American Trails

My Kind of Town: Connecting Nonmotorized Plans and Trails
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Imagine a trail that stretches from the banks of the Detroit River to Lake Michigan. Imagine that trail running through cities like Detroit, Ann Arbor and Kalamazoo instead of simply coming close to them. Imagine that these cities have miles of dedicated bike lanes and expanded pedestrian spaces that allow trail users unobstructed access to all of the restaurants, museums and amenities each has to offer.

An example of the "**Supreme Streets" concept, promoting safe use and access for vehicles, transit, bicyclists, and pedestrians**

Sounds good, doesn't it? Trails that actually connect to something (other than another trail) are something of a rarity, it seems. I hadn't really concerned myself with this fact because I work mainly within the urban arena. But a recent trip to a trails conference changed that.

Trail Towns

Michigan currently boasts a sophisticated network of trails, and is ambitiously planning to expand that network throughout the state. As an advocate for nonmotorized transportation, I started wondering how the idea of trail networks and nonmotorized transportation infrastructure could merge together. This burgeoning trail network seems like a natural partner to other nonmotorized improvements.

While attending a recent conference focusing on trail development, I certainly heard talk of “trail towns” and the economic benefits for downtowns courting trail users. These conversations included discussions of what it means to be “bike friendly”: providing services that trail users may need, providing effective ways for finding and advertising the services, and ensuring a quick and easy route from the trail to a town.

After discussing these initiatives with a few of my colleagues, one nagging question continued to bother me. I quickly asked, “That’s it?” I went on to explain that a true “trail town” should provide nonmotorized facilities throughout its borders. Furthermore, the town should be an extension of the trail itself.

After a few moments of polite discussion, our conversation changed course. It seemed, however, most of my fellow conference goers did not fully understand the point I was making. I was immediately struck by a rather stark disconnect between trail planners and those of us who work primarily in the urban realm.

Providing bike and pedestrian access while keeping a safe separation from parking and roadways

The chasm I speak of is the inherent connection between traditional trails and urban nonmotorized improvements. Alas, as is true with any divide, this one results in lost opportunities for the success of a trail and a community trying to be a trail town. But divides can be bridged, and here is my attempt.

Supreme Streets

As I mentioned above, it occurs to me that trail towns can and should mean much more than simply being bike friendly. After all, once trail users get to a town, shouldn’t they be

able to effectively get around town as well? Wouldn't their ability to access all that a town has to offer be the friendliest gesture a community could make?

You've most likely heard of Complete Streets and several other movements focused on the future of our roadways. These ideologies are sweeping across the country through city planning, legislatures and advocacy groups:

Complete Streets refer to those that are designed and operated for all users, regardless of age and ability. Roadways should therefore accommodate vehicles, transit, bicyclists and pedestrians.

Green Streets encourage sustainability in the design and construction of roadways by using the latest best management practices, such as rain gardens for improving storm water quality.

Living Streets go beyond simply adding sidewalks to include active use of the corridor, such as outdoor dining and sales, and neighborhood festivals.

Each of the above can have positive impact on quality of life, but can sometimes be too narrowly focused. They can often lose the forest for the trees, so to speak. So this is where I offer the complementary notion of "Supreme Streets."

Supreme Streets are nothing more than a fundamental reevaluation of the purpose of our roadways. They borrow tenets from several other movements and combine them into an overarching expression of a community's values. I suggest that the future American roadway should incorporate all of these goals and follow a definition of a "Supreme Street":

"Roadways are designed and operated to promote safe use and access for vehicles, transit, bicyclists and pedestrians of all ages and physical abilities through the application of universal design practices. These designs account for alternate uses of the corridor, realizing that roadways are a significant portion of public space and therefore have a large impact on local culture and overall quality of life. Furthermore, roads are designed to minimize the negative impacts to the environment by striving to improve air and water quality at all times."

The pursuit of Supreme Streets is integral to any thoughts of becoming a trail town. Indeed, a fully developed network of bike lanes and expanded pedestrian spaces is a natural extension of traditional trail development. They are the fundamentals of a true trail town.

Urban Trails

Traditional trails shouldn't stop when they reach a town – or even a large city. Southeastern Michigan, like many other regions across the nation, has a number of trails located within older communities that have been converted from abandoned railroad tracks. This is particularly fascinating when placed within the context of an urban city such as Detroit.

The Dequindre Cut project, a former Grand Trunk Western Railroad line that is now a 1.35-mile greenway leading into Detroit, did just that. The project is a rousing success in

many ways, and even as it attempts to expand, it would exponentially increase its ridership if there were multiple dedicated on-street bike facilities feeding it.

Detroit adopted what I consider to be one of the more aggressive nonmotorized transportation master plans in the country. The Motor City has set up a nonmotorized transportation committee and updated its road design standards to include dedicated bicycle facilities. The first 13 miles of bike lanes will be installed within the historic Corktown and Mexicantown neighborhoods this year, and more are planned within the Midtown district and Southwest Detroit. These projects are attempting to connect to the Dequindre Cut to increase access.

Detroit is not alone in this effort, as Seattle has completed miles of urban trails through and around the Emerald City. Chicago's riverfront provides walkers and bicyclists with sweeping views of Lake Michigan and the city's skyline. There are more examples than I have space to list, which shows the power and potential that urban trails possess.

One for the Road

So how is this dilemma solved? As the trail conference I attended illustrates, a large disconnect exists between urban nonmotorized advocates and traditional trail developers.

If we combine forces and work together, we can use this vision of Supreme Streets and urban trails to further pursue and promote trail towns. If we close the chasm and link trails to neighboring communities through Supreme Streets, the possibilities are endless. All cities can benefit from the economic, health and community advantages that trails and their connecting links provide to a surrounding area. It's time we jointly blaze a new path in trail development, one that unites our communities through walking, biking and hiking.