

February 5, 2019

An Open Letter to Bloomington City Council members,

“I want you to panic... I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is.” Greta Thunberg, Jan 24, 2019

Bloomington is considering the adoption of a new Transportation Plan. The timing is good. Bloomington has the potential to be a leader in sustainable transportation and transportation equity, but the Plan and the political-will indicate otherwise.

I have been in transportation planning for 20 years, and transportation practices remain a subtle but real platform for social separation and privilege. Our transportation system has catered to the driving public (white/wealthy) resulting in inflated levels of driving, poor mass transit, dangerous roads, high GHG emissions, and poor access for those without cars (people of color/low-income). Bloomington has been no different.

Putting out the Fire

The US has continued this car-centric trend in spite of evidence provided years ago that building roads induces traffic, reduces the use of other modes, and adds to VMT and crashes. We have come to a point that the evidence is overwhelming, but the voting majority who enjoy the privilege of driving - and the institutions that support it - want it to continue to be prioritized, and politicians follow suit. Remember, our house is on fire.

Who:

When I read certain Councilmember's comments that they oppose making Atwater 2-way and an article stating that Plan Commissioners wonder if such a change is necessary, it appears that even progressives are softening to the change-nothing plans of the connected. I have seen it throughout my 20 years; the political rhetoric of environmental and equity concern, but in the final decision, it's business as usual -- the preferences of the connected happen. I am reminded of Martin Luther King's comparative statement regarding the discriminatory practices of the northern states: "only the language was polite; the rejection was firm and unequivocal."

How:

What we have learned is that mode shift is everything. If you want to move toward GHG & vision zero goals and toward a sustainable planet, mode shift is a massive step forward. Although there are many factors that control mode choice, two in particular can be very effective.

The first I call "R3" -- the Redistribution and Rededication of Right-of-Way. As noted, since we have dedicated an excess of right-of-way to the car, we need to rein that in. Reverse it. This means implementing a citywide road diet. Reduce the number of lanes dedicated to the car, rededicate that pavement to other modes -- biking, walking, transit, or all of the above to create an exclusive network for each.

Is this going to reduce vehicular traffic flow? Yes. Is this going to upset drivers? Yes. Is this going to cause people to shift modes, reduce driving, reduce GHG emissions, and reduce traffic crashes? Yes, absolutely, and it can do so quickly. Remember, our house is on fire.

Unfortunately, the Transportation Plan, as written, says nothing about the redistribution of right-of-way. It has a brief section on transit with many good concepts, but no plan for implementation. There are no modal split targets with detailed methods of getting there. There is no plan that rededicates right-of-way to transit or any other mode.

Be aware that most cities, including Portland unfortunately, are following the white/wealthy mantra of maintaining the vehicular traffic flow, while claiming they will build new capacities for other modes. Will this work? No. There currently is not enough funding to maintain current road infrastructure, let alone build new infrastructure. Remember, our house is on fire.

The second thing is to undo all the historic infrastructure projects that were built to get *through* an area, and change them to get *to* an area. This is exactly what the 3rd/Atwater and College/Walnut one-way pairs were designed for – to get *through* an area. You'll find them in all the politically-disconnected areas of a city. Indianapolis was replete with one-way pairs to get the politically connected to work and back to their suburban homes. They are a legacy of inequity, of catering to the suburban driver, are context insensitive, pedestrian hostile, and degrade the community.

This change to 3rd/Atwater is the only really positive and progressive part of the entire Plan, and our political progressives, who claim they want to reduce GHG and finally have an opportunity to do so, may oppose it.

Having seen numerous transportation plans in my years, this is a soft plan. Passing this plan, particularly if you take out the 3rd/Atwater plans, allows your Public Works department to just keep doing what it has been doing. No change is necessary. This makes the political statement that there is no fire.

What:

The two major missing pieces of this plan are R3, and a transit plan.

Cities with high-levels of sustainable modes are transit-oriented; they dedicate right-of-way to transit (Bus Rapid Transit – BRT) while designing streets and zoning specifically for transit (Transit Oriented Development - TOD). It provides the highest transit convenience and reliability, and results in people shifting modes.

