

The Next Page: A Life in Pittsburgh ... With a Lot Less Car in It - The 12 Step Program

Yes, bike lanes are nice and all that. But we're talking 'bout a revolution in the streets!

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By Bob Firth

The city of Pittsburgh is kicking off a huge new comprehensive plan called "[PlanPGH](#)." It incorporates the Move PGH task force, announced in January, to look at improving transit and walking and biking options dramatically. With Earth Day fresh in mind, I'm considering just how hard it will be to get more Pittsburghers out walking and biking.

Could car use be an addiction?

Well, here are my 12 steps for a Pittsburgh "intervention." Decide for yourself.

1 Face it: Rail trails and river trails are boring.

Don't get me wrong, I think what's happened with the development of the rail trails and river trails has been a marvelous thing. But here's the problem with so much focus (and so much money) on rail trails: SEGREGATION.

Conceptually these trails are *not* about everyday life with less car in it. They're about segregating bike life from everyday life. Give me biking where life is real and full of things happening, like shopping and visiting friends!

2 Notice that a strip of bike lane paint is not a lot of protection from a two-ton SUV with a texting driver.

So if the answer to getting biking really going in this city is not about having one of the world's greatest networks of rail and river trails, is the answer adding lots of bike lanes on city streets using strips of paint?

At a recent Community Design Center lecture, Robert Freedman, Toronto's director of urban design, nailed the answer: Bike lanes are great for "the spandex crowd of 18- to 30-year-olds." But for the vast majority who are not spandex-compatible, "you need to think seriously about physical separation."

3 Join 1,465 other cities* and start doing car-free Sundays on selected arteries in the summer.

OK, let's "test" physical separation. Famously, New York has been experimenting with closing off parts of Times Square and Herald Square to cars. If New York can close parts of its insanely busy Broadway year-round, what street in Pittsburgh could not be conceivably eligible for regular Sunday closure?

Ready for my suggestion? Try two lanes of Fifth Avenue from Bigelow in Oakland all the way to the intersection at Penn Avenue. Use construction barrels, say, to mark it off. Start at 1 p.m. (to give churches time to clear) and go to 6 p.m.

Imagine a Sunday where you could bike or roller-blade from Oakland to Mellon Park and back (5-mile round trip) and not give a thought about cars. I bet we'd see little kids and moms and oldsters (and the rest of the non-spandex crowd) out cycling and roller-blading in droves!

*See the World Health Organization "[1,000 Cities, 1,000 Lives](#)" Campaign.

4 Then summon the courage to do something big: Take one lane of Fifth Avenue from Bigelow to Penn and curb it off permanently for biking and roller-blading.



 PDF:

[Lot Less Car In It](#)

THIS is the new worldwide epiphany: You are simply never going to get the multitudes comfortable biking on arteries in the same "asphalt space" as two-ton SUVs.

Let me tell you about my first sighting of the Montreal concrete-median protected bike lanes: They blew me away. I saw a mother on roller blades pushing a baby carriage ahead of her. You're never going to see that on a bike lane on a major artery protected only by a strip of paint. Being able to ride in the middle of the "action" in the city and not have a thought about cars is a stunning experience. Stunning.

I know this would be a tough thing to pull off -- but imagine the WOW of a statement this kind of dramatic action would make about Pittsburgh as the Green City of the East. (Take that, Portland!) What's so beautiful about this stretch of artery is that it links cool places to visit -- Pitt, Mellon Park, Shadyside. You pass by historic mansions and great churches. *And hello: It's flat!*

This is the kind of thing we need to "think seriously" about if we're to get bicycling going as a part of everyday living here.

5 Do something about all the drivers who drive like they're going to explode if they have to wait two more seconds for a pedestrian.

What makes Pittsburghers so susceptible to pedestrian-in-crosswalk rage? I've nearly been run over by speeding SUVs who have to come to a screeching halt for a traffic light not 100 feet after passing me in the crosswalk. Californian motorists can be cool, calm and collected while they dutifully respect the pedestrian in a crosswalk, why can't Pittsburghers?

Hey, let's start a campaign: "YIELD TO PEDESTRIANS LIKE CRAZY CALIFORNIANS DO!"

6 Make it a high development priority to blanket the city with outdoor hang-outs with lots of shade and with lots of moveable chairs and tables (the ones that are really easy to steal).

The new Schenley Plaza in Oakland has been an instant hit. I can't wait for the new Market Square to be finished (our office overlooks it). Europeans have known this for eons: a funny thing happens when you put moveable table and chairs out for "the people," tables and chairs that can be easily stolen: They *don't* get stolen. And the place comes alive (if it has shade and good people-watching conditions).

