



“Open Streets” Event Summary

Location: Online event

Date: Thursday, June 18, 2020

Time: 6:00 to 7:00 pm



About UpNext North Jersey

UpNext North Jersey (UpNext) is a pilot emerging leaders group that engages young North Jersey residents in a dialogue with the NJTPA regarding important regional issues. The NJTPA seeks to better understand the values and needs of this demographic group related to regional transportation and land use issues. The NJTPA provides UpNext members with unique opportunities to engage with regional thought leaders and decision-makers and provide creative and fun ways for participants to “give back” to communities.

The Public Outreach and Engagement Team, part of the Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University (Rutgers-POET) worked with the NJTPA to plan four events for UpNext members throughout FY 2019-2020. The first event, the program kickoff, occurred in September 2019 at the NJTPA offices in Newark. The second event took place at the Paterson Museum in January 2020. A third planned event for March 2020 in Asbury Park was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and Rutgers-POET worked with the NJTPA to plan virtual events for the remainder of FY 2019-2020. The first virtual event occurred in April 2020 and, with the theme of Future Disruptions: Planning for the Unplanned, UpNext members discussed the impacts of the pandemic on transportation and land use considerations in the region. This report describes Rutgers-POET’s event planning and promotion work for the year’s second virtual event (and fourth event in total) which focused on bicycle and pedestrian issues.

Overview of the *Open Streets* Event

The event consisted of a presentation and a discussion session that touched on obstacles to safe and convenient biking and walking, needed infrastructure improvements, and strategies that the public can use to advocate for better biking and walking infrastructure. James Sinclair, of the New Jersey Bicycle and Pedestrian Resource Center, gave a presentation on the variety of big and small, permanent and temporary changes localities can make to improve biking and walking conditions, including open streets programs. Following the presentation, UpNext members participated in a discussion about their ideas for improving bicycle and pedestrian accessibility both locally and regionally.

Rutgers-POET and the NJTPA selected this topic based on the results of a membership poll that named bicycle and pedestrian issues as the topic the group most wanted to address during an event. Furthermore, the topic is timely: in response to physical distancing requirements to minimize the spread of COVID-19, many cities and towns in the region and nationwide are limiting vehicle traffic on roads in order to make more room for biking, walking, and outdoor dining and shopping. The immediate need to use roadways, parking spaces, and parking lots in alternative ways may lead to greater long-term support and prioritization for bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure and safety improvements.

Planning and Promotion

Leading up to the event, Rutgers-POET worked with NJTPA staff to plan and promote the event. Rutgers-POET and NJTPA staff worked with James Sinclair to set an agenda for the event, brainstorm the information to be shared in the presentation, and outline discussion topics. Rutgers-POET promoted the event through social media and email invitations to UpNext members. Members received a save-the-date invitation, followed by several rounds of emails to provide more information about the event agenda. Rutgers-POET also promoted the event on the UpNext Facebook group and created an event page where Facebook users could RSVP.

Agenda

6:00 to 6:10 pm – Welcome remarks: Ted Ritter, NJTPA staff, kicked off the event with welcoming remarks, thanked UpNext members for participating in the pilot year of the program, and described their potential involvement in outreach for the NJTPA's upcoming long-range transportation plan. Sarah Tomasello from Rutgers-POET then introduced the topic of the event and introduced James Sinclair and his presentation.

6:10 to 6:30 pm – Presentation on Open Streets and Bike/Ped Issues: Sinclair's presentation covered a range of practical information about bicycle and pedestrian planning and infrastructure projects, including: design solutions to improve bicycle and pedestrian access; considerations when planning an open streets event; strategies to advocate for local improvements; and examples of temporary and permanent infrastructure installations. Sinclair described how the current need to maximize space for outdoor recreation, dining, and shopping has enabled the implementation of designs such as parklets and open streets that otherwise might take years to receive local approval.

