Crash Analysis Studio

Session 24: New Haven, Connecticut

Held on June 24, 2025

Session Participants

- **Rishabh Mittal**, Transport Planner and Consultant; Local Conversation leader; Strong Towns member; multimodal transit advocate
- **Leslie Radcliffe**, Former Chair of New Haven City Plan Commission; Community organizer; Traffic safety advocate; resident of The Hill in South New Haven
- **Jose DeJesus**, Community Engagement Program Coordinator at Yale School of Medicine; Entrepreneur; Carpenter; lifelong resident of the Hill in South New Haven
- **Tony Harris** (moderator), Community Engagement Coordinator at Strong Towns

Summary of Crash Event

- The crash on the south section of Ella T Grasso Boulevard–also known as State Route 10–occurred near the flea market between Printers Lane and Adeline Street around 6 pm on December 29, 2020.
    - A 41-year-old New Haven local was driving an SUV in the right lane of the Boulevard south of Columbus Avenue
    - Law enforcement reported she struck an unidentified male pedestrian as he was attempting to cross the street mid-block; according to Safe Streets Coalition of New Haven, this individual was 35-year-old Carlos Ortiz[1].
    - This crash took place south of Columbus Avenue.
    - Weather reports indicate it was dry with temperatures in the 30s that evening.

- The crash on the north section of Ella T Grasso Boulevard occurred outside the Evergreen Cemetery entrance at 7:03 pm on January 14, 2020.
    - A motorist struck and killed 50-year-old Arthur Bastek.
    - This crash took place north of Columbus Avenue.

- These two crashes took place during the same calendar year and within a mile from one another; unsafe mid-block crossings were listed as a causal factor in the police report for both crashes.

- Responses to each crash have looked notably different since they occurred in 2020.

[1] At least eleven other fatalities have been tracked along the south section of Ella T Grasso Boulevard since 2014. These individuals include Frank Aceto, Ranko Borak, Shaneka Woods, Lonny Bosquiat, Pedro Lopez, Anthony Little, Eric Pechalonis, Curtis Woods, Henry McDuffie, Damaso Rosario Luna, and Dennis Eaton.

    - The Connecticut Department of Transportation (CTDOT) implemented quick-build interventions along the north section of the road in 2023.
        - These quick-build responses narrowed the road down from four through traffic lanes—two in each direction—to two lanes total, with just one in each direction.
    - The south section of this boulevard has remained unchanged since the crash occurred.

- The speed limit on both sections of Ella T Grasso Boulevard is 35 miles per hour (mph).

Contributing Factors

The south section of Ella T Grasso Boulevard exemplifies a roadway designed for speed and throughput rather than local accessibility and safety. With four 12-foot-wide travel lanes, minimal pedestrian protections, and a 35 mph speed limit that is routinely ignored, the corridor sends strong visual cues that fast, aggressive driving is permitted **and** expected. The built environment conveys an illusion of safety for drivers while creating high-risk conditions for pedestrians and other vulnerable road users navigating this mixed-use area. This illusion may feed and perpetuate a cars versus pedestrians mindset, when in actuality, all road users are placed at increased risk of peril by the environment along this boulevard.

Speed study data collected specifically for this session reinforces these concerns. Even though this data was collected during daytime hours when deviant behavior is less extreme, it still dictates speeding is a formidable problem here. Over 81% of drivers exceeded the posted limit, and close to one in four were traveling at 45 mph or faster. These speeds far exceed the 25 mph threshold at which pedestrian injuries become significantly more likely to be fatal.

Comparisons to the northern section of the boulevard—where lane widths were narrowed and bollards were installed—show these interventions partially reduced dangerous driver behavior. While these reductions do not guarantee safety at the northern section, they do illustrate how physical design interventions are capable of constructive impact. The presence of parks, businesses, and high levels of foot traffic near the southern crash location makes the discrepancy between design intent and lived reality even more dangerous.

Poor visibility around the southern section of the boulevard compounds the existing risk. Street lighting is concentrated at intersections, with mid-block segments often left under-illuminated and dim. Lighting becomes hazardous when commercial establishments that help illuminate the area close each night. Long crossing distances and driveway cuts add further complexity. Community reports of frequent drag racing, stunt driving, and street takeovers—particularly on weekends—speak to a corridor not just overlooked, but actively misused. Session participants identified that the following factors may have contributed to this crash:

