

BURLINGTON, VERMONT WALKABILITY CAMPAIGN

Nate Hoover

Project Goal:

To better inform both the public and decision makers on development projects and processes in Burlington relating to walkability issues and to advocate for prioritization of pedestrian facilities and spaces.

Background:

Burlington is currently going through a myriad of development projects, including a proposed highway connector through a South End neighborhood and a \$200 million mall redevelopment in the downtown core. Additionally, several plans are being created, specifically a Walk-Bike Master Plan, a Downtown and Waterfront Master Plan, a South End Master Plan, and a Housing Action Plan. These projects are currently seeking public input and are offering public meetings on a regular basis. These engagement processes are an opportune time to better inform both the public and city decision makers on the benefits of walkability and the infrastructure designs that work. The City of Burlington is at a point in time where they have to decide if they are going to continue catering to the needs of cars and commuters, or if they are going to start prioritizing the quality of life of city residents and the needs of people on foot. With all of the different projects going on, it is important that the thread of walkability is woven into every plan and made a priority.

The specific corridor in the city that interests me is Pine Street, which will experience a dramatic increase in traffic if it is connected to the highway bypass. Pine Street is a dangerous arterial street that has seen a variety of pedestrian and cyclists injuries over the years. Pine Street is also a burgeoning area for small businesses, breweries, and restaurants that would benefit from improvements to the area's walkability. The neighborhood is part of an industrial enterprise zone that does not allow for housing to be built in this area, but the way the area is developing, it could support a lively pedestrian district with residents living above storefronts/offices or with new housing built adjacent in low density areas.

Potential Partners:

Local Motion
Burlington Walk Bike Council
South End Arts and Business Association
Department of Public Works
South End Alliance
Transportation Research Center/University of Vermont
Champlain Housing Trust

Strategies:

Writing Campaign:

- Submit written comments on the Walk Bike Master Plan initial draft, South End Master plan draft, Downtown and Waterfront Master Plan, Housing Action Plan, Mall Redevelopment, Champlain Parkway, and Downtown Parking plan
- Create blog and distribute blog posts to help inform public about walkability issues in Burlington
- Submit larger editorial piece on key walkability issues and assess where the city's priorities lie
- Generate my "killer facts" sheet with quick hitting walkability facts relating to Burlington

Benefits of a written campaign: The benefits are twofold. This will give me a chance to frame my proposals/arguments, do necessary background research on city projects, and continue developing my advocacy voice. It will also help me inform the public on development issues in the city and give a broader perspective of urban planning issues.

Community Meeting Outreach:

- Attend community meetings to make public comments
- Network with community members/public officials to gain perspective from other stakeholders and increase dialogue on important walkability issues
- Educate fellow citizens on city planning issues

Benefits of community meeting outreach: Chance to meet with engaged citizens to discuss issues relating to walkability and to better inform them of best practices from other cities.

Important Dates for Meetings or Written Comment Submissions:

- Sunday, September 13th – Open Streets BTV including public outreach for Walk Bike Master Plan.
- Monday, September 14th – Walk Bike Master Plan Public Workshop.
- Opinion article submitted to Burlington Free Press by September 25th
- Written comment on the Champlain Parkway due by September 28th
- Tuesday, September 29 - 5:30-7:30pm – Form Based Code meeting
- Written comment for the South End Master Plan draft due by October 1st
- Written comment for Burlington Town Center Mall Redevelopment due by October 14th
- Presentation at Vermont League of Cities and Towns on Walkability in Vermont
- Written comment for Housing Action Plan due by October 26th
- Attend National Walking Summit October 27th-30th

Challenges:

Burlington has a very vocal and engaged populace, which is great, but a lot of the meetings I attend the commenters display a lack of understanding of urban development processes and how urban design impacts their lives. NIMBYism is rampant in Burlington and the city has a reputation with developers as a place to avoid. I feel that educating individuals on some of the more complex relationships between people and the built environment might lead to more productive dialogue. How does low density development impact travel decisions? How does vehicle traffic help or hurt a business district? As a rural state, Vermont is fairly auto-dependent and the City of Burlington caters to the needs of drivers/commuters more than I feel it should, but it's a culture that is very resistant to change.

Next Steps:

My work over the next few months will help me inform citizens of the vernacular and concepts of walkable community development. This will help guide the planning process as we develop the city's Walk-Bike Master Plan over the next year. This campaign will also help me develop my personal skills of written and verbal communication to help influence decision makers and better promote walkable community design.