

Wheel People

We already know how to get more people walking

That many humans have quit walking in order to move almost exclusively via motorized chairs such as cars and off-road vehicles (ORVs) is a fascinating transformation. It's equally fascinating to ponder whether humans will ever return to walking.



Those who subscribe to the one-way-ness of the transformation confidently announce, "You're not going to get people out of their cars (or off their ORVs)." This claim is most often heard while people are discussing conflicts between motorized transportation and the environment, whether urbanized (e.g., west Eugene roads impacting wetlands) or rural (e.g., national forests with their legal and illegal truck, RV, car and ORV routes impacting wetlands, creeks, meadows, wildlife and eroding slopes). In most towns and cities, "transportation" has largely become synonymous with motorized, single-passenger transportation. In the national forests, "access" and "recreation" are generally code for car and ORV access.

"You're not going to get people out of their cars" implies that roads, cars, trucks and ORVs will inevitably proliferate, whether or not this kills us and all our relations, which it increasingly is doing, through crashes, pollution, obesity and/or global warming. It implies we're the urban-legend frog that sits in water as it warms from cold to boiling, ultimately cooking without trying to leave.

Now we're learning that Alaska will likely lose all its polar bears by mid-century because of melting ice. A third of Americans are obese (with all its connected diseases), while one in about seven were obese in the mid-1970s. Every day, 113 people in the U.S. die in motorized vehicle crashes. And we can't get people out of their cars?

The reality is that if water is gradually heated, frogs do leave. An artist friend, returning to Rome this summer, remarked on an astounding change:

"Thirty years ago it was not fun to walk around old Rome," she says. "Now, occasionally a car passes, and it's a delight to walk."

One thing Rome did was limit passenger vehicle entry into the central zone to residents and some authorized nonresidents (e.g., physicians and disabled people). Now, authorized nonresidents (other than disabled people) and freight delivery drivers must pay the equivalent of a year's passes on public transit to get a pass to enter the central zone via private vehicle. And then parking is hard to find.

When bicycle use in Amsterdam plummeted in the 1960s and 1970s in favor of cars, Amsterdam's 1978 city council opted for a policy of curbing car use by favoring bicycles and public transit. One key has been reduction of parking availability and increases in parking fees. Public transit and "Park and Bike" facilities increase the advantages of biking, public transit and walking. Currently approximately 35 percent of traffic in Amsterdam (population 750,000) is by bike; 25 percent by public transport.

The story is different in our national forests, where ORV use is skyrocketing. More than 400,000 miles of roads are "legal," and illegal ("user-created") routes are routinely created by ORV drivers who cut across meadows, through fish streams, up slopes and around muddy, incised routes. Fences that are in the way are frequently cut. Enforcement staffing is miniscule, and rural courts often levy meaningless fines for destructive violations.

This becomes a vicious cycle: People avoid walking or hiking on routes used by ORVs. Go to any national forest, and you can obtain an extraordinarily detailed map of forest roads, ORV routes and motorized cross-country sacrifice areas. Ask for a map focused on walking routes, and there will be none. You can perhaps detect some faint dashed lines on the road map but no map guidance as to which are motorized, or descriptions of the length, difficulty or maintenance level of the nonmotorized trails. You're on your own.

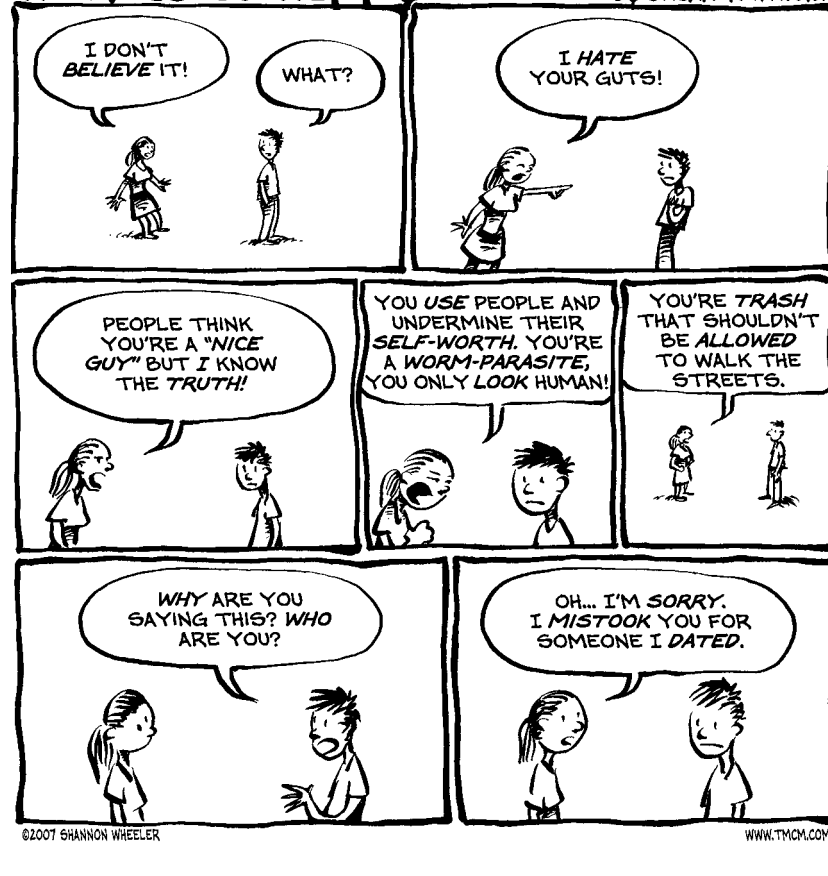
National parks, such as Grand Canyon and Zion, on the other hand, seem to be able to entice people into public trams. At each entrance, you are offered family-friendly maps of walking trails, with descriptions of the length, difficulty and special features of each trail. Walking made easy.

