

What can Bend learn from Boulder about transportation?

Colorado city prioritizes transit, focuses on walkability and biking

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When it comes to housing, Boulder is one of the last cities Bend wants to emulate. Median home prices in the Colorado city are nearly double Bend's.

In terms of transportation, Boulder might be able to teach Bend a few things. At least, that's what members of the citywide committee working on a plan for the next two decades of transportation think.

Committee members and Building a Better Bend — a nonprofit that hosts lectures about improving the quality of growth — invited Mike Gardner-Sweeney, Boulder's director of public

works for transportation, to speak this week about how his city approaches transportation management.

While Bend is updating its transportation plan for the first time since 2001, Boulder updates its plan every five years. The city also collects data on its progress toward meeting goals in the transportation plan and reports that progress every two years, so it knows what to focus on in the next update.

“If you wait too long between those periods, you’re almost having to reconstruct the plan,” Gardner-Sweeney said. “The intention is it’s a living document. You don’t write it and then hide it.”

Boulder has a population of 109,000, about 20,000 more than Bend. It’s slightly smaller than Bend area-wise, 25.8 square miles to Bend’s 32. Like Bend, Boulder is surrounded by open space and within commutable distance of other cities.

Boulder estimates 50,000 of its 101,000 jobs are held by people who live outside of the city. Bend has [about 25,500 commuters](#) come in to the city to work each day.

Boulder, though, is growing at a much slower rate than Bend.

The Colorado city caps construction of new housing, allowing no more than 400 homes or apartment units each year.

The city owns 45,000 acres surrounding Boulder and prohibits development there, meaning new homes and businesses can be built only on vacant lots within the city or by redeveloping existing properties.

That means Boulder’s transportation plan has to focus mainly on roads and paths that exist, while Bend has to balance improving existing infrastructure with building new in areas that will be brought into the city.

Boulder has a developed network of greenways, or paths for bikers and pedestrians. Bend plans to [start testing](#) these on NE 6th Street and NW 15th Street next spring.

In Boulder, greenways are along Boulder Creek and its 14 tributaries.

Cyclists don’t have to cross surface streets and can reach destinations in about the same time they would if they drove, Gardner-Sweeney said.

“For pretty much every one of those 14 tributaries, there’s a path in the drainage way,” Gardner-Sweeney said. “If it’s a flood, stay out of those drainage ways.”

Like Bend, Boulder has a mix of older neighborhoods developed in a grid pattern and newer ones that were developed with arterial networks — think the tight, grid-like layout in the Old Bend neighborhood vs. the less connected street network on the east side.

This layout makes it harder to make large streets work well for all modes of transportation, Gardner-Sweeney said.

Boulder focuses on “complete streets,” which can be safely and efficiently used by cars, bikes, buses and walkers. It prioritizes its transit system, and 80,000 people who live or work in Boulder have transit passes that, like insurance, are purchased through group plans or paid for by employers.

The city centers walking in its plan. The goal is to reach a point where 80 percent of the city’s population live in walkable neighborhoods, similar to Bend’s goal of complete communities in expansion areas.

Encouraging walking includes investing in pedestrian underpasses and flashing crosswalk beacons to improve pedestrian safety, he said. While cyclists and pedestrians are involved in only 8 percent of the total traffic collisions in Boulder, 52 percent of collisions that result in fatalities or serious injuries involve pedestrians or cyclists.

While investing in other modes of transportation, the city also pays attention to cars, Gardner-Sweeney said. However, he said Boulder hasn’t dealt with too many complaints that investing in other forms of transportation perpetuates a so-called war on cars, the way Bend has, he said.

Boulder as a community decided years ago that it wanted to minimize pollution, greenhouse gas emissions and congestion, which are all goals that lend themselves to supporting non-car modes of transportation.

One of the city’s goals is to reduce the number of trips taken by a single person in a vehicle to 20 percent of total trips for Boulder residents and 60 percent of trips for nonresidents.

“Even in our most lofty of plans, the automobile is still a piece of our puzzle,” Gardner-Sweeney said. “It’s not just going to disappear.”

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