

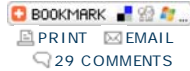


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OPINION

# "Living Streets" may be a dead end

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"Is this the best as a civilization that we can produce? After thousands of years of civilization, this is the best we can do?"

Peter Park, Denver's planning director, is describing the look and feel of many of the city's major roads, and he is not one to hold back on the subject.

And who can blame him? A tour along Colorado Boulevard, for example, or Leetsdale, Federal, Evans or Hampden, does not exactly leave you gasping in admiration for the beauty of American urban design.

Much of the stretch of Hampden Avenue near where I live, for example, is an assault on the eyes. As if that weren't bad enough, the sidewalks often abut the street, keeping the few pedestrians who venture onto them perpetually on their toes.

So who could possibly oppose a program such as Denver's Living Streets initiative, which concluded a series of neighborhood workshops last month, to spruce up our commercial corridors? Unfortunately, the initiative aims to go beyond targeting signage blight, reorienting sidewalks, installing greenery and taking other steps to improve the aesthetic appeal of major corridors. Living Streets also seems determined to restrict our mobility, although it doesn't put it that way, of course.

Instead, the Living Streets literature (at [denverlivingstreets.org](http://denverlivingstreets.org)) is replete with appealing streetscapes dominated by pedestrians, bicycles, buses and trains. These are "vibrant places where people of all ages and physical abilities feel safe and comfortable using any mode of travel (walking, biking, transit, or private auto)," and where development offers "great destinations for people."

Sounds fine, except one of the proposed ways to create great destinations is to

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eliminate or narrow vehicle lanes, thus slowing traffic and encouraging congestion. That way, the theory goes, more people will walk, bicycle or take mass transit. And while planning director Park denies any specific plans exist to close lanes, he is serenely indifferent regarding their importance to mobility. Indeed, he tells me, "adding lanes actually induces more congestion."

Surely not. Adding lanes (which is not an option anyway in the corridors I mentioned) may attract motorists from nearby routes or inspire some additional trips, but there is no doubt it usually relieves congestion, too — at least compared with what traffic would have been in their absence. To claim otherwise contradicts everyday experience on roads that widen at some point from, say, two to three lanes (Interstate 225, for example, traveling north toward I-70). It also contradicts the analysis of experts such as those at the Texas Transportation Institute, which in their 2009 Urban Mobility Report explains once again the importance of road capacity.

A major cause of congestion, the report says, "is the slow growth in supply — both roads and public transportation — in the last 20 years . . . Travel has increased 72 percent in big metro regions while road capacity on freeways and major streets has grown by only 40 percent (the actual new capacity is much smaller)."

At least one proponent of the Living Streets initiative — the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency — is candid about the likelihood of congestion. In its report, "Implementing Living Streets: Ideas and Opportunities for the City and County of Denver," the EPA allows as how "reducing the number of traffic lanes on arterials may increase traffic congestion in the short term," and then admits that the tactic may boost long-term congestion, too.

Not to worry, though. EPA is confident we'll simply "choose to travel at less busy times or on other routes or . . . make fewer trips altogether." Or we'll move closer to our jobs or take jobs "closer to home."

Such complacency from a federal agency is downright alarming. What if people can't afford to move closer to their jobs or can't find one closer to home? What if they resent wasting an extra half hour or more in traffic on unavoidable trips?

Living streets? By all means. But not at the price of personal mobility.

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