

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



COMPLETE STREETS: Designing for Transit, Pedestrians, Bicyclists and Cars

2008-09 SEASON; FORUM #2
Thursday, November 6, 2008
THE LITTLE FOX THEATER
2209 BROADWAY
REDWOOD CITY
6:00 P.M. - 7:45 P.M.

On November 6, 2008, the City of Redwood City and the nonprofit “Communities by Design” held the second presentation of the 2008-2009 Forum season. The Forum featured a presentation by **Michael Ronkin**, Principal of Designing Streets for Pedestrians & Bicyclists, LLC, in Salem, Oregon and former Bicycle and Pedestrian Program Manager for the Oregon Department of Transportation. His presentation addressed “Complete Streets: Designing for Transit, Pedestrians, Bicyclists and Cars.”

Mr. Ronkin began by explaining that if a jurisdiction has a Complete Streets (CS) policy, it ensures that the entire right-of-way of a roadway is planned, designed and operated to provide safe access to all users – including pedestrians, bicyclists, public transit users, and motorists. CS takes into account travelers of all ages and abilities. He said that most change actually occurs not with large projects, but incrementally through small projects. Simply put, a CS is a shifting of priorities so that roadway projects from the beginning are planned for all potential users. In the long run a CS policy saves money by “getting it right the first time.”

Mr. Ronkin pointed out that 55% of Americans would rather drive less and walk more and that about one-third of Americans don’t drive because of their age or the cost of driving. The benefits of a CS system are safety (sidewalks and intersections designed for pedestrians reduce pedestrian crash risk by up to 88%), improved mobility for disabled people, reduced use of expensive paratransit services, improved health and physical activity, and reduced air and noise pollution. Additional benefits are reduced traffic and increased economic activity on well-designed multi-modal streets that serve commercial areas. He pointed out that most trips are

“Transportation is the second highest household expense.”

-Michael Ronkin

actually quite short and could be made by walking, biking, or taking public transit. Finally, since transportation is the second largest expense for most American households and costs are rising, a CS policy helps people to leave their cars at home and save money.

Mr. Ronkin discussed some of the specific changes that a CS policy can bring, including improved intersection design for pedestrians using painted markings and crossing islands, bicycle lanes, crosswalks serving transit stops, sidewalk ramps for disabled persons, and access to trails.

Mr. Ronkin then explained what CS is not. It isn't a design prescription, a mandate for immediate retrofit of existing streets, or a silver bullet to all congestion or access problems – but it does help. He pointed out that each traveler seeks a similar experience – convenient, safe, and comfortable – that provides access to where they need to go, in a reasonable time, and at a low cost. He argued that access (being able to get somewhere) needs to be emphasized over mobility (how easily one can get there, such as by car).

Mr. Ronkin showed examples of what a complete street might look like, emphasizing that there is no magic formula and there are many different types. A CS might be a downtown street with slow auto speeds and no marked bike lanes, or it might be a well-marked crosswalk for elementary school students going to school. On a rural road, bicycles might use the marked shoulder area safely, while on an arterial street they may need a well-marked bicycle lane. The main point is that all of the modes of transportation are considered, in the context of that particular roadway.

The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) Green Book, which is the design manual used by cities and counties, is very supportive of walking and bicycling and is not prescriptive. The problem has been that in many cases, it has not been followed by designers, who tend to use formulas for lane width, sidewalk design, etc.

Mr. Ronkin addressed the differences between CS and “context sensitive solutions.” Context sensitivity looks at external context (land use) and internal context (who is likely to use the street) to design a street. He argued that bicyclists, pedestrians, and transit users are more than “context” but that the idea of designing within the context of surrounding land use is sound.

“In planning a road, start with the pedestrians and end with the vehicles.”

-Michael Ronkin

Mr. Ronkin demonstrated how a complete street can fit into available right-of-way, arguing that streets should be designed from the outside in (in other words, from the sidewalk to the bicycle lane, to the travel lanes), adding up

desirable elements, and fitting them into the right-of-way. Conventionally, streets are designed with wide travel lanes and a narrow curbside sidewalk, and are often widened to the outside to accommodate extra space for cars. He encouraged participants to begin with the question “What do we want, and how do we design it?” rather than “How much right-of-way do we have?” Driver comfort is not the only criterion in CS design. He showed an example of transforming a commercial strip roadway from five lanes to four lanes with a landscaped central divider strip, turn lanes, bicycle lanes, and separated sidewalks, all within the same amount of right-of-way.

Mr. Ronkin is an advocate for “road diets,” which have the goals of reducing crashes, freeing up space for better use, creating more desirable conditions for walking and bicycling, and little or no travel time loss. With a 4-lane road, a faster driver can pass others, and with a 2-lane road, the slower driver sets the speed. Each version of the road has been shown to carry about the

same volume of car traffic, but 2-lane version is much safer than the other, according to more than 400 case studies.

An ideal complete street policy, according to Mr. Ronkin, includes all modes of transportation and users, applies to all transportation projects, allows some exceptions, clarifies management approval for exceptions, is context-sensitive, emphasizes connectivity, uses the latest design standards flexibly, and sets performance standards. A CS policy should result in new training for planners and engineers, restructured procedures, and re-written design manuals. A number of cities have already integrated CS into their planning, including Chicago, Iowa City, Seattle, and Charlotte.

“All travelers, no matter which mode they are using, seek a similar experience – convenience, safety, comfort, access, reasonable travel time, and low cost.”

-Michael Ronkin

In conclusion, Mr. Ronkin commended California on the recent passage of Assembly Bill 1358, the California Complete Streets Act of 2008, which requires cities and counties to modify the circulation element of their general plans to include all modes and users in a manner that is suitable to the rural, suburban or urban context of the general plan. He also cited the Caltrans Deputy Directive DD-64-R1 that defines in great detail how Caltrans will implement CS on its road system. Importantly, this directive mentions maintenance and operations, which is more crucial to CS than big projects.