

# Getting Started

by Richard Untermann

Every car trip begins and ends on foot. The more people can do on foot before getting into (or back into) their car, the fewer cars there will be on the road. Today, our predominant traffic problem is congestion — too many cars driving between this or that activity. Many roads have become lanes for moving cars from one parking space to the next.

## LOOKING BACK

Prior to the 1940s, most Americans lived, worked, shopped, and played in neighborhoods or small towns. Most of these places had grid patterned streets with sidewalks and mixed uses: houses and apartments, corner grocery stores, work, schools, and parks all jumbled



*Sidewalks Everywhere! Walkers need safe sidewalks, connecting residential neighborhoods with shopping, transit, schools, parks, and work.*



*Calm Automobile Traffic. Cars must travel at slow enough speeds so they are not threatening to pedestrians. Called "traffic calming," many communities are narrowing the roadway — shown here with an expanded sidewalk.*

together. While residents could drive, take the bus, or use their bicycle, walking was the principal means of getting around. Neighborhood shopping occurred every mile or so, and many people walked to shop. Streetcars followed many main streets, and families were lucky to have one car, which was not used much.

Following World War II, America abruptly abandoned this pattern in one of the most dramatic shifts in land use and transportation ever seen. In a wholesale conversion to an auto-oriented, suburban lifestyle, we invented an entire new road pattern, shifting from the open-ended grid to a hierarchy of streets. Our roadways also became wider, so cars could travel faster.

Going along with our changed streets was a new land use pattern, whose chief characteristics were low residential density and the separation of unlike land uses. Houses were separated from apartments — and from work, shopping, play, and school. Building locations "reversed" from being at the sidewalk (with parking in the rear) to the back of the lot, separated from the sidewalk by a parking lot. Narrow "walkable" building lots also became wide, auto-oriented ones.

With these new patterns, to go anywhere required driving. We soon abandoned building sidewalks, since nothing was close enough to walk to. Faster, more comfortable cars allowed us to build further and further out in the country.

With hindsight we now know that cars pollute; that our heavy reliance on cars leaves us vulnerable in an energy crisis and worsens our balance of trade; and that the multitude of cars often creates a frustrating tangle of congestion. In addition, our obeisance to the automobile has resulted in the loss of many beautiful landscapes, too often replaced by look-alike strip malls, shopping centers, and

## Quick & Low Cost Tips for Helping Pedestrians

### Tip #1: Consider establishing a Pedestrian District zoning category.

Part of the city — a business or historic district, special street, etc. — could be designated as a Pedestrian District; and be eligible to receive special funding, have reduced traffic speeds, and serve as a focus for traffic calming improvements. You might also combine this idea with Tip #2.

### Tip #2: Double traffic fines in heavily used pedestrian areas.

This will reinforce to motorists the importance of slowing down, and improve everyone's perception that they are in a safe place for pedestrians. Highway departments ask drivers to slow down along construction sites or risk higher fines, why not do the same in areas where pedestrians congregate?

subdivisions. We have also come to see that the many people without access to cars — children, older citizens, handicapped people, and the poor — are at a disadvantage in our auto-dominated society.

The positive news — which I'll be reporting in future columns — is that a growing number of communities have come to realize that there *are* alternative to building more and wider roads, and that there are forms of transportation other than the car. Some communities have begun reconsidering the older pattern of grid streets, comfortable side-



*Tailor Land Uses to Walking. Pedestrians need shopping, work, play, housing, and school to be where they walk.*

walks, and mixed land uses. Others are planning their land use pattern and transportation network to better serve the needs of two worker families, and to take into account the rapid changes in telecommunications.

In getting started, communities usually (and wisely) focus first on straightforward pedestrian improvements such as sidewalks, and on *not* automatically doing things like widening roads. Priorities for pedestrian improvements are in areas used by larger numbers of people: near shopping, schools, parks, libraries, and bus stops. Other focal points for pedestrian improvements are historic districts and dense core areas.

**SAFETY, COMFORT,  
AND CONVENIENCE**

It shouldn't surprise anyone that pedestrians want places that are safe, comfortable, and convenient. Pedestrian-oriented improvements should meet these three needs. Safety is pretty obvious. People need to be (and feel) safe from traffic dangers and crime. Other-

wise, all of the money and effort spent on pedestrian improvements may be wasted.

Comfort is also critical to the success of pedestrian improvements. There need to be places for people to stop and rest, to find food and drink, and to get out of the rain. Comfort also means that the pedestrian environment needs to be visually attractive and well-maintained.

Finally, pedestrian improvement strategies need to be convenient. Simply put, if people can't get what they need or want on foot, they will drive. Convenience necessarily means coordinating planning for pedestrian improvements with land use planning — ensuring, for example, that retail stores, work places, parks, and schools are not located hundreds (or thousands!) of feet away from the network of sidewalks.

In coming columns, we will look at steps communities can take to improve pedestrian and bicycle access; to control the automobile by using "traffic calming" techniques; and to tailor land uses to walking. ♦

*Richard Untermann is Professor Emeritus of Urban Planning at the University of Washington. Untermann has long had a deep interest in pedestrian issues, and is the author of Accommodating the Pedestrian: Adapting Towns and Neighborhoods for Walking and Bicycling, published by Van Nostrand Reinhold Co. of New York. He has contributed two articles to the Planning Commissioners Journal, "Center-ing Our Suburbs" in PCJ #22 and "Taming the Automobile" in PCJ #1. Untermann now resides in Santa Barbara, California, where he works as a consultant on planning and design issues.*

*[Editor's Note: I am pleased that Richard Untermann will be preparing a series of columns for the Planning Commissioners Journal. He brings a wealth of experience in dealing with a broad range of traffic, pedestrian, parking, and related issues].*