Lessons from Ferguson: Building Complete Communities

By Jennifer Pangborn-Dolde, AICP, PTP, Nicole Young, Bonnie Roy, and Justin Carney

In August 2014, the world saw the events of Ferguson, MO, USA unfold on West Florissant Avenue creating a debate about how a mostly white police force engaged with a predominantly African-American community. What has become a common household name—“Ferguson”—is not an isolated situation. Many communities around the country face similar issues with the intersection of race, class, underprivileged areas, and underserved citizens. Perhaps something that was missed in looking at the polarizing images was the backdrop of the infrastructure landscape.
West Florissant is an arterial street like so many in America—a wide street with wide lanes (five-lanes wide in most places) and utility poles lining the corridor. Expansive parking lots separate the five lanes of traffic from the storefront development. Every small business has a curb cut along the roadway, none of which are well defined. Cars speed along the thoroughfare without noticing the family businesses that dot the corridor, many of which are owned by residents who live nearby. The sidewalks disappear amongst the sea of pavement, limiting access to neighborhoods, businesses, and transit. Pedestrians struggle to navigate this harsh, vehicle-dominated environment and are subject to conflict in this asphalt oasis. Pedestrian crossings feel non-existent because the streets were built to propel cars along commuter routes.

All of this leads to the following questions: How does isolating the pedestrian experience along a major community road contribute to the isolation of people from their community? How does limiting access to mobility limit access to opportunity? What role does transportation play in building not just complete streets, but complete communities?

The quaint neighborhoods along West Florissant, built in the 1950s, were developed into a corridor as middle-class white populations migrated past the city and further into suburbs. Decades of neglect and little consideration of the potential impact of how we built our infrastructure, widened our roads, and expanded our metropolitan areas led to poor inner-ring communities. The roadways that were built emphasized and prioritized the car. The connection to neighborhoods, institutions, parks, and town centers were lost. These thoroughfares used to be the heart of the community—representative of its people and its commerce. Transportation planners can play a role in bringing together a cohesive identity and creating community places for neighborhood engagement.

Streets that were once a place where children played kick-the-can and neighbors stopped for conversation are now pipelines to outer suburbs. St. Louis, MO, USA is diligently working to recreate great streets in our region to allow for pedestrian, bike, and transit to share the domain of the car. A vision for West Florissant Avenue was started in 2013, recognizing the need for improvements along the corridor providing greater connectivity to the community. Many see the corridor as their only central place for shopping, meeting neighbors, and economic development. The project aims to re-image West Florissant by improving economic conditions and creating an attractive sense of place, while providing mobility, access, and safety through the corridor.

As cities try to imagine great streets to accommodate pedestrians, bicycles, transit, and vehicles, we can look at examples after example across the nation’s roadways for our mistakes. Transportation cannot be about propelling cars through communities; rather transportation networks need to be dynamic and should create connections for the daily lives and engagement in neighborhoods.
“You have to design your streets for everyone. The cities that have safe streets, that are easy to get around, are the ones that will grow and thrive in the 21st century.”

—Janette Sadik-Khan, Commissioner, New York City Department of Transportation, 2007-2014

What has been recognized in the wake of Ferguson, when looking through the lens of infrastructure investment, is the unequal distribution of transportation in the greater region and its relationship to issues like access to education, income inequality, the quality and composition of neighborhoods, and access to healthcare.

In *Americas Unfair Rules of the Road—How Our Transportation System Discriminates Against the Most Vulnerable*, Corinne Ramey discusses how “race and transportation have long been intertwined, from federally funded highways that plowed through minority neighborhoods to Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott.”

In St. Louis, the city where Brown vs. Board of Education struck down “separate but equal,” our transportation investments are still effectively segregated. Nationally, there are billions spent for highway/roadway reconstruction. Meanwhile, efforts for public transit are challenging, despite the American Public Transit Association’s (APTA’s) findings that return on investment of $1 invested in public transit yielding $4 of economic development. Nationally, Missouri ranks near the bottom of states funding public transit.

With two-hour commutes to distributed job centers and over-crowded bus lines in densely populated areas, the St. Louis public transit system is still far from optimal. Like many metropolitan areas, St. Louis is struggling to publicly fund public transportation. Because the initial outcome is more tangible, transportation investments are more likely to focus on roads and benefit those with vehicles rather than those without. Transit is often not available to those who need it most, particularly those living in suburbs, due to of lack of funding or lack of density. The amount of need in many communities is vast. Transit provides the fundamental access to jobs, education, grocery stores, doctor’s offices, and recreational activities that every community requires. Still, many newly planned public transportation projects often focus on serving affluent areas, existing development, and connecting households with access to vehicles, at the expense of those who might truly benefit from transit.

