

# No safe place for children to walk?



## It's time to ask for what children need

Pedestrians in the United States could do with a little assertiveness training. That's the opinion of the members of the *Partnership for a Walkable America* — a coalition of private, federal, state, and local organizations from across the country that are committed to promoting the changes needed to make America more walkable.

"Pedestrians in the United States are inconvenienced and put at risk in ways that motorists in this country are rarely inconvenienced and put at risk," according to Dan Burden of the non-profit organization Walkable Communities, Inc., in High Springs Florida.

Examples of this are abundant all across the country. In Sumner, Washington, for instance, Evelyn Moe says her street has become a thoroughfare for truckers and is now nearly impossible to navigate on foot.

"We don't go walking on our street," Moe said. "I don't even allow my kids out in the front yard unless I'm out there."

Moe and her husband, Mike, live in the county outside Sumner, located just south of Seattle. Tulips and rhubarb grow in the fields near the 3-bedroom home where they are raising their two boys: Kevin, 6 and Lyle, 4.

"The area that we live in is mostly a rural area with lots of farming nearby," 33-year-old Moe said. "Often, large trucks go by with rhubarb on the back and when that happens, basically, the whole house shakes."

The speed limit on the narrow two-lane street in front of the Moe's home is 35 miles an hour, but vehicles frequently whiz down it exceeding 45. The street has no sidewalks nor shoulder for walking.

"There's just enough room for the cars to go by," she said. "If you wanted to walk there, you'd be walking out in the muddy fields along the side of the road."

David Perez lives on the other side of the United States from the Moes but has a similar problem: His street isn't safe for his kids either.

The road in front of his home in a tree-lined neighborhood in Durham, N.C. is used as a short-cut for commuters trying to gain a few extra minutes.

The speed limit is 25 but people often exceed it, 39-year-old Perez said. The dimensions of this problem were amplified recently when a speeder slammed his car into the front of the house opposite the Perez home.

“The guy was going so fast that if it wasn’t for a big tree in the yard, he probably would have ended up in the house,” Perez said.

## **Kids On the Block**

These street conditions make Perez and his wife, Melannie, nervous about allowing their 7-year-old son, Jordon, to play in the front yard. That’s understandable. Some of the most vulnerable users of our streets are child pedestrians, according to John Fegan of the Office of the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Approximately 30,000 children ages 15 and younger were injured in pedestrian crashes in the United States in 1996, according to figures from the U.S. Department of Transportation. On average that year, 346 boys and 231 girls were injured each week. The number of child pedestrian fatalities is also alarming. In 1996, a total of 715 children died in pedestrian crashes — an average of nine boys and five girls each week.

According to Fegan, there are many things that can be done to change these numbers and make streets safer for kids.

“Parallel street parking, for instance, is a hazard for children that can be eliminated or limited,” he said. “We know that children dart out and with parked cars, drivers can’t see them. One way we could eliminate that hazard would be to change how cars are parked. Engineers could eliminate street parking or switch it to angled parking on one side of the street. Another option would be to lower the vehicle speed so there would be more time to detect a child. That would also reduce potential injuries if there’s an unfortunate crash.”

Installing sidewalks or asphalt paths next to roads would also eliminate traffic hazards for young walkers, said Richard Blomberg of Dunlap & Associates, a research organization in Stamford, Conn.

Blomberg consults with several Connecticut school districts regarding school bus safety. He said

one of the biggest problems he sees are “zoning laws that don’t make any sense.”

“One of those laws says that if you build 13 or fewer homes, you don’t have to put in sidewalks. And if you add homes later, you still don’t have to build sidewalks. So guess how many homes each developer builds initially? And then two years later, they’re building another 5 or 10 homes and meanwhile, they’re grandfathered and there are no sidewalks.”

Many of these communities later have problems transporting children to school, Blomberg said.

“The roads there are narrow and winding with lots of blind curves and since they don’t have sidewalks, children are forced to walk and wait for the bus in the road,” he said.

The problem is not isolated to Connecticut, according to Charlie Zegeer of the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center in Chapel Hill, N.C.

“In many areas of the country, sidewalks are an exception rather than a rule and children are expected to walk to school or to the bus stop in roadways or ditches,” he said.

It doesn’t have to be this way, Zegeer noted.

“There are an abundance of design options that can make streets safer and more pleasant for pedestrians,” he said. “People just need to let area traffic engineers, developers and city planners know that they want them”

## **Engineering Changes That Can Help**

Zegeer noted that communities would do well to consider:

- Narrowing streets to slow traffic
- Adding sidewalks
- Adding crosswalks and traffic lights
- Positioning a series of low speed humps on either side of raised crosswalks to slow motorists where many children cross

- Squaring off intersections or situating medians in the center of streets so children who are crossing only need to negotiate one direction of traffic at a time
- Placing crossing guards at places where many children cross
- And situating bulbed-out sidewalk curbs at intersections so the crossing distance is narrowed for kids.

