

opinion

Denver to keep on moving

By Susan Barnes-Gelt

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For too many Americans, "city" is a four-letter word. But in Denver, traffic engineers have recognized that mobility means more than moving cars. Under the leadership of the intrepid Bill Vidal, Denver's Department of Public Works is about to issue the city's "Strategic Transportation Plan: Moving People."

Blueprint Denver, the 2002 integrated land use and transportation plan, was the first step in recognizing the challenges ahead. In order to be vibrant, livable and sustainable, Denver must maintain the integrity of stable neighborhoods while directing growth to undeveloped places (like Lowry and Stapleton) and to underdeveloped areas. As articulated in Blueprint Denver, the keys to balancing areas of stability and areas of change depend on the thorough integration of land use and transportation and on transforming Denver's arcane zoning code.

The zoning code update has been studied, task-forced and processed for 3 1/2 years and is just about ready for prime time. However, the imminent release of Moving People should re-energize this comprehensive planning initiative.

This remarkable transportation plan has taken nearly four years to prepare. The vision statement is

a riff on the vision of Denver's Plan 2000: "A great city is livable for all of its people now and in the future." The STP calls for a multimodal transportation system to support a livable, connected and sustainable city. It prioritizes safe pedestrian connections, a comprehensive bicycle system and dependable transit alternatives.

The plan proposes to limit Denver's roadway footprint. Accomplishing this and accommodating growth, increased density and congestion required city traffic engineers and their consultants to change their approach. The team substituted travel sheds for corridors, and looked at 12 geographical areas with similar characteristics and facilities. By analyzing person trips (i.e., bike, walk, transit and auto) in each travel shed rather than vehicular trips, the team compared current and future demand with capacity. They explored whether better sidewalks, more bike lanes or improved connections could address the gap between demand and capacity.

In other words, professionals who were accustomed to road-widening, paired couplets of one-way streets and no on-street parking recognized that great neighborhoods demand pedestrian-friendly, multimodal streets, transportation choices and that mixed-use neighborhoods call for mixed-use streets.

The plan goes into great detail regarding the importance of maintenance, traffic management and strategic operations as well as with roadway improvements. It clearly recognizes that behavior must change as well. Increasing demand for development where shopping, recreation and jobs are closer to home is part of the solution. And perhaps \$4 per gallon gasoline may be just the catalyst to persuade people to take fewer short car trips and walk or bicycle instead.

However, the single most important element in this

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visionary plan is the assumption made four years ago when the planning process began: the timely and full build-out of FasTracks, the \$7.9 billion public multimodal expansion plan for the region. FasTracks calls for six light rail, diesel commuter rail and electric commuter rail lines, totaling 119 miles. The system is to be completed between 2013 and 2016, along with the expansion of bus routes and parking facilities.

In the face of a faltering economy, political uncertainty and a vacuum of leadership, I agree with Alaska's 1984 Miss Congeniality on one thing: Don't blink. Keep moving.

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