

Communities By Design, a
nonprofit 501c(3) training and education
organization, in cooperation with the
City of Redwood City,
is pleased to present:

The Forum *at Redwood City*

A CONTINUING CONVERSATION ON CITY DESIGN



HEALTHY
STREETS FOR
HEALTHY
PEOPLE — BEST
PRACTICES IN
RETROFITTING
OUR BEST AND
WORST STREETS

2004-05 SEASON: FORUM #4
WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 5, 2005
LITTLE FOX THEATER
2209 BROADWAY
REDWOOD CITY
6:00 P.M. - 7:45 P.M.

On January 5, 2005, the City of Redwood City and the nonprofit “Communities By Design” hosted the fourth presentation of the 2004-05 Forum season, with a presentation by **Dan Burden**. Mr. Burden – the Executive Director of Walkable Communities, Inc., a non-profit organization in Florida dedicated to building pedestrian-oriented cities and towns – spoke about “Healthy Streets for Healthy People – Best Practices in Retrofitting Our Best and Worst Streets.”

Mr. Burden began his presentation by sharing his perspective that streets are the backbone of our nation’s communities. The street is the stage on which a community’s social interactions take place and the bonds of a neighborhood are formed. When streets are interesting and attractive, people will take their time walking and enjoying their surroundings. And yet sadly, many streets today are being designed to only accommodate the automobile. Instead of investing more of our resources into improving the existing street system, local

jurisdictions have continued to pour resources into building more and more auto-oriented roads, which only exacerbate congestion, promote sprawling development patterns and force people to endure ever-longer commutes. In the words of Mr. Burden, “we can only bring back the health of our people with better streets.”

Mr. Burden used graphs and images to debunk a common myth about walkable streets: that pedestrian-oriented streets are inefficient and hinder traffic flow. Using an analysis from traffic engineer Walter Kulash, Mr. Burden explained how there’s actually a decrease in the per lane capacity when a street has more than three lanes, thereby making a two to three lane street the optimum for traffic flow. Walkable streets also tend to lower vehicles speeds to the 25-30 mph range, which leads to an increase in the carrying capacity of the street. As a general principle, Mr. Burden recommends making greater use of more, smaller streets wherever possible. Mr. Burden reinforced this phenomenon using the example of the Embarcadero in San Francisco, which carries the same volume of traffic as a multimodal, pedestrian-friendly street today as it did when it was a “dysfunctional freeway.”

In the engineering field, the traffic flow of a street system is rated using a “level of service” standard. In response to what Mr. Burden’s sees as the shortsightedness of this system, he has developed an alternative “level of quality” standard. Instead of focusing on the volume of vehicles that a street can accommodate, Mr. Burden’s standard considers the value of the pedestrian experience, including visual aesthetics, opportunities for public interaction and safety. According to Mr. Burden, traffic will behave according to how interesting, intriguing and attractive a space becomes. However, this is not to say that levels of service and levels of quality are mutually exclusive, high levels of both standards can coexist. Mr. Burden used the example of U.S. A-1-A in Ft. Lauderdale Florida to explain how the pedestrian and bicycling experience was improved without compromising the carrying capacity of the road.

According to Mr. Burden, many streets in the U.S. could benefit from going on a “road diet.” By reducing the number of vehicle lanes and narrowing their width, we can make room for wide bicycle lanes and pedestrian walkways. Road diets help to reduce vehicle speeds and improve pedestrian safety and walkability. According to Mr. Burden, the ideal walkable street should have narrow travel lanes that are no more than ten feet wide – instead of the standard eleven-foot width recommended by the Federal Highway Administration – with a center median, and a wide (6 foot) bicycle lane, a six-foot foot planter strip between the road and the sidewalk, and a six-foot sidewalk.

Other improvements we can implement to make our streets more healthy include median islands, which reduce the number of vehicle accidents by at least 50%, and in some places have increased pedestrian safety by as much as 80-90%. Curb extensions can be added to the road to prevent people from parking too close to intersections. Roundabouts are also an increasingly popular road treatment because of their ability to move more cars with less delay and reduce vehicle accidents while also helping to improve walkability.

Some of the Mr. Burden’s favorite road treatments are often the least expensive. Trees and on-street parking can help to enhance walkability by framing the street and making it feel smaller to the driver, thereby encouraging cars to slow down. In Brighton, Michigan, Mr. Burden led a team that achieved a 7% reduction in vehicle speeds by simply marking the unused road space with paint to make the street feel narrower to the driver.

There is also an economic benefit to walkable streets. In several of his slides, Mr. Burden explained how merchants – who were at first skeptical of a street redesign for fear of losing

valuable parking or because of increased congestion – saw a marked upswing in sales, sometimes as much as 20-30%.

Mr. Burden concluded by encouraging the audience to study places like Canada, New England and the Silicon Valley and to learn from what he considers to be their models of walkable communities. In closing, Mr. Burden warned that that the task of building walkable communities will not be easy; it will require a collaborative, inter-disciplinary approach.