

How One-Way Thinking is Hurting Historic Downtown Neighborhoods

By Matt Hanka, ABD and John Gilderbloom Ph.D.

A key strategy to renewing downtown historic neighborhoods is converting one-way to two-way streets. Oppressive four-lane downtown one-way streets help kill neighborhoods and small businesses. We need to convert these one-way ghetto makers into two-way streets with parking, trees, and bike lanes to calm traffic and make neighborhoods more livable for families, young urban pioneers, and the elderly, who want to live closer to medical care downtown.

One-way streets pose many threats for pedestrian and motorist safety, make city streets seem less safe, disproportionately impact poor and minority neighborhoods, hurt downtown businesses, reduce the property values of homes, and negatively impact the environment and contribute to global warming. Conversions to two-way have already happened in more than 100 cities around the United States.

These one-way streets also constitute a kind of “environmental racism,” where speeding motorists on one-way streets increase the levels of exhaust, noise, and pollution. One-way streets are predominately located in older downtown neighborhoods in minority, poor and working-class neighborhoods. Engineers claim that “one-way” is the best way because it moves traffic quicker, but they don’t understand the sociological, ecological and economic impacts of a one-way street.

One-way streets have hurt downtown commercial businesses. For instance, on Vine Street in Cincinnati, 40 percent of the businesses closed after conversion from a

two-way to a one-way street. One-way streets have a negative impact on storefront exposure, which is lost when one direction of travel is eliminated as well as speeded up.

One-way streets also create greater opportunities for crime in urban areas. Having one way traffic reduces overall use, allowing for negative vacuums to be created. One-way streets are the gun, drug, and sex distribution centers for a city. Why? You need a two or three lane one-way street where you can pause to negotiate the deal and get out of there quickly. You can't do that on a two-way street because it slows down traffic. That's why the one-way two/three lane street works best for pimps, drive by shootings, and drug dealers. If you break the law, its better to drive 50 mph on a one-way with no obstacles.

If the streets are converted to two-ways, the traffic will slow down giving a greater balance of traffic flow in the morning and afternoon. Slower traffic increases people activity on and around the street, and enables pedestrians and motorists to safely interact with the streetscape and activity around them.

One-way streets also lower property values. Identical historic homes are valued less if they are located on busy one-way streets where traffic goes faster and lacks the steady flow of a two-way street. Real estate 101 tells us location, location, location, or more plainly don't buy the house across from the X-rated movie house, the glue factory or fast and furious one-way street.

We know the positive impact of Oak Street in Old Louisville going from one-way to two-way with businesses coming back and housing doing better in this area. But where Oak Street reverts to one-way at Floyd Street going east, immediately, housing and

business activity dramatically declines through poor Smoketown and working-class Germantown.

Many downtown neighborhood groups are demanding conversion of one-ways to two-ways as part of their neighborhood plans. Similar efforts can be made on Muhammad Ali and Chestnut Streets from Phoenix Hill to Shawnee, where a lot of urban revitalization has taken place, as well as on Brook and First Streets in Old Louisville and Mellwood and Story Avenues in Butchertown, and Main Street through downtown to spark or maintain urban renaissance.

Why is planning aimed at enhancing suburbs but hurts downtown neighborhoods? You cannot find three and four lane one way streets in suburbia, as it decreases housing appreciation and quality of life..

We are not arguing that two-way streets alone are the panacea for all our urban ills. Indeed, there are one-way streets that work, such as the world famous crooked Lombard Street in San Francisco. However, it is undeniable that transforming one-way streets to two-way streets is one of many proven ideas within a new urbanist agenda that revitalizes and reinvents our historic downtowns and neighborhoods.

The cost of going from one-way to two-way streets would easily be recaptured in increased taxes on homes and business growth. This would reinforce the movement from the suburbs to downtown, and also would move people to invest in these neighborhoods as places to live. Reduced crime also saves the city money in police expenditures. **It would also significantly reduce the foreclosure rates in these neighborhoods.**

Two-way streets should be at the heart of a city's downtown development strategy. Neighborhoods become more sustainable, livable, and prosperous because of two-way streets. Cities like Miami, Dallas, and Minneapolis are reverting back to two-way streets, which have resulted in a larger influx of upwardly mobile residents to their cities, yet Louisville has not taken proper action to use this planning tool to help save and enhance our downtown neighborhoods. This strategy fosters the reinvention of the downtown by converting empty factories into loft housing, creative economy of art and computers while convincing people in the suburbs to “live, work, and play” in downtown. Downtown one-way streets is bad one-way thinking.

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