

26 November 2009

Report on the 25 October 2009 Roland Avenue *Sunday Streets* pilot

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## Background

Through its *Sunday Streets Program*, the City of Baltimore proposes to close off selected streets to motorized traffic during Sunday mornings, making them available for recreational use. *Sunday Streets* is modeled on Bogota, Colombia's *ciclovia*. Every Sunday, from 8AM until 1PM, a network of normally busy Bogota streets is closed to motorists, allowing up to 1.7m residents to traverse the city on bicycles, rollerblades, skateboards or on foot. Bogota's *ciclovia* has operated weekly since the early 1980s, providing residents in 70% of the city's neighborhoods with easily accessible recreational opportunities. The idea is catching on. European examples include Copenhagen and Paris. In Switzerland's [Slow Up Program](#), 35-50km segments of particularly scenic roads are closed on consecutive Sundays during the summer months for pedestrians, skaters and cyclists to use. At this writing, 38 cities in eleven countries have organized *ciclovias*. Routes range from 1 to 121 km in length. Duration of *ciclovia* events ranges from 2 to 12 hours. The number of events ranges from 18 to 64 per year. Annual budgets range from US\$45k to US\$2.08m. In Seattle WA, Cambridge MA, San Francisco CA and El Paso TX, *ciclovias* happen at least every month during the cycling season. *Ciclovia* programs are credited with improving physical fitness, engaging young people in constructive social activities and increasing neighborhood cohesiveness ([Sarmiento et al 2008](#)).

*Sunday Streets* is an integral part of [Baltimore's 2009 Sustainability Plan](#).

The City's street network is particularly conducive to *Sunday Streets*. (For more on this, see Baltimore's [2006 Master Bicycle Plan](#).)

City planners prepared a detailed *Sunday Streets* implementation plan nearly three years ago. The plan identifies specific streets and outlines logistic and security procedures for the Police and Transportation Department to follow. However, it has never been implemented, ostensibly for budgetary reasons.

Supporters of Baltimore's *Sunday Streets Program* include the local bicycling advocacy group [One Less Car](#). In 2008, One Less Car developed a 5-mile *Sunday Streets* pilot route which runs from Lake Montebello to Druid Hill Park along 33<sup>rd</sup> Street. This "[lake-to-lake](#)" pilot, proposed for August 2008, was not implemented, again for budgetary reasons (see below).

On October 25, 2009, a modest, one-mile long *Sunday Streets* pilot was carried out successfully on Roland Avenue, sponsored by the [Roland Park Civic League](#). Details of that experience are described below. Most notably, the activity was successfully executed from plan to completion in 8 weeks.

## Planning the Roland Park *Sunday Streets* pilot

The *Sunday Streets* pilot was conceived as a component of the RPCL's [2009-10 Sustainability Initiative](#). The Initiative aims to educate residents about energy conservation, recycling, native ecology and other aspects of environmentally sustainable lifestyles. Roland Park is one of eight pilot neighborhoods participating in the [Baltimore Neighborhood Energy Challenge](#) (BNEC). One day each month the RPCL encourages residents to walk, ride bikes, use mass transit or carpool to school and work. RPCL sought to connect these local efforts with the City's *Sunday Streets* initiative.

Roland Park proposed a *Sunday Streets* pilot for three reasons. First, it made sense- if even on a small scale- since the event would pull in a wider audience that could then be motivated to take other sustainability actions beyond the BNEC challenge. Second, the small-scale pilot could be used to test whether a *ciclovía* could be accomplished at a lower cost than had been previously estimated by the City. Since the large City costs were for the police, the Civic League proposed that volunteers be used to supervise the route rather than paid City employees. Third, the Civic League wanted to create a model that could be provided to other communities that would want to organize their own event. The aim was to prepare a "cookbook" of how to create a successful event, identifying problems encountered or mistakes made, and making recommendations so that other communities could avoid those same roadblocks.

In August 2009, RPCL President Phil Spevak and Sustainability co-Chairs Rita Walters and Mike McQuestion began planning Roland Park's *Sunday Streets* pilot event. Discussions with One Less Car led to the concept of joining the proposed Roland Avenue pilot to the lake-to-lake route via University Parkway. This would involve neighborhoods in City Districts 6, 7 and 14.

