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“Residents are Ready to Participate in City  
Alternative Transportation Planning”

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We are students and instructors who participated this summer in a 30-day Field School through the Center for Social Ecology and Public Policy (CSEPP), a nonprofit organization located in Ashland, and Southern Oregon University. For students interested in Applied Anthropology as we are, the Field School is a place to learn methods of community fieldwork and to develop strategies for linking citizen issues with public policy development.

Transportation was selected as a focus of public policy because it was a frequent topic of conversation in Ashland and because the City just received a grant to develop an alternative transportation plan.

We engaged the citizens of Ashland in everyday settings—the coffee shops, restaurants, the Coop, parks, grocery stores, and homes—talking to over 250 people in the course of our work. One of our central findings was that biking and pedestrian activities have become deeply embedded in the culture of Ashland, becoming so widespread and routine that they have become part of the Ashland identity. This suggests that the widespread enthusiasm for non-car modes of transportation can be harnessed through citizens and policymakers working together to create significant improvements in Ashland’s alternative transportation infrastructure. We also found out that:

- There is high appreciation for the biking and pedestrian amenities that the City has provided in Ashland.
- Downtown and North Main are perceived to be unsafe for bicyclers and in need of a workable bike path. Bikers want more and better bike racks, more bike storage on buses, and a connection between the Greenway and the Ashland bike trail.
- Bikers, walkers, and drivers expressed a high degree of nervousness about the “rules of engagement” especially downtown where there is high uncertainty about rights of way. As one person said, “We have created this monster whenever people cross. Cars are so paranoid now that I have even seen them stop at green lights.”
- There is widespread interest in having discussions about how to make downtown more workable among the various users. Often, however, people would preface their ideas with a statement that either the City or the businesses “would never go for that,” indicating sensitivity about the topic but high interest nonetheless.

- Several people had the idea of diagonal parking downtown to increase the parking, elimination of a lane of traffic and the installation of a bike path.
- Regular bus users accept the 30-minute bus frequency and accommodate it into their routines. People who expressed frustration about infrequent bus service tended to be those who did not use the bus regularly.
- Ashland residents would prefer night and weekend bus service to more frequent bus service.
- The hills about Siskiyou Boulevard received much comment from residents who understood that the area has natural disincentives for bus and bicycle use because of the steepness. Besides fun ideas like a tow rope, or shopping carts to carry things, they recognized that van service to feed into the bus lines will be necessary at some point to make alternative transportation feasible in this area.

The Field School recommended to the City that in planning updates to the transportation system, interaction with the public should go beyond just meetings oriented to “input.” Rather, we suggest that the city also make efforts to engage residents in their own turf in settings that are natural and comfortable. Among our specific recommendations was to develop opportunities to “turn over” mini-elements of the planning process to “citizen interest circles.” Some of the opportunities are:

- The numerous informal networks of people organized around alternative transportation that could advise and direct the City in useful ways. As one example, an informal network of parents meets in the park one morning each week for a dance class for their children. They all arrive by bike and walking and have many creative ideas for enhancing bike and pedestrian use in town.
- Residents estimate that between 30-40 people regularly commute to Ashland by bicycle. A gathering of these folks could offer many insights.
- The Farmers’ Market attracts many people with interest in this topic and is an informal setting that would lend itself to creative discussion.
- Discussions at the Senior Center and Mountain Meadows routinely involve transportation issues and these people would like to be included in transportation planning.
- The Ashland Trails Association is active in maintaining and expanding the trail system in and around Ashland. They could be asked to promote a collaborative approach with residents in determining next improvements to the system.

As emerging social scientist professionals, it became clear to us that walking and biking activities in Ashland contribute in very direct ways to what the literature calls “social capital”—those enduring norms of reciprocity and trust that bind a community together. For example, the alleys of the Railroad District are used every day by walkers who greet each other and the neighbors around them. When you see this and the myriad other ways that biking and walking put people in touch with one another, it is easy to see that biking and walking helps us know and connect with each other. These things are what make Ashland special.