1. **Both the design speed and documented travel speed of Ella T Grasso Boulevard are incompatible with pedestrian traffic that is encouraged at this intersection and in the surrounding area.**
    a. The current speed limit on Ella T Grasso Boulevard is 35 mph.[2]
    b. A speed study conducted for this studio on the south section of the boulevard where the crash occurred indicated that 81.3% of motorists exceeded the posted speed limit.
    c. The study stated the 85th percentile speed, or the speed at which 85% of drivers traveling at or below, was 47 mph
    d. A pedestrian safety analysis states that fatality rates and rates of serious injury climb for automobile collisions involving pedestrians at 25 mph; 216 of the 219 motorists tracked were traveling beyond 25 mph and past this safety threshold. Almost every driver profiled was operating at a speed known to pose fatal risks to pedestrians.
    e. More than one-fifth of the motorists tracked—23.7% of them—were traveling at ten or more miles per hour over the speed limit.
    f. 126 motorists—or 57.5% of the sample—were driving between 36 and 45 mph.
        i. This data distribution indicates that this space communicates to drivers that it is a low-risk behavior to travel at speeds up to ten miles per hour faster than the posted limit. This increase in travel speed is significant as it directly correlates with crashes that have a higher likelihood of causing severe injuries and fatalities.

    g. These figures differ slightly from the speed study conducted on the north section of Ella T Grasso Boulevard where quick builds have been implemented.
        i. For the north section speed study, 76.5% of the 166 vehicles tracked exceeded the speed limit.
        ii. Only 16 of these automobiles—9.6% of the total tracked—were driving ten or more miles per hour over the limit.
        iii. The 85th percentile speed for the north section was found to be 44 mph.

    h. By design, vehicle travel speeds on both sections of Ella T Grasso Boulevard subject non-motorist users—including people traveling by foot and public transit riders—and motorist users to substantive danger.
        i. While vehicle travel speeds on portions of the boulevard with quick builds still put road users at risk, levels of deviant motorist behavior are measurably lower on these portions.
        ii. Design elements around the southern section of the boulevard pose a higher level of risk for non-motorists, partially due to the higher volume of pedestrians who travel through this area on foot.

2. **The southern section of Ella T Grasso Boulevard is designed to prioritize high speed and high capacity automobile traffic in a manner mismatched with**

[2] This is the case for both sections of the boulevard where speed studies were conducted.

non-motorist usage expected in this area since it is situated amongst neighborhoods, commercial establishments, and multiple parks.

a. Ella T Grasso Boulevard facilitates high speed automobile travel.
b. Travel lanes south of Columbus Avenue are wide enough to make drivers comfortable traveling at a design speed higher than the posted 35 mph limit.
    i. Each of the four through traffic lanes where the south section crash occurred are 12 feet' wide; this exceeds the ten-foot width deemed appropriate in most urban areas.
    ii. While the south section of the boulevard features access to planting strips and sidewalks on both sides of the boulevard, the crossing distance across asphalt for non-motorists users still totals 48 feet.
    iii. Bike lanes and multi-use paths for non-motorist users are also absent along the south section of the boulevard.

c. Travel lanes north of Columbus Avenue are still excessively wide, yet display constraining features that may help discourage high speed travel.
    i. Each of the two through traffic lanes where the crash occurred were reduced to widths of 11.5 feet during the 2023 road diet; these lane widths still exceed the recommended width.
    ii. The fourteen foot wide buffer areas on either side of the lanes for through traffic are marked by bollards; this configuration helps to both physically and optically narrow the travel area available to northbound and southbound motorists.
        1. This segment of Ella T Grasso Boulevard features access to a sidewalk and planter area on its east side, though pedestrian infrastructure is absent on its west side.
    iii. The listed measurements indicate that although there is 57 feet of pavement for non-motorists to cross at this location, only 23 feet of that pavement is allocated for driving by motorists.
        1. Restriction of traffic to one southbound and one northbound lane also restricts the number of variables a non-motorist has to account for when crossing the boulevard.
    iv. The 85th percentile speed on the north section of Ella T Grasso Boulevard was found to be 44 mph, nine miles per hour faster than the posted limit; this speed indicates the area is still prone to crashes that may seriously injure or kill both non-motorists and motorists.

3. **South of Columbus Avenue, Ella T Grasso Boulevard features–at best–inadequate pedestrian infrastructure for the high volume of individuals who regularly navigate the area on foot.**
    a. Sidewalks exist on both sides of the boulevard, but there are no curb extensions, refuge islands, or marked mid-block crossings.
    b. People like Carlos Ortiz who walk through the area near the flea market do so without designated crossings despite high levels of foot traffic.

c. The closest legal crossing to the flea market is more than 300 feet away; accessing this crossing requires a detour amounting to approximately 1,000 extra feet of travel.
    i. One local expert reported that pedestrian timing at this designated crossing may still be insufficient to meet the needs of individuals who have limited mobility or may be traveling with children.

d. AASHTO[3]-based standards call for mid-block crossings when crosswalks are between 200 and 600 feet away from a highly frequented destination.
e. Many people walking to and from businesses may opt to cross mid-block out of necessity or convenience.
f. Without signalized crossings or pedestrian-centric traffic calming measures, people traveling by foot are expected to navigate a vehicle-dominated space that does not adequately provide for or consider their safety.

