

Opinion: The bicycle is the vehicle to transform a community

Publisher's note: *The following is Ty Polastri's speech from the Aug. 16, 2011, environmental summit at Homewood.*

By Ty Polastri

How many of you have ever ridden a bicycle?

How many continue to ride today?

The No. 1 reason people no longer ride is because they don't feel safe. They don't feel safe riding a bicycle to work, school, running errands or going to the beach out of fear they will be injured from an automobile.

And we need to change that.

From 2005-07, over 2000 residents took magic markers to aerial photos and laid out the communities they would like to see during the placed-based workshops of Pathways 2007 – the outcome from that process was a consensus for a more people-centric, multi-modal, and sustainable community.



What is people centric?

The way I look at it is when people ride their bike or walk they become more intimate with their surroundings:

- They become more aware of the air they breathe
- They make eye contact and connect with one another

- They move their bodies and happy neurotransmitters are released
- They see businesses for the first time and stop to shop, eat or drink.
- It's a slower pace that allows the world to penetrate us.

How do we plan a more people centric community?

One way is to begin changing the context of how we see the downtown. What if we saw the roadway as a life-way, and the life-way as an avenue for livability? From this context we begin looking beyond the limits of the curbs and see the streetscape full of people, businesses, schools, parks and residences. There are children at play, adults at work, shoppers strolling, and elderly and the disabled moving with ease and safety. The streets are a streetscape of aliveness full of vitality and commerce, rich in color and texture, with places for people to commune with nature and each other.

Another way is at the planning table with highway engineers, behaviorists, economic development specialists and local government representatives speaking about the uses of the buildings on the streetscape and reframing the design parameters to include a more humanistic approach to the mobility of people, goods and services.

For example, an area of the streetscape has several restaurants, wouldn't it be cool to provide space so they could set up sidewalk dining. Or another section of the streetscape has a senior's housing complex. We will need to consider their needs as for some of them may be hearing, sight and mobility impaired. We may need to design their streetscape to aid their safe mobility and use of public transit. What if a vacant lot was turned into a public meeting place with benches and landscaping that could provide a convenient time out from our busy lives.

When we begin to look at people's needs and activities, and the uses of the buildings on the streetscape, we begin re-humanizing ourselves and we set the stage for reclaiming our community where the automobile no longer is the dominate user of the streetscape – but rather one element of a more multi-modal mobility plan.

Another phrase that is being used to describe this streetscape is complete streets.

Complete streets are consistent with the Tahoe Regional Planning Compact mandate to reduce dependency on the automobile and green house gas emissions, meets Pathways 2007 thresholds, the Prosperity Plan, and is under mandate by the state of California.

We know what needs to be done.

We need leadership and collaboration among federal, state, local agencies and the private sector to work together to co-design our communities, develop cost effective investment strategies, and efficient policies that enable us to begin reshaping our communities for the 50 million California residents who will descend upon us in the coming decades – with the intent of restoring their spirits, reconnecting with family and friends, and giving a go at a new challenge that may include of biking, skiing, hiking, shopping, and all the other activities that make up the Tahoe Lifestyle.

So, you see it's not really about the bicycle alone.

But when a community accommodates for the bicycle it becomes the vehicle that sets in motion a transformation for accommodating all users on the streetscape, and sends a clear message that we care about the long-term health of our communities, the environment and the economy.

At the Lake Tahoe Bicycle Coalition we are doing our part to help promote, educate and move toward a more livable and

sustainable Lake Tahoe.

Ride with us as we move to restore the heart, vitality and safety of our communities for generations to come.

Thank you.

Ty Polastri is president of the Lake Tahoe Bicycle Coalition.