

Cities, Stop Bending the Rules for Drive-Thru Businesses



(Source: [Flickr](#).)

How far would you go to advocate for a safer community for people who walk?

For self-described urbanist, cycling advocate, and public administration grad student John Holmes, speaking up cost him his job. Holmes took to social media after the City Council in Charlotte, North Carolina, approved a request to rezone a Chick-Fil-A fast food restaurant for drive-thru-only operation.

The biggest problem with the rezoning? The [restaurant in question](#) is in an area slated for transit-oriented development, across the road from a light rail station. It's among nearly 2,000 acres of land that [Charlotte rezoned in 2019](#) to encourage walkable urban development in the vicinity of the Blue Line. Although the area is dominated by auto-oriented chain retail right now, it is intended to evolve away from that form over time. This is why Chick-Fil-A had to ask for an exception from the normal rules to operate the most auto-oriented possible use—an exclusively drive-thru establishment—in this location. And Charlotte granted the exception.

As an [opinion column in the *Charlotte Observer*](#) by Paige Masten observes, "Holmes and other transit advocates have a point: granting exceptions is pretty contradictory to the goals that Charlotte has set for itself in recent years.... It's yet another reminder

that even Charlotte's best ideas seem to be crippled by its inability to follow through on them."

Masten's column also reveals what happened to Holmes for his advocacy. When Holmes arrived the next morning to his job as an operations manager at a different Chick-Fil-A, his boss pulled him aside and fired him for speaking ill of the company online. (Sadly, under at-will employment law, Holmes's firing was [almost certainly legal](#).) When he [posted on Twitter about the incident](#), Holmes received an outpouring of support and even a job offer (albeit too far away to accept).

For Holmes's part, he told the *Charlotte Observer* that he does not regret speaking up, even though the timing is awkward, with a baby on the way at home. He said that he was angered by the city's lack of commitment to its own plans.

Charlotte's City Council's willingness to bend their own rules at the request of a national chain business is sadly typical. Such businesses tend to throw their weight around with city councils, and for years they've told us that they need drive-thrus, that their customers want drive-thrus, and that allowing them is the price of doing business. And cities, more often than not, bend the knee, even when their land-use plans call for discouraging or disallowing such designs.

In some cases, like the Charlotte one, these petitions for special treatment begin to amount to a sort of corporate gaslighting. Approved along with Chick-Fil-A was a drive-thru (again in a transit-oriented area where it would not normally have been allowed) for Fifth Third Bank. The bank [somehow persuaded most City Council members](#) this exception was necessary, even though Fifth Third was also on record that it would still build the bank branch even if the city voted down the drive-thru. As for the Chick-Fil-A, through some Orwellian logic, planners suggested in the approval hearing that a drive-thru-*only* business would make the area *more* pedestrian-friendly. (Huh?)

The truth is, all of these national chains have urban-format stores in their repertoire of designs, and often these locations are tremendously successful. Cities should not be afraid to impose design standards that meet the community's needs and that don't jeopardize long-term planning for the public realm—even when that means calling the bluff of a major fast-food chain, bank, or pharmacy.

A Costly Mistake to Undo

Unfortunately, drive-thru businesses are tremendously problematic for people outside a vehicle. They create hazardous crossing points where it's easy to be hit by an

inattentive driver, render all types of bike lanes less functional and safe, and break up the urban fabric, leaving unappealing dead zones. They also simply eat up a lot of precious urban land and contribute very low value compared to a traditional, walkable development pattern—a point illustrated by Strong Towns' widely cited [Taco John's case study](#).

I wrote at length in 2020 about these hazards and others, arguing, "[No, We Still Don't Need Drive-Thrus](#)," even despite their rapid growth during the COVID-19 pandemic. There are other ways to offer convenient and safe take-out access to your business that aren't so destructive of cities.

And once you've allowed a drive-thru, it's very difficult to backtrack—even when it proves to be unusually problematic. This is the lesson of St. Paul, Minnesota's infamous "Carbucks."



(Source: [Flickr](#).)

Starbucks got permission in 2015 to open a coffee drive-thru lane at the intersection of Snelling and Marshall Avenues. In a postmortem for *MinnPost*, Bill Lindeke, who was on the St. Paul Planning Commission at the time, [relates the sordid tale](#). Although opponents of the proposal argued at the time that a drive-thru on the small, irregular site would lead to traffic problems, city engineers signed off on the coffee chain's site plan, and the company was granted a variance (a special exception from normal zoning rules) and opened its drive-thru. Lindeke relates what happened next, to equal parts anger and schadenfreude among local transportation advocates, who took to stationing themselves with their cameras outside "Carbucks" during the morning coffee rush to document the inevitable chaos:

There were often far more people interested in drive-thru coffee than places for their cars to idle. The resulting queue invariably backed up into the street, and, at times, even blocking the busy Snelling and Marshall intersection.

Meanwhile, the design of the queue and its intersection with the street triggered a constantly evolving battle between infrastructure and the driver inattention. For example, after a few drivers mistakenly drove straight over the curb and sidewalk (probably doing damage to their car), the company installed a crude fence at the end of the exit making it clear not to drive over the embankment. Meanwhile, coffee-seeking cars routinely blocked the bike lane, so the City began installing plastic bollards to better demarcate the space. As they got mowed over, the bollards were re-installed with varying and futile frequency.

Some of it worked, but nothing seemed to solve the fundamental problem of too many cars in too small a space. Eventually, with months of complaints from bicyclists and neighbors, the St. Paul Department of Safety and Inspections (DSI) began requiring a police officer to stand on duty directing traffic and keeping the streets and sidewalks clear from 7 to 10 AM each morning.

Ultimately, though, despite the obvious problems with this drive-thru—in this case severe enough that public money was being spent to mitigate them—Carbucks continued to operate until the drive-thru was temporarily closed in April 2021, and permanently in February 2022. Starbucks plans to redesign the space to accommodate an outdoor patio.

What ultimately killed Carbucks was not even the traffic or safety problems it created. It was anti-police sentiment in the wake of the widespread protests following George Floyd's murder. Starbucks employees forced the company's hand by demanding the removal of the police officer directing traffic. A happy ending for a somewhat unrelated, serendipitous reason—but that shouldn't be what it takes to prevent a drive-thru from creating a public nuisance, or even simply degrading the quality of the urban environment in more mundane ways.

The best thing cities can do is prioritize good urbanism in places where people are going to be on foot. Make a clear set of rules. And then enforce them consistently. Don't break them by special request, even for tasty lattes or fried chicken.



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[Tony Dutzik](#)

Feb 24, 2023



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Missouri's governor is stuck on a mid-20th-century economic model, wherein connecting cities via interstates provides big economic returns. But such a mindset is going to do a lot more harm than good in today's world.

[Richard Bose](#)

Feb 16, 2023



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...Because effective public transit isn't just about the rails; it's about what happens around them.

Tiffany Owens Reed

Jan 3, 2023



Daniel Herriges

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Daniel's obsession with maps began before he could read; a general fascination with cities and how they work was soon to follow. He can often be found exploring out-of-the-way neighborhoods (of his own town or another) on foot or bicycle. Daniel's lifelong

environmentalism can also be traced all the way back to age 4, when he yelled at his parents for stepping on weeds growing in sidewalk cracks.