

FYI

Transportation in Newton

By Lois Levin

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We rely heavily on cars and trucks for transportation. According to the Newton Energy Action Plan, the Transportation sector accounts for about a third of Newton's "carbon footprint". Among medium-sized cities, we are not unique in this regard.

For decades, many if not most US cities have been modified - sometimes designed - to accommodate cars. As a result, the needs of non-drivers, especially children and the elderly, have often been given short shrift when it comes to transportation policy.

Enrique Peñalosa, an internationally respected scholar and urban reformer, recently spoke to an overflow crowd at the Boston Public Library. The charismatic former mayor of Bogota, Colombia is known for having created a culture in his home city where bicyclists and pedestrians are treated with considerable respect. Here is a characteristic quote: "Urban transport is a political and not a technical issue. The technical aspects are very simple. The difficult decisions relate to who is going to benefit from the models adopted."

In many cities, highly successful planning and development, built upon an understanding of some important principles of urban design, has given pedestrians and bicyclists greater access to public spaces and facilities. One of those principles is that increasing road capacity often fails to improve automobile traffic flow. When lanes are added to roads in urban areas, not only do more people use them to make more trips, they also take longer trips, often at higher speeds. A corollary to the principle that 'if you build it, they will come', is equally true, but not as widely understood: decreasing road capacity does not necessarily impede traffic flow.

When the Embarcadero Skyway in San Francisco was destroyed in 1989 by the Loma Prieta earthquake, it was assumed that traffic would clog the city streets. It never happened. The surface road handled the flow of traffic very efficiently. When ultimately a new light rail transit line was added to that surface road to accommodate more travelers, the number of cars was further reduced. And this is not an isolated example.

Urban drivers behave quite differently when traffic lanes are reduced and when there are fewer regulatory signs and signals. Drivers weaving in and out of lanes, or trying to find alternate routes, actually create bottlenecks or make them worse. According to a Jan 2009 article in [Scientific American](#) eliminating lanes and reducing traffic regulation "forces drivers to take more responsibility" for their driving behavior, to drive more cautiously and to make more eye contact with other drivers, pedestrians and bicyclists. As a result, traffic flows more smoothly and people reach their destinations more efficiently. This has been demonstrated in many of the world's cities where downtown intersections have been converted into plazas shared by cars, bikes and pedestrians.

Here in Newton, the daily traffic congestion on some heavily utilized streets is not due to inadequate space for cars. Our population numbers have not changed dramatically for decades. Our traffic problem is due to the fact that there is too much roadway space devoted to cars. When Newton alters street design to emphasize safe passage for

pedestrians and bicyclists and expands, facilitates and improves access to public transit, there will be far less pressure on our roads and vehicular traffic will flow more smoothly and efficiently.