



A FREE GUIDE FROM MR. BARRICADE

# How to Change Your **Street**

A civil engineer's step-by-step guide to getting a safer crosswalk, slower traffic, a protected bike lane, or a new sidewalk where you live.

**Vignesh Swaminathan, PE**

Mr. Barricade / @mrbaricade / 1.6M on TikTok

## STEP 01

# Why your voice works

Cities almost always have more street problems than money to fix them. Projects do not get built in the order people complain. They get built in the order they rise to the top of a list, and residents can move them up that list.

## What usually moves a project up.

- **Safety history:** reported crashes, especially ones with injuries.
- **Who uses it:** kids near schools, older adults, transit riders, people without cars.
- **Fit with adopted plans:** a safety plan, bike plan, or Safe Routes to School plan.
- **Cost and timing:** can it ride along with a repaving job or a grant?
- **Documented support:** requests, letters, and public comment on record.

## Where residents make the difference.

- Written requests create a record staff can point to when they ask for funding.
- Elected officials pay close attention to people in their own district.
- Public comment goes into the official record of a meeting.
- Organized neighbors help a project survive the pushback that comes with change.

### ENGINEER'S NOTE

Staff inside your city often want the same thing you do. Your job is to give them a paper trail, a clear ask, and visible support so the project can win its spot on the list.

## How to use this guide.

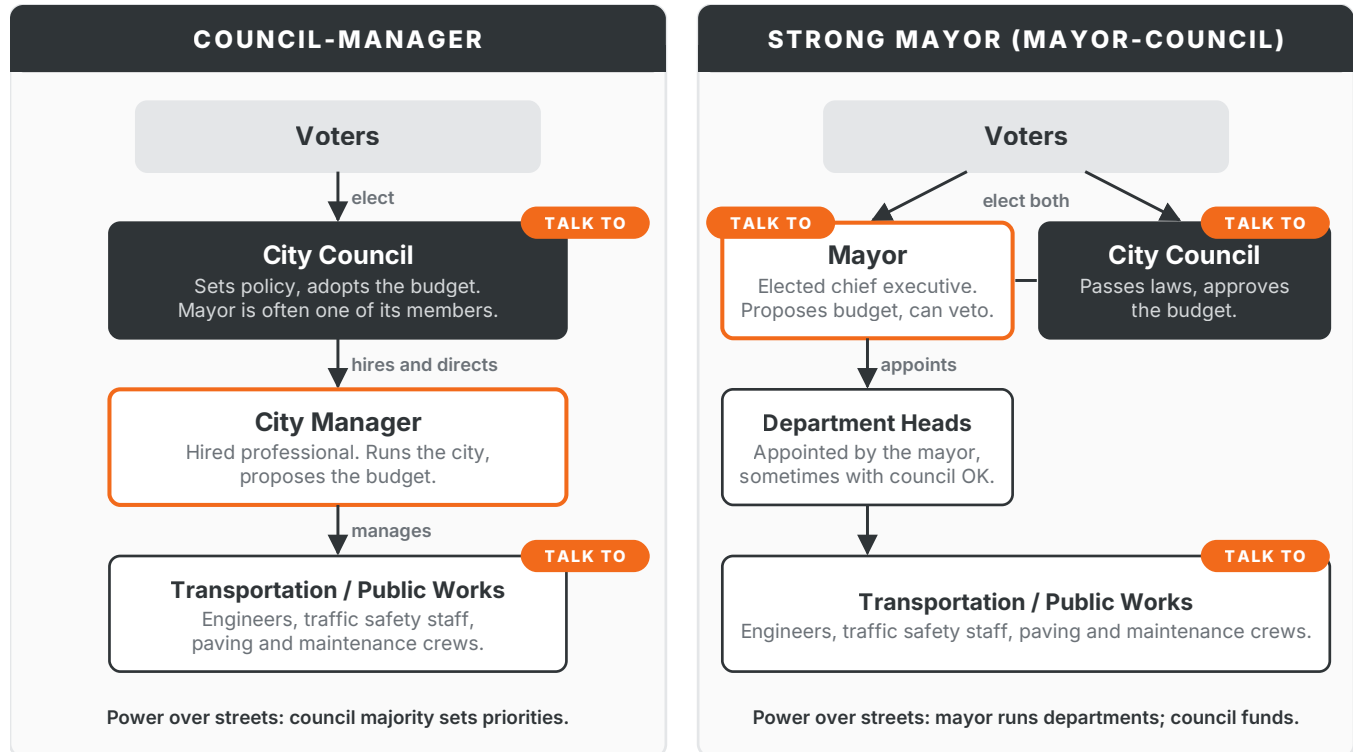
| STEPS     | WHAT YOU WILL LEARN                                                                  |
|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 02 and 03 | Who runs your city and who owns your street, so you ask the right people.            |
| 04 and 05 | How to file a request that gets action, and how projects move from idea to concrete. |
| 06        | How to read the budget and find your street in the Capital Improvement Program.      |
| 07 to 09  | How to find meetings, how they run, and how to speak so you get results.             |
| 10 and 11 | How to be a constructive voice at project meetings, plus the street design toolbox.  |

