

*Get Connected –
Promoting Non-Motorized Transportation in Sheboygan County*

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If you have followed the Nonmotorized Pilot Program to date, you realize a number of our funded projects are retro-fit applications. That is, we are adding facilities in built environments where gaps in the bicycle/pedestrian network exist. In most cases, retro-fits are typically more expensive than doing things upfront. The question that then arises is why are these retro-fit projects necessary?

There are many answers to that question. Areas of towns, which typically have comparatively relaxed infrastructure standards, may have been annexed into a municipality, which typically have higher infrastructure standards. Lack of intergovernmental cooperation where projects cross multiple jurisdictions is another reason. Funding is always an issue, and in many unfortunate cases the bicycle and pedestrian parts of a project are what get nixed. Sustainable land-use planning, or lack thereof, is yet another example. The list can go on and on.

The latter point, land-use, is what I would like to briefly focus on for this article.

No matter what town, village, or city you visit, since roughly the end of WWII development patterns there have been quite different compared to what they were before that time period. Before WWII development tended to be more compact and based on a grid system. In its compactness, one typically saw employment, commercial, and residential mixes all within short distances. The grid system provided multiple routes one could take to arrive at their destination. Overall, the development footprint was relatively small and efficient.

In comparison, post-WWII development became auto-centric, residential areas became based on a curvilinear/cul-de-sac pattern, and there was less mixed-use land use types. Now lacking a grid system, people left their subdivisions and employment centers through one, or maybe two, roadways and then, all filtered out onto the same roadway which was not typically upgraded to handle the additional development pressure. Commercial areas witnessed the rise of the mega parking lot. Overall, the long-term development footprint was comparatively large and inefficient.

So how do land-use decisions tie into nonmotorized transportation? In short, the pre-WWII developments were based on the human scale. The post-WWII developments were based around the automobile.

In pre-WWII developments, one could walk on a sidewalk from their home to the neighborhood grocery store, walk to the neighborhood school, walk to the park, and in many instances could easily walk to work. Bicyclists had it easier as well. Just like an automobile they had more routes to choose from and streets were narrower leading to lower traffic speeds.

In post-WWII development, sidewalks were omitted more and more forcing people to walk on streets. This in itself keeps people from walking, but the residential, commercial, and employment centers were typically separated from one another as well. This made it much less desirable to walk and/or bike to destinations and, as we know, led to the rise of the automobile as the primary means of transportation. Furthermore, streets became much wider resulting in higher automobile speeds and longer intersection crossings if pedestrian facilities were even present.

Fortunately, at least from my beliefs, municipalities, developers, and even states are starting to realize the pre-WWII development patterns were much more sustainable from not only an environmental, but also from an economic standpoint (e.g. less road surface area results in less long-term maintenance costs, etc.). Transit-oriented development and traditional neighborhood designs are again starting to become accepted and desired. As a bonus these, types of developments typically sell out faster and for more than their counterparts.

Granted, there are many more factors that prevent folks from walking and/or biking to their destinations. But, I would argue that land-use patterns play a rather large role.