

Part 4: PEDESTRIAN / BICYCLE PATH NETWORK

Attitudes are changing. Walkability is in short supply in many of our traditional downtowns and older residential neighborhoods of America. These once venerable areas are now criss-crossed with ever widening multi-lane streets, dotted with intersections boasting rounded corners for quick turns, and teeming with the resulting fast flowing traffic. These single-minded traffic designs put slow moving pedestrians and bicyclists at peril. Indeed, pedestrians now account for 13% of all motor vehicle-related deaths; 55% of all those deaths occur on neighborhood streets. This would be even higher except for the fact that ever fewer people attempt walking. Trips taken on foot have dropped 42% in the past 20 years. In some places any mode of transportation other than a motorized vehicle has been engineered virtually out of existence.

And it is not only the *people* who are in danger. When residents no longer feel safe to walk in their neighborhoods, the quality of life that made those areas livable is in jeopardy. In some neighborhoods that *livability* has already died.

Many citizens, politicians, economists and enlightened developers, however, are beginning to realize that "quality of life" and "livability" are not just warm-and-fuzzy, Hallmark-card sentiments or sales gimmicks. In an increasingly competitive global marketplace, livability is the factor that will determine which communities thrive and which ones wither. The MIT, Nobel Prize-winning economist Robert Solow put it well: "Livability is not some middle-class luxury. It is an economic imperative."

Even many traffic engineers (whose Highway Capacity Manual as late as 1994 referred to pedestrians as "flow interruptions") now realize the need to include bicyclists and pedestrians in their traffic management programs. In those cities and towns where pedestrians and bikes are valued as an integral part of the traffic network (Portland, Boulder, Madison, Seattle, among others), the number of walkers and bicyclists has risen. And it's those towns that often top the various lists of "Best Places to Live."

Leesburg's excellent position. A number of factors make Leesburg an excellent candidate for an extensive network of bike and pedestrian trails. The town is still small enough to easily get around. Schools, stores and services are within easy walking distance of many neighborhoods. Our shady, tree-lined streets make attractive routes. We have many older residents who can't drive any longer and *need* to walk. The local high-tech economy is attracting young professionals who are arriving from college towns and western cities where biking is an integral part of the transportation system. And the Town is blessed with the bicycle equivalent of a commuter super highway leading straight into the Dulles high-tech corridor – the W.O.&D. trail.

Leesburg, however, is at a crossroads. The burgeoning economy is applying pressure to the transportation system. The traditional fix would be to add more vehicle lanes. Accommodate faster traffic. Squeeze out pedestrians and bikes in favor of more cars and trucks. But the Town cannot afford to simply apply the short-term, outdated method of trying to pave its way out of the problem. A time-honored maxim holds that

we cannot fix today's problems with the same thinking that created them in the first place. We must provide multi-modal choices in our transportation system. And just as important, *we must become proactive whenever possible to enable people to make choices other than the single occupancy automobile.*

This means tearing down barriers and creating opportunities for people to make changes in how they move around. There should be bike lanes leading to places like Giant, Safeway and Blockbuster. Secure parking for bikes at such locations should be installed. The main post office needs to easily be accessible on foot or bike to residents on either side of Catocin Circle. Major streets such as East Market should have a sufficient number of safe, attractive, and marked pedestrian and bike crossings so as to *encourage* people use them. A network of bike routes should connect neighborhoods with businesses and ultimately lead to the W.O.&D. trail.

While recognized as a recreational asset, the bicycle also can serve as an independent means of transportation for the regular transportation network for business and personal trips. The Town should therefore promote bicycle parking at business locations, as well as commercial and recreational destinations. Presented with safe alternatives, it has been shown that people will change their transportation habits. A Harris poll found that 70% of U.S. adults want better facilities for non-motorized transport.

Fast moving traffic provides mobility at the expense of our quality of life. Safe sidewalks, inviting trails and bike paths, however, provide balance to our transportation system while enhancing our overall quality of life and strengthening our communities. Communities that hold together, that have a feeling of continuity, are those that not only allow, but also *encourage* people to interact. Towns that will prosper, even when the economy turns down, will be those with strong communities.