Every city works a little differently. Treat this as a playbook and adapt it to your local process. This is general education, not engineering advice for a specific project.

## STEP 02

# How local government works

Most US cities use one of two forms of government. Knowing which one yours uses tells you who really decides what happens on your street, and who to call first.



## Council-manager.

- The elected council sets policy and adopts the budget. The mayor is often a council member who chairs meetings.
- The council hires a professional city manager who runs departments and proposes the budget.
- **Power over streets:** a council majority. Individual members cannot direct staff on their own, but they can ask for items and build votes.
- **Talk to:** your council member and their aide, then transportation staff for the technical details.

## Strong mayor (mayor-council).

- The mayor is elected as the chief executive, appoints department heads, proposes the budget, and can often veto.
- The council passes laws and approves the budget.
- **Power over streets:** the mayor's office runs the transportation department day to day. The council controls the money.
- **Talk to:** the mayor's policy staff, your council member, and department staff.

### CHECK YOURS

Search your city's website or charter for "form of government." Some places use other forms, such as a commission or town meeting. Counties usually have an elected board of supervisors or commissioners with a hired county administrator, which often works much like council-manager.

## STEP 03

## Find who owns the street

The fastest way to stall is asking the wrong agency. Before you push, confirm who maintains the street, because that agency is the one that can change it.

| OWNER            | TYPICAL STREETS                                                                                                          | WHO TO CONTACT                                                                                |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>City</b>      | Most neighborhood streets and many main streets inside city limits.                                                      | Transportation or public works department, plus your city council member.                     |
| <b>County</b>    | Roads in unincorporated areas, and in some places county expressways or arterials.                                       | County roads or public works department, plus your county supervisor or commissioner.         |
| <b>State DOT</b> | State routes and highways, including some main streets that carry a state route number. In California, this is Caltrans. | The DOT's local district office. Your state legislator's office can help open doors.          |
| <b>Others</b>    | Transit stops, school driveways, private roads, rail crossings.                                                          | The transit agency, school district, property owner, or railroad, often with the city's help. |

### How to tell who owns it.

- Look for a state route shield sign on the street.
- Check your city's street, maintenance, or GIS map online.
- Ask 311 directly: "Which agency maintains this street?"

### Find your people.

- Use the city's "find my council district" lookup with your address.
- Find the transportation department's traffic safety, active transportation, or Vision Zero staff.
- Note names and emails. You will use them again.

### IF THE STATE OWNS IT

Your city can still be your ally. Ask your council office to raise the issue with the state DOT, and ask whether a city plan already covers the corridor. Requests that come from a city or county partner tend to carry more weight with a state agency than a single resident alone.

