

Palm Beach County ponders program that takes focus off cars

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For decades, building and designing roads has been all about motorists. But a new philosophy is taking shape in which the main focus will be on pedestrians, cyclists and people who use public transit.

The Palm Beach Metropolitan Planning Organization, the county's transportation planning agency, is working on creating a policy, called "complete streets," that makes it safer and easier for people to cross roads, walk to shops, bike to work or catch a bus.

It's a concept that has taken hold in recent years in South Florida. Both Broward and Miami-Dade counties have formally adopted such policies. And the Florida Department of Transportation said last year that it's road-building will revolve around the concept.

Now, Palm Beach is putting its own twist on the concept. An early draft proposes:

- Making pedestrians the top priority when creating and retrofitting roads, followed by cyclists, public transit users and commercial vehicles. Motorists who drive alone will be at the bottom of the list;
- Requiring transportation projects seeking state and federal money through the Palm Beach planning organization to follow its complete streets policy;
- Prioritizing projects that focus on complete streets; and
- Encouraging county government and cities to adopt and implement complete streets policies.

"If we want to develop **Palm Beach County** into a place where walking, biking and transit is safe and attractive, you have to take this approach," said Nick Uhren, the transportation agency's executive director.

So that would mean putting in more buffered bike lanes, which provides space between bike lanes and the lanes for vehicles, and extra-wide sidewalks. Also, roads could be narrowed to make room for cyclists and pedestrians.

There are other options, such as creating mid-block crossings for pedestrians, having traffic signals change more frequently so pedestrians don't have to wait long to cross roads or installing pedestrian safety zones that sometimes allow walkers at intersections to cross diagonally.

"It's time for **Palm Beach County** to do it," said Jim Smith, a Delray Beach bike and pedestrian advocate, who has been pushing for a county-wide complete streets policy. "You have to take care of the most vulnerable [people on the road]," he said.

In the past, **Palm Beach County** has focused almost exclusively on moving cars around as efficiently as possible. And that has helped create the disparities in how people travel, Uhren said. Some 78 percent of county residents drive to work alone compared to 10 percent who carpool, 1.7 percent who use public transportation, 1.9 percent who ride bikes and 1.6 percent who walk.

The question for county commissioners and municipal elected officials, who make up the Metropolitan Planning Organization's board and will have to approve the agency's policies, is: Do they want to take away from motorists and give to pedestrians and cyclists who make up a small percentage of the traveling public? Uhren said.

The resounding answer may be yes. Most of the transportation funding requests from Palm Beach cities in recent years involve projects that include complete streets concepts, Uhren said.

"That's what the communities are clamoring for," he said.

West Palm Beach has had a complete streets policy since 2004. Delray Beach is in the process of adopting one. Cities such as Boca Raton, Boynton Beach and Jupiter also have zeroed in on those ideas.

A push by communities is what made the state transportation department focus its effort on complete streets, said Kim Delaney, a planner with the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council. Plus, the department was troubled by the increasing number of pedestrians and cyclists getting killed in the state.

Florida has the second-highest pedestrian death rate per capita in the country, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. And **Palm Beach County** is a particular concern for the state transportation department.

The state realizes "we have some gigantic roadways that are the largest contributor to safety concerns, accidents and fatalities," Delaney said. "The state is looking at reducing lane widths [on state roads] and dedicating space to other users."

The Palm Beach transportation agency's proposed policy will evolve over the next few months as more input is sought from the community. Uhren realizes not everyone will buy into the idea.

The Boca Raton neighborhood Tunison Palms recently balked at the city's plans to include bike lanes on a few of their streets. And creating complete streets is going to be expensive, Smith said.

"No doubt it will cost more money," he said. "The county can't pay now for re-striping and repaving streets. They're going to have to find money to support a complete streets policy."

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