



Pushing policy that promotes equity in active living - From the outside and from the inside



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ABSTRACT

This is an invited commentary article, and so no abstract is required. By way of a brief description, this article tells two success stories in which policies were changed to increase equity in active living, and identifies the keys to success in each case.

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1. Introduction

It's hard to change public policy, and it takes a long time.

What I mean is that it's hard to be *one of the first few people* who pushes for policy change, and the whole process takes a long time. I see the anatomy of a policy change as a “bell curve” over time - a few “early adopters” introduce a radical idea; over months or years, they build support and momentum; until, at a tipping point, the idea becomes mainstream. Public policies tend to change at the moment in that process, when the political decision-makers (keeping an eye on their electorate) transition to the new way of thinking.

Although it's hard and takes time, policy changes can be accomplished - from the outside and from the inside. The purpose of this article is to tell two success stories in which policies were changed to increase equity in active living, and identify the keys to success in each case.

2. Reducing neighborhood speed limits

In 2007, I was halfway through a 12-year stint as Executive Director of the PedNet Coalition advocacy group in Columbia, Missouri.

With our vision of a “healthy and active community,” PedNet had experienced its first policy “win” three years earlier by convincing the Columbia City Council to adopt a Complete Streets policy, such that all new roadways would be designed with safe facilities for pedestrians, bicyclists, and people with disabilities. However, existing streets were not affected by the new policy, and speeding traffic in neighborhoods - most of which had been built with excessively wide, visually open, straight-away streets - continued to be a significant safety and quality of life concern.

PedNet volunteers, leading elementary-aged children in Walking School Buses, contended with speeding traffic on a daily basis. Wheelchair users, who had no other way to get around, were forced into harm's way because of poorly-maintained or non-existent sidewalks. And some of the most dangerous streets were in low-income neighborhoods, where walking was an essential mode of transportation. Vulnerable road users - such as children, senior citizens, people with disabilities, people of color, and those in poverty - are disproportionately impacted by traffic crashes and vehicle speed is the most important factor in severity of injury and likelihood of death in a collision. For these reasons, reducing speed limits is a social justice issue which, if addressed, increases equity in active living.

However, when residents, PedNet leaders, other advocates, and members of the City Council made this request, they were told by City traffic engineers that reducing speed limits would not be effective because roadway design determines the speed of traffic - not the posted, legal speed limit. This response failed to address the concern and prompted the obvious question: “Why did they design the roadway wrong in the first place?” The engineers also argued that police enforcement would be too expensive and that simply changing the signs without enforcement would be a waste of money.

Sixth Ward Councilwoman Barbara Hoppe was not satisfied with the engineers' position and, in partnership with the PedNet Coalition, demonstrated to her Council colleagues that hundreds of U.S. Cities have 20 mph or 25 mph neighborhood speed limits with high levels of compliance. Compelling national data, PedNet's advocacy efforts, and Councilwoman Hoppe's determination to push back against the engineers' resistance, eventual led to City Council support for a \$10,000 research study that would be conducted by the University of Missouri Traffic Engineering Department.

In the study, vehicle speeds at several locations in each of two pilot neighborhoods were recorded for a week at each of three time-points spread over a 6-month period:

1. At start of study (baseline speeds);
2. After installation of “25 mph” speed limit signs at neighborhood entrances and within neighborhoods;
3. After a 30-day education campaign in which PedNet advocates went door-to-door to explain the need for lower speed limits, and spoke at meetings of the Neighborhood Association and the school PTA.

Analysis of the results demonstrated statistically-significant speed reductions of 1.0–6.2 mph after installing the signs alone, and further reductions following the education campaign (Sun & Rossy, unpublished). This came as a surprise to the City engineers, who withdrew their opposition. On June 15th, 2009 (two years after the initial request), the City Council unanimously approved lowering the residential speed limit from 30 mph to 25 mph city-wide.