## STEP 04

## Start with 311 and a good request

311 (or your city's online service request form) is the front door. A clear, specific request reaches the right engineer and creates a case number you can track.

### What to include.

- **Exact location:** street and cross street, which corner or side, and a map pin.
- **What happens:** speeding, drivers not yielding, a missing sidewalk, a long crossing.
- **When:** school drop-off, evening rush, weekends.
- **Who it affects:** students, seniors, people with disabilities, riders.

### Photos that help.

- One wide shot showing the whole street or intersection.
- One close-up of the specific problem.
- A shot at the time the problem happens.
- Keep faces and license plates out where you can.

#### SAMPLE REQUEST: COPY, EDIT, SEND

**Subject:** Pedestrian safety review at [Street] and [Cross Street]

**Location:** [Which corner or side] of the intersection, near [school, park, or transit stop].

**What I see:** During [time of day], drivers [describe the behavior, for example, turn without stopping for people in the crosswalk]. [Describe what is missing, for example, there is no marked crosswalk on one side]. Photos taken on [dates] are attached.

**My request:** Please evaluate this location for pedestrian safety improvements. Please share the case number, who will review it, and the next steps.

**Contact:** [Your name, email, phone]. Thank you for your work.

### Make it count.

- One location and one issue per request.
- Stick to what you saw. Calm and factual reads as credible.
- Describe the problem first. Suggest a fix second.

### After you submit.

- Save the case number and the date.
- If it closes with no detail, reply and ask what review was done.
- Copy your council office on serious safety issues.

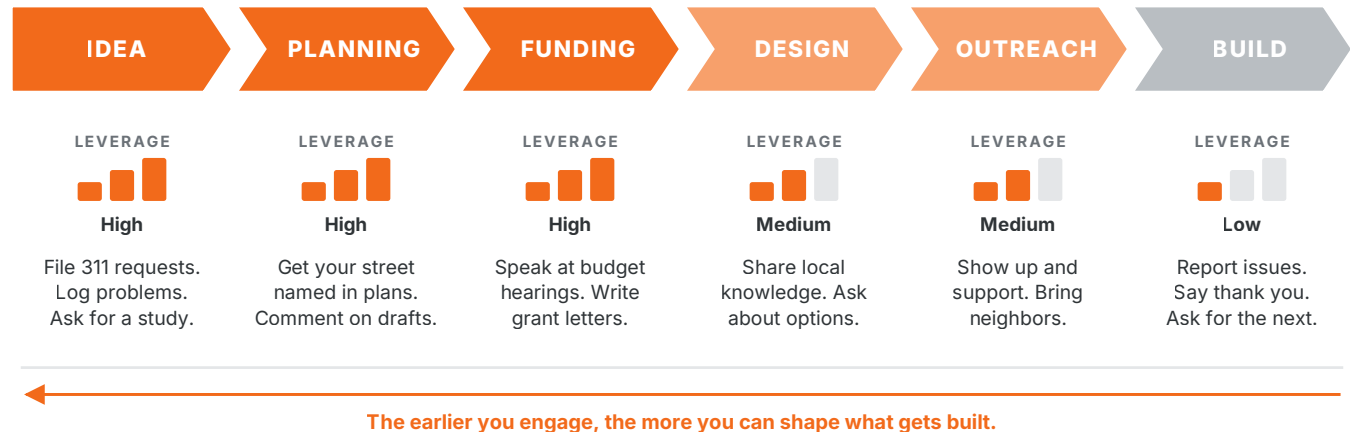
## STEP 05

# The process and the strategy

Most street projects follow the same arc. Your influence is greatest early, before money is committed and drawings are finished. By construction, the big decisions are made.

## PROJECT LIFECYCLE

Typical span: months to several years



## Coalition strategy.

- **One shared ask** that everyone can sign on to.
- **Broad beats loud.** Parents, seniors, disability advocates, businesses, faith groups, neighborhood associations, and walking and biking groups. A principal or a shop owner often reaches officials who expect to hear from advocates.
- **Split the roles:** one person tracks agendas, one gathers data, one keeps in touch with the council office.
- **Numbers at key votes,** and a few familiar faces at every meeting.
- **Stay respectful and nonpartisan.** You will need the same officials again.