Historical context. Leesburg and Loudoun County currently enjoy the availability of the Washington and Old Dominion Railroad Regional Park, established in 1968 as a National Recreation Trail linear park, 100 feet wide and 45 miles long, running between Arlington/Alexandria and Purcellville. The W&OD Trail is a multi-use paved trail, built on the roadbed of the former railroad, providing a recreation and transportation route for walking, biking and horseback riding.

The Town of Leesburg identified the need for an organized and conceptual approach to trail development as early as 1988 with a resolution authorizing a greenway and trail study and master plan. The County of Loudoun expressed an interest in participating, and a joint effort was underway. The plan received technical assistance in exploring the possibilities for linking and conserving important areas of Leesburg and Loudoun with a county-wide network of greenways and trails. The ultimate plan developed built upon the concepts of linkage and connectivity. The plan embraced a partnership effort between the public and private sectors in the development and maintenance of greenways and trails, with many members of the community working together to realize a shared goal for maintaining their quality of life.

Those members of the commission who developed the plan saw proof in examples throughout the country that greenways increased the value of nearby properties and were beneficial to the economy of a community from the attraction of high-quality business, recreation and tourism. Greenways and trails were envisioned as a link between residential and commercial areas, encouraging citizens to seek alternative methods of travel beyond motor vehicles. The plan's vision called for trails beyond those used for recreational purposes, making bicycle and pedestrian trails a viable means of transportation throughout both Leesburg and Loudoun County. Included in the plan's recommendations were goals of building greenways and trails into the land development process and land use decisions; creating options and incentives to encourage landowner participation in the establishment of greenways and trails; support for the establishment of methods to address maintenance, safety, signs and litter; providing long-term funding, maintenance, and administration of the greenway and trails system through public-private partnerships; informing and educating the public about opportunities generated by the greenway and trails system; and encouraging road improvement projects to provide for non-automobile as well as automobile uses.

Twelve years after identification of the need and seven years after completion of the *Greenways and Trails Master Plan for Leesburg and Loudoun County, Virginia*, many of these goals remain in the embryonic stage, and await an aggressive mounting of public and private support to see them through to fruition. As Leesburg approaches the mature stages of its growth capacity, opportunities and flexibility to have a substantive impact on connecting neighborhoods and community business centers will diminish. The Task Force urges the Council to make pedestrian and bike access a high priority in its policies and planning to ensure Leesburg's vitality and connectivity are maintained and nurtured into the future.

Recommendations

- Establish as Town policy the goal of making Leesburg a "connected community" via a comprehensive trail and sidewalk network, promoting pedestrian travel as a safe, convenient and viable transportation mode. Make this policy a priority of the Town plan.
- Create a pedestrian and bicycle network that connects destinations such as schools, transit stops, community services, recreational uses and neighborhood business districts.
- Work with citizen groups, business associations and public agencies to identify and prioritize destination linkages for pedestrian access.
- Work with Town staff to ensure that Town ordinances and policies promote pedestrian travel, improve pedestrian safety and eliminate barriers to walking.
- Work with Town staff to develop a community outreach and education program to encourage pedestrian travel and promote pedestrian safety.
- Include in this education effort an initiative to connect people with jobs and encourage pedestrian access to employment centers.

- Work with local tourism promotion officials to create a walking/bike tour map of Leesburg points of interest, and use the map to promote local restaurants and services.
- Create bike trail lanes on existing roadways where it can be done safely: the result will encourage bike access, narrow streets and slow traffic; where lanes cannot be marked, identify and mark bike routes.
- Create focal points for bike access by providing bike parking, and directional signage on trails to specific points of interest and services:

Commercial/Business Destinations

Government Centers (Town and County)
 Courthouse Complex
 Post Office(s)
 Battlefield Shopping Center
 Shenandoah Square
 Leesburg Plaza
 Prosperity Center
 Bellewood Commons
 Virginia Village
 Village Square
 Market Station
 Historic District
 Shenandoah University

Points of Interest

Balls Bluff
 Ida Lee Recreation Center
 Museum
 Visitor's Center
 Dodona Manor
 Rust Library
 Thomas Balch Library
 Izaak Walton Park
 Catoclin Skateboard Park

- Ensure every opportunity is taken to expand the sidewalk network, whether by development or re-development by private property owners or through public construction.