6:30 to 7:15 pm – Discussion: Following the presentation, UpNext members participated in a discussion about their experiences biking and walking in the region and their ideas to improve bicycle and pedestrian accessibility and safety in different place types. Sinclair and NJTPA staff fielded questions about state and local bicycle and pedestrian policies and referred members to key resources and advocacy organizations. The discussion is reported in more detail below.

Attendance

Of the approximately 30 people that attended the UpNext kickoff event in fall 2019, 13 members attended this virtual meeting. The previous virtual event had approximately 15 attendees, and the event at the Paterson Museum had 14 attendees.

Feedback

This section summarizes the feedback that the NJTPA received from UpNext members during the discussion portion of the event. Throughout the discussion, members showed support for building transportation infrastructure that encourages more people to travel by biking, walking, and using other forms of personal mobility. They discussed strategies for making these forms of travel more convenient, safe, and efficient, such as by allowing bikes and scooters on board NJ TRANSIT trains and buses, creating routes for long distance bike travel, and keeping bike lanes free of obstacles and debris. Members recognized that securing support from local officials can be challenging and can prevent bicycle and pedestrian improvements from being prioritized or implemented. Even in places where there is political will for these improvements, a lack of funding resources can be a remaining barrier. The following section organizes and summarizes the comments that UpNext members made throughout the discussion.

Build and retrofit transportation infrastructure that supports and promotes walking and biking rather than driving single occupancy vehicles.

- » Shut down McCarter Highway in Newark for a Ciclovía. Part of the reason why Newark's waterfront has not seen mixed use or residential development is because the high volume of traffic on the nearby McCarter Highway creates a hostile environment.
- » Route 21/20 should be converted into a waterfront park with bike and pedestrian path stretching from Newark to Paterson, with controlled cut-through streets across the river. The density of the Newark-Paterson corridor will increase over the next 50 years and a permanent linear park would enable the use of active modes like walking and biking to get around the area.
- » Prioritize bicycles and pedestrians in street design. Cars should be guests on all non-freeway roads.
- » Personal-sized transit uses space most efficiently, and bicycles are both cost-effective and more energy efficient than any other vehicle.
- » Why do we incentivize travel in large, inefficient, damage-causing vehicles?
- » We should be able to replicate the success of a place such as Amsterdam. The city's roads were full of traffic in the 1970s, but they have since shifted to more efficient modes.
- » Remove parking minimums in zoning requirements, especially in high density areas, and use upzoning to allow denser development.
- » How do you support walking and biking in the many places in New Jersey that are highly suburban and undeveloped?
- » The design solutions shown in the presentation seem geared toward larger towns and cities. In Leonia, the road lanes are not wide enough to accommodate bicycle infrastructure.

A lack of local support and/or funding resources for bicycle and pedestrian (bike/ped) amenities can prevent good design projects from being approved and implemented.

- » Politics prevents good design that supports biking and walking from being approved. It is a national problem due to powerful interests that support the predominance of single-occupancy vehicles over alternative travel modes.
- » As the pandemic recedes, the present support for bike/ped projects may pass.
- » In addition to having an internal champion that pushes for local change, it's very important to have an external champion that is prioritizing the issue and putting pressure on the city or town to make the change.
- » Home rule and "boroughitis" are layers of political barriers to bike/ped improvements that are specific to New Jersey municipalities.
- » Municipalities have a lot of control over implementing bike/ped improvements if they have jurisdiction over the roadway that needs the improvements.
- » While there is a political barrier, many communities primarily lack the resources to plan and build bike/ped infrastructure. There are a lot of communities, such as Piscataway, that show the political will but lack the resources to carry out bike/ped improvements.

- » Residents who grew up in the suburbs but now live in a town or city remain culturally dependent on their cars even if they enjoy biking. How do we make cars less cool?

Ease restrictions on allowing bikes and other types of micro-mobility on board public transit.