4. **Ella T Grasso Boulevard features geometric dimensions that invite unsafe driving behavior, making the boulevard into an environment incompatible for individuals traveling on foot or otherwise outside of privately owned automobiles.**
    a. The straight and wide configuration of the south section of Ella T Grasso Boulevard encourages high-speed driving.
        i. The 12 foot-wide through traffic lanes do not feature optical or physical constraints to moderate driver behavior.
        ii. At the nearest crosswalk in front of the New Haven Adult & Continuing Education Center, a fifth 12-foot-wide traffic lane for turning motorists extends the total crossing width to 60 feet; this may make crossing challenging for non-motorist road users.

    b. Local experts also noted a longstanding issue of drag racing that, more recently, has evolved to include street takeovers featuring all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and stunt driving.
        i. These activities frequently occur on weekends between cross streets like Printers Lane and Washington Avenue.
        ii. Spectator cars and participants often disrupt–and sometimes totally shut down–typical traffic flows.
        iii. One source from 2023 indicates 15 to 25 cars may participate in racing near Columbus House[4] on a typical Friday night.

5. **Aspects of the built environment along Ella T Grasso Boulevard may limit motorists' sightlines and the visibility of non-motorists at night.**

[3] American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.
[4] This is a non-profit organization near the crash location that provides support services to individuals experiencing homelessness.

a. Residents expressed that the city needed to repair multiple street lights during a February 2020 neighborhood walk along Whalley Avenue near Ella T Grasso Boulevard; this walk occurred months prior to the crash that killed Carlos Ortiz.
b. Current visibility on the south section of Ella T Grasso Boulevard largely depends on lighting from commercial establishments along the west side of the thoroughfare.
    i. Though street lights adequately illuminate major intersections along Ella T Grasso Boulevard, some southern stretches of the boulevard are poorly lit when businesses close after dark.
    ii. Existing street light fixtures require optimal pole spacing, LED bulbs, and ongoing maintenance to illuminate the 48-foot width present along Ella T Grasso Boulevard; these upkeep elements may or may not currently be in place.

c. Numerous driveway cuts and vehicles navigating in and out of parking lots along the southbound stretch of Ella T Grasso Boulevard may further compound existing visibility risks.

6. **Jurisdictional fragmentation between the state of Connecticut and the city of New Haven limits local ability to implement improvements along Ella T Grasso Boulevard.**
    a. The CTDOT owns Ella T Grasso Boulevard, making the state responsible for design and maintenance; the city of New Haven partners with the state on pedestrian elements like sidewalks and local signal timing.
    b. Urban corridor upgrades and related projects are funded and scheduled statewide.
    c. The CTDOT relies upon the South Central Regional Council of Governments (SCRCOG) for coordination since the state of Connecticut does not have counties.
    d. These protocols–especially in combination with one another–can delay corridor-specific funding and slow safety interventions, even in the presence of persistent advocacy from residents of the Hill neighborhood.

Recommendations

To address the persistent risks and systemic shortcomings of Ella T Grasso Boulevard, delegate resources to transforming the corridor into a people-first public space—one that values safety, dignity, and usability for all. The proposed responses below directly link to the hazards identified by panelists, such as excessive speeds, poor visibility, wide crossing distances, drag racing behavior, and jurisdictional gridlock. These challenges require deliberate design changes that prioritize human life and well-being over vehicular speed and convenience.

Improving conditions on this corridor will require tactical interventions and structural reform. Immediate actions include deploying temporary safety infrastructure measures and formalizing jurisdictional discussions between the City of New Haven and the CTDOT. These short-term efforts can lay the groundwork for more permanent changes like road diets and mid-block crossing signals. In particular, lane narrowing and optical friction elements—like bollards or refuge islands—offer fast and cost-effective ways to rebalance the corridor in favor of non-motorist safety.

Systemic transformation will come through sustained city-state collaboration and a commitment to context sensitive urban-scale design. Jurisdictional transfer of the boulevard's south section may be key to unlocking the autonomy needed for timely and responsive safety improvements. Where pilot projects succeed, they should be formalized and expanded. Where leadership is needed, elected officials must clearly communicate that safety—not speed—will define the future of this public space. The outlined recommendations reflect a long-overdue shift: from tolerating dangerous conditions to intentionally designing a corridor that respects the lives of all road users.

On the south section of Ella T Grasso Boulevard, specifically between its intersections with State Route 1 and Kimberly Avenue, the practices below should be adopted.

Immediate Recommendations

1. Retime and extend pedestrian signal durations at key intersections like Columbus Avenue to better accommodate older adults, individuals with disabilities, and parents with children.

