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Weather puts damper on car-free Sunday

Rain dampens the first car-free Sunday, but residents enjoy playing in the streets. Two more are planned at Rainier Avenue South and Alki Avenue Southwest.

By [Lynn Thompson](#)

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ROSS MANTLE / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Sarah Kwatinetz, 9, left, and Sophie Kaplan, 9, sit at their lemonade stand along East Prospect. The street closure pushed drivers and pedestrians past the girls' stand.

Car-free streets

Aug. 31, Rainier Avenue South will close from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. between South Alaska and South Orcas streets in Columbia City. The closure coincides with Bicycle Sunday on Lake Washington Boulevard South.

Sept. 7, Alki Avenue Southwest will close between California Way Southwest and 63rd Avenue Southwest. One lane will be reserved for the water-taxi shuttle.

Heavy rains turned the first of Mayor Greg Nickels' planned car-free Sundays into a nearly people-free afternoon.

Supporters hoped this trial closure of a quiet five blocks east of Volunteer Park on Capitol Hill would prove a successful introduction to what's likely to be the more challenging street closures of Rainier Avenue South and Alki Avenue Southwest on the following two Sundays.

Residents and visitors along 14th Avenue East had mostly praise for the idea of opening the street to bicyclists, pedestrians and kids on training wheels and roller blades. They said Seattle is

joining many cities around the country and the world, including Portland, San Francisco and New York City, in dedicating some public thoroughfares to people for a day.

"It's about enjoying the neighborhood and playing without cars," said Margaret Kramer, who arrived at the 14th Avenue barricades on foot while her two sons rollerbladed down the middle of the street.

But at least one resident expressed frustration at the inconvenience and cost — about \$45,000 for permitting, barricades and police for all three Sunday street closures, according to the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT).

"I think it's a total and complete waste of money," said the young woman, who would give only her first name, Geri.

She echoed some of the intense criticism that's been directed at Nickels on local talk radio and in neighborhood blogs since he announced the experimental closures in late July by telling residents to give their cars a vacation and "just chill."

Some have complained that the enforced street closures, like the 20-cent fee for grocery bags effective in January, is turning Seattle into a "Nanny City" where residents are told what's good for them. Geri, who lives on 14th Avenue East, said, "I reuse my shopping bags. I don't have a car. I don't like being told what to do."

She took the mayor up on the suggestion that people create chalk art on the closed streets by scrawling in the middle of 14th: Earth 0, Nickels 1.

A day that was supposed to make people feel good about being on the street started out harshly for some. Twenty-seven cars were ticketed for not observing the street-closure notices, and 20 were towed, according to SDOT.

The street, 14th Avenue East, was chosen because the date coincided with a Seattle Peace Concert in the park. With Sunday's rain, however, the musicians played to a largely empty green.

Some apartment residents invited friends over for breakfast and then sat on the stoop as tow trucks hauled away the oblivious. One man raced out in jockey shorts to save his car from the impound lot; a woman in a nightie did the same.

Still, the apartment visitors said they hoped Seattle would expand the trial run.

"I think it's a cool idea," said Angela Wittman. "It's about community building. It gets people out on the streets."

Louisa Malatos was another enthusiastic participant. She stood out of the rain in an apartment entryway while her son Turner, 11, got pointers on bike safety and helmet adjustment from the Cascade Bicycle Club.

"I'm really glad they're doing this," she said. "There aren't safe places in the city for kids to learn to ride a bike."

Chris Cameron, commute director for the bicycle club, participated earlier this year in the Portland "Sunday Parkways" event, which links four city parks to six miles of street closures and attracts thousands of people.

As he stood under the club's dripping tent Sunday, alongside a nearly empty 14th Avenue, he still found reason for optimism.

"This is a great start. We applaud the city for doing this."

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