This was a very successful campaign, and it's important to try to understand the keys to success. In my opinion, there were three critical factors:

1. Consistent advocacy over a long period of time
2. A “champion” with advocacy experience on the City Council
3. A data-driven approach to decision-making

2.1. Consistent advocacy

PedNet mobilized dozens of volunteers to testify at Council hearings, meet with Council members and City engineers, develop and distribute consistent messages, go door-to-door in the pilot neighborhoods, and speak at neighborhood meetings. Without these efforts, the campaign would not have gained traction, the majority of decision-makers would have continued to rely on their technical staff, and the status quo would have been preserved.

2.2. A “champion” on City Council

The single most important element of the campaign was the role of Sixth Ward Councilwoman Barbara Hoppe. Prior to running for City Council in 2006, Ms. Hoppe had spearheaded a citizens' campaign to prevent a 100-acre neglected private park close to downtown Columbia from being sold for commercial development. As a result of her efforts, a citywide tax was passed to purchase the property and develop it as public open space - Stephens Lake Park is now considered a “jewel.” The advocacy skills, personal capacity, and network of supporters she developed while saving Stephens Lake Park prepared her for the speed limit campaign.

2.3. Data-driven approach

The engineers' opposition to reducing speed limits was ideological. Through their professional training, transportation engineers come to believe deeply that the rapid movement of motor vehicles is the most important measure of success of any project or transportation system. Because this position is dogmatic, verbal arguments have very little impact and hard data must be collected through excellent experimental techniques, and in a transparent manner.

If any of these three elements had been missing, it is difficult to imagine the campaign would have been successful.

3. Adopting a vision zero policy

In late 2014, I was halfway through a 3-year term as an elected member of the Columbia City Council.

In my new role, I was working to increase the budgets for sidewalks, traffic calming, and transit services; arguing that we should downsize

and recoup funds from massive road expansion projects; and attempting to dismantle minimum parking requirements. By now, the 25 mph signs had been in neighborhoods for 5 years (engineering staff had originally stated that converting the signs would be so expensive, they would phase it in over multiple budget cycles - after the ordinance passed, they changed their minds and did it immediately), the lower speed limit was popular with residents, and there were fewer complaints about cut-through traffic.

However, there still existed a serious problem with Columbia's major roads, which became painfully obvious with a sudden spate of pedestrian-involved crashes. In a period of just 6 months (October 2014 through April 2015), four pedestrians were killed and six others were seriously injured as a result of being struck by fast-moving motor vehicles. Almost all of these crashes occurred on high-speed, high-volume state highways close to low-income neighborhoods. The victims included a man with a developmental disability, a graduate student from China who stepped off a bus and was trying to cross the highway to her apartment, four residents of low-income neighborhoods adjacent to the highways where they were hit, and an infant.

Working with PedNet (under new leadership) and the City's Bicycle and Pedestrian Commission, I persuaded Mayor Bob McDavid to join U.S. Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx's new Mayor's Challenge for Safer People, Safer Streets (U. S. Department of Transportation, 2016) and establish a Task Force on Pedestrian Safety. I was appointed as one of two co-chairs for the Task Force and given a lot of authority to select the members and define the scope of work, which I did in close consultation with PedNet's new Executive Director, Annette Triplett. Around this time, PedNet received a public health grant to advocate for Columbia to adopt a Vision Zero policy.

The Task Force met for ten months and delivered its final report and sixteen recommendations (the first of which was to adopt a Vision Zero policy) to the City Council on April 4th, 2016 (City of Columbia Mayor's Task Force on Pedestrian Safety, unpublished). The following day, I was re-elected for a second three-year term on the Council, and the work of developing the policy language, designing an implementation program, rallying support from Council colleagues, and overcoming any city staff opposition, began.

At the time of writing (November 2016), and with ongoing support from PedNet and Task Force members, the Council and City staff are in agreement with the proposal (including a novel “One Percent for Safety” program under which 1% of the budget from major roadway projects costing \$500,000 or more will be transferred to the Vision Zero Implementation budget). It is anticipated that the policy will be adopted before the end of the year.

