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More than one way to think about urban streets

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More than one way to think about urban streets

John Gilderbloom and William Riggs, Special to The Courier-Journal 12:01 p.m. EDT March 16, 2015



A year ago, The Courier-Journal published our op-ed on the positive outcomes of converting multi-lane one-way streets to two-way traffic flow, and the piece went viral. It became one of the top downloaded pieces by planners, elected officials and public administrators and sparked a movement for citizens to take back their streets.

Regionally New Albany, Lexington, Covington, Newport, Indianapolis and Cincinnati are now having lively debates over which streets to convert for the purposes of regenerating central business districts and nearby historic neighborhoods. Mayors, police chiefs, council members, developers, community activists, and the media embraced our study and recommendations. Our research was based on a micro analysis of what happened before and after two streets in Old Louisville (Brook and First) were converted from one-way to two-way.

We found many pluses and no negatives: Traffic accidents, crime and abandonments fell and housing prices had a spike that was higher than any other neighborhood. Mom-and-pop business enterprises had an increase in profits, with more people choosing to move from one-ways to two-ways. Jeff Speck, the author of the New York Times bestseller “Walkable City,” gave a great shout-out on a tweet which likely encouraged thousands more to read it, but we recognized the limitation of our work.

Obviously, one neighborhood and two streets provide a nice case study but we knew more work was needed to overturn 65 years of city planning that facilitated auto traffic. We needed to go from a micro to a macro analysis.

So we put back on our lab coats and expanded the study for all of Louisville. We used the latest computer mapping and statistical techniques available, and the same reliable, public data source, but instead of one small place we looked at all of the neighborhoods in Metro Louisville and hundreds of streets. We compared the 22 Louisville neighborhoods with the most dense concentration of two-, three- and four-lane one-ways to the other 168 neighborhoods with only two-ways.

The results of this study not only confirmed our earlier analysis of the positive outcomes of two-way conversion, but were even more compelling. These results show that if you travel through in a neighborhood of one-way streets you are twice as likely to be in an accident or be injured. In fact, on a yearly average neighborhoods with one-way streets have 126 more collisions and 36 more injuries requiring hospitalization — some causing loss of life. Moreover, if you are riding a bike or are a pedestrian, you are also more likely to be injured on a one-way street. In terms of property values, if you own a house in a neighborhood with one-way streets your house values approximately half of a neighborhoods with two-way streets — an average of \$152,629 compared to \$64,681.

These are as provocative as our original study, presenting an argument that such neighborhoods with one-way streets are harmful to community and safety; in some cases it is a life-and-death issue.

University of Louisville’s urban mission is about letting knowledge serve the city, but in our case, the best knowledge of street design does not appear to be percolating up to elected leaders and leadership power brokers. Mayor Greg Fischer’s Vision Louisville along with Leadership Louisville’s recent West Louisville recommendations both failed to make conversion of one-way to two-way streets a major goal to promote downtown neighborhood renewal, safety, prosperity and sustainability.

A few years back, the David Armstrong mayoral administration talked about making Louisville a great place to live, work and play — a place where one could have a beautiful home, great parks and good job all connected by livable and sustainable streets. Germantown, Portland, Smoketown and West Louisville need this shot in the arm! It is time to reignite that vision with a focus on safe streets for everyone. It is time to move toward street design that enlivens rather than destroys our urban neighborhoods. Let’s move to change this “one-way” of thinking.

John “Hans” Gilderbloom is director of the University of Louisville Center for Sustainable Urban Neighborhoods and William “Billy” Riggs is a Kentuckiana native currently working as an assistant professor of city planning and transportation engineering at California Polytechnic State University.

New Albany meeting

Gilderbloom reports the public is invited to comment — 3 minutes per person — on converting several downtown New Albany streets from one-way to two-way on Wednesday, March 18, from 6 to 7:30 p.m. at the Pepin Mansion at 1003 E. Main St., New Albany, Ind.

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