The key to getting traffic calming designs such as these implemented in your neighborhood, is to create a demand for them, said Carol Tan Esse of the Federal Highway Administration.

“If people want a walkable community, they need to let the engineers and architects and developers know,” she said. “In the end, the consumer dictates the market.”

In designing roads that are easy and safe to walk, it’s the little things that count, according to Zegeer. One minor engineering change that would help walkers immensely, he said, would be to have more frequent pedestrian crossings and longer crosswalk lights.

“At many of our signalized intersections in cities there’s not enough time given for people to safely cross, particularly children, pedestrians with slower walking speeds, or people in wheelchairs,” he said.

Burden agreed, emphasizing that pedestrians often have to walk a half-mile to a traffic light to cross a street.

“A lot of people, especially older people and children, can’t cross the street without a traffic signal, but they try anyway,” he said. “They end up jaywalking across the street and then the motorist comes back and says the pedestrian is not behaving. Well, pedestrians are just trying to get from one side of the street to the other in the best way they know how. Why should they walk half a mile to a traffic light that doesn’t give them enough time to cross anyway?”

Squaring off intersection corners is another way of making roads safer for crossing pedestrians,

Zegeer said. Placing cement safety islands just beyond right-turn lanes further helps walkers who are crossing.

“Over the years, engineers have basically tried to provide a much wider turning radius at intersections to allow larger trucks to make these turns,” Zegeer said. “Doing this has lengthened the crossing distance for pedestrians and made it so motorists are encouraged to make a much faster turn. This has made it more dangerous for pedestrians.”

## **Pedestrians and Motorists**

Further complicating the problem have been motorists who fail to yield the right-of-way to pedestrians while turning, Zegeer said.

“Many drivers are not aware that they are supposed to yield the right-of-way to pedestrians or they choose not to obey that law,” he said. “So many times you’ll see a pedestrian having to wait for the motorist to turn. Who’s going to win if the pedestrian steps out into the street? Are they going to win or is the 2,000-pound car going to win?”

“Of course pedestrians can claim their share of the blame,” Zegeer said. “They often choose to ignore pedestrian signals and walk during the ‘*Don’t Walk*’ signal.”

Good enforcement of pedestrian traffic laws has helped solve this problem in some cities such as Seattle, Zegeer said.

“Seattle gives thousands of tickets every year to pedestrians and to motorists who violate pedestrian laws and partly as a result of that, pedestrian violations of the walk signal and motorist violations of right-of-way law tend to be much less,” he said.

“If you go to Seattle and watch pedestrians, if it says ‘*Don’t Walk*’, the pedestrian will wait. It doesn’t matter that there’s no traffic because pedestrians are conditioned that cops will give tickets whereas in many northern cities, pedestrians cross at will. Also, cars turning right in Seattle are conditioned to wait for pedestrians to cross before

making their turn because they know they will be ticketed if they don't," he said.

Seattle's crackdown on pedestrian laws began in 1987, said John Moffat of the Washington Traffic Safety Commission.

"To me, it's been a real cultural shift for Seattle," Moffat said. "Now, when I go to other locations and see the problems they have, I think we're making progress in Seattle."

According to Bill Wilkinson of the Pedestrian Federation of America in Washington D.C., controlling speeding is an enforcement issue that would go a long way toward making streets safer for pedestrians.

"What we have right now is a system that accepts speeding," he said. "There's no effective enforcement and we routinely let cars come off the showroom floor that have the power to more than double the legal speed limit. Additionally, engineers are designing roads that have speeds that far exceed the land-use setting that they're in."

## **Making America Walkable**

For change to happen in America's streets, local planning and transportation agencies, developers, city council members and local police need know that providing a friendly environment for people on foot is an important priority.

"When people walk out the front door of their home, school or place of work, they ought to have a choice about whether they want to walk, take a bicycle or take their car to wherever they want to go," Wilkinson said. "The majority of people right now don't have that choice. The only thing that's going to make pedestrians be a priority is people getting out there and saying: 'This is not okay in the community I'm going to be living in. I want a place where I don't have to worry about my kids walking to school or me having to drive everywhere I want to go.'"

"The public doesn't have to have the answers," Wilkinson added. "They just have to have the indignation to say: 'Excuse me, this isn't what I

want. I want a transportation system that is a whole lot friendlier toward the community.'"

Jerry Scannell of the National Safety Council in Chicago agreed.

"Changing our streets begins with people asking for change," he said. "I believe that we can make significant strides in improving pedestrian safety without sacrificing mobility. The technology is there. The resources are there. All we've got to do is get people to ask for it."

**For more information on ways to make your community walkable see the Web site of the Partnership for a Walkable America at <http://www.nsc.org/walk/wkabout.htm>**

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