

“Federation Corner” column
The Montgomery Sentinel, 16 April 2015

County options now

By Paula Bienenfeld

Our Monday night Civic Fed meeting was a *tour de force*, organized by our First Vice President Jim Zepp.

Jim had invited three professionals from the transportation field, Vinn White, senior policy advisor for transportation policy at the U.S. Department of Transportation (U.S. DOT’s *Beyond Traffic* project); Adrian Guan, senior technical programs specialist for Intelligent Transportation Systems-America (ITSA, from Intelligent Transportation System, or ITS); and Christof Spieler, engineer and planner from Houston, who is a board member of Houