

Mayor's Column
September 11, 2017

As the summer comes to a close many villagers are returning from trips abroad. A recent Politico essay suggests that one must indeed travel to a European destination to experience the formerly classic American town.

The narrow streets of European locales often meander through tightly packed houses, cafes, shops and pocket parks, all crowded with people on foot.

Until the mid 20th Century, this was the norm in many parts of the United States. Since then we have spent nearly a century engineering our population away from walking. Most planners, and more importantly, medical experts think it's time we recalibrate.

Our infatuation as a country with the automobile has spawned the mall culture and as a consequence, we as a society, walk on average half as much as our peers did in the mid 1900's.

As a cautionary corollary, medical study has demonstrated that eight hours or more of daily sitting nearly doubles the risk of Type 2 diabetes and sharply increases the risk for heart disease and cancer. Adding a brisk walk to a daily schedule cuts stroke risk in half. According to a former head of the Center for Disease Control (CDC), "Walking is the closest thing we have to a wonder drug."

Research has identified two distinct types of walkers: the utilitarian walker who walks because it's an easy, fast way to get where they are going/accomplish something whether to work, a store or dining out vs. the recreational walker who wants to enjoy the scenery and uninterrupted peace near parks, rivers and woods.

In essence walkers are in it for the destination or the journey, but generally not both. In order to facilitate the destination walkers, safety has to be the prime concern and with that in mind Town Planners advise a whole change in our perception of what streets are for. Currently, there is a total bias towards keeping the cars moving vs speeding things along for the pedestrian. Roads and intersections are viewed with the goal of making them most expeditious for cars and trucks. In contrast, the most walkable communities have wider sidewalks and walk lights timed for the pedestrian.

Scientific study also demonstrates that human activity levels are influenced greatly by the "built environment." To bring it to the micro level, how can we keep our "European Village" and foster increased pedestrian travel? With both Ridge Hill and the

convenience of the Internet encroaching on our lifestyle patterns, we are so fortunate to have the beautiful bones of an architecturally exquisite densely shared “downtown.”

As a government, we know we must do all we can to preserve our unique asset which is fast becoming an endangered species. Our Village lifestyle is not easily replicated so preservation is key.

To that end, the Trustees and I are working on bringing businesses and services to the Village that you want to walk to and frequent; creating pristine sidewalks for safe passage, adding more trees, benches, proper lighting and better pedestrian demarcation at intersections and crosswalks.

The Trustees and I are also in the midst of embarking on a comprehensive review of our Village’s Master Plan. On the residential side, we will be reviewing our rules and regulations as they pertain to items such as including the length of time a project is allowed to be under construction, notification to neighbors of intrusive work, the preservation of historic homes and trees and the parking rules in front of Village homes.

On the commercial side, we are reviewing the permit process with the goal of streamlining the time it takes to open a new business in our downtown. In addition, we recognize the changeover from “dry goods” stores to service establishments such as gyms, dance studios and are reviewing our rules accordingly.

Our goal as we embark on a new legislative year is to preserve and improve our Village as a vibrant, safe, intergenerational, fit and walkable community for generations to come.