Giving Up Car Lanes

Some Counterintuitive Results

In the summer doldrums of the Great Recession of 2010, I thought this month I would write not about present or imminent development, but rather about some interesting studies that can inform Norwalk's development plans in the future.

As plans advance to position downtown Norwalk as a more pedestrian-oriented environment, I have been keeping an eye out for stories and studies concerning what happens when Right-of-Way ("ROW") gets taken away from cars and given to pedestrians and bicycles.

Having been to my share of public meetings, I am in the habit of anticipating what people's concerns, criticism, and opposition may be, so that I can come prepared with answers (if available) for their questions. In contemplating a hypothetical proposal to put downtown on a "road diet," the yells and screams I imagine go something like this: "Are you crazy?! It's not safe!" "Traffic is bad enough already!" "We need more travel lanes, not less!!"

But two recent studies demonstrate good news and some counterintuitive results for communities that have given more of their roadways over to pedestrians and bicycles: less accidents, and quicker trips…for cars.

In a study by Professor Norm Garrick at UConn's Center for Transportation and Urban Planning, communities across the state of California were measured for their a) percent of people bicycling to work, and b) road fatalities. A strong ***inverse*** correlation emerged, i.e., communities with the highest percentage of people biking to work (like Davis, CA) were the same communities with the lowest local road fatalities. It would appear that, were we to assume that more bicycles on the roads in Norwalk would lead to more accidents, we could well be wrong, and, in fact, the opposite may even be true.

In another story, about a year ago, New York City closed long stretches of Broadway to motor vehicles going through Times Square and west mid-town Manhattan, giving the space over to pedestrians.

What do you think happened to traffic? Bad to worse? Massive congestion? Traffic jam of the century? One would think. But one would be wrong.

According to *Planning Magazine* (April 2010), The New York City Transportation Department conducted before and after measurements on the speed of traffic in the district. Travel speed data taken from GPS systems installed in taxis in West Midtown showed a 17 percent improvement in northbound trips after Broadway was pedestrianized. The speed of eastbound trips in West Midtown improved by five percent, while westbound trips improved by nine percent. Only the speed of southbound trips declined – by two percent.

I spoke to some engineering friends and colleagues about these puzzling results, and their theory is that, in providing dedicated pedestrian space, the city actually made travel more efficient for both pedestrians ***and*** vehicles, as each basically got out of the way of the other. Pedestrians no longer had to worry about cars, but cars also no longer had to worry about (as many) pedestrians, since they all gravitated to the dedicated pedestrian space, and away from other intersections.

Norwalk's continued growth and economic development may well depend upon its downtown. Growth in the downtown will in turn depend upon density. Density will depend upon a much more multi-modal approach to getting around. It's nice to see that, if we end up taking that approach, it may not have the negative side effects for motorists that one would fear.