

The Illogic of Widening Franklin Street

So, exactly how far in a box does the city have its head stuck? Here's how far: the official reason, I hear, that we can't constructing narrower streets to save money is because that would result in emergency vehicles being delayed.

Let's examine that statement, and let me use Frankfort Street as the case study. Frankfort, by my count, has 22 residential units, which would mean roughly 55 residents. The city Fire Department reported 7095 incidents last year, over 80% of which were ambulance runs. Ignoring the facts that some of those incidents were nonresidential, and some of those ambulance runs were to outside the city limits, that would suggest that in a typical year Frankfort has 6.5 emergency fire and ambulance runs.

Now for one of those runs to be delayed, there would have to be another car on the street. If each of those 55 residents makes 3 trips a day, out and back, that's 330 times per day a car travels up or down Frankfort. Since the street is under 1000 feet long, at 20 miles per hour, each trip would take 36 seconds, if it went the entire length of the street. 330 trips would take about 3 hours per day, so each of those emergency runs has only a 1 in 8 likelihood of encountering another vehicle anywhere along the street.

But even that's no problem as long as that vehicle can easily pull over to the side, which will be the case unless the parking lanes are full. Now, I don't know about the folks on Frankfort – word is, they may be total party animals – but on my street, other than the church parkers on Sunday, you only see a long line of parked cars maybe twice a month, for maybe 4 to 6 hours in a row. If we double that to 24 hours a month for those crazy party folks on Frankfort, that means that whenever an emergency vehicle encounters a car, there's only a 1/30 chance that parked cars will prevent that car from pulling over.

Of course, even that's only a problem if the emergency vehicle and the car happen to meet right where that string of parked cars is located. Let's say there are 15 vehicles, each taking up a 25 foot space, with a 10' driveway every 50 feet. That's 450 feet of parking, less than one fourth the street's length if the parking is on both sides of the street.

So that means that each of those 6.5 runs has a 1 in 8 times 1 in 30 times 1 in 4 chance of encountering another car where the parking lanes are full. In other words, if the street weren't wide enough to allow the emergency vehicle to pass the other vehicle between two rows of parked cars, an emergency delay would happen on Frankfort about once every 150 years. Probably even less often than that.

And that's why they tell us we need to spend an additional \$50,000 or so, times three (since the street will need to be reconstructed twice again over that 150 year interval) – to prevent a 2 minute delay, once every other lifetime. Now admittedly, if Franklin were Witzel or Main, the numbers would be different. But for the overwhelming majority of our city streets, the city's argument amounts to little more than the boogie man will get us if we don't pay for wide streets.

So, exactly how far up a box does the city have its head stuck? Well, let's just say it ain't exactly a box.