

The 3rd Annual Break the Gridlock Conference:

“Overcoming Car Dependency”

Proceedings



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Michael Shiffer - "New Plans for the CTA"

New Plans for the CTA, Towards a better informed discourse and planning

Michael Shiffer, an associate professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Vice President of Planning and Development at the Chicago Transit Authority, gave his presentation in two parts. During the first portion, he wowed the crowd by demonstrating the multimedia tools CTA uses for planning, underlining his point that the use of these tools for public transport planning helps the public better understand transit options. His graphical presentation included many examples, such as panoramic views of specific transit node locations and video taken of the full length of track of the blue line elevated train in fast forward. He stressed the use of these tools to facilitate conversation, stating that "representational aids link concrete representations such as video sound clips and comparable examples to otherwise abstract output. The result of this is an image of place that changes in real time to fit a multitude of alternative scenarios being assessed."

During the second part of his presentation, Shiffer spoke of new ideas brewing at the Chicago Transit Authority and initiatives the Authority is trying to make into reality. He mentioned a 37 million dollar improvement for the Dan Ryan branch of the red line, making the point that "building new infrastructure is an important part of enhanced rail transportation." He underlined the need to make buses more competitive as well as accommodating growth on the rail transit system.

Shiffer then outlined the short, medium and long term initiatives for the Planning Division of the CTA. Some of the medium and long term plans include making bus routes more competitive and new ideas such as Bus Rapid Transit - combining flexibility of the bus with the exclusive right of way represented by rails. Other new bus improvement ideas he explored included Limited Stop Services, Far Side Stopping (stopping on the far side of an intersection), Signal Priority (holding traffic signals for buses), Queue jumping (special lanes for buses), Off Vehicle Fare Collection and Dedicated Right of Way. Shiffer also clarified plans for rail extensions by the CTA throughout Chicago, including the idea of a Circle Line which better supports crosstown commuting, creatively reusing existing infrastructure with only 6.6 miles of new or rebuilt El and Subway tracks.

Shiffer closed his speech by mentioning some of the ongoing challenges the Transit Authority faces, such as regional/institutional cooperation between entities such as Metra, the Regional Transportation Authority, and the Chicago Transportation Authority.

John Wetmore – “The Perils of Pedestrians”

John Wetmore, a pedestrian advocate who has won awards for a variety of television documentaries including his monthly cable show “Perils for Pedestrians” grew up in St. Paul Minnesota and Evanston and had the experience of walking to school. In the sixth grade, his family moved to Bethesda Md, where he found himself walking to school on streets without sidewalks. In Bethesda, he lived the same distance from his school that he had walked in Evanston. This is where the seed of his later advocacy took root. In 1980, he wrote a letter about the problem, and in 2000, Bethesda finally installed Ped/Bike access under the 50/50 initiative.

During his presentation, John Wetmore showed many examples of the perils pedestrians face across the U.S., along with some examples of pedestrian friendly infrastructure implementations. He outlined three basic pedestrian needs: the need to walk parallel to the road, the need for a way to get across the street, and the need for meaningful destinations within walking distance. Wetmore also touched upon the broader land use issues impacting pedestrians, such as mixed use versus “modern” zoning. In one of his examples, he showed 1930’s street in Maryland, a 20 ft wide, fairly narrow 2-way street with parking on one side. He spoke about how this is a safe street because its configuration automatically causes drivers to slow down to a low speed, children felt comfortable playing basketball in the street.

Wetmore spoke about of the lack of awareness of some of the hazards pedestrians face: non-maintained walks, snow on the sidewalk from a shoveled drive, parking on the sidewalk in a driveway, utility poles on sidewalks, sloping walks, curving walks, street signs only facing the direction of car traffic, inadequately marked crosswalks. He also spoke about some of the prevailing attitudes in car-centered culture, such as “no one should be crossing there”, or shopping mall developers assuming that the “people they want” at a new shopping center will be arriving by car.

Wetmore illustrated some of the principles of good pedestrian friendly design that are frequently violated. Some of these principles include the idea that when you lose sidewalk space, it’s more difficult to get across the street on foot. Another is that a gentler curve in the street at a corner results in an increase in speed of cars rounding that corner. Additional principles he mentioned are that pedestrian bridges only work if they are perceived to be convenient, and that walking distance is partly a function of the answer to the question: “is it pleasant to walk?”

Wetmore closed his presentation by giving the reason for his cable program and advocacy: as he was walking to school in Maryland,

he remembered “how wonderful it was to walk places and how crucial the ability to walk places is to quality of life.”

