



Supporting Urban Pathways

by **Christopher Davala, PCI #490**

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As a police officer who rides a bicycle, I am often called upon to participate in local cycling initiatives, and on several occasions have presented at the annual Maryland Bicycle Symposium in Annapolis, Md. As the result of my presentation at the 2008 Symposium, I had the good fortune to be invited to participate in the 2010 Rails-to-Trails (RTC) conference in New Orleans, called *Urban Pathways to Livable Communities: Building Partnerships for Healthy Neighborhoods*. The focal point of the conference was New Orleans' efforts to develop a 3.1 mile corridor of abandoned train and canal ways into a greenway linking over seven communities throughout the Katrina-torn area. They requested that I give a presentation on "The Role of Police in Creating Safe Pathways."

The goal of the event was to gather transportation, public health and urban planning professionals in New Orleans for an exciting two-part conference. The focus was to explore key strategies for building effective partnerships to stimulate the development of healthy, walkable and bikeable neighborhoods, and to restore and rebuild communities. Key partners from public health, smart growth, environmental justice, community development and active transportation participated in a series of sessions that examined implementation and benefits of livable communities from multiple angles. The overreaching goal was to bring together local and national experts to engage the issue of livable communities from the streets of New Orleans to the hallways of Capitol Hill.

So jumping a plane, I headed to the land Super Bowl XLIV Champion New Orleans Saints. After finding my hotel, I ventured forth to the registration hotel. The city still has a vibrant feel about it, but I started to get the "up close and personal view" of post-Katrina New Orleans. City streets and sidewalks are still heaved and many buildings are listed as condemned, "ready for renovation" or are just falling apart and uninhabitable. The police department is still working out of construction trailers set on a tract of land deemed part of the Lafitte Corridor. I got to know the streets of New Orleans well as I walked everywhere so as to get a feeling of what I would need to address during my lecture.

In the first set of presentations, I found myself in great company with folks from all across the U.S., including Compton, Ca., Brooklyn, Ny., St. Paul, Minn., Richmond, Va., Chicago, Ill.; Cleveland, Oh., and San Jose, Ca. Presenters were recognized for their efforts to increase popularity of greenways in their communities. The word ADVOCACY was everywhere. Each presenter provided insight into the ups and downs of making their community project a reality.

Miquela Craytor from the South Bronx Greenway – recently recognized by the American Society of Landscape Architects for transforming a "dumping ground" into a waterfront park – shared the misgivings New Yorkers have about greenways coming to the inner city. Many people were and still are afraid that if the greenway comes to their neighborhood, property values will soar. Lower income residents were afraid of being run out of the Bronx because they would not be able to afford living adjacent to the park's benefits.



Jacob VanSickle from the Morgana Run Trail and the Slavic Village Development in Cleveland, Oh., painted a grim picture of their initial efforts, but elaborated on how they got the community involved through dog walks, skateboarding clubs and pedestrian fairs. His community worked hard to promote, program and advocate for their trail system. Their efforts have been highlighted by recent installation of community art, which draws citizens to the trailhead.

Keith Holt emphasized the hurdles his Chicago community experienced. There, the Active Transportation Alliance faced trail challenges which seemed insurmountable. Holt found himself trying to determine why Chicagoans were not using the trail system beyond the Lakefront Trail. His research revealed that many didn't use the trails because of a lack of bike shops offering maintenance, sales and storage. His focus then was to bring smaller bike shops back to the communities so those in and about the city would have resources to support their riding.

My lecture was to be short, focusing on a brief overview of safety concerns and what constitutes the feeling of safety. We each have a "comfort level" which represents our feelings of safety. Does walking through London's Heathrow Airport, with every police officer carrying a submachine gun or handling a police dog make you feel safe? Does sitting in your living room, doors and window barred closed and "protected" by a \$5,000 alarm system make you feel safe? Safety is all a perception. Rest assured, walking alone through an unfamiliar city such as New Orleans lowered my level of comfort – thus making me feel less safe. As police officers, we recognize that no matter what we do, there will never be a place immune to crime, and nor will there ever be a place you can feel completely safe. Our job is to reduce the risk and provide a haven in which our citizens can feel safe, thus raising their comfort level. There is no single answer; all we can do is work to keep everyone vigilant towards everyone's safety.

The ensuing discussion was refreshing – and unique. Ideas were tossed around and a healthy buzz filled the room. Speaking with the representatives from Compton, Ca., was fascinating. Their issues mostly dealt with the stigma associated with their community, which is often affected by gang wars and homicides. Imagine trying to get people to come out of their houses and walk along a trail which runs through the middle of "gangland!" It is amazing to think that police and fire/EMS units have to deal with such conditions, all the while trying to promote community harmony. Daunting in itself, but the community is trying to demonstrate there is more to it than the rumors and accusations of being a hopeless place.

As the day progressed, the topics seemed to return again and again to "safety." I found myself in a few heated conversations about why the police community isn't more aggressive nor more involved with these important topics. There was true passion for every community discussed, and we all had the same goal: a viable community in which we all could be proud and safe.

The highlight of my speaking role and trip was an afternoon stroll along the Lafitte Corridor Greenway. There, the Friends of Lafitte Corridor are seeking to preserve and revitalize the Corridor and adjacent neighborhoods from the French Quarter to Canal Boulevard. The Friends advocate for and facilitate the creation of a greenway that encourages active living and economic development and links neighborhoods, cultural features, historic sites, retail areas and public spaces.



The 3.1 mile abandoned land tract traverses seven neighborhoods in one of the areas hit hardest by Katrina. The Friends of Lafitte Corridor have laid out a clear means to provide a safe path of travel for individuals and families between homes, schools, businesses and community resources. They are looking to increase transportation options, especially for people who do not have access to cars, as well as provide useful community space to be shaped and used by the residents of neighborhoods adjacent to the Corridor. At the same time, they anticipate that improving the corridor will enhance recreational opportunities for all residents and visitors, including the elderly and disabled. Just by walking a portion of the destroyed railroad tracks, I learned how the project will also educate visitors about the cultural and economic history of New Orleans and the city's relationship to the larger landscape.

There are some hurdles to overcome: political wants, financial needs and bickering are just a few. But the vibrant community seems to want the project. This became ever so apparent after the tour of the Corridor, during the first-ever Party on the Greenway! This event, part of the Urban Pathways conference, was hosted by the Rails to Trails Conservancy, Friends of Lafitte Corridor, the Urban Conservancy and Catholic Charities/Sojourner Truth Neighborhood Center. The event featured music by the Treme Brass Band, food from Dooky Chase, a raffle for a children's bicycle and free bike helmets to the first twenty kids who arrived with their parents or guardians. Everything at the event was free and was open to everyone, and everyone did come – engineers, politicians, police officers and EMS crews, neighbors young and old, kids and grandparents. Games were played, people danced, and the weather cooperated.

What struck me the most were the kids and their upbeat attitudes. I was humbled when I played soccer with a five-year-old who was born shortly before Katrina. His mom painted a picture of life before and after the storm. She described her evacuation ordeal and how she was glad she left before the storm hit the hardest. She had both uplifting stories and sad ones, but most of all, I think she genuinely wanted to have someone listen to her plight. She wanted someone to listen to her wish for the greenway to open up and provide a haven for her and her neighbors.

As I walked back to my hotel, I had a stimulating conversation with several attendees of the conference, all of whom were likewise fascinated by the community we were visiting. The gathering of minds was refreshing.

I came away with the feeling that diverse communities are trying to challenge the single-handed grip the automobile has on Americans. Advocates are pushing the envelope to resolve problems of congestion and overcrowding of our streets with gas guzzling automobiles. There continues to be a push to make room for transit, bicycling and walking.

Communities are trying every possible innovative idea to find sustainable and magical places which significantly increase the quality of life. Child obesity, air pollution, community involvement, economics, and safety are all reasons we need to improve upon our communities and the people who visit them.

IPMBA plays an integral part in the development of these grassroots development efforts. More and more, EMS, Police and Security will be sought to address safety concerns in our communities. We can respond not only by providing manpower, but also by offering advice, and



advocating for such efforts. We can become more involved in weaving Education, Engineering, and Enforcement into a tight fabric by supporting our local advocacy groups in their community development goals. As bike cops and medics, we can help improve safety and encourage more people to get on their bikes more often.

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