

Indianapolis streets can serve as avenues for more than just car traffic

City-County Councilman John Barth stood on the corner of 39th and Illinois streets one night last week, explaining the [benefits](#) of a proposed ordinance to make such areas friendlier to those not in cars.

As he worked to make his case, however, it was made for him. Roughly 200 feet away, a group of children, eager to make their way from a parking lot on the west side of Illinois to a park on the east side, raced dangerously across the street as [cars](#) driving too fast approached.

"Look at that," Barth said. "It's really challenging for pedestrians to get across the street, and look at all of the reasons for people to want to get across the street." The area is filled with stores as well as a popular park, houses and apartment buildings.

Barth and Council President Maggie Lewis, with a nod of support from the mayor's [office](#), last week introduced their "Complete Streets" ordinance, which is modeled after policies already in place in other cities.

It's based on a simple but under-appreciated concept: Streets aren't only for cars and when it comes time to repave or rebuild them, why not consider a holistic approach that makes the streets, intersections and neighborhoods more accessible to walkers, bikers and mass transit?

The 39th and Illinois node isn't bad by Indianapolis standards. The sidewalks are wide and new bike lanes have been painted. But under a Complete Streets standard, the bus stop might include a shelter and the road might have a cutout that allows buses to pull over without delaying traffic and people to board away from the street. A median with trees might be added, and planners could include a small grassy buffer between the sidewalk and the street. More crosswalks would be in place, and, at a minimum, all of the sidewalk corners would have ramps for wheelchairs and strollers.

"This area has so much potential to be a wonderfully complete community," said Kathryn Shorter, president of Midtown Indianapolis, pointing to the area's busy park and healthy retail scene. "But we need to think more about pedestrians and cyclists and understand that cars can't always be the king of the road."

In addition to creating more vibrant neighborhoods, there is a safety component to such designs, as those not in cars have more space between them and traffic. In such environments drivers have also learned to slow down, reminded by their surroundings that they are in a neighborhood and not on an interstate.

Carmel and [Speedway](#), it should be noted, have embraced this model in their impressive downtowns.

Although some taxpayers will understandably worry about the cost of such ideas, advocates make clear that they are not setting up a one-size-fits-all system. The bottom line is this: Planners would be required to consider more than just cars when they repave an area. They'd have to think about the design that is best for the city as a whole. The ordinance is reasonable and flexible.

Moreover, any cost increases should be weighed against the economic development such policies spur, the boost they spark in home values, and the many residents who leave Indianapolis each year in search of a better and safer quality of life in the suburbs. And, I should [note](#), there are tremendous health benefits associated with living in a more walkable and bikeable city.

"Ultimately, it's all about choice," said Kim Irwin, who has driven the Complete Streets push as executive director of the Alliance for Health Promotion. "People love that idea of choice, but when it comes to getting around the city right now, in many instances people have no other option but to drive."

That can change. It wouldn't take much effort -- just a different mindset and a little more planning.

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