2. Install and monitor temporary pedestrian-activated beacons near high-demand mid-block crossing zones.
    a. A signalized crossing with flashing beacons between Printers Lane and Adeline Street—near the flea market—will account for mid-block crossings that currently happen in the absence of infrastructure.

3. Collaborate with city staff and CTDOT to implement a quick-build road diet between Columbus Avenue and Washington Avenue, following CTDOT's own successful examples north of Columbus, which show such projects are feasible without major traffic disruptions.
    a. Reallocate the four lanes of through traffic to one through lane in each direction, with a two-way left turn lane or flexible median in the center.
    b. Use paint and bollards to optically and physically narrow the street.

4. Deploy pole-mounted LED lights or solar-powered temporary fixtures near the flea market, cemetery, and other poorly lit segments to improve nighttime visibility until permanent infrastructure can be installed.

5. Install and enforce “No Right Turn on Red” signs, particularly at intersections with limited pedestrian sightlines and frequent turn violations.

6. Work with key city staff to build a proposal requesting the CTDOT transfer jurisdiction of the south segment of Ella T Grasso Boulevard.
    a. Reference how Connecticut General Statutes § 13a-46 can be employed to transfer rights over a highway to a local municipality.
    b. If applicable, cite the redevelopment of Route 34 as an example of what control transfer might look like.

7. Elected officials of New Haven should provide direction and guidance to CTDOT staff for the desired user behavior along Ella T Grasso Boulevard—particularly between Columbus Avenue and Kimberly Avenue—to help improve safety for all road users.
    a. Elected leadership may prepare a formal document supporting this objective that states:
        i. Safety for all users shall be the primary design priority that outranks all others along Ella T Grasso Boulevard.
        ii. All future design and planning efforts for this boulevard and surrounding roadways shall be contextual to an urban character safe for motorists and non-motorists.

Mid-term Recommendations (within 12 months)

8. Right-size existing travel lane widths from 12 feet to 10 feet; utilize freed space to:
    a. Introduce pedestrian buffers or multi-use paths that signal to drivers the necessity of slower speeds.
    b. Introduce median refuge islands at existing desire lines to reduce exposure time for people traveling by foot. Precast concrete and mountable curb materials can be inexpensively and rapidly deployed.

9. Replace effective temporary crossing beacons with pedestrian hybrid beacons (HAWK signals) or Rectangular Rapid Flash Beacons (RRFBs) to make these crossings more permanent.

10. Enhance drag racing deterrence strategies through installations like rumble strips, raised pavement markers, or additional visual narrowing treatments.

11. Collaborate with the CTDOT to follow up on the City’s jurisdictional transfer proposal by assisting with any DOT evaluations. This may include:
    a. Assessing existing or shifting highway standards.
    b. Articulating how jurisdictional transfer aligns with New Haven’s citywide safety goals.
    c. Forecasting and accounting for potential costs and liabilities associated with the transfer.

Long-term and Systematic Recommendations

12. Further pursue jurisdictional transfer or maintenance agreements by:
    a. Cooperating with the CTDOT to recognize and hold any necessary public notice periods.
    b. Collaborating with the CTDOT to conduct any additional—likely optional—environmental reviews or assessments.
    c. Facilitating any final sign off by Office of Policy & Management (OPM) representatives.

13. Replace effective temporary lighting solutions with well-distributed, more permanent street lighting fixtures; ensure light levels are pedestrian-scaled and eliminate dark zones that can heighten risk and danger exposure.

14. Normalize incremental changes—such as bollard-protected curb extensions or temporary bump-outs—by initiating ongoing, low-cost pilot interventions; scale successful intervention approaches for implementation across the entire corridor.

15. Integrate any Ella T Grasso Boulevard corridor improvements into broader safety programs like Vision Zero; initiate use of this corridor as a pilot for testing comprehensive redesign approaches.

Concluding Statement

The design flaws along Ella T Grasso Boulevard—specifically nearby Columbus Avenue—present significant dangers to the New Haven community. Prioritizing traffic flow over the safety and usability of non-motorists has led to injuries and fatalities in communities across Connecticut, New England, and the United States.

In New Haven, local leaders and citizens must lead by example, transforming Ella T Grasso Boulevard and the roadways it intersects with into people-centric places. By adopting modified design principles, the state and municipality can ensure that roadways are built to safely accommodate all users, especially pedestrians and motorists.

Evaluating the numerous factors contributing to crashes allows designers, decision-makers, and the public to move beyond merely assigning blame. Instead, they can focus on systemic design changes that prioritize pedestrian safety alongside motorist usage. By transforming this intersection into a local roadway that prioritizes safety and accessibility, New Haven can set a valuable precedent for other communities both within and beyond Connecticut state borders.