At RPCL's request, City Councilwomen Sharon Green Middleton (Dist. 6) and Mary Pat Clarke (Dist. 14) organized a planning meeting at City Hall. The meeting took place on 22 September 2009. Attending were twelve persons, including City Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke and her staff person Cindy Leahy; a representative of Councilwoman Middleton's office (Ty Miller); three representatives of the Baltimore City Department of Transportation (Nate Evans, Howard James, Sandra Butterfield); an officer from the Northern District of the Baltimore Police Department (Jon Walter); two representatives of the Office of the Mayor (Greg Hinchcliffe, Gary Letteron); the Executive Director of the Knott Foundation (Greg Cantori, who is also a One Less Car board member); and RPCL (Phil Spevak, Mike McQuestion).

Reasons for the failure of the previously attempted lake-to-lake *Sunday Streets* pilot were reviewed by Mr. Cantori. The principal reason was the very high cost of deploying dozens of City police and DoT workers along the proposed 5 mi. course. The original cost estimate was about \$233,000 for four Sundays with the City providing \$104k of that amount. Police-related expenses represented about two-thirds of the costs. In addition, local neighborhood organizations and establishments had not been engaged.

Dr. Spevak and Mr. McQuestion then presented details of the proposed Roland Park *Sunday Streets* pilot event. While the original plan was to do it on Saturday 24 October, it would be better, all agreed, to do the test on Sunday so as to minimize impacts on business. The proposed linkage to 33<sup>rd</sup> Street was considered too ambitious by City Transportation representatives. At their suggestion, it was further agreed to close only the southbound side of Roland Avenue. The idea of mobilizing local volunteers to help set up barriers and act as safety monitors, thereby reducing costs by reducing the number of police officers needed, was discussed but not endorsed. The group agreed to explore whether traffic officers could be used in place of police officers as a means to reduce cost.

The City permit stipulated that RPCL would not be selling food. Because the event would be short- from 8AM to 1PM- RPCL would not be obliged to arrange outdoor toilets. Cindy Leahy of Councilwoman Clarkes's office, had previously obtained an estimate of City costs: \$4,293.50 to close Roland Avenue from Northern Parkway south to Cold Spring Lane for five hours. The Police and DoT would handle the event using their standard procedures.

RPCL volunteered to undertake three additional actions. The first was to prepare a detailed traffic map, showing which intersections would be closed and where motorists would be re-routed. The second action was to communicate the street closing plan to all commercial establishments, schools and churches along the route. Thirdly, RPCL would inform homeowners along the route and explain the implications of the street closure.

As it turned out, just one institution, Roland Park Country School, objected to closing southbound Roland Avenue. RPCL proposed, and the school accepted, a compromise that resulted in shortening the *Sunday Streets* course to the northernmost ingress to the RPCS campus, thereby permitting cars to enter during the event. It was further agreed that the cars could leave together from a second egress, 100 yards further to the south, late on Sunday morning. In the event, police officers escorted the cars to the corner of Roland and Deepdene Avenues.

On 12 October, Dr. Spevak and Mr. McQuestion met with Ms. Stephanie Yanovitz, Senior Transportation Planner, Baltimore Metropolitan Council at the RPCL Office. Dr. Spevak and Ms. Yanovitz walked the Roland Avenue route and discussed details of the event. Ms. Yanovitz subsequently prepared a series of detailed maps of the proposed street closures which RPCL provided to the City.

In the final two weeks, the RPCL team was in frequent email and telephone contact. Two conference calls were held to assure all contingencies were covered. Attempts to engage City Police and DoT counterparts responsible for street closings were not successful and there was confusion as to which City officials to contact. The first City contact came on 16 October, when a DoT counterpart (Mr. Edward Lee) called Mr. McQuestion (whose name appears on the permit) to ask whether the event was still on. The following week, DoT officials surveyed southbound Roland Avenue and placed temporary no parking signs along the route. Mr. McQuestion received two calls from the Baltimore Police Department Special Events Unit (Officer Alexis Brown) and Northern District Command (Maj. Ross Buzaro). Mr. McQuestion briefed each counterpart. It became clear that the various City offices had not shared very much information about the event.