Improved infrastructure connectivity within transportation systems is an imperative. It means building trust within communities. It means finding funding sources when financial resources are already stretched. It means looking at land use and zoning. Beyond context sensitive solutions, it means community sensitive solutions. Residents will see a return on investment in a corridor where infrastructure enhances connectivity for all residents, all users of the transportation system. In areas like Ferguson, so many other issues are exacerbated and inequalities are heightened in residents who do not have access to opportunity or mobility within their community centers. By continuing to focus on automobile systems, we will systematically contribute to the inequity in these communities.

Planners and engineers have historically solved problems by hard, fast improvement. Investments have been in physical elements that are tangible to touch, such as roadways and intersections. Transportation planning has an opportunity to do more in creating the nexus between individuals and their built environment.

Investments in connectivity strengthen communities and people. People are the key. Building up individuals into a community improves trust, improves quality of life, increases access, and generates opportunity. Through transportation planning, there is an ability to make different choices, and become the catalyst for improving communities—starting with the decision to create streets that are comfortable, accessible places for people enabling stronger communities.
Every trip to a store, work, place of worship, school, or park starts with a walking trip, perhaps connected to another mode of transportation. When planning projects, the focus needs to be on connecting these places that make up communities, not just moving people through the transportation system. The recent shift towards complete streets is moving us to look at more than just the roadway and the sidewalks. Open spaces, land uses, and context sensitive solutions provide opportunities for how the physical network connects to health and livelihood. There is a fundamental need to establish the human connection of community. Transportation planners can play a larger role in building not just our infrastructure, but our communities. Taking one step forward, transportation planning can help to build great communities that are connected through great streets, thus providing a pathway to access and opportunity for all people. This involves pushing for an equitable multi-modal transportation system ensuring all age, ability, income, and racial demography are included.

Public engagement is vital to building communities, but there is much more to consider. Building the connection with residents, business owners, and politicians is critical for benefit of the community. The question remains “How can transportation be a key facet in transforming communities?” It is often suggested that transportation connects places, but maybe we need to further focus on how transportation connects people. Ways to do this could be through:

- Bringing together representatives of the neighborhood early in the project when establishing mission statements, vision, goals, objectives, and strategies—including, but not limited to, faith organizations, social workers, health departments, politicians, law enforcement, business owners and education professionals. Building a great community with access to housing, amenities, education, parks, healthcare, and jobs.
- Connect with grass-root and advocacy groups to help build trust in neighborhoods. Capitalize on knowledge of the community and passion for citizen engagement within existing networks. Create consensus building towards community investment with purpose towards context sensitive solutions.
- Form a “Complete Community” plan with strategies on using transportation to bridge the gaps. Strategies should include ways to strengthen relationships between neighborhoods and all necessities of life. Create a transportation network that is safe and accessible to all users across modes.
- Consider the effect decisions regarding traffic signage and speed limits have on transportation enforcement. Appropriate traffic strategies can encourage positive interactions with citizens and the system. Transportation planners can work with elected officials, local agency staff, and law enforcement opportunities to safely do their jobs and provide daily positive interactions with the community.
• Provide transportation options that allow for personal mobility and freedom for people from every walk of life. According to the American Public Transit Association, a two-person household can save on average over $10,000 and reduce household carbon emissions by 10 and up to 30 percent annually by downsizing to one car. Transportation planners can lead the way for a true multi-modal system allowing for independence from the car and safe pathways to alternatives. Consciously invest in inviting sidewalks, functional bike options, and an efficient transit system.

If Ferguson can cause transportation planners to reflect on the need for change, perhaps we can rise to the call and be the next leaders in creating complete communities and providing access to opportunity for the communities that need it the most. By linking the often unseen connection between stronger communities and transportation, transportation can be an agent for positive change.

As Ferguson and surrounding communities look toward the future, the West Florissant project will connect neighborhoods, institutions, parks, and town center areas with safe and attractive linkages for pedestrians, cyclists, vehicles, and transit. The design offers a healthy lifestyle not solely dependent on cars and benefits from rich sustainable landscapes and natural features. The vision of West Florissant as a great street brings a cohesive image to define the heart of a great community.

References

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Justin Carney is a senior planner for St. Louis County’s Office of Strategy + Innovation. A 17-year professional, he has spent the past 10 years advancing a variety of long-range planning, public policy, and neighborhood engagement efforts. He has taken a lead role in two strategic plans and development of St. Louis County’s Complete Streets ordinance. Currently, he is the project manager for the County’s Age-Friendly Community Action Plan and represents St. Louis County on active transportation initiatives around the region.