

NACTO Designing Cities Conference
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Jamie Parks
Complete Streets Program Manager
City of Oakland

Several weeks ago I had the good fortune to attend the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO) Designing Cities Conference in New York City (<http://nacto.org/designingcities/>). While I was there specifically to speak at a panel session on multi-modal signal timing, the conference provided an excellent opportunity to learn how Oakland's peers are re-inventing the function of City transportation agencies through focus on livability, innovation, and community engagement. I was very impressed with what I saw and heard, and wanted to share so that we can continue the discussion here in Oakland.

Rather than transcribe everything I found of interest, my intent is to keep this relatively short and link to various blogs and articles frequently to provide more detail.

Federal Transportation Policy is Dead

The highlight of the conference for me was Bruce Katz of Brookings calling for a "metropolitan revolution" as the key to a thriving 21st century economy. While stressing that cities are the nation's economic engine and emphasizing the importance of investment in the infrastructure needed to keep them running, Katz lamented the lack of national political focus on urban issues and even quipped that "If anything intelligent comes out of Washington, it's almost like an accident."

Despite the lack of federal interest in cities, Katz implored cities and metropolitan areas to act on their own (like Measure B1!), predicting that those who don't will be left behind. The remainder of the conference was a testament to the types of innovative projects and ideas that cities can deliver on their own.

<http://bikeportland.org/2012/10/25/brookings-bruce-katz-transportation-reform-key-to-metropolitan-revolution-79291>

Change is Coming Whether We Prepare or Not

An undercurrent throughout the conference was the on-going change in urban demographics and transportation culture. Compared to previous generations, 20-somethings own fewer cars, drive less, have less attachment to car culture, bike more, and increasingly desire urban residences. The result is declining traffic: vehicles miles traveled and congestion have declined in recent years even as transportation policy has failed to adjust to the new reality. The result is a public with new expectations for the services that transportation agencies should provide, with a focus on providing citizens with multimodal options. As Gabe Klein, Commissioner of Chicago DOT, said, for transportation agencies "It's change or die."

<http://bikeportland.org/2012/10/29/big-city-leaders-talk-politics-of-transportation-reform-79407#more-79407>

<http://www.streetsblog.org/2012/10/26/nacto-wrap-up-cities-are-doing-it-for-themselves/#more-289732>

http://daily.sightline.org/blog_series/dude-where-are-my-cars/

Good Transportation is Good Economics

Livable transportation isn't just about making nicer places to live, it's critical to urban economic development. At the city and regional level, locations that offer livable, transit-rich environments will be poised to create the "innovation districts" (as Katz called them) that will increasingly dominate the 21st century economy. At a local level, several sessions highlighted the positive impacts that various parklet, pedestrian plaza, and other innovative uses of public space have had on local retail.

<http://www.streetsblog.org/2012/10/29/dot-big-report-on-local-retail-impact-of-sustainable-streets-coming-soon/>

<http://bikeportland.org/2012/10/25/money-talks-the-economic-impact-of-livable-streets-79306>

Don't be a Roadblock; Be a Facilitator

Cities increasingly rely on communities to identify and develop transportation projects. In particular, Chicago's "Make Way for People" program is exemplary in this regard. The program is responsible for dozens of parklets and plazas throughout the City, but hasn't spent a single dollar of capital funds to do it. The program is there to respond to community demand for new pedestrian space, and help communities navigate the City's permitting and regulatory process, a process that had stymied many dedicated community activists in the past. Oakland's emerging parklet program is a great step in the right direction!

http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/cdot/supp_info/make_way_for_people.html

Innovation Projects are Cost-Effective Projects

The best projects aren't always the most expensive projects. New York City's famous pedestrian plaza program started by using paint and lawn chairs to reimagine Times Square. Chicago's Make Way for People program uses private funding and donations to create new pedestrian space. Public-private partnerships are bringing car-sharing and bike-sharing to cities throughout the country. BRT projects that can be implemented in years rather than decades are replacing long-stalled rail expansion plans. Cities need more funding, but in the meantime they continue to push boundaries and create a new model for urban transportation.

<http://bikeportland.org/2012/10/24/an-interview-with-nyc-transportation-commissioner-janette-sadik-khan-79257>