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METRO FINAL

PATHS TO SUCCESS

Movement aims to make Detroit an easier city to walk and bike



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Detroit's main streets make good highways but lousy neighborhoods.

It's time to change that.

The local development community is abuzz with talk of adding bicycle lanes, wider sidewalks, new landscaping and other devices to narrow Detroit's arterial streets — Woodward, Gratiot, Jefferson and others.

Whether it'll happen is open to question. But the goal is to recapture Detroit's cityscape for the people who actually live here.

With Detroit's population losses, streets are overbuilt for the traffic they carry.

The City Council gave a major boost to this talk in September when it approved a plan for a nonmotorized transportation system for Detroit. Still just a concept so far, the plan, developed by Detroit-based Giffels-Webster Engineers and other firms, needs money and further defining to make it happen. But it commits the city to making progress toward a goal of reducing the automobile's impact on the city.

By creating bike lanes and otherwise redefining its main streets, many Detroiters hope to narrow the city's auto traffic lanes and make the city's hard-pressed neighborhoods more walkable.

If it happens, it would mark a major change. For many decades,



MARY SCHROEDER/Detroit Free Press

TAKING A RIDE: The Dequindre cut looking northbound on the Lafayette overpass in Lafayette Park near downtown is under construction. About 100 miles of new greenways are in some stage of planning, construction or completion in southeast Michigan.



Artist's rendering by Giffels-Webster Engineers

LIVING IN THE FUTURE: By narrowing streets from three traffic lanes in each direction to two, the city could make way for alternative transportation like bicycles and make it easier for pedestrians to cross. That would make neighborhoods more walkable.

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the city's arterial or so-called spoke streets such as Grand River and Michigan — nine lanes wide — have defined the urban landscape.

But with Detroit's population less than half its 1950s-era peak, these main streets now are absurdly overbuilt for the amount of traffic they carry.

Scott Clein, an engineer with Detroit-based Giffels-Webster Engineers who worked on the nonmotorized transit plan, showed me traffic studies of Michigan Avenue near downtown that suggest the street has far more capacity than it needs for the traffic it carries today.

That confirms my own informal observations. Simply by standing on a corner along Woodward or East Jefferson or Gratiot for five or 10 minutes, anyone can see how empty even the city's major streets are much of the day.

That provides an opportunity. Many of Detroit's neighborhoods are cut off from each other by these over-wide streets. Pedestrians, particularly older ones or parents with children in tow, find it all but impossible to cross one of these nine-line gulfs before the light changes.

By narrowing the streets from three traffic lanes in each direction to two, the city could make way for alternative transportation like bicycles and make it easier for pedestrians to cross. That, in turn, would make neighborhoods more walkable, and, hopefully, more livable.

Motorists may not like it, but they'll get used to it in Detroit as they have in other cities such as like Portland, Ore., and Denver, places where bike lanes and public transit have greatly improved the quality of life.

Meanwhile, Ann Arbor and other cities have begun installing so-called traffic-calming devices like slightly raised in-

For more information

■ Visit the Web site of the Michigan Trails & Greenways Alliance: www.michigantrails.org.

■ For a free copy of the Michigan Trails and Greenways Map and Directory, send a self-addressed stamped business envelope to: MTGA Trail Map, 410 S. Cedar, Suite A, Lansing 48912.

tersections and wider sidewalks to slow down speeding traffic.

The suggestion to narrow Detroit's main streets is part of a broader effort to create greenways throughout metro Detroit. An outgrowth of the old rails-to-trails movement to convert unused railroad tracks to bike and walking paths, the greenways movement is aimed at connecting neighborhoods with parks, trails and other nonautomotive links.

The Community Foundation

for Southeast Michigan already has committed about \$25 million to create greenways. About 100 miles of new greenways are in some stage of planning, construction or completion.

Detroit's new RiverWalk is the most famous greenway. Lesser ones are taking shape around metro Detroit. The goal now is to knit them into a network that ties the region's many neighborhoods.

It's a 21st-Century vision for a city that Detroit hopes to become.

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