

Why cars have a place in downtowns

By LOIS FISHER

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The Press Democrat recently reported that teens and young adults are causing problems on Water Street in Petaluma in the evenings. We have read over the years of problems with teens in Old Courthouse Square in Santa Rosa, along the creeks of Rohnert Park and in Petaluma's Putnam Plaza. This latest article discussed the increasing number of arrests that are required to keep the peace in the evening on Water Street.

How can the increasing disturbances in this area be explained? On The Press Democrat Web site, most people responding to the article blamed the teens themselves, their parents, the lack of a teen center in Petaluma, etc. From an urban design perspective, there is another answer.

A common factor in all three problem sites is that they are or include a pedestrian-only area carved out of an urbanized area.

There is a deep longing within all of us for the chance to walk along a wonderful street that is full of attractive shops, trees and activity -- without cars. We all enjoy that experience during the summertime Santa Rosa Downtown Market. If you have ever been to Europe, you may have experienced that freedom and joy on a daily basis.

We experience some of this in shopping malls. At some level though, we all understand that we are on private property and that the public will no longer be allowed in that space once the gates close at night.

As an urban designer, I have noticed that when designing a local downtown area there is usually a groundswell of support for making certain streets vehicle-free. There is a general feeling that this type of design would be wonderful for the environment and would encourage people to walk to shops.

Creating a pedestrian mall out of a public street has a long track record. Since 1959, about 200 public streets in the U.S. were converted to pedestrian-only malls. Wikipedia states that "most of these experiments were failures in the respect that they cut off automobile traffic from retailers." Of the 200 conversions, only 30 remain pedestrian-only. Some of these such as the K Street mall in Sacramento remain problematic. The "success" rate of pedestrian-only streets hovers at around 15 percent in the United States.

There are some successes though. The Pearl Street downtown mall in Boulder, the San Luis Obispo creek walk and the Santa Monica Third Street Promenade all work well. Can we study those successes and bring them to Sonoma County?

The key to success is that the community already has a strong pedestrian base. This happens easily in college towns like Boulder and San Luis Obispo where many students are on foot or bicycle. Santa Monica's success derives from heavy tourist traffic. By contrast, in Sonoma County we average one car per resident. A pedestrian on a street in our area has a car parked nearby.

In Europe most pedestrians do not have a car parked nearby. They walk the streets day and night. This creates a healthy level of activity and natural oversight that discourages the monopoly of public spaces by people who do not drive, such as teenagers and the homeless. Sonoma County currently lacks a high density of round-the-clock pedestrians in downtown areas.

The problematic area of Petaluma's Water Street includes a section of street where cars were recently removed as part of a redevelopment project. In the remaining problem areas, there is little vehicle traffic, as the area is used more like a parking lot than a through street. Without many cars "patrolling" that part of the street at night, it has become vulnerable to questionable activity.

Now think of the other local pedestrian-only areas: the walkway just south of Third Street in downtown Santa Rosa behind the cinemas. Do you enjoy walking there? Do you think that your daughter or sister would enjoy walking alone there at night? How about the

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pedestrian walkway in Healdsburg from the northern edge of the plaza west to the parking lot?

I understand and share the desire for a wonderful pedestrian experience. If a place like that exists, I would love the opportunity to study it so that it could be recreated elsewhere.

Lacking that precedent, we can all expect a dismal 15 percent success rate if cars are removed from downtown retail streets.

In the meantime, a wonderful alternative is the model used for the Santa Rosa Downtown Market -- retain the cars for safety and retail health, while reserving the right to close the street for festivals.

Young people deserve a healthy public realm. Squares surrounded by through streets such as we find in Healdsburg and Sonoma allow young people to find the socialization that they crave, while providing a benign level of adult surveillance that allows the area to remain safe and vital.

Lois Fisher is a Windsor resident and an urban designer.

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