## Bring data.

- **State crash databases:** most states publish reported crash data. In California, UC Berkeley SafeTREC's TIMS maps data from SWITRS.
- **National:** NHTSA's FARS covers fatal crashes across the US.
- **Local maps:** many cities publish a Vision Zero map or High Injury Network.
- **Ask staff** for existing traffic counts or speed surveys. Many agencies collect them.
- Reported crashes miss most near misses, so log your own with date, time, and photos.

## KEEP A SIMPLE LOG

One spreadsheet with dates, observations, photos, case numbers, contacts, and what they said. It turns scattered complaints into a record you can hand to anyone.

## STEP 06

## Reading the budget

A great idea without funding stays an idea. The budget tells you what the city will actually build, maintain, and staff, and when to push.

|                         | OPERATING BUDGET                                                                                                | CAPITAL BUDGET                                                                                                    |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>What it pays for</b> | Day-to-day costs that repeat every year: staff, signal and pothole repair, street sweeping, routine restriping. | One-time investments in long-lasting assets: new sidewalks, signals, street reconstruction, protected bike lanes. |
| <b>How it works</b>     | Adopted each year.                                                                                              | Approved project by project. Spending often spans several years.                                                  |
| <b>Why you care</b>     | It decides how many engineers can study requests and how well streets are maintained.                           | It decides whether your project gets built, and when.                                                             |

### The Capital Improvement Program.

- The CIP is a multi-year plan, often five years, that lists capital projects with their cost, schedule, and funding source.
- The first year is usually funded with the annual budget. Later years are plans and can change.
- Find it on the city's budget, finance, or public works page, or search your city name plus "capital improvement program."
- Counties and state DOTs keep their own lists. States publish a STIP, and regional planning agencies publish a TIP.
- Many cities adopt budgets in late spring for a July 1 fiscal year. Check your city's budget calendar for hearing dates.

### Maintenance and repaving programs.

- Most cities track pavement condition with a pavement management system, often using a 0 to 100 Pavement Condition Index.
- They publish a paving list or map showing which streets get sealed, resurfaced, or rebuilt, sometimes years ahead.
- Ask staff for the multi-year paving schedule and look for your street.

#### WHY REPAVING IS THE CHEAPEST MOMENT

When a street is resurfaced, the old lines are covered or removed and the crew has to restripe anyway. Painting a new layout, such as narrower lanes, a bike lane, or high-visibility crosswalks, then costs little more than putting the old one back. Under federal ADA guidance, many resurfacing jobs also trigger curb ramp upgrades at crossings. FHWA has published guidance on adding bike networks during resurfacing. The layout is usually decided well before crews arrive, so speak up when your street first appears on the paving list.

## STEP 06, CONTINUED

# How to spot your street in the CIP

CIP documents look intimidating, but most follow the same pattern. Here is how to read one row. The table below is an illustrative example, not real data.

| ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE: NOT REAL DATA |                                                                      |              |       | Capital Improvement Program, dollars in thousands |        |            |          |                        |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|-------|---------------------------------------------------|--------|------------|----------|------------------------|
| 1                                   |                                                                      | 2            |       | 3                                                 |        | 4          |          | 5                      |
| ID                                  | PROJECT AND LIMITS                                                   | PHASE        | PRIOR | YEAR 1                                            | YEAR 2 | YRS 3 TO 5 | UNFUNDED | SOURCE                 |
| TR-101                              | <b>Pavement Resurfacing Program</b><br>Streets on annual paving list | Construction | 0     | 4,000                                             | 4,000  | 12,000     | 0        | Gas tax, local measure |
| TR-114                              | <b>[Your Street] Complete Street</b><br>[Cross St A] to [Cross St B] | Design       | 350   | 900                                               | 2,500  | 0          | 6,000    | Grant (pending)        |
| TR-122                              | <b>Safe Routes to School Crossings</b><br>Various school zones       | Planning     | 0     | 150                                               | 600    | 1,200      | 0        | Grant, local match     |
| TR-130                              | <b>Traffic Signal Upgrades</b><br>Citywide                           | Construction | 1,200 | 800                                               | 800    | 2,400      | 0        | Gas tax                |
| TR-141                              | <b>Bikeway Quick-Build Program</b><br>Per adopted bike plan          | Unfunded     | 0     | 0                                                 | 0      | 0          | 3,500    | Not yet identified     |

