The Neighborhood Car? Is it Time?

Posted by Prof. Goose on October 12, 2007 - 12:00pm in The Oil Drum: Local
Topic: Environment/Sustainability
Tags: hans noeldner, oregon, original, wisconsin [list all tags]

This is a guest post from Hans Noeldner, a trustee in the village of Oregon, Wisconsin, a rapidly growing bedroom community of about 8,300 near Madison, Wisconsin. Hans' first piece on the rules of downtown revitalization can be found here and his piece on the "Declaration of Dependence" can be found here.

Today he writes a letter to his fellow members of the Wisconsin Governor's Task Force on Global Warming (GTFGW). It seems to me that the theme of "unwinding" vehicular one-upsmanship is pertinent...

Note, these are exactly the kind of stories we are looking for for the new TOD:Local segment, please submit them to Glenn or the eds box!

Dear GTFGW – Transportation Working Group (TWG) members:

Sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words. Imagine for a moment that we extrapolate into the future, from the relatively modest cars most people drove twenty-five years ago...to the 5,000-pound SUVs and 6,000-pound pickup trucks that dominate our suburbs today...to the vehicles that might cluster 'round our soccer fields and school drop off zones after another ten or twenty years of "healthy" economic growth:

(You will have to click here, it's a flash module...and click "CST" and "MST" at the bottom.)

NOTE: this is not a joke – in fact there are several "trucks" very much like this one in the Village of Oregon, Wisconsin, although not jacked up so high. I can assure you they are seldom if ever used for work or even to tow stuff. Perhaps you have experienced how frightening it is to ride a bicycle on public roads and streets with machines like this whizzing by. If the prospect of many more such vehicles in the future seems unlikely to you, ask yourself whether people in 1982 would have believed we would drive what are driving in 2007. God help us if the GTFGW is unwilling to confront this kind of conspicuous consumption and vehicular one-upsmanship.

Policies that UNWIND and reverse motor vehicle "size creep" should be one of the top priorities for the TWG. A logical starting point would be to review and recommend maximum size, weight, and speed limit standards for ultra-compact "Neighborhood Cars" – i.e. vehicles designed for urban use that would look like this (albeit with the stipulations outlined below):

http://www.feldmannsmart.com/evp.cfm?pageid=89542&utm_source=g&utm_mediu...

As important, the TWG should recommend preferential licensing, parking, and roadway standards which maximize the advantages of Neighborhood Cars. If a nine-foot length standard were adopted, for example, two or three Neighborhood Cars parked perpendicular to the street could fit in a "standard" nine-foot by 18-foot parallel-parking stall. I cannot overstate the environmental and economic benefits of doubling available parking in traditional downtowns and walkable neighborhoods by merely repainting lane and stall demarcation lines. Standards similar

to the ones that prioritize handicapped parking – i.e. Neighborhood Car parking near the front doors of destinations – would send a powerful signal to motorists to "do the right thing". And these short vehicles would also increase roadway capacities and traffic flow – without ANY infrastructure changes!

Yet there are more advantages. Small, short, speed-limited Neighborhood Cars would help make existing streets user-friendly for non-motorists. There can be no doubt that significantly more people would be willing to bicycle in Neighborhood Car traffic than among big pickup trucks and SUVs, or that fewer pedestrians would be afraid to cross the streets. When it comes to vehicular intimidation, size really does matter!

The Neighborhood Electric Vehicle concept is a good starting point, but the TWG should consider the TYPE of energy used for propulsion separately from factors like the basic physics of rolling resistance and the basic spatial arrangements of motor vehicle "habitat". Consider the logic of weight limits for Neighborhood Cars. Given equal engineering efforts, the energy consumption of a 2,000 pound vehicle will always exceed those of one that weighs 1,000 pounds. Similarly, given the most efficient drive system available, direct & indirect emissions from a vehicle that is driven as fast as 40 MPH or 60 MPH will always exceed those of a comparably-sized vehicle optimized for (and driven at) speeds of 25 MPH and less. And naturally emissions go WAY down when our streets become more user-friendly and more people choose to walk and bicycle rather than driving. (This is basic psychology!)

Before closing, I note that Neighborhood Car policies, like many of the other policy recommendations the GTFGW is devising, would work best if adopted nationally or regionally. Perhaps Wisconsin could be a leader in this area.

If any of you consider the Neighborhood Car concept promising, I will further expand on it and circulate during the next 1-1/2 weeks.

Yr Hmbl & Obdnt Svt,
Hans Noeldner