Assuming there are no unforeseen glitches ahead, it is fair to say that this was another very successful campaign. Again, it is important to try to understand the keys to success - these are the critical factors:

1. A “champion” with advocacy experience on the City Council
2. A non-profit partner with advocacy experience and dedicated grant funding
3. A multi-disciplinary approach that broke down silos

3.1. A “champion” on City Council

This time I was the “champion” on City Council. Barbara Hoppe, after serving three terms, retired in 2015 - just as the Task Force was being established. As before, I believe the Council “champion” was the most important factor, but one is enough. I was able to perform that role - working behind the scenes with the Mayor, controlling the legislative process of establishing the Task Force and bringing the policy forward, and using the “bully pulpit” effectively.

3.2. Advocacy partner with dedicated funding

PedNet is a critical partner in the Vision Zero campaign, just as we were in getting the reduced speed limit adopted. In addition to bringing advocacy skills to the campaign, PedNet used grant-funded staff time to conduct research on Vision Zero policies being considered and adopted in other cities and put \$100,000 into a partnership with the City to conduct initial education, enforcement, and engineering activities. The offer of these funds makes it much easier for City Council members to deflect criticism from the community, and they will effectively “kick-start” the Vision Zero Implementation Plan.

3.3. Breaking down silos

The Mayor's Pedestrian Safety Task Force included professionals and stakeholders from a wide range of fields, including education, public health, trauma surgery, disability rights, social services, substance addiction, law enforcement, traffic engineering, the University of Missouri and Columbia Public Schools. The diversity of this group, which came together to address a shared problem, enabled each Task Force member to break out of her/his silo and recognize the value of an elegant, multi-disciplinary solution. If Vision Zero had been presented to each agency individually, I do not believe it would have gained traction.

All three of these elements are essential to the success of this campaign. Note that the combination of a “champion” on City Council: and an advocacy partner is common to both lists of “keys to success.”

4. Conclusions and next steps

Changing public policy is hard work and takes a long time. In my experience, an essential component is an engaged partnership between an effective citizens' advocacy group and an “issue champion” on the elected decision-making body. Two other “keys to success” in these campaigns were breaking down silos and collecting valid data in a controlled experiment.

Data-driven decision-making is a powerful force for change, underscoring the essential partnership between research and practice that is at the heart of the Active Living Research program. Successful practitioners in the art of advocacy need good data and analysis in order to demonstrate health disparities and make the case that certain policy changes will increase equity in active living, and in quality of life.

In my current work with America Walks, I am facilitating a new partnership we are calling the *Transit-Walkability Collaborative*. The premise

of these conversations is that walkable community advocates and transit advocates can accomplish much more together than apart. Neither a perfectly walkable neighborhood without transit service, nor a top-quality transit system without safe connections to stops and stations, is very effective. But, in combination, reliable, frequent transit service connecting safe, walkable neighborhoods can provide a supportive environment that enables millions of families to live well without a car - saving households an average of \$9000/year per car, and precipitating a cascading sequence of community benefits.

In active living advocacy, the economic argument is usually more effective than the health argument. Therefore, in my view, it should be a top priority to conduct research that demonstrates the private-sector and public-sector economic benefits of a walkable, transit-rich. Here is my question for the research community:

What is the total cost of transportation per capita in a “walkable, transit-rich” city versus a car-oriented city of similar size?

This could be determined by aggregating the following components for a large number of cities, calculating the per-capita costs, and comparing those with measures of walkability and transit service quality:

- Annual capital, maintenance, and operations cost of providing public transit service
- Annual cost of building, maintaining, and operating public roadway system
- Annual cost of owning and operating private automobiles

If the cost of a walkable, transit-rich city is lower than that of a car-oriented city, I believe this approach will help make a powerful economic argument for cities to invest public funds into walkability and transit service, rather than highway projects and parking capacity. These data - in the hands of a partnership involving an advocacy organization and a City Council “champion” - could win many campaigns.

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