Give our city an endless supply of such small urban spaces and you give us all good reasons to get out and walk and bike to them!

7 Host a worldwide design competition for a radically cool looking outdoor portable toilet. (Then sprinkle them all over the city.)

There's something else we can't have enough of if we really want the multitudes out walking and biking: public restrooms. Imagine the publicity we would get if Pittsburgh announced an international design competition to definitively "solve" the ugliness of the Port-O-John. Requirements: radically inspiring design, eminently practical and affordable enough for the city to deploy them by the hundreds. (I can hear the applause from the South Side even now.)

8 End the practice of keeping transit buses hidden from potential riders.

Why isn't it scandalous that our Port Authority has never put up schedules at bus stops? I've studied dozens of transit systems, and every one of them has schedules at many (if not most) of their bus stops. Ask a marketer -- point-of-purchase promotion is extremely important. What do we do at point of purchase? We "hide" our buses in plain sight by giving passers-by no clue as to when the buses will stop (or where they can take you).

Oh yes, Port Authority is working with third-party developers on a bunch of high-tech things like being able to "text" for the next bus arrival times at a stop. But which is the more "advanced" technology: an 8.5-by-11-inch piece of paper that does the job in seconds (but takes a little bit of Port Authority elbow grease) or a Rube Goldberg "smartphone" clicking-through-menus solution costing someone \$80 per month in usage charges?

You want to get more people out of cars and onto buses? I vote starting with the simplest cheapest thing with the biggest possible impact: posting a piece of paper!

9 **Figure out how to make transit for errands and weekend family adventures enticing.**

I know people who ride the bus to commute to work but who never use buses on weekends. Why? Do the math. For a family of four, a roundtrip to an Oakland or North Shore adventure would cost \$16! With so many mostly empty buses on weekends, how could it hurt to offer family day passes for, say, \$5?

As for weekend errands, there are two things that have made it tough: the low frequency of bus service and the fact that the routes weren't designed to take you to shopping places. As regards the latter, I'm happy to report that with the new 64 and 75 routes and their connections to the Shadyside, Eastside, SouthSide Works and Waterfront shopping, Port Authority has taken a big step in the right direction.

But here's the rub: On weekends they run only every 30 minutes or so. I say bite the bullet and run them every 15 minutes during prime weekend shopping hours and promote the heck out of them. Paint the buses green. Put up big green banners at the bus stops. And *please*, PLEASE post nifty-looking schedules and maps at the stops. (Maybe even get the stores to print the schedules and maps on their bags!)

10 **Promote "Life with a Lot Less Car In It" as the great city-living pleasure.**

When I started working on this piece, I ran into more and more people who had recently found out what it was like to live with a lot less driving. One person's household was down to one car, another had recently moved into an East End neighborhood. They were a bit nervous at first; it took some getting used to.

But to their great surprise, in a short time they found using buses and walking more was an enjoyable way to live. We need to let the secret out: Life with a lot less car in it is not scary or a sacrifice. It's a pleasure!

11 **Govern the city like walking and biking actually matter: Next time we get a big snow, treat key walking and biking rights of way as the equal of key traffic arteries.**

Memo to City-County Building: a couple of weeks after the heavy snow in February, Homewood Cemetery staff finally plowed the Forbes Avenue sidewalk, ending right at the boundary line of Frick Park. People would start walking down the plowed part until they rounded the bend and discovered that it was near murder trying either to hike through the mounds of snow ahead or dodge the cars on Forbes. And the Forbes bridge -- a mess for a month for pedestrians. Meanwhile, all four lanes for cars were perfect.

I noticed the same inaction on clearing the sidewalks on the bridges into Schenley Park from Oakland.

City Hall: show us you're serious about the importance of biking and walking. Make a list of the key pedestrian linkages with no safe alternatives -- like the ones above -- and clear them at least within a day or two of clearing the secondary streets!

12 **Remind everyone: plan ahead for a spike in the price of gas.**

Remember the panic in 2008? Oil at \$140 a barrel, gasoline over \$4 a gallon? Seems like a bad dream. But remember what it did to people's perception of life with a lot less car in it.

Some experts say big price rises are inevitable. Start to think now about how to incorporate walking and biking into your everyday life.

It's coming. Seriously.

Cartoonist Rob Rogers does "Rob's Rough," an early look at his work and his creative process, exclusively at [PG+](#), a members-only web site of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Our [introduction to PG+](#) gives you all the details.



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