



# Traffic Safety Center

Setting New Directions in Traffic Safety

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## Making Safety a Must

**By David Ragland, Traffic Safety Center Director**



With the increased dominance of the automobile as the primary means of mobility, walking and transit use have decreased dramatically over the past 50 years or so. Widespread automobile use has led to pollution, accelerated depletion of non-renewable resources, and devotion of vast amounts of land to highways and parking lots. Widespread automobile use has also led to the trend of reduced physical activity, which has contributed to a decrease in physical fitness levels and an increase in the proportion of overweight people in the population.

Over the past few decades, the desire to reduce the impact of the automobile on the environment has led to intensive discussion among urban planners and others about how to reverse this trend, and to encourage other means of mobility. "Sustainable" and "Smart" growth are

the best-known terms that describe this type of theory or model, which proposes altering the man-made environment to encourage transit use and walking and bicycling.

Similarly, over the past few decades, and especially in the past few years, researchers and officials in public health have become increasingly aware of, and alarmed about, what are likely to be increases in related chronic ailments such as heart disease and diabetes as people become less active.

These diverse concerns, both about the impact of the automobile on the urban environment and reduced physical activity on health, have led to parallel but now increasingly coordinated efforts to encourage walking, biking, and the use of transit through physical alterations of the built environment or through special programs

that reduce barriers to alternative forms of transportation.

This alignment of concerns about the impacts of automobiles on the environment and the effect of reduced levels of physical activity on the population's health may provide an historic opportunity at the start of the 21st century to create (or re-create) an environment in which people have more opportunities to walk, bike, or ride public transportation as a means of mobility and recreation and ultimately minimize the reliance on the automobile that dominated the 20th century.

Whether the various programs and approaches to increase opportunities for physical activity through walking and biking will be successful is presently an open question. Trends are still toward more driving and less walking and biking. The reversal of such trends will depend on many factors. However, a critical element will be the degree to which walking and biking can be made safe. This is especially crucial because walking and biking will have to occur in an environment where the automobile is, and will continue to be, a major presence.

Certainly, if we are to encourage walking and biking through alterations in design of the built environment or through education and public awareness, we are under a strong obligation to make walking and biking safe.

This issue of the Traffic Safety Center Newsletter discusses some of these questions, including: the role of the built environment in promoting walking and biking, models such as the Safe Routes to Schools program that include safety as an integral element in promoting walking, and practical resources that communities can use to improve the safety of walking and biking. We hope to illustrate why and how the goal of reducing dependence on the automobile can be accomplished while maintaining and enhancing safety for subsequent increased numbers of pedestrians and bicyclists.

*Photo: Dan Burden, <http://www.pedbikeimages.org>*

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