

How Salem Can Become Happy Town

Let's make Salem a happy city: use smart urban design to make people feel good.

I'm reading a great book called *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design*. The author, Charles Montgomery, studied what psychology and neuroscience tell us about happiness.

Then he related those findings to how cities are designed. There are proven ways to make a city more conducive to happiness. That's the good news.

The bad news is that Salem has a ways to go before we become the sort of happy city other locales have transformed themselves into.

But the way is open to us.

Urban design isn't rocket science, complex and only comprehended by a few. Each of us is an expert on happiness: our own. We all can do some urban experimentalism.

What places in Salem make you smile inside? What places make you go "Ugh, I can hardly wait to get out of here"? (I say: downtown's Court Street and Lancaster Drive, respectively.)

Connectivity best describes a happy city.

People enjoy being sociable. Bikeable, walkable streets and multi-use paths connect us with each other. Montgomery says, "Public life happens when we slow down."

People also feel good when they're connected with nature. Green spaces — parks of all sizes, trees, planter boxes, natural areas, creeks and ponds — they soothe the urban soul.

There already is a plan to improve downtown which uses proven happy city principles: the Streetscape Project.

Imagine how much more appealing downtown Salem would be if main streets were two lanes rather than three, with trees, benches, inviting sidewalks, and other pedestrian amenities added.

Public officials, other leaders in the community, and citizens just need to get their creative juices flowing and do it.

Along with not doing things that work against Salem's happy city potential.

Such as not wasting \$400 million on an unneeded third bridge. Cutting down beautiful downtown trees for no good reason. Pouring money into autocentric street improvements that reduce biking, walking, and skateboarding options for Salemians.

Hugely more good would come from spending \$40 million to make downtown and other parts of Salem more attractive, than spending \$400 million for a bridge founded on outmoded urban planning and economic development notions.

Salem is falling behind neighboring cities with more "with-it" urban design approaches. For example, our bicycle friendliness sucks compared to Portland, Corvallis, and Eugene.

This matters, along with other happy city characteristics like vibrant mixed use areas where people can live, work, shop, dine, and recreate without needing to hop in a car.

Nowadays people and businesses thinking of relocating pay attention to how well a city is looking to the future, rather than being locked in an urban design past.

Climate change is real. Environmentalism is a necessity, not an option. Young people aren't addicted to cars like their parents were. Salem planners need to realize this is 2014, not 1964.

May this new year put Salem on the path to being a happier city through better urban design.

Strange Up Salem seeks to lift our city's Blah Curse. Give us a Facebook like.
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