



re-FORMING *Transportation*

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Detroit,
pop. 713,777

The last quarter of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th century were defined by the 'good roads movement.' Some thought the movement was started by the automobile industry; but in reality, it was brought about by bicyclists attempting to improve the poor quality roads in rural areas outside of and between cities to make them suitable for biking. The early leaders of the good roads movement in Michigan became the founding fathers of the modern highway movement. With the growth of the automobile came the need for roads to meet the demands of the new vehicles' higher speeds and safety requirements. This need was met at the expense of bicyclists and pedestrians. As a result, the right-of-ways of American roadways became increasingly car centric at the expense of other modes.

COMPLETE STREETS

As we move through the 21st century, there is a new movement to restore balance to our transportation infrastructure. Known as “complete streets,” this philosophy holds that roads should be designed and operated to provide access for all users, regardless of age and ability. The entire roadway right-of-way should accommodate vehicles, transit users, bicyclists, and pedestrians as deemed necessary by the community. Real-world examples of this philosophy are showing up in redesigned roadways from Detroit to Grand Rapids to the Upper Peninsula.

Michigan took a significant step in the right direction in 2010 with the passage of Public Acts 134 and 135. As required by these two Acts, the State Transportation Commission adopted a complete streets policy for the Department of Transportation on July 26, 2012. But in the day-to-day world of municipal officials, can complete streets work?

YES, THEY CAN!

Two projects recently completed within the city of Detroit are showing that they can work. The Southwest Detroit Greenway provides connectivity within and between three historic neighborhoods. Similarly, the Second/Third Avenue project offers the opportunity to greatly increase access to numerous amenities within one of Detroit’s hottest areas.

The Southwest Detroit Greenway was composed of two distinct projects, Corktown-Mexicantown Greenlink and the West Vernor Greenway. Together they added about 16 miles of bicycle routes and bike lanes. These lanes were created by restriping the existing pavement to add the bike lane. Existing traffic patterns and on-street parking were essentially unchanged.

Working with the local residents and businesses, Second and Third Avenues in Midtown were converted from one-way operation to two-way operation. The roads originally had three lanes in one direction with on-street parking on both sides of the traveled way. Under the new configuration, the roads now have one lane of traffic in each direction with bike lanes and on-street parking. The project also created center turn lanes and removed on-street parking at signalized intersections. It preserved existing bus stops throughout the corridor.

Each project is a great example of how Complete Streets can positively impact a community. Cyclist activity throughout Corktown and Mexicantown and along Vernor continues to increase as people become accustomed to the changes.

PLANNING IS KEY

Yogi Berra once said, “If you don’t know where you’re going, you’ll likely end up someplace else.” In the case of complete streets, this Yogi-ism is certainly true as each of these projects are part of the city’s Non-motorized Transportation Master Plan, prepared in 2006.

During the preparation of that master plan, we quickly realized that the Motor City was ripe for a transformation, due at least in part, to some painful facts. Detroit’s population has decreased significantly since the 1950s. The corresponding decline in vehicle traffic on city streets corridors, along with the construction of an advanced interstate network in southeastern Michigan, provides significant opportunities to repurpose pavement.

Indeed, the majority of the improvements mentioned above were accomplished with pavement markings and signs. A small amount of road construction was required on each project to transition to adjacent sections of roadway, but very little in comparison to the entire project. The most significant costs were associated with the conversion of traffic signals to two-way operation. The point is, the improvements are not terribly expensive. The Southwest Detroit Greenlink cost \$555,000 to construct, while the conversions of Second/Third Avenue cost \$1,044,000. With municipal budgets shrinking, the ability to achieve so much for so little is important.



The Corktown-Mexicantown-Southwest Detroit Greenlink is part of the city’s Urban Non-motorized Transportation Master Plan. Linking Corktown, Mexicantown, and Southwest Detroit will provide people with convenient, safe access to three of the city’s most historic and vibrant neighborhoods.

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More importantly, the fact that Detroit had adopted a master plan including these changes was vital in actually getting them implemented. Anyone involved in the design of public improvements has likely heard his or her fair

share of complaints. This is certainly the case when attempting to repurpose pavement long thought to be the sole purview of the vehicle.

Since Detroit had gone through the steps needed to produce a proper master plan, many of these complaints disappeared as we attempted to implement the improvements. The community at large had numerous opportunities to comment on non-motorized transportation improvements during the preparation of the master plan. At that scale, the public was able to judge the proposed improvements more objectively because we were not talking about a specific project in their backyard.

Furthermore, once the plan was adopted by city council, the department of public works began its efforts to implement the new plan at every turn. From the creation of a non-motorized task force to creation of standard details, the city has embraced the concepts so long as they are accompanied by sound engineering logic. 

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