

Salem Sunday Streets — Every Day!

Imagine this town with fewer cars and more bikes. People strolling around a fun-filled city center. Food carts, outdoor yoga, captivating music. Salemians able to safely skateboard and bicycle downtown.

If you were at the recent Salem Sunday Streets event, you didn't have to imagine. It was real! If you weren't there, make sure you don't miss the next one.

Here's a big shout-out to Corrine Fletcher of the City's Community Development Department, who ably took the lead in organizing the 2014 Salem Sunday Streets.

Aside from one word, I loved what she said in a press release:

“Salem Sunday Streets will be an opportunity to safely discover active transportation, engage in physical activity, and build community. Ultimately, the event will be an opportunity for temporarily transforming our community and streets into vibrant, people-centered spaces.”

Let's toss that “temporarily” and make it “permanently.”

I longboard land-paddled my way around the 2013 Salem Sunday Streets. This year I travelled on my new passion, an outdoor elliptical bike.

Those two Sundays are the only times I've been on downtown streets on anything other than my feet or a car. Like many other people, I'm leery of being on a non-motorized device in an auto lane.

Too dangerous. Not enjoyable. Give me a dedicated bike path, though, separated from traffic, and I'm a happy longboarder or bicyclist.

This is one reason why Salem Sunday Streets needs to grow and prosper. It shows people what downtown — or anywhere, really — can be like when cars aren't dominating the urban landscape.

The final event on the afternoon of September 7 was a marvelous performance by a Portland group, the March Fourth Marching Band. Circus

funk is their musical genre. Joyous smiles are what they produced in everybody watching and dancing.

After enjoying the stilt walkers, dancers, and energetic groove music, I slowly biked my way down the middle of Court Street with my wife and dog walking along beside me.

Salem felt completely different.

People had taken over several streets. Cars had been banished for four hours. Instead of being restricted to narrow sidewalks while machines noisily roared by on wide three-lane quasi-freeways, several blocks of State and Court streets were returned to self-propelled humans.

Who were having a great time. Not just emotionally. Economically also. Commerce was being conducted in the booths at the event. This points to a simple truth.

Almost all economic activity occurs when people stop driving and are out of their vehicles. Thus the goal of Salem's planning policies shouldn't be to move cars and trucks from here to there. It is to have, as Fletcher said, vibrant here's and there's which attract people.

Shoppers. Visitors. Businesses. Tourists. Residents.

A March Fourth Marching Band lyric said, "You've got to free your mind, if you want to free your soul." Good advice for Salem: we need to get free of car-centered attitudes if we want to free our 21st century development spirit.