

EDITORIAL

"Living streets" or traffic jams?



City planners envision a more pedestrian-friendly Denver, but taking away lanes on major streets could end in more gridlock.

By The Denver Post

POSTED: 10/15/2009 01:00:00 AM MDT

The Denver "Living Streets" initiative now being discussed in community meetings around town is something citizens need to consider carefully. They shouldn't let their hearts get ahead of their heads.

Though much good could come from re-imagining how we structure our streets and roads, bike paths and transit systems to make them more pedestrian-friendly, it's also conceivable that dramatic changes to our grid also could snarl traffic and actually make communities less livable.

Denverites are lucky to have a mayor and city planners who long for aesthetically pleasing avenues that allow lots of pedestrian- and transit-friendly access to businesses and shops and entertainment.

But we also have to be realistic about the fact that Denver already has been constructed as a sprawling city over a large geographic area and that the overwhelming majority of us get around in cars.

We get it that our reliance on the automobile has disadvantages aplenty. Though cars have become more fuel-efficient and cleaner, millions of vehicle trips per day have an enormous environmental and societal impact. The obesity epidemic and its mushrooming medical costs show us that our communities ought to be more walkable. Major roads lined with big-box stores, chain restaurants and parking lots aren't pleasing to the eye.

Denver's top planner, Peter Park, argues convincingly that the traditional way of solving congestion — building more roads or adding more lanes — isn't necessarily the answer. Adding lanes onto existing roads through residential areas devalues property and soon enough the added lanes are just as packed as before.

But if adding lanes increases congestion, surely removing lanes in Denver's busiest corridors, such as Colorado Boulevard, Hampden Avenue and University Boulevard, to accommodate bike paths or pedestrian trails would increase congestion as well.

It's difficult to see how Colorado Boulevard could ever become the kind of walkable LoDo environment that springs to mind when folks say they want to trade traffic lanes for bike paths and pedestrian malls.

Shrinking Colorado Boulevard would create complete gridlock, and meanwhile, who really is going to walk the blocks and blocks it would take to get from one strip mall to the next?

Public Works director Bill Vidal tells us that some streets, including Colorado Boulevard, likely won't work as "Living Streets." But he says the more livable you make other areas, the more residents will be encouraged to bike or just foot it there, thus relieving congestion on major arteries.

Going forward, planners and Public Works will use the community input they're getting to make changes to streets as repairs and redesigns are needed.

If Park is right and bad public policy got us in a situation where our sprawling road system has become unsustainable, then let's not let bad public policy make things worse with ill-considered major changes.