

Making the healthy choice the easy choice

By: Dan Burden

Dan Burden Consultants

For decades, we engineered physical activity out of our everyday lives. Planning and design choices made health inducing active transportation (walking bicycling transit) not just difficult but impossible. How do we now work with communities to create built environments that induce better health?

In 1994, a two-lane road and intersection in Bradenton Beach, Florida was killing one pedestrian every 16 months. The street design was so hostile that people were forced to get into their cars to cross the street safely. I met the city's engineering and enforcement team in a parking lot. As we looked at the intersection, I pulled out a quarter and laid it on an open set of plans splayed out on the hood of a car, proposing the safest treatment available – a modern roundabout, which had never been used before in Florida.

The roundabout worked so well that when I returned 20 years later, the local chief of police proudly declared that not one crash had occurred since the redesign, people were walking, and the downtown was being rebuilt and thriving. For Bradenton Beach and many other communities, the magic was in people working together – across disciplines and sectors – taking inspiration from one another to solve a problem. Community members showed bravado by choosing and supporting a bold intersection design because they all agreed that the loss of life was unacceptable.

Today, the calls I field are from communities seeking active lifestyles for residents and wanting more years of good health. There is a national shift from focusing on treating disease to preventing it by better designing our communities for people and place. Designed well, our built environment enables activity, ensures a choice in ways to access get around, and encourages social interaction. When cities are designed poorly, the results are dangerous streets, food deserts and social isolation. Sadly, poor design of our built form is rife, and the outcomes are high rates of obesity in adults and youth, low levels of physical activity, and an epidemic of loneliness, which collectively threaten wellbeing in almost every community.

When we place people at the center of design efforts, we create places that are not just good for individual health but for community and planetary health, too. When we make the individual our design vehicle, not the car, we achieve better built form, including a broader diversity of uses, appropriate block lengths and street patterns, and true conservation of open spaces through sustainable development.

At the heart of community building must be the people who live, work, learn and play. Having assisted more than 3500 communities to address their built environment challenges, I know that when technical staff, elected officials, property and business owners, students, and residents walk and talk together, the most creative and context-sensitive solutions come to life.