

Let's Go Dancing in the Streets

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – May 26, 2013

While you were riding the storm out last Sunday, I was putting bicycles on the rooftop rack of our car. It was raining; but I'd been tracking radar and hourly forecasts all day. It was now or never.

We weren't headed to a trail in the woods somewhere. Our biking destination was Peachtree Street in downtown Atlanta. Sunday was Atlanta Streets Alive, and the city was closing 2.7 miles of the region's most famous boulevard to cars from 2-6 pm. I wasn't missing that because of a little rain shower.

My wife and I arrived under threatening skies, but no rain. So, we took down the bikes and headed to Peachtree St at Ellis St. We missed the bicycle parade hours earlier led by Mayor Kasim Reed, but we still enjoyed a glorious stretch of road going north to Pershing Point. It was a rolling street festival through crowds of people walking, biking, dancing, singing, playing, painting, performing, eating, drinking, pushing strollers, walking dogs, and sporting costumes.

Musicians performed along the way, but Martha & the Vandellas were singing "Dancing in the Streets" in my head. It wasn't all in my head, though, since I couldn't help but sing out.

Two Streets Alive events last year on North Highland Avenue drew more than 13,000 people in May and over 20,000 in October. The fun will come again to Peachtree this September and to North Highland in October. Atlanta Bicycle Coalition organizes the events with major support from the Coca-Cola Company, Ponce City Market, the City of Atlanta, and other sponsors.

Open Streets is not a local phenomenon. Over 70 events were held nationwide in 2012, according to the Alliance for Biking and Walking. Globally, the movement is often referred to as "Ciclovía," inspired by a Colombian tradition started in the 1970s. In Bogota and surrounding communities, 70 miles of streets are closed to car traffic every Sunday from 7 am to 2 pm. More than 800,000 people turn out weekly to enjoy fun-oriented, human-powered activities.

You may wonder what events in cities like Atlanta, Bogota, Portland, Chicago, Minneapolis, or Jackson have to do with a town like Covington. But, there are lessons to learn and apply here.

Last week, I wrote about younger Americans travelling less by car and more by foot, bike, and transit. I suggested we need to make Covington and Newton County more accessible for those transportation modes.

Walkability, bikability, and livability are not new concepts. Local needs and potential responses were documented in a 2005 Covington/Newton County study of the US Highway 278 corridor, funded by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs under the Livable Centers Initiative (LCI).

Focused on 4.5 square miles in downtown Covington, the study painted a vision of livable/walkable centers connected by corridors. The final report detailed projects for land use, development, zoning, transportation, and retail. Summarizing, the report said: "The recommendations presented in this LCI Study will transform the US 278 corridor into a dynamic, walkable place with wide, tree-lined sidewalks that connect Downtown and surrounding neighborhoods; preserve historic structures; lay the groundwork for quality transit; allow for safe and smooth traffic flow; and orient buildings to favor the pedestrian."

The City Council and County Board of Commissioners endorsed the LCI recommendations. The city went further, making completion of the entire set of projects a goal in its 2007-2011 work plan. It should shock no one that the majority of those projects are not even started -- the city's estimated price tag was more than \$40 million!

Here we can learn from Open Streets. The city responded as governments and businesses normally do: big ideas = big plans = big bucks. We plan, we engineer, and then we sit and wait for money to fall from the sky.

Open Streets draws inspiration from "Tactical Urbanism," an approach focused on short-term actions to yield long-term change. Such ideas were also shaped by new thinking in the world of entrepreneurial business, as espoused by Eric Ries in his 2011 best seller "Lean Startup."

Sharing lessons he learned launching new companies and products, Ries shuns big-bang approaches, advocating quick starts with an inexpensive "minimum viable product" you continuously improve with customer feedback. Ries was writing for entrepreneurs, but his ideas are catching on with government planners.

Trails, parks, and revamped streetscapes are worthy long-term investments. But, we must also start faster and create tangible active living benefits sooner.

"Calling out, around the world, are you ready for a brand new beat?" Let's go dancing in the streets!