One-way pairs are defacto highways that degrade the community and create a hostile pedestrian environment. Does it make sense to put a highway right next to a pedestrian-rich college campus? No. What does make sense is making 3rd Street,

along the campus, transit only, while allowing Atwater to carry car traffic both directions. To go further, the entire length of 3rd Street from Ivy Tech to the west to SR446 to the east should be a BRT corridor with dedicated transit right-of-way anywhere 3rd Street is 4-lanes.

10th St along campus could also be transit only, at least for a portion of the day, similar to what 7th Street was decades ago. 25% of IU's classroom space is north of 10th St. This is a central campus street.

Likewise, downtown is a pedestrian-rich business district and would benefit from 2-way streets. To go further, the plan should include a BRT corridor from Kroger to the south to the Bypass to the north. These changes will make transit more attractive and driving less attractive, and people will shift modes.

Combine Transit Agencies

Let me also recommend that the two transit agencies, Bloomington Transit and IU Campus Bus, combine to be a single agency. This should be emphasized in the Transportation Plan. This will generate some new monies that can be used to supply BRT service. There are state formula funds that are distributed as a function of ridership and bus-miles. IUCB is ineligible for these funds and their ridership and miles would be incorporated into the funding formulas if the agencies were combined. Also, there is evidence that the IUCB shuttle from the stadium undermines BT ridership as about 80% of the users of the shuttle live on BT bus route, but use the shuttle system out of convenience. This generates car trips and reduces bus trips.

In deference to the draft Transportation Plan, some of these ideas are envisioned in the *Access to Transit* section of the Plan (p. 5), but they are not emphasized, detailed, or firmly planned for implementation.

Other Transit Plan Concerns:

The Street Typologies are car-centric. The Main Street and General Urban Street should not have center turn lanes. That is an expansion of the street footprint that emphasizes speed and not safety. Studies are NOT showing urban 3-lane streets are safer than 2-lane streets. The added center-turn lane increases speed, crossing distance, and volume. It adds yet another lane for cars.

The 4- and 5-lane street cross-section for the "Suburban Connector Street" should be completely removed, or only provided if shown with exclusive BRT transit lanes with only two lanes for general traffic use. A 4- or 5-lane urban street for cars is an uncrossable river for bike/ped and should never happen again. This should show a 3-lane road as the Suburban Connector Street. If the capacity of a 4-lane road is desired, at the worst, keep alive one-way pairs that are a block apart for the high-capacity arterial option. These are themselves tragic, but not as tragic as 4- and 5-lane urban streets, which create walk- & bike-ending barriers and substantially increase crash risks for all modes.

Safety

Lastly, I would like to reiterate the importance of a mode-shift emphasis throughout the Plan. I take issue with this statement on page 12:

“Street design should be the primary strategy to reduce or eliminate fatal and incapacitating injury crashes, paired with enforcement and educational efforts.”

This should be changed to:

“Mode shift should be the primary strategy to reduce or eliminate fatal and incapacitating injury crashes through demand management strategies.”

Cities like Amsterdam, Copenhagen, and Stockholm, which have SOV mode share of ~30% rather than [Bloomington’s] 62% see a fraction of the traffic injuries per capita than U.S. cities. The Netherlands saw a reduction of annual child traffic deaths go from over 400 in 1971 down to 14 in 2010 primarily by mode shift. The primary strategy for Vision Zero plans should be to shift to sustainable modes, all of which are far less lethal to the current population and future generations than our current unsustainable mode of driving.

Modeling

Detailed plans with transit, bike lanes, road diets, and TOD can be modeled through a sophisticated travel model, which Bloomington has. This can tell us if we meet thresholds of mode splits and emission reductions. Multiple scenarios should be run to help determine what will work best. Travel modeling is a science that continues to improve.

Conclusion/Recommendation

It is time to get serious about climate change, equity, and safety in our cities. These shifts are initially painful, but necessary, and result in a more livable city that is better for the planet and future generations. People that say it is not necessary are saying they would like to continue enjoying the privileges they gained from decades of prioritizing driving. I recommend a delay of approving the Plan until these issues are fully addressed. Remember, our house is on fire.

Buff Brown

I lived in Bloomington from age 2 to 55. I have been a professional transportation planner for nearly 20 years, and in the last 4 years worked as the Senior Transportation Planner for the cities of Tigard, OR and Redmond, WA. I still own a home in SE Bloomington.