

Car fixation shouldn't determine plans

BY LEONARD SCHOPPA

Our community is facing a series of big decisions on land use and zoning issues that will shape our transportation options and lifestyles for years to come. Unfortunately, the discussion we are having has been constrained by our inability to imagine a future that is different from the auto-dominated one that has transformed our community over the last 50 years.

The Daily Progress provided a nice illustration of our clouded vision in an editorial headline "Parking laws, ideal or real?" (July 11). Critiquing Charlottesville's plan to allow dense housing development with fewer parking places near the university, the editorial questioned whether students "who are young enough to want freedom and mobility above many other values" would ever give up their cars, which are their "literal vehicle(s) of freedom."

This idea that automobiles embody the American value of freedom is certainly the received wisdom in our culture. When we look at transportation policy alternatives in my classes on comparative public policy, students invariably make the point that the unusually heavy reliance on automobile transportation in this country reflects American cultural values that equate the sports car moving at high speeds on the open roadway as the embodiment of freedom.

It's difficult to get beyond these entrenched images, but that doesn't mean we have to be captive to their allure. For many people, an automobile-centric community does not provide "freedom."

Let's start with the elderly, who are growing in number as the baby boomers start to retire. Although we all hope this day won't come, deteriorating sight and slowing reflexes will eventually leave many of us unable to drive safely on our streets and highways. For those of us who have already reached this point, a community and intercity transportation system that is organized almost exclusively around the automobile does not provide much "freedom."

More and more of our older citizens find themselves trapped at home, unable to get out without relying on friends or family members

to come by and give them a ride. Other advanced industrialized societies provide elderly citizens with a safe and reliable alternative: public buses, light rail and intercity rail. Our community provides bus service only once an hour in most parts of Charlottesville and not at all in many of the newer housing developments in the urban ring. Think about it. If you suddenly were unable to drive because of deteriorating health, would our transportation system give you much freedom?

Next let's consider our younger citizens, the 10- to 15-year-olds who are eager to explore the community, participate in activities in various parts of town and get together with friends. Right now, most of these kids have no choice but to rely on their parents for rides in the minivan or SUV. This summer, many are sitting at home playing video games, waiting for mom or dad to get home to give them a ride to places they want to go.

Given their frustrating inability to move around town on their own in our auto-centric community, these young people naturally come to equate the day they get their license with "independence day," but it doesn't have to be that way.

In other societies, children move freely around town on bicycles, on foot and on public transportation. In Tokyo, elementary school children are required to walk to school from the first day of classes and they get used to moving around their neighborhoods on foot and by bike, without relying on mom. Thirteen-year-olds take day trips by rail to Tokyo Disneyland, again without their parents.

Well, you might be thinking, automobiles at least equal freedom for those between the ages of 16 and 75, and that's most of us. Not so fast. Are we truly free if our *cul de sac* neighborhoods, with sidewalks to nowhere, leave us with no way to get anywhere we want to go without climbing into our cars? Americans' increased use of the car to get around, in place of walking and biking, is one of the primary reasons we're seeing an epidemic of obesity. An automobile might seem like freedom, but it is confining many of us to poor health and poor fitness.

Other societies make sure adults get plenty

of exercise without having to join (and drive to) a gym. Getting to work, shopping and running errands all involve a healthy dose of walking for most citizens in Europe. In the Netherlands, a bicycle-friendly infrastructure encourages residents to use bikes for one-fourth of their trips. Wouldn't we be freer if our land use and transportation decisions left us with *healthy* choices the next time we wanted to get to a restaurant or to visit a friend?

Finally, we can't forget our society's poorer members. Relative to our incomes, cars are more affordable than ever. But many of us still can't afford the cost of keeping a car on the road; the cost of making car payments, buying insurance, keeping the car repaired and buying gasoline often add up to more than a single mother can afford on a low-wage job.

These citizens too are confined by a community structure that leaves them with few ways of getting around other than sporadic and lengthy bus rides. Lacking dedicated lanes, our buses are forced to wait in rush-hour traffic with everyone else and weave in and out of parking lots up U.S. 29 north of Charlottesville, forcing someone who wants to get from West Main to Wal-Mart to sit on the bus for 45 minutes or more each way. Our auto-centric community doesn't provide these citizens with much freedom.

If we can get beyond the image of the sports car on the open road, we will realize that true freedom lies in land use and transportation decisions that give us *choices*: healthy choices, cheap choices, clean choices and choices that are open to the young and the old.

Once we understand where true freedom lies, we will realize that zoning rules that encourage greater density around the university, which means more people walking, biking and using public transit, promise to provide all of us with *more* freedom.

Once we understand how *cul-de-sacs* confine us to a single transportation choice that is leaving many of us obese, we will realize that allowing the North Pointe developer to go ahead with plans to develop his property in this format — in violation of the neighborhood model our community endorsed just a few

years ago — does not promise true freedom.

And once we understand how young people and old people need to be able to get places on foot, on bikes and by public transit, we'll put a stop to the Hollymead Town Center plan that will put acres of parking lots and an 11-lane road between its new stores and the residential neighborhoods of Forest Lakes and Hollymead. The developer brags that his parking lots will be bordered by more than two miles of sidewalks, but where exactly will these sidewalks lead?

It's high time we start putting money and energy into developing a community that gives our citizens transportation choices. We need to put dedicated bus lanes down the middle of U.S. 29 north of the city to give our residents quick and easy public transit access to the areas where most of the shopping and many of our jobs are located, linking this line to the free trolley that already runs every 15 minutes (with heavy ridership) between downtown Charlottesville and the university.

We need to append bike and pedestrian plans to our comprehensive plans so that we can begin applying for the state and federal grants that would allow us to build off-road bike trails and pedestrian trails to rival those in Europe. We could build, for example, a bike trail through McIntire Park and along the train tracks that, with connector routes, would give residents of Greenbrier, Woodbrook, Dunlora and other urban-ring neighborhoods a safe and attractive way to bike downtown or to the university. Such a route would cost a tiny fraction of the \$100 million that Albemarle County planning staff estimates will be needed to widen U.S. 29 and build the road infrastructure needed to support the Hollymead Town Center development.

We've been investing heavily in the dream of the sports car on the open road for 50 years — only to find that it doesn't really bring us freedom. It's time we started investing in a new dream.

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