

Tour describes pedestrian obstacles

Downtown streets present numerous challenges

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ASHEVILLE — Downtown streets and sidewalks have several features to make life easier for pedestrians but are still no paradise for those using human power to move around.

And cars often rule the roost outside the city center, sometimes posing safety threats to those on foot.

Those are two lessons from an hour-long “Walking the Talk” tour of pedestrian infrastructure on the north side of downtown Tuesday sponsored by Strive Not to Drive, the local organization that encourages people to use alternatives to the automobile via an annual campaign.

About a dozen people followed Don Kostelec, who heads a local transportation planning firm, and Mike Sule, director of advocacy group Asheville on Bikes, alongside parts of Walnut Street, Broadway and Merrimon Avenue.

The pair equipped two participants with hula hoops that, when held horizontally, represented the “bubble” of space a person needs to walk comfortably. Another rolled along in a wheelchair and City Councilwoman **Gwen Wisler**, an avid bicycle rider, reluctantly put on a cardboard crown that designated her as “Queen Car.”



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Don Kostelec, right, holds a hula hoop that simulates the amount of space a person needs to walk comfortably during a tour of pedestrian problems and successes in Asheville Tuesday.

The two blocks of Walnut east of Broadway and the portion of Broadway just to the north of Walnut got fairly good marks from tour leaders and participants, although Kostelec pointed out that walkers’ bubbles could get squeezed from time to time as they round the northeast corner of the two streets, in front of Mellow Mushroom.

During an organized count, the intersection saw 700 pedestrians in a couple of hours on a Tuesday evening in September, Kostelec said. There isn’t always enough room on the sidewalk for every-

one to easily walk where they are going, he said, but a mid-block pedestrian crosswalk on Broadway is a nice amenity that makes crossing safer.

Group members saw more problems as they moved north.

At the intersection of Broadway and Woodfin streets, Kostelec pointed to a crosswalk with a dogleg in the middle and asked, “What’s a visually impaired pedestrian going to do when they get to that curve in the crosswalk?”

“Go straight,” the small crowd responded.

Participants got more critical and nervous as they approached then walked under Interstate 240, emerging on the southern end of Merrimon Avenue.

“There’s absolutely no infrastructure to support cyclists at all and it’s a major intersection. There’s a lot going on,” Sule said.

“All these people are in hurry mode,” one woman said, referring to motorists.

One pedestrian crossing of an interchange ramp did not have a crosswalk. Kostelec said pedestrian signals were not timed properly in some places and evidence of past fender-benders suggests pedestrians there need to be especially careful.

Holding aloft a wheel cover that had lost its Toyota, Kostelec told the group, “If you find vehicle shrapnel in the walking environment, it’s a good indication that it’s not the best place to be walking.”

Kostelec said the “discrete details” like proper crosswalks and signals can combine to make an area walkable, and their absence can have the opposite effect. Some of the streets on the tour are a city responsibility and some belong to the state Department of Transportation.

Sule said more people would park their cars if facilities for pedestrians and bicyclists were better.

As things stand now, he said, “It’s like handing a student a broken pencil at the beginning of the exam and failing them because they didn’t finish the essay. We don’t have the tools to move about our city safely.”