Councilwoman Middleton and her office solved this problem. On 21 October, a team from the Baltimore Police Department (led by Lt. Milton Corbett), DoT (Edward Lee) and RPCL President Phil Spevak walked the Roland Avenue route. Details of the police deployment were discussed. In the event, five police officers and six transit police officers would be deployed along with six DoT workers. Volunteers would be allowed to participate, however Lt. Corbett stated that volunteers could not be entrusted to maintain public safety.

The permit was faxed to Mr. McQuestion on Friday, 23 October. This short lead time is normal procedure, explained Cindy Leahy who had kindly followed up the permitting process on behalf of RPCL.

## Publicity

For four weeks prior to the event, the RPCL informed Roland Park residents about *Sunday Streets* (and other sustainability-related events planned for the 23-25 October weekend) through announcement and information on the RPCL website. RPCL emailed [press releases](#) on 30 September, 7 October and 19

October. The Baltimore Messenger ran a story on 10 October announcing “Seven Generations Weekend”. Volunteers dropped informational flyers door-to-door in each of the six Roland Park plats (n=1100 households).

Invitations to join the *Sunday Streets* event were emailed to some twenty adjacent neighborhood associations. Of these, follow-up telephone contacts were made with five: Wyndhurst Improvement Association, Chatham Neighborhood Association, Mt. Washington Improvement Association, North Roland Park Improvement Association, Greater Homewood Community Corporation. Announcements were uploaded to the One Less Car, Baltimore BikePed Beacon and Baltimore Bicycling Club blogs. The BBC subsequently organized two rides that passed through the *Sunday Streets* event. A password-protected [workspace](#) was set up to help coordinate the action.

On 28 September, Mr. McQuestion received a call from the Mayor’s Office of Marketing and Public Relations (Ms. Kimberly Manns), enquiring about the *Sunday Streets* event. There was no further contact with the Mayor’s Office following this telephone briefing.

### The event

By 7AM on the morning of 25 October, the DoT team had distributed signs, barriers and cones at each intersection along the route. By 8AM, the DoT team had blocked the intersections. A DoT spokesperson (Nate Evans) set up a table in front of the Roland Park Library displaying a map of the full Baltimore Sunday Streets plan, a signup sheet and a traffic counter. Four police officers and six transportation officers were deployed to guide northbound and cross-street traffic, particularly at the intersections of Cold Spring, Wyndhurst, Deepdene and Northern Parkway. The DoT workers were not similarly deployed.

The City No Parking signs stated that parked cars would be towed that morning. RPCL volunteers observed about a dozen cars parked along southbound Roland Avenue at 7AM. They knocked on doors to inform residents to move their cars. All but four were at home and did so. Discussion with the commanding police officer (Sgt. Smith) determined that the four remaining cars posed no real obstacle and that no towing would be needed.

By 9AM people were beginning to fill southbound Roland Avenue. By prior arrangement, two local bike shops (Princeton Sports, Joes Bike Shop) had set up repair stands along the course. On hand were City Councilwoman Mary Part Clarke and Mr. Frank Pratkanis, a leader on a neighborhood association near Lake Montebello. The crowd peaked at approximately 11:00 to noon. Discussions with the police officers revealed that all were enjoying the experience, including the officers. (For a more detailed account see: <http://rolandpark.org/SevenGenWeekend>.)

At 1PM the DoT team began collecting the barriers. Southbound Roland was reopened to through traffic at about 1:30PM.

### The way forward

At RPCL’s request, the lead DoT official (Edward Lee) and Police Dept. commander (Sgt. Smith) met at 1PM with Dr. Spevak and Mr. McQuestion to review the morning’s experience and formulate recommendations for subsequent *Sunday Streets* events. All agreed the event was an unqualified success. The turnout was outstanding, the community’s response was enthusiastic. A DoT official (Nate Evans) later estimated that at least one thousand people participated. The event pulled participants from many

communities beyond Roland Park, manifesting the tremendous potential support for a wider event. No injuries or untoward incidents occurred. Only a few motorists expressed dismay at being inconvenienced. It was apparent that volunteers could have replaced many of the City workers.

