also pay attention to what the facts are and not buy into the outrage.”

Not all members of the cycling community feel the same way.

Take Todd Dipaola, a founder and former board member of the South Bay Bicycle Coalition.

“I am exactly the individual that should be supporting changes like this. I support the goal and believe it is achievable, but not this train wreck implementation,” he said in an email.

When the South Bay Bicycle Coalition — which hasn’t taken a stance on the street changes — wrote a bicycle master plan for the region six years ago, seven cities were engaged, Dipaola said.

But that’s not what happened here.

“I 100 percent respect the goal, but am very disappointed with the process. Poorly thought out, nonpublicly vetted, and hastily executed projects can create a backlash against safe streets,” he said. “Unfortunately, we have taken a solvable engineering problem that is becoming a political knife fight.”

Bonin’s office also is [accepting public feedback](#), and says changes could be made in the future. It will all be discussed at a Department of Transportation meeting at the end of July.

“We need your input and constructive suggestions as we gather data about safety and traffic so we can keep what works, and change what doesn’t,” Bonin wrote.

“Not every neighbor will agree with every part of this, but as long as we are all working toward a common goal — safe and inviting neighborhood streets that minimize traffic — we can make Playa del Rey an even better and more vibrant community.”