Aaron Naparstek – “The Honku Poet”

Aaron Naparstek, an advocate with “Transportation Alternatives” in New York, is more widely known as the “honku poet”. His presentation embodies the ability people have to bring together their communities in small but significant ways. At the time of his honku fame, he lived on a “honky corner” on Clinton Street on Cobble Hill, an area of Brooklyn. People would constantly pull up to his corner in a car and honk for long periods of time. This situation occurred because cars took a shortcut through his residential neighborhood on the way to the Brooklyn Bridge. The din on his corner grew so problematic, that he got the idea for “honku” poetry to crystallize his moments of frustration, as a form of therapy. A “honku” is a haiku on the themes of car noise that Naparstek found so frustrating. He wrote several “honkus” and took the one he liked best and posted 50 copies around the neighborhood. He made it part of his daily routine to fit in a bit of his activism. At first he was embarrassed by his personal quirk, but as time went on, he noticed others had written their own “honkus”, the first scrawled on top of his efforts, and then others in the same font he used. This little movement grew until, last spring he counted 25 different poems on a lamppost. In addition to writing poems, other people got involved to get police to write tickets for the loud motorists. Eventually, the “honku poet” attracted the attention of the media and this has even led to a book of collected “honku” poetry.

Naparstek stated that he believed the “honku” “raised consciousness in the neighborhood and brought people together who had the same feelings about the problems.”

Addressing the problem of misuse of public space and in trying to understand why people honked, he came to the conclusion that the honking starts and ends in the driver’s seat; it is an educational and cultural mindset. As a contrast, Naparstek pointed to the transportation mindset in Germany.

In closing, Naparstek mentioned he is collecting “honkus” from around the U.S. for his new book.

Chris Carlsson

Chris Carlsson founder of “Processed World” an underground magazine, director of the “Shaping San Francisco” multimedia project, and one of the founders of Critical Mass bicycle movement in San Francisco, spoke on the “issue of how to get ideas central to people’s lives.”

Carlsson is interested in how stories and questions provide a catalyst for change. His “Processed World” magazine arose from his experience as an office worker, handling “meaningless information”. The magazine became a creative outlet for a break from the jobs he had to do, a way to communicate horizontally, an honest take on the world of work. He told the audience: “you can never have a conversation on politics without addressing the world of work.” “There’s this reinforced dichotomy between what you do for a living and what you want to do. Then there’s the bigger question of why we do the work we do, which rarely gets addressed in public discourse.”

He further spoke on the idea of the right of each person to do useful work, and the importance of creative fun and building community, as illustrated by Critical Mass.

Chris ended his presentation by reading excerpts from the new book he edited: “Critical Mass: Bicycling’s Defiant Celebration”.

Workshops

Walk-About with Wetmore Workshop
synopsis submitted by Bob Matter

Fifteen conference participants attended the Walk-About with Wetmore, a walk around the block with pedestrian rights activist and producer of the television show "Perils of Pedestrians" John Wetmore. One of the attendees used a wheeled-walker for assistance. One was on crutches. We didn't have to walk far to start finding perils-a-plenty.

From the corner we could see (and hear) I-90, a superhighway that slices through the neighborhood creating a barrier to pedestrians as formidable as the Berlin Wall. All too often such construction is undertaken without consideration of the added distances pedestrians will have to travel out of their way to get to the other side.

The corner we were standing on had numerous problems. For one thing, the whole corner was "curb cut" to street level. Curb cuts, also known as wheelchair ramps, are good when there are two perpendicular ones on each corner and the space between them remains raised to curb level. This provides a guide for the blind so they know when they are entering a crosswalk. When the whole radius of the corner is street level, a blind person may unknowingly walk into the street in the area between crosswalks. Also when the complete radius is street level, cars can turn faster and at less of angle. The perpendicular sections of this corner had a cross-hatch pattern in the concrete to assist the blind, but the center radius of concrete was incorrectly smooth. The patterns are for the blind to feel with their canes, not for wheel chairs to get traction. We could see the opposite corner's curb cuts and sidewalks had too steep of a grade.

On the east side of Noble St. we saw an alley intersect a sidewalk. One side was curb cut for wheel chairs. The other side was an old-fashioned style curb about 4-5 inches higher than street level. We speculated that someone in a wheelchair may cross to the west side of the street to pass that barrier. However when we got to a mid-block crosswalk, it had no curb cuts either. A little further down the street was another midblock crosswalk. That one was totally blocked by an illegally parked Dodge Durango SUV.

The sidewalks on Noble St. and Potomac Ave. were not too bad. There were some tripping hazards like depressions for utility access, and the rectangular concrete sidewalk sections had larger than necessary gaps between them. To an able bodied walking person, those gaps may be unnoticeable. But to someone in a wheelchair or pushing a wheeled-walker they can add considerable

difficulty. Sidewalk sections can be separated satisfactorily with only a "saw-cut" gap.

Walking along the west side of Pulaski Park on N. Cleaver St., we encountered angle parked cars. Angle parking allows more cars to park on the street than parallel parking. The front ends of the cars were jaggedly overhanging the sidewalk anywhere from a few inches to over a foot. Even the angled parking could not create enough parking for this street. One pickup truck owner decided to create his own parking spot by driving over the curb and parking half of his vehicle on the sidewalk and the other half in the no-parking zone adjacent to a driveway.

John Wetmore entertained questions and comments for the whole duration of the workshop and added his own observations as well. All the participants appeared to thoroughly enjoy the workshop. I know I did. I feel that attending the workshop has made me more knowledgeable of and sensitive to the perils of pedestrians.

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