- » Does NJ TRANSIT allow scooters, bicycles, and forms of electric micro-mobility on board its vehicles? If not, then planning for intermodal transit cannot be effective.
- » E-bikes and e-scooters are banned on board NJ TRANSIT vehicles. Are they worried about fire hazards?
- » Every public transit vehicle should be designed to accommodate regular bikes and scooters, and they should always be allowed on-board.
- » E-scooters are an ideal form of personal mobility. They are fast and can travel far distances while also being compact, lightweight, and easy to carry and store. E-scooters are an energy efficient form of transportation and are even more efficient than train travel.

Make longer distance bike travel more efficient and safer.

- » Many people bike on Route 18 in Piscataway and it seems very unsafe.
- » The straight, efficient routes and smooth surfaces of highways can make them great places to ride bikes for longer distances. Highways provide more direct connections between places than local roads and can be safer for bicyclists if local roads are crowded and congested. Highways often have some amount of extra space that could be adapted for bicyclists.
- » Going to the extreme of biking on the highway may not be necessary. There is often a local bike network that is equally safe and efficient.
- » The downside of biking along highways is the exposure to pollution from passing vehicles.

Provide enough space on shared paths, or provide separate paths, to safely accommodate both bicyclists and pedestrians in parks.

- » With more people now walking in parks, should they have dedicated bike lanes that are separate from pedestrian paths? Parks in Orange do not have dedicated bike lands.
- » Pedestrian paths should be wide enough to be safe for both bicycle and pedestrian use.
- » The paths in Overpeck Park are several feet too narrow to accommodate both bicyclists and pedestrians. The paths in the park are paved, but some paths on the northern side of the park have big ruts.
- » Bicycles and scooters should be separated from pedestrians in parks, such as in Lincoln Park in Jersey City.

Safe routes to school campaigns and infrastructure projects can benefit all bicyclists and pedestrians while being more politically feasible than other bike/ped improvements.

- » The use of bikes and scooters by children and the need to make conditions safe for them can be an effective pressure point for local officials to improve bicycle infrastructure.
- » Creating cut-through bike/ped paths between cul-de-sacs helps children get to school safely while cutting down on trip time.
- » There should be more safe routes to school campaigns that include all stakeholders, including the local police department that is responsible for enforcing the campaign.
- » Improvements that create safer conditions for children to walk and bike to school benefit everyone.

Ensure bike/ped improvements benefit all users, particularly those in disadvantaged communities.

- » The presentation mentioned that equity should be part of the planning process. Can you describe how this occurs when planning for bicycle and pedestrian improvements?
- » It is important to remember that not only young, affluent people ride bikes. The riding constituency is large and socioeconomically and racially diverse.

- » Some bike share, scooter share, and rideshare companies offer discounts to users who are receiving some form of public financial assistance, such as nutrition or housing assistance.

Improve road safety conditions and regulations for bicyclists and educate all road users on how bicyclists may use the road.

- » Storm drains, vegetation, litter, and other obstacles in the roadway create unsafe conditions for bicyclists that drivers may not be aware of. Drivers may not understand that bicyclists may be forced to swerve into the roadway to avoid obstacles in their path.
- » Many new bicyclists do not know the rules of the road. Encouraging people to bike without educating them on the rules can be dangerous.
- » Traffic laws are not very friendly to bicyclists and scooter riders. The Idaho stop should be legal in New Jersey, meaning that, for bicyclists, stop signs become yield signs and red lights become stop signs.

Other comments.

- » Jersey City and Hoboken finally agreed to send out an RFP together for the same bike share company, and hopefully the rest of Hudson County joins the bike share as well.
- » Bike shops should have been identified as essential in the original executive order that closed all non-essential businesses.
- » Newark Bike Club, Newark Community Cycling Center, and Girls on Bikes are several organizations working to promote bicycling in Newark.
- » A lack of street trees along roads can make outdoor dining uncomfortable if there is no shade from the sun.