

Walking and bicycling have been my main modes of transportation for the last 10 years and I'm now in my fourth year without a car. I have found many instances when our car based transportation system was deficient. Here is one example:

Around 5 years ago I had finished grocery shopping in Hartford and was riding my bike home with about 50 pounds of food on the back of it. The only road home is Route 5 south, and leaving downtown Hartford it climbs a steep hill, with two wide lanes in each direction for cars and the usual 6 inches of shoulder for bikes. Halfway up the hill I heard loud traffic noises behind me, and I stayed as far right as possible waiting to be passed. Within seconds a double axle dump truck pulling a trailer with an excavator on it was beside me, with a car in the left lane passing him at the same time. The intensity of the sound and physical vibration from the truck almost knocked me over, but I was pinned between it and the granite curb 6 inches away. However then the trailer came along with the excavator treads hanging several inches over the side, and as the treads passed within a couple inches of my handlebar I was almost caught by them, and would have fallen under the back wheels at the end of the trailer.

While the requirements for car drivers are more accommodating of people who shouldn't be driving, a professional driver with a CDL should have known better. It's not possible to prevent fools from driving, but it is possible to build roads that are more forgiving. Half a mile away in Lebanon is Seminary Hill, a steep road that handles more traffic, but has safe bike lanes, good sidewalks, and only one lane for vehicles. The highway engineers of the roads that I use have been blind to other users, and have given us roads that prioritize fast travel of cars. This bias physically tells people that you must have a car, and actively discourages people from using other ways of getting around. This is deficient design that borders on negligence.

Where I live all roads that you would want to use for errands travel along a river valley, and there are no other choices unless you are willing to ride up to the top of a ridge a few miles away. These main routes serve everyone. My situation is similar to many towns, where I have to ride 2 miles on main routes to get to the Post Office, bank, or grocery store in the center of my town. Bicycling is the obvious choice, since there is no transit, taxis, or rideshare, and it is too far to walk. For much of it I end up riding in the travel lane with the high speed traffic because there are tiny road shoulders.

One third of Vermont's population is like me. They are not able to get in a car, turn the key, and drive off, because they are underage, overage, or have health, handicap, legal, economic, or living situation restrictions. A car based system is not a safe, fair, and equitable system, and VTrans should be spending one third of it's funds on systems to serve the people who do not drive. Looking at the death, injury, property, and financial loss caused each year by vehicles, there should be a proactive program at VTrans to retrofit the deficient roads designed in another era, to get bicyclists and pedestrians out of the vehicle travel lane. When simple measures such as wider road shoulders, better intersections, and narrower vehicle lanes are readily available, it's long past time to step out of a "fast car serves everyone" mindset to one that benefits all users.

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