Read across one row: what it is, where, what stage, how much is funded each year, and where the money comes from.

- 1 Project and limits.** Search the PDF for your street name and nearby cross streets. Also check citywide programs, such as paving or Safe Routes to School, that may include your street.
- 2 Phase.** Planning and design are when input changes the most. Construction means the design is set.
- 3 Year 1.** Money in the first year is the most certain. Later years are plans that can slip.
- 4 Unfunded.** This gap is where advocacy matters most. Ask what it would take to close it.
- 5 Source.** A pending grant is a chance to send a letter of support.

## Grants to know.

- **Federal:** Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) and the Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP).
- **State and regional:** for example, California's Active Transportation Program, plus programs run by regional planning agencies.
- Grants are competitive and run on cycles. Offer to write a letter of support.

## How long things take.

| TYPE OF CHANGE              | TYPICAL RANGE           |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Signs, paint, signal timing | Weeks to months         |
| Quick-build project         | Months to a year or two |
| Concrete capital project    | Often several years     |

Timelines vary widely by agency, funding, and complexity.

**Not in the CIP?** Ask your council aide whether the street is in an adopted plan, on the paving list, or eligible for an upcoming grant. Those are the three usual doors in.

## STEP 07

## Finding the right meetings

Council gets the final vote, but most street decisions are shaped earlier in smaller rooms, with more time and fewer people.

| BODY                                    | WHAT IT DOES                                                          | WHY IT MATTERS FOR STREETS                                               |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>City council</b>                     | Final votes on budgets, plans, contracts, and policy.                 | Funds projects and sets citywide priorities.                             |
| <b>Transportation commission</b>        | Advises council on traffic, parking, and transportation policy.       | Reviews street projects and plans before council.                        |
| <b>Bicycle and pedestrian committee</b> | Advises on walking and biking plans and projects.                     | Often the earliest public look at designs.                               |
| <b>Planning commission</b>              | Land use, development, and the general plan.                          | New development can bring frontage, sidewalk, and crossing improvements. |
| <b>Other boards</b>                     | County board, transit agency, school board, regional planning agency. | Control state, transit, school, and regional money and streets.          |

### Where to find agendas.

- Look for "Agendas and Minutes" or the city clerk's page. Many cities use portals such as Legistar, Granicus, PrimeGov, or CivicClerk.
- Subscribe to email notices for each body you care about.
- Open the staff report attached to each item. That is where the real details live.
- Past minutes and video show how members think and vote.

