Advocate urges foot power

JOSEPH DITS South Bend Tribune jdits@sbtinfo.com | Posted: Saturday, October 12, 2013 6:00 am

SOUTH BEND - Mark Fenton, a career walker with his internal engine cranked up, flew into the city Thursday and within hours took 100 people for a "walking audit" of downtown streets and the multiuse trails across the St. Joseph River.

By Friday, he took his fast-talking gospel to almost 500 people who'd gathered for a GreenTown conference on sustainable and healthy communities. Keep in mind that he'd raced with the nation's racewalking team from 1986 to 1991 and hosted the PBS show "America's Walking" until five years ago.

As he looks at the numbers, he said in the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel, those bike-to-work weeks and even Thursday's national walk-to-school day don't cause people to become more physically active.

They don't create habits that "stick," said Fenton, a consultant on walkable and bikeable communities who teaches on public health and policy at Tufts University in the Boston area.

The nation's physical activity has remained flat over the last 20 years, he said.

What does stick, he said, are communities that are built in a way that people feel like biking and walking.

Based on his brief walk, he said South Bend's downtown has the "raw materials": a river that doesn't flood in the downtown and the whitewater of the East Race, old architecture that remains, a grid of streets and multiuse trails.

It helps that some city leaders and advocates want to take it further, along with a vision to connect the river trail systems between South Bend and Niles, he said.

What works against the downtown, he said, are its wide streets and one-ways.

In his presentation, he showed a photo of the Jefferson Boulevard bridge when car traffic was at its lightest and said, "There's no real need for all those lanes for the landing of a 747." Use paint to add bike lanes, he suggested.

And in about three blocks from the DoubleTree, he found what he'd expect in suburbia: big parking lots next to stand-alone buildings.

To make changes, he said, "It's going to take courageous decision making."

It also depends on more people living in or near downtown, from high to low incomes, to fuel the foot
traffic and businesses, he said.

Developers are proposing large-scale apartment and condominium projects in downtown South Bend and Mishawaka.

"This downtown can and should be full of people," said Fenton, who points out that some Realtors are starting to link properties to walkscore.com, a website that scores communities for destinations that are within a walking distance.

He said he's aware of Mayor Pete Buttigieg's "smart streets" proposal -- though not in detail -- to overhaul downtown streets by ridding the one-ways and adding roundabouts. He noted that "it's the right thing to be doing over time."

He said it's important to look for data. He suggests: Analyze the cost of the downtown project versus what it could potentially bring back in extra tax revenue from downtown growth.

Fenton criticized the sorts of developments where streets and sidewalks are separated from stores by large parking lots, saying, "All we're doing now is subsidizing those who want to drive."

Afterward, Mishawaka city planner Ken Prince noted that the city aims to make its downtown walkable, but its north-end shopping and restaurant district -- of which Fenton had shown a photo -- is a regional hub with a large flow of car traffic.

He pointed out that the relatively new Toscana Park at Mishawaka's far north end is a good example of a small enclave of shopping and future hotel and apartment space that has been built to be walkable within itself.

Fenton himself said that yet-to-be developed rural areas are a frontier to start fresh with walkability.

One idea that downtowns can try is angled parking where the angle is flipped -- so that cars have to back in, he said. That makes it less risky for bicyclists who otherwise face the rear of a car backing out, and it puts kids closer to the sidewalk as they exit the back doors. Des Moines does this.

The branded GreenTown conference has been held in the Midwest 15 times since 2007, said organizer John Harris, of Chicago. This one involved workshops by officials, businesses and organizers of green programs from area cities. Most participants were local, but some came from Chicago, Terre Haute, Grand Rapids and southwest Michigan, he said.

Search YouTube for a video of Fenton doing his walking audit of South Bend.

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