Fred’s Departing Observations and Advice

As my wife and I prepare to leave Lebanon County, I think of the progress bicycling and walking have made on our road ways. I started biking in the early 80s, so I’ve been on local and state roads in Lebanon County for almost 40 years.

During the early years every ride would have a conflict: people throwing objects from passing motor vehicles, shouting unseemly epitaphs and worse, trying to intentionally remove me from the road.

In 2019, unwanted actions like those are uncommon occurrences, but they’re still there and still life threatening. Though now riding these same roads is many times safer than in 1981. I think part of the change is a cultural shift, biking has become more acceptable (maybe Lance had something to do with this) and there are just more of us.

With all that said, it doesn’t mean our work is done— it won’t be done until people believe you don’t have to be brave to ride your bike to work or to the grocery store. Or, until we’d feel comfortable if an eight-year-old says she’s biking over to her friend’s house two miles away. Those are the standards; we’re not there yet.

There’s still an anti-bike zeitgeist amongst many drivers, there’s still a laissez-faire attitude toward biking (and walking) among the many agencies (PennDOT, too many MPOs and municipalities) that design and sanction our roadways. There are still developers that ignore the needs of bikers and walkers within and near their developments and this is acceptable by PennDOT and some municipalities. That’s where LVBC has a critical role.

You don’t really think that the through bike lanes in Lebanon County would be there if it wasn’t for pressure from LVBC advocates; you don’t really think the shared lane markings and BMUFL signage through several local municipalities would be there if it wasn’t for advocacy from LVBC; you don’t really think that bicyclists would have been able to participate with municipalities’ comprehensive planning if LVBC had not sought representation. Or, with prodding from advocates that municipalities that own the traffic signals would consider how a bicycle might activate a traffic signal to turn green. We need to let highway decision makers know we are not just watching but expecting results that make it much safer to bike in Lebanon County.

There’s still widespread ignorance among road designers in both the public and private sectors on what is the best way to mitigate traffic congestion. Most traffic engineers know, or should know, constructing more traffic lanes ultimately doesn’t reduce traffic or adding more roads, when we can’t maintain the roads we presently have, ultimately doesn’t reduce traffic. Constructing wide, clear roadways with sweeping turns doesn’t make it safer for all road users (Limited access roads being an exception). If you build roads for motorists— more motor vehicles will come. If you build safe roads for bicycling, more bicyclists will come.

So where to from here?

If we as cyclists want safer roads we must do our part.
I leave Lebanon County as a member of the Lebanon County Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO). The body that oversees transportation needs in the County. It is important for bicyclists to be represented on the MPO as the Technical Planning Committee and the Policy Board mull roadway improvements and additions. Our representatives should be there to remind them roads have users besides motorists. Even with good intentions, decisions are being made by people who don’t know the needs of active road users. Bicyclists need representatives at these important meetings.

I recently attended an I-81 corridor meeting with another LVBC member. More meetings are to come. These meetings are important for your attendance as that any place an I-81 interchange crosses a bike-able roadway the needs of cyclists and pedestrians must be considered. The meeting in Carlisle outlined the goals of the proposed construction. There are three I-81 interchanges in Lebanon County. It’s not only the interchanges but roads approaching the interchanges that must be considered as well.

Cyclists need a presence at local municipality meetings. The decisions made at the local level impact a significant percentage of roads that cyclists’ use. Also, when a highway occupancy permit (HOP) is applied for by a developer, the municipality where this development will be located has an opportunity to add their concerns and comments. PennDOT Connects is PennDOT’s expectation that every municipality in Pennsylvania, including in Lebanon County, understands the needs for bicyclists’ safety and will require them as part of the permit.

We advocates for safer bicycling could ignore all this, but if we do, we will return to the not too distant past when bicyclists’ needs were totally ignored. It is already happening in Lebanon County.

Bike use is not baked into our culture as it is in many places like Denmark and the Netherlands or even Portland, Oregon or Davis, California. Our neighboring Lancaster County MPO has a bike/ped advisory committee, adopted Complete Streets for the entire County, and adopted a new county bike/ped plan. Our MPO rejected funds in 2016 to undertake a bike/ped county plan.

Where we are moving is Elizabethtown, a borough that strives to be bike friendly. Harrisburg, the City of York, City of Lancaster, Carlisle, Chambersburg – all of them are working towards safer bicycling conditions. Nationally, communities with active bicycling advocacy groups and supportive state DOTs and MPOs are making huge strides in altering infrastructure for multi-modal users. Other places without active road user advocates experience the same car-centric road designs as I first experienced in 1981. Where will Lebanon County end up being?