

To: Atherton Town Council

September 13, 2021

Re: Right Turn on Red Restrictions at Middlefield Road/ Oak Grove Avenue Intersection

Dear Members of Town Council,

We have lived at the intersection of Maple Leaf Way and DeBell Drive in the Maple Manor subdivision for over 35 years. Our natural exit from our home is to drive down DeBell Drive to the gate at Middlefield Road, and then turn either right (North) towards Encinal School, or left (South) to Palo Alto, or, after driving south for a few car lengths, making a right turn (West) on Oak Grove Avenue to Menlo Park. We have made this turn thousands of times.

We carefully observe all traffic -- pedestrian, bike and auto activity -- at this intersection, and, of course, comply with the current No Right-Turn on Red restriction that's in place during peak opening and closing times at Menlo-Atherton High School. However, we strongly oppose extending this restriction to twelve hours a day, every week day the entire year! Implementing this change will have no measurable positive effect, but will cause many negatives.

Not supported by traffic statistics Attached to your agenda is the Police Department's Collision Summary Report covering ten years (6/1/2011 to 5/31/2021) at this intersection. Of the total of 57 collisions reported, fewer than 18% (10)<sup>1</sup> took place when a vehicle was turning right. It is entirely disproportionate to tie up traffic for twelve hours every weekday of the year because just once a year a driver shows bad judgment while making a right turn.

Traffic gridlock Being able to turn right on red provides a traffic "safety valve" along Middlefield and Oak Grove. Middlefield, in particular, is becoming an alternate through street for North-South traffic. If 7am-7pm No Right turn were in place, cars would quickly stack up at the intersection, and it would be dangerous, if not impossible, for drivers on Glenwood to turn right onto Middlefield, drivers exiting Lindenwood at the Linden Gates to turn left, and for us using the DeBell gate to enter the southbound traffic lane. That is one reason why our neighbors surveyed for the Traffic Committee meeting are so strongly against this measure. If the "Notification Boundary" of this proposal [attachment 1 to the Staff Report] had been extended into Lindenwood proper, even more of our neighbors would have voiced their opposition to the proposal.

Increased Pollution from Auto Emissions The backup of vehicles waiting for a green light at this intersection for 12 hours each day will result in an enormous increase in pollution from engines idling. This is a foreseeable and dangerous threat to all the families who live in our neighborhood, and a significant local multiplier of greenhouse gases. Recently, the Council reviewed restrictions on gas leaf blowers because of emission issues. Unfortunately, the Traffic Committee failed to consider the same problem here.

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<sup>1</sup> Excluding a Police car making a right turn in the rain.

No credit given for Structural Improvements Over the last 5-6 years, major safety improvements have been made at this intersection, including, at each corner, raised and marked curbing, and pedestrian “call buttons,” which bring traffic to a halt so those on foot or bikes can cross safely. These protections are available 24 hours a day, and we often see them put to use. If, despite these safeguards, a reckless driver fails to yield to a pedestrian in a crosswalk (already the law), there is no reason to assume that extending the hours of No Right Turn on Red will change the outcome.

No investigation of alternate approaches Just a block away, at the corner of Oak Grove and Laurel, Menlo Park faced the same issue, when it made pedestrian safety improvements to that intersection adjacent to the Nativity School. Rather than have right turn restrictions based on hours, it chose to have them based on the presence of pedestrians. There, the signs simply say, “No Right Turn when Children Present.” We asked both Chief McCulley and Mr. Ovdia if they had consulted with Menlo Park about its solution when staff was considering changing the regulations governing the Middlefield/Oak Grove intersection. Neither gave a direct reply to this question, so we have to assume that they did not reach out to our neighbors to learn from their experience.

Community input As you see from your packet, the overwhelming majority of written comments received by the Transportation Committee opposed this dramatic extension of the No Right Turn on Red hours. The staff memo from Mr. Ovdia for the upcoming meeting attempts to undercut this opposition by referring to an online survey for the Neighborhood Traffic Management Action Plan (“NTMAP”) that, he writes, was “open” for input during this same period and had a question regarding the right-turn restriction. However, it should be noted that Mr. Ovdia’s June 2, 2021 letter to the community asked only for comments by email or to the Transportation committee directly. He made no reference to, nor supplied a link for, the NTMAP online survey, so I very much doubt that the “even split” to which he refers reflects any input made after this proposal began to jell. In fact, I could not find the NTMAP survey on the Town website. Here is the link to the town’s page on opinion polls. <https://www.ci.atherton.ca.us/370/Opinion-Polls> It contains nothing about an NTMAP survey. If this survey is “open” and is contained in some other electronic location, I’d be curious to know how accessible it is to the normal Atherton resident.

Other Rationales for change The staff report makes several references to Police Sgt. Metzger’s observations and recommendations supporting this change, concluding that “standardizing the hours would also make it easier for compliance by the motoring public and enforcements.” We respectfully question how compliance is made “easier” by increasing a prohibition from four to twelve hours a day. This is like making the tax code “simpler” by raising all rates or eliminating all deductions.

As to “enforcements,” we trust that our police officers have training, equipment and professional focus that are more than adequate to meet the challenges of monitoring an open, well-marked and familiar intersection. Yes, it is busy and crowded, and twice a day there are lots of teenagers and cars in and around the M-A campus. But most drivers learn to be patient,

and for those who are not and are careless, the Police department's own report shows that more than 80% of the incidents at this intersection do not involve autos that make a Right Turn on Red.

We strongly request that this change be rejected.

Sincerely,

Kathy and Smith McKeithen