### Open meeting laws.

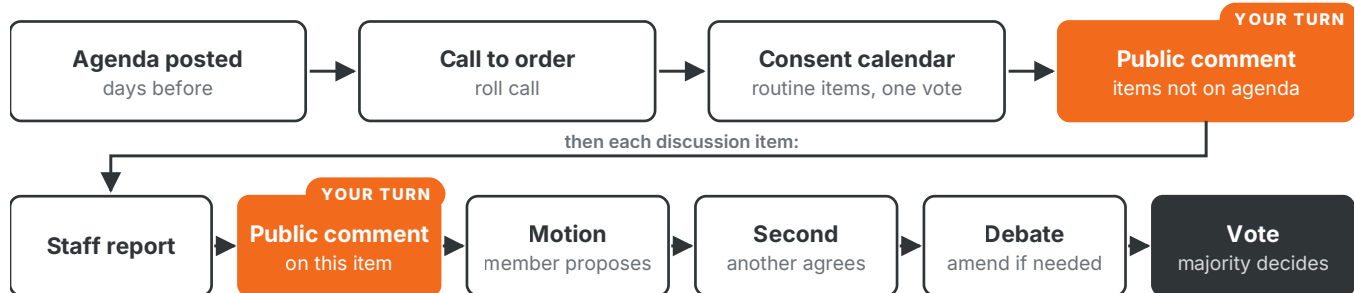
- Every state has its own open meetings law. Common principles: meetings are open, agendas are posted ahead, and bodies act only on items listed.
- **California's Brown Act:** regular meeting agendas are posted at least 72 hours ahead, special meetings at least 24 hours. The public may comment on agenda items before or during their consideration, and on other topics within the body's jurisdiction. Bodies may set reasonable time limits.
- Posting rules and the right to speak differ by state. In some states, public comment is set by local rules rather than state law. Look up your state's law and your body's rules of procedure.

## STEP 08

# How meetings actually run

Most councils and commissions follow Robert's Rules of Order or a simplified version (many California cities use Rosenberg's Rules). You do not need to master them. You need to know when to speak and how an item moves.

## A TYPICAL MEETING



Any member can usually ask to pull an item off consent for separate discussion.

### Consent calendar.

- Routine items approved together in one vote, usually without discussion: minutes, contracts, grant applications.
- Your project's grant application or construction contract may be on consent. A short letter of support still counts.
- A member can pull an item for separate discussion. Some bodies let the public ask too.

### Discussion items.

- Staff presents, the public comments, members debate, then vote.
- Study sessions and informational items usually have no vote, but they shape what comes back later.

### Words you will hear.

- **Motion:** a formal proposal to take an action.
- **Second:** another member agrees it should be considered.
- **Amendment:** a change to the motion on the floor.
- **Substitute motion:** a different proposal that replaces the first.
- **Call the question:** end debate and vote.
- **Continue or table:** delay the item to a later meeting.
- **Direct staff:** tell staff to study or bring something back.
- **Receive and file:** accept a report, no action.
- **Quorum:** the minimum members needed to act.

## STEP 09

# Presenting to get results

Most speakers get 1 to 3 minutes. The ones who move votes are short, specific, and easy to say yes to.

## The 2-minute structure.

### 1 ABOUT 10 SEC

**Who you are:** name, neighborhood or district, why you use this street.

### 2 ABOUT 40 SEC

**Data plus a story:** one number from a credible source and one specific moment you saw.

### 3 ABOUT 30 SEC

**One clear ask:** an action this body can actually take.

### 4 ABOUT 20 SEC

**Support and thanks:** case number, signatures, groups backing you.

## One clear ask.

- "Direct staff to evaluate..." or "include this project in the CIP."
- "Approve item 7 as recommended" or "fund this in next year's budget."
- Match the ask to the body. A commission advises. Council decides and funds.

## Slides or photos.

- Check whether public speakers may show slides, and the deadline to submit.
- One or two clear photos beat a full deck. If slides are not allowed, hand printed copies to the clerk.

## Written comment ahead of time.

- Email the clerk or body before the deadline. It becomes part of the record and members often read it before the meeting.
- Keep it to one page, with the agenda item number in the subject line.

## Follow up and build relationships.

- Email the next day: thanks, your ask, and any photos or data.
- Council aides and chiefs of staff are your best allies. Ask for a short meeting.
- Be the resident staff are glad to hear from. Credit them in public when things go well.

## STEP 09, CONTINUED

## Sample scripts

Fill in the brackets. Read it aloud with a timer, then cut until it fits comfortably.

### SAMPLE PUBLIC COMMENT: ABOUT 2 MINUTES

"Good evening, [Mayor and Council / Chair and Commissioners]. My name is [name], and I live in [district or neighborhood] near [street and cross street]. I [walk my kids to school / ride to work / take the bus] along this street every day.

According to [state crash database or city safety map], there were [number] reported injury crashes on this stretch in the last [number] years. Last month I watched [one specific, factual moment].

I'm asking you to [direct staff to evaluate this street for safety improvements / include it in the Capital Improvement Program / approve this item as recommended]. If the street is due for repaving, that is the most cost-effective time to make these changes.

I filed a 311 request, case number [number], and [number] neighbors signed a letter of support, which I've submitted for the record. Thank you for your time and for your work on safer streets."

### SAMPLE FOLLOW-UP EMAIL: SEND THE NEXT DAY

**To:** [Council member], cc [their aide] **Subject:** Thank you, and safety at [street]

Thank you for hearing public comment last night. As I mentioned, I'm asking that [your one clear ask]. I've attached photos, my 311 case number, and our letter of support with [number] signatures.

Would you or your staff have 20 minutes in the next few weeks to talk about next steps? I'm glad to help however is useful, including sharing community surveys or rallying support at future meetings.

Thank you, [name, address, phone]

### TIPS

Invite two or three neighbors to make short comments of their own. Several brief, personal comments land better than one long one. Speak to the ask, not to the room, and thank staff by name when they have helped.

## STEP 10

## Be an enabled advocate at project meetings

Once a project is real, the city will hold community meetings, open houses, pop-ups, and online surveys. These events often decide whether a project keeps its strongest safety features. An enabled advocate shows up prepared, constructive, and on the side of getting it built.

### Before.

- Read the project page and materials. Know what decision is on the table.
- Sign up for project updates and share the meeting with supporters.
- Pick the one or two points that matter most to you.

### At the meeting.

- Sign in. Attendance and comment cards are often counted.
- Talk to staff at the display boards and ask how the design handles your concern.
- Be specific: name the location, the option you support, and why.
- Fill out the survey or comment card before you leave.

### After.

- Send written comments by the deadline and share the survey link.
- Thank staff, then show up again when the project goes to commission and council.

### Support the staff.

- Staff often need visible public support to defend a design when opposition shows up.
- Supportive comments in the record give them and elected officials room to say yes.

### How to avoid being dismissed.

- Stay calm and courteous, even when others are not.
- Acknowledge real tradeoffs, such as parking, loading, and driveway access.
- Stay on the project's scope. Save bigger asks for other forums.
- Speak from your experience as someone who uses the street.
- Skip heavy jargon. Plain language is more persuasive.
- Be consistent. The same reasonable voice at every step builds trust.

#### CONSTRUCTIVE INPUT SOUNDS LIKE

"I support Option B. The separated bike lane connects to the school route. Could the design keep the separation through the intersection, where most conflicts happen?"

## STEP 11

# Know the toolbox

You don't need to design the fix, but knowing the common tools helps you ask better questions. Items tagged below appear on FHWA's Proven Safety Countermeasures list.

|                                                    |                                                                                                                                         |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Quick-build (paint, posts, planters)</b>        | Tests a safer layout quickly and at lower cost, and can be adjusted before it is rebuilt in concrete.                                   |
| <b>High-visibility crosswalks</b><br>FHWA PROVEN   | Bold markings, signs, and lighting make people crossing easier for drivers to see. Listed by FHWA as crosswalk visibility enhancements. |
| <b>Curb extensions (bulb-outs)</b>                 | Shorten the crossing distance, make people waiting to cross more visible, and slow turning drivers.                                     |
| <b>Leading pedestrian interval</b><br>FHWA PROVEN  | Gives people walking a few seconds of head start before drivers get a green, so they are already in the crosswalk when cars turn.       |
| <b>Refuge islands and medians</b><br>FHWA PROVEN   | Let people cross one direction of traffic at a time on wide streets.                                                                    |
| <b>Flashing beacons (RRFB, PHB)</b><br>FHWA PROVEN | Push-button lights that alert drivers to stop for people crossing where there is no full traffic signal.                                |
| <b>Protected bike lanes</b>                        | Physically separate people on bikes from moving cars using posts, curbs, parking, or planters.                                          |
| <b>Road diet</b>                                   | Reconfigures extra travel lanes, often four lanes to two plus a center turn lane, to calm speeds and free space for bikes or walking.   |
| <b>Speed humps and cushions</b>                    | Physically slow drivers on residential streets. Cushions have gaps so wide emergency vehicles can pass.                                 |
| <b>Sidewalks and walkways</b><br>FHWA PROVEN       | Give people a separate, continuous place to walk instead of the shoulder or the travel lane.                                            |

## ASK FOR THE OUTCOME

Lead with the problem and the result you want ("drivers speed and kids can't cross safely"), then mention a tool or two. That leaves engineers room to pick what fits the street, its traffic, and the standards they must follow.

Source for tags: FHWA Proven Safety Countermeasures, [highways.dot.gov/safety/proven-safety-countermeasures](https://highways.dot.gov/safety/proven-safety-countermeasures).

## CHECKLIST

# Your street change checklist

Print this page and tick boxes as you go.

## KNOW THE SYSTEM

- ☐ Learn your city's form of government
- ☐ Confirm who owns the street (city, county, or state)
- ☐ Look up your council member and their aide
- ☐ Find the right transportation staff contact

## DOCUMENT AND REQUEST

- ☐ Pick one location and one clear problem
- ☐ Take wide, close-up, and problem-time photos
- ☐ Submit a 311 request and save the case number
- ☐ Start a log of dates, observations, and contacts

## BUILD SUPPORT

- ☐ Agree on one shared ask with neighbors
- ☐ Circulate a one-page sign-on letter
- ☐ Connect with the school, PTA, or local groups
- ☐ Pull crash data from your state or city

## FOLLOW THE MONEY

- ☐ Search the CIP for your street and cross streets
- ☐ Check the multi-year paving list
- ☐ Mark budget hearings on your calendar
- ☐ Offer letters of support for grants

## FIND THE MEETINGS

- ☐ Subscribe to council and commission agendas
- ☐ Read your state's open meetings rules
- ☐ Read the staff report for your item
- ☐ Check consent calendars for your project

## SPEAK UP

- ☐ Write and time a 2-minute comment with one ask
- ☐ Send written comment before the deadline
- ☐ Speak in person or remotely
- ☐ Email a thank-you and your ask the next day
- ☐ Request a short meeting with the council aide

## SHOW UP FOR THE PROJECT

- ☐ Attend open houses and fill out the survey
- ☐ Give specific, constructive input
- ☐ Thank and support staff publicly
- ☐ Return when it goes to commission and council

## STAY ON IT

- ☐ Set a check-in reminder every few months
- ☐ Say thank you publicly when it's built

## WHAT'S NEXT

## Next steps

You have the playbook. Here is how to keep going with me.

1

### Join the courses waitlist

Guided challenges that walk you through changing your street, step by step, with others doing the same.

[mrbarricade511.com/challenges](http://mrbarricade511.com/challenges)

2

### Book a 1:1 consult

Talk through your street, your city's process, and how to frame your ask so it gets traction.

[mrbarricade511.com/1-1-consultations](http://mrbarricade511.com/1-1-consultations)

3

### Follow @mrbarricade

Short, plain-language explainers on street design, safety, and how cities really work.

[@mrbarricade on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube](#)



### About Vignesh Swaminathan, PE

Vignesh is a licensed civil engineer who works on protected bike lanes, intersections, and interchanges. As Mr. Barricade, he explains street design to more than 1.6 million followers on TikTok.

**General education only.** This guide shares general information to help residents take part in local transportation decisions. It is not engineering advice for a specific project, location, or agency. Every city has its own process and standards, so check with your local agency.

**Views are my own and don't represent my employer.**