Reaction elsewhere in the City was positive. The Roland Park *Sunday Streets* pilot was amply covered by local television, newspapers and blogs. At this writing, City Councilwoman Mary Pat Clarke is preparing to introduce a resolution calling on the Mayor's Office to implement *Sunday Streets* Citywide.

It was clear that there were some real limitations or problems in the event and its planning. First, the pilot plan failed to achieve its goal of using volunteers in route supervision though there was agreement after the event that, with proper training, volunteers could have been used. Second, it was difficult at the outset to identify the responsible City counterparts with whom to communicate. Only the direct involvement of a City Council representative solved this problem. Third, the cost remained prohibitively high. RPCL managed, through discussion with the City, to reduce the cost from the prior City estimate of \$11,650/mile to \$4300/mile. However, the expense remained unreasonably high due to the requirement that paid City employees be used where they were not needed. By RPCL estimates, effectively and safely using volunteers would have reduced the cost of the event to \$1500-2000/mile. Fourth, RPCL did not allow sufficient time to plan the event. More lead time would have permitted better communication with businesses and schools and churches. They, in turn, might have made better accommodations and participated more actively in the event. Fourth, by having the event on Sunday, after having the other sustainability events on Saturday, some necessary motor vehicle use (eg, transporting the elderly and infirmed), may have been hindered. In the future, all events should take place on a single weekend day, thus allowing individuals who need to drive to do so on the other day.

Determining the proper ratio of City officials to local volunteers will be an empirical problem to be solved literally block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood. On this stretch of Roland Avenue the ideal, sustainable ratio might be 2-3 police and transportation police officers and 1-2 DoT workers to, say, 10-20 volunteers. Volunteers, all agreed, could guard each intersection, explain options to motorists and erect and take down the traffic barriers. But the ratio would still need to be worked out separately for other segments of future *Sunday Streets* events.

Research to date shows that only a few US Cities have figured out how to sustainably fund Sunday ciclovias. (Among them are El Paso, TX and San Francisco, CA.) Baltimore may be able to secure interim federal funding for Sunday Streets. In early October, Mr. Cantori circulated an announcement from US CDC requesting proposals from states and cities for new obesity control funding ("Communities putting prevention to work"). The proposed grant would complement the Baltimore City Health Department's "[Blueprint for Healthy Outcomes in Children: Addressing Childhood Obesity](#)", an action plan to reduce childhood obesity in Baltimore. *Sunday Streets* would be a robust obesity-reduction strategy for children and adults (Berkey et al 2003; Hoehner, Ramirez and Elliott 2005; Journal of Adolescent Health 2009). A working group was quickly formed with the City Health Department taking the lead. A conference call took place on 6 October and an online workspace has since been constructed (<http://www.BaltimorePrevention.org>). RPCL is one of the collaborating agencies on this proposal. Besides federal funding, local businesses may be willing to sponsor *Sunday Streets*.

Outside funding and, eventually, regular City funding, may be necessary conditions for *Sunday Streets* to succeed. Sustained success will also require building *Sunday Streets* from the ground up. Other neighborhood organizations must be mobilized to take the responsibility to inform their communities, organize volunteers and maintain liaison with City officials. A second issue is the official permitting procedure. Will each neighborhood organization have to secure a permit or can the City dispense with the permit process altogether? The latter seems preferable considering that *Sunday Streets* is expected to be a routine, weekly occurrence. Finally, in some "low-crime areas" the City should consider using already assigned and working police officers to cover the route rather than hiring extra officer at overtime rates.

As a next step in the development process, RPCL and One Less Car propose working together to produce a Roland Ave + Lake-to-Lake *Sunday Streets* event. The RPCL segment will run south on Roland Avenue from Lake Street to University Parkway, to 33<sup>rd</sup> Street where the two courses will join. RPCL and One Less Car will work through Councilwomen Middleton, Clarke and Conaway to plan the event. They will contact each neighborhood association along the proposed route and elicit their active involvement. The tentative date will be Earth Day, Sunday, 18 April 2010. RPCL will coordinate volunteer recruitment and training for this event. The current report is being distributed to all key contacts who participated in the 25 October *Sunday Streets* pilot event. It should be made available to any neighborhood group that wishes to participate in future *Sunday Streets* events.

Looking forward to a wider, Citywide *Sunday Streets* event, one important question remains: Who will take leadership?

## References

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