When we say, "You can't get people out of their cars," it seems we're really saying that we love motorized chairs so much that we don't want to implement tried-and-true policies that make walking, bicycling and public transit attractive alternatives.

Mary O'Brien of Eugene has worked as a public interest scientist since 1981. She can be reached at mob@efn.org

How to Be Happy

by Shannon Wheeler



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PLAN IS FLAWED

The mayor's (West Broadway) Advisory Committee, from the beginning, has forced a preconceived and ill-conceived plan for West Broadway development onto an unsuspecting public. And despite Mayor Piercy's public statements that the review of the project is intended to be a "transparent" process, it has been anything but. Public input has been ignored, stifled, resisted, excluded and preempted.

While publicly the committee has been very self-congratulatory, indicating in the press that they are concerned about public benefits, privately they have moved to squelch, muzzle and ignore valid proposals that actually have the public in mind as opposed to those with a vested interest in the West Broadway area. For instance, a proposed interactive public fountain was conveniently "forgotten" to be included on the agenda at public workshops and never made it onto the committee's draft proposals. They simply refused to discuss it.

Similarly, the committee's position on "open space" is limited to wide sidewalks and private courtyards, ignoring urban park alternatives while advocating unnecessary, costly parking garages. Wednesday (9/5) night was the last straw: The Committee refused to either discuss or allow into their final proposal open space alternatives by committee member and CPA representative Rob Handy. There is no reason why Eugene shouldn't have the kinds of green space public amenities now enjoyed by towns such as Olympia, Vancouver (Wash.), Colorado Springs, Portland and even Hillsboro.

It's time to end the kind of provincial, limited thinking that has caused every urban renewal project to date to fail. The design of cities should be trusted to architects, city planners and designers, not bean counters.

Thomas Lincoln
Springfield

THAT PARK THING

I probably shouldn't be spending my time and energy writing about Mark Gillem's positively spot-on idea for revitalizing Downtown Eugene (8/30 and 9/6 Viewpoints). But it is a start, and Plan B isn't going anywhere. (Plan B: Wear tight-fitting camisoles that read, "DO THE PARK THING ACROSS FROM THE LIBRARY!" around town in hopes of being asked, "What's the park thing?")

My theory is that there is not as much time as we'd like to believe there is to decide what shall be done regarding this "downtown revitalization thing." Here's the truth. We, Eugene, have \$105 million in the bank, waiting, impatiently, like a 3-year-old, "to GO!" If we don't start paying attention, the impatient \$105 million that wants to go may just go away from, instead of to, Eugene. Why give the impatient millions to those whose goal it is to "take the money and run" when we could give the money to Eugeneans whose goal it is to stay here and spend it in Eugene?

City Hall has nearly pleaded with us to speak up and tell them what we want them to do with the redevelopment funds. They are as willing as we are to err on the side of caution, being as change-shy as the next Eugenean to do anything in light of past failed attempts to revitalize downtown. They are patient. We are patient. But the money and the money grabbers are not. We can have this lovely thing. We can get rid of that old Sears pit. All we have to do is inform City Hall what we want.

If you haven't already, go down to the library, walk out, and imagine a city park actually being there. Then inform the only person whose opinion matters to you (you) what you think. I bet you, too, start thinking about getting T-shirts that read: DO THE PARK THING. But first, please write City Hall requesting Mark Gillem's Library Park, then get the T-shirts made. That way, the shirts can just read "Thank you!" and we can all wear