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New Michigan law gives walkers, bikers a share of streets

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New York City has converted some traffic lanes for combined bicyclist and pedestrian use. There's a clear separation from vehicle traffic, and many New Yorkers say they are happy with the new arrangement. (JOHN GALLAGHER/Detroit Free Press)

A little-noticed act passed by the Michigan Legislature this year could have a big impact one day on how our cities look.

The act directs transportation planners in the state to plan for what's called complete streets -- streets that accommodate pedestrians and bicyclists along with cars and trucks.

It means that Michigan is now on the record acknowledging that it is a mistake to build roadways just to move high volumes of vehicle traffic as fast as possible. Designing healthy cities means considering all potential users of a street, regardless of their age or ability.

Ultimately, complete streets could produce road designs that accommodate sidewalk restaurants and the like, and intersection designs that allow pedestrians to cross in safety, not in fear of their lives.

A complete street, in other words, would be designed to handle pedestrians, people in wheelchairs, families pushing strollers and bicyclists. It also would meet the needs of retail and commercial users for wider sidewalks or slower traffic speeds.

A turn in right direction

It's a dramatic change, says Scott Clein, an engineer with the Detroit office of the engineering firm Giffels-Webster, who does a lot of work designing nonmotorized transportation links.

The act doesn't mean we'll see bicycle lanes on all Detroit streets anytime soon. The Legislature did not allocate any new money, and the act allows transportation planners to ignore it if sufficient need arises -- say, the safety of the public or overall cost.

Even so, Clein says, "It's a great start. The state has passed a bill that says flat out (that complete streets) has to be considered equally as important as how much traffic you can get from point A to point B. That's important."

This whole topic of complete streets has informed much of the discussion lately about how to reinvent Detroit. Many Detroiters now acknowledge that we have too much road capacity in the city for the amount of traffic. That's an opportunity to repurpose at least some of our streets for more environmentally-friendly uses.

New uses might include running a light-rail line up some streets (as is now planned for Woodward Avenue). And it can mean we'll see a lot more of those bicycle lanes that are starting to turn up here and there around the city.

Complete streets also can mean bus-only lanes, or wider sidewalks created as part of the network of greenways -- nonmotorized transportation venues -- that Detroit is slowly creating.

Examples from New York

Not long ago, visiting New York City, I saw some excellent examples of complete streets. A traffic lane had been converted to combined bicycle/pedestrian use, with a clear separation from the vehicle traffic.

Not everyone is happy with the new way there; merchants complain that parking spaces are being lost to bike lanes. But there's no doubt many residents are happy with the new arrangement.

"We're still ultimately left with people making decisions that have the ability to obtain exemptions either because it's too expensive for a particular project or they can throw out the public health and safety" exemption, Clein says. "But at least it's a step in the right direction."

At best, complete streets are an affirmation that cities are meant to serve all users and residents, not just the motorists who speed through every day on their way to somewhere else.