Nashville Active Transportation Advocates Get on Board with Transit

Walk Bike Nashville isn’t technically in the transit-advocacy business. In fact, the word transit doesn’t appear anywhere in the group’s mission statement or, for that matter, elsewhere in the “About Us” section of its website. But getting involved in improving the public transit landscape in Nashville has become something of an unavoidable endeavor for an organization focused on making conditions better for people who walk and bike for transportation, says the group’s executive director, Nora Kern.

If Nashville wants to transform itself from a sprawling, car-oriented metropolis to one that more readily lends itself to walking and biking, “transit is essential,” Kern says. Then there is the basic reality that many of the people her group is advocating for – those who walk and bike because they have no or limited access to cars – often depend on transit to get where they need to go. Those riders of necessity face tough conditions in this fairly typical (from a transportation perspective, anyway) American city. Close to 90 percent of the workers living in Nashville-Davidson County get to their jobs by car, according to the most recent American Community Survey estimate, slightly higher than the 86 percent of the U.S. workforce for which that is true.

The Nolensville Pike Bus Stop Project

Like many cities, metro Nashville isn’t just challenged by limited bus schedules and routes but by a landscape bisected by wide, high-speed road networks, limited accommodations for pedestrians and a culture long accustomed to automobile dependence that make getting around outside of a car far more dangerous than it should be, even along some of the city’s best-used transit corridors. That had historically been the case at one particular transit stop located in a heavily transit-dependent community that has recently served as a focal point of Walk Bike Nashville’s advocacy work.

The bus stop at Nolensville Pike near Welshwood Drive is located along a busy, five-lane state road that happens to fall along one of the city’s few high-frequency bus routes, one of the best-used in the city. Studies had also identified the stop and its vicinity among the most dangerous for pedestrians in Nashville, Kern says. To get across the street, people were often forced to sprint across the wide roadway, dodging traffic to reach grocery stores and other amenities located on either side. A pedestrian had been killed near the stop every year for several years in a row by the time Walk Bike Nashville got involved. (Read Walk Bike Nashville’s blog about the project here.)

“No one was doing anything,” Kern remembered. “It was on all these studies, but nothing had happened.” Eventually, several community groups got together as part of a Nolensville corridor planning effort that involved lots of public discussions, a walk audit, and related initiatives. Out of that process emerged several priorities, one of which was adding a crosswalk to connect the two sides of Nolensville near the bus stop, a project that Walk Bike Nashville opted to champion.
With funding from New York City-based TransitCenter, the organization launched a media campaign last year that had at its centerpiece a short film showcasing the very clear challenges associated with the intersection. Local media outlets and elected officials took great interest, with the zeal to do something tragically stoked by another pedestrian fatality near the intersection in the midst of the campaign.

In didn’t take long for the yields of advocacy efforts to become visible in a mid-block, high-visibility crosswalk, refuge island, new signage and pedestrian-activated flashing beacons installed by the Tennessee Department of Transportation across Nolensville in the vicinity of the bus stop last year. The project, whose $50,000 price tag was borne by TDOT and the city, according to Kern, is technically considered a pilot, but Kern guesses it will be kept in place for some time. In the wake of that success, Walk Bike Nashville has obtained a second grant from TransitCenter and hopes to do a similar projects on other important transit corridors.

From Bus Stop to Ballot Box

Over the past four years, the group has also developed a working relationship with the Metro Transit Authority, the local transit operator, thanks in part to an active transportation grant procured by Walk Bike Nashville and administered for the local Metropolitan Transportation Organization by the transit authority. In particular, MTA CEO Steve Bland has been supportive of the group’s work. “He gets that walkability and transit go hand in hand and he’s been a big ally over the past couple of years,” Kern said.

Today, Walk Bike Nashville representatives and others working on expanding transportation choice in the Nashville metro region are in the midst of their biggest transit-related push yet: an historic vote set for May 1 in which voters will decide whether to raise taxes to fund a massive expansion of the city’s transit network. The plan, which is estimated to cost upwards of $5 billion over the coming decades, would raise the sales, hotel/motel, rental car and business and excise taxes. Among other things, it would fund increased service on several existing transit routes and introduce light rail to the city. It would also fund new or enhanced sidewalks and crossings at key locations.

Walk Bike Nashville is part of a 124-member coalition called Transit for Nashville advocating for the referendum’s passage. The group also includes the local chamber of commerce, a labor union, and others, Kern says. But the referendum faces significant opposition, fueled in part by the Koch brothers, whose advocacy group Americans For Prosperity helped defeat a previous, far-less-ambitious transit proposal that fizzled in 2012. Organizing support for the referendum is a centerpiece of Walk Bike Nashville’s activities this spring, Kern said.

Lessons Learned

-Make the problem visible. Walk Bike Nashville’s efforts to improve conditions for pedestrians along a dangerous stretch of Nolensville was aided by media interest, tough-to-ignore statistics about fatalities near a particularly treacherous intersection, and a video-based awareness campaign. Their work was also bolstered by the interest of a state representative from the area who filed a letter of complaint about the location with the Tennessee Department of Transportation.

-Recognize the natural alignments between pedestrian and transit advocacy. Make friends with those in the transit advocacy community and build allies around shared interests.

-Focus on equity. “Pedestrian advocacy can veer toward privileged communities,” Kern says. “Advocating for sidewalks along our transit corridors really gets to the heart of providing equitable access to transportation.”