
Effort afoot to make Memphis streets friendlier to pedestrians, cyclists

By Tom Bailey Jr.

Friday, April 23, 2010

The list of things we can use to achieve a healthy weight includes the usual: fruits, vegetables, portion control, exercise.

Now to the list add streets, the kind that invite walking and biking.

About 200 engineers, planners, city officials, architects, developers, community leaders and others gathered at the University of Memphis this week to participate in a two-year study funded by a \$387,000 grant from the National Institutes of Health.

Partnership for Active Community Environments is using the money to identify both the barriers to, and support for, building activity-friendly neighborhoods.

Another name for that apparently is new urbanism, really an old-school type of development that blends residences, work, shopping and recreation into one neighborhood. All within walking distance.

New urbanism places commercial buildings -- not their parking lots -- up to the sidewalk. Hugged on one side by walls, windows and doors instead of cars and asphalt, pedestrians feel safe and comfortable.

And with stores and restaurants enclosing the street, walkers and cyclists are more likely to see somebody they know or to meet someone they'll get to know.

Urban Land Institute Memphis, which promotes "the responsible use of land," worked with PACE in organizing the meeting called "Great Streets/Healthy Communities."

Urbanism creates a sense of place and community by offering "regular chance contact between people who may not know each other," Scott Polikov told the participants.

He's a town planner and consultant from Texas who's a national leader in new urbanism.

Regional malls, to where shoppers must drive and which disconnect retail from neighborhoods, are falling from favor, he said.

Polikov described the recent history of building single-use, isolated structures for, say,

convenience stores, and buffering them from nearby residences because the stores are unpleasant to look at.

The better way, he said, is to erect high quality, mixed-use buildings that endure with a neighborhood. The uses inside them may change over the years, but they don't need to be redeveloped.

Instead of dividing and buffering such buildings from nearby residences, transitions are created between the retail and residences.

Transportation engineer Rick Hall of Florida, another leading figure in new urbanism, listed the top 10 factors for making a street or neighborhood more walker-friendly:

Small blocks, so that businesses don't have enough room to put a parking lot in front of their building; buildings that edge the sidewalk; mixed land use; lower traffic speeds; on-street parking (parking creates walkers, he said); interconnected streets; narrow streets; lower traffic volumes; and street trees.

The participants held small-group discussions and voted on the top three barriers to activity-friendly neighborhoods in Memphis: lack of financial support, costs, and too much focus on designing streets for autos.

Their vote for the top three incentives and supports for such neighborhoods: financial incentives for builders and developers, private/public initiatives, and land-use planning efforts such as passing the proposed unified development code.

Finally, the participants voted for the top three action steps that should be taken in Memphis: Increase communication and collaboration across key stakeholder groups; increase community involvement of civic, business, and health collaborations; and provide tax incentives and fee waivers for activity-friendly building practices.

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How much progress?

Bicycling magazine's May edition ranks Memphis among the three least bike-friendly cities in the United States.

"After we tagged Memphis a 'worst' in 2008, the city striped a couple of miles of bike lanes -- the first within city limits -- and in February broke ground on a recreational trail that will lead to popular Shelby Farms Park," the magazine states.

"Better yet, voters recently elected a new mayor, A C Wharton, whose campaign platform included a goal of creating 500 miles of bike lanes. So why is Memphis still on the list?

"Because the bike laws here were written in 1967, and the bike/(pedestrian) plan developed back in 2001 has never been adopted."

Actually, the Memphis Metropolitan Planning Organization adopted a bike-pedestrian plan in late 2004 to create 143 miles of routes and lanes by 2026 and an unfunded "vision plan" for nearly 700 miles of bike facilities.

Open to argument, however, is how much progress local governments have made in carrying out the plan.

Martha Lott, coordinator for the Memphis MPO, said numerous, exciting bicycle and pedestrian projects are in the works. "From the Shelby Farms Greenway, to new sections of the Wolf River Greenway, to bicycle facilities being developed through the MPO's various bucket projects, there is a lot of work being done to make our region more pedestrian and bicyclist friendly," she said.

The MPO encompasses Shelby County and parts of Fayette and DeSoto counties.



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