

Transform neighborhoods; combat disparities



Rob Sadowsky is the executive director of the Bicycle Transportation Alliance.

20-minute neighborhoods can be revolutionary if they work for everyone

BY ROB SADOWSKY
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

The soon-to-be updated Portland Consolidated Plan calls for the implementation of 20-minute neighborhoods. The 20-minute neighborhood, in theory, is a place where people can reach most of their routine destinations within a 20-minute walk from home — schools, groceries, library, restaurants, parks, barbers, nail salons; you name it. This is a beautiful concept and raises many important questions:

■ What is important to have nearby for your neighborhood? For one person, it's access to hip bars and microbreweries. For another, it's a halal grocery store. For another, it's a grocery that specializes in fresh produce and fresh tortillas.

■ Do we have the options that are necessary to walk for 20 minutes on safe sidewalks to our destination? Who should pay for new sidewalks? What if putting in sidewalks means removing a bit of someone's front lawn?

■ Is there adequate transit service that will allow a community resident to take a bus or train home from the grocery store, when they need and to where they need it to go?

■ Is the neighborhood safe for young children to walk to and from school without fear of danger?

Portland has a deserved reputation of being one of the most livable communities in America. We also have a long history of falling short on providing accessible transportation options along with accessible affordable housing for every citizen. Transportation burdens and benefits have been distributed unequally, and

communities of color have been disproportionately affected by these decisions. People of color predominantly live in neighborhoods that lack a complete active transportation network. High-crash corridors disproportionately claim the lives of people of color, and communities of color experience health inequities such as disproportionate rates of diabetes and asthma. These disparities are unacceptable and are directly at odds with our belief that everyone deserves safe and accessible active transportation options.

Let me give a few examples. After World War II, the rapid rise of the automobile made building highways a top priority of the Eisenhower administration. We saw large highways and arterial streets built right through the middle of our cities. These highways split communities down the middle and created new borders that were hard to cross. Communities such as Albina, Lents and Brooklyn were split by the building or widening of roads such as Interstate 5, I-205 and Powell Boulevard, respectively. It was not by accident that these neighborhoods were some of the least empowered communities. The original plan was to build I-205 through the 39th Avenue corridor (now named Cesar Chavez Boulevard). Powerful forces in Laurelhurst fought that plan, and it was placed much farther east in a community that did not have the political clout for that fight.

Albina first appeared on a map in 1873. It was originally a separate town, absorbed into Portland in 1891. Albina, one of Portland's few neighborhoods with a predominantly African-American population, was an easy target for planners of the proposed freeway now known as I-5. City planners wanted to avoid a legal fight with more wealthy residents. The freeway carved a two-block-wide chasm through the entire Albina area, dividing historical neighborhoods and causing long-held distrust of Portland's transportation officials on the part of local residents.

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Try crossing these communities to access a 20-minute neighborhood safely — not very fun. Now, try selling residents (and in some cases former residents) in these communities on ponying up money as part of a street fee to pay only for maintenance of an infrastructure that they do not see a personal gain from. Ask families in the Lents neighborhood to help pay for a splashy new urban

linear parkway (the Green Loop) that will attract visitors to downtown and the Central Eastside. Where is their splashy urban parkway that will attract visitors to Lents? Lents has its own plans for a town center detailed in the Consolidated Plan, but it lacks the flair and the excitement that the Green Loop is capturing. As a city, if we are truly interested in equity and inclusion, then the Lents Town Center vision will be completed before any groundbreaking begins on the Green Loop.

Portland's vision of 20-minute neighborhoods can be truly transforming. We can only be successful if this transformation occurs for everyone and I'd argue that we need to start out by focusing on neighborhoods that are farthest from that dream as part of our commitment to right historic inequities and to combat the disparities that these communities face in public health and safety.

About this series

This commentary is part of a series by the Bicycle Transportation Alliance that looks at the intersection of transportation and poverty in Portland's metropolitan area. It examines where we are and where we might be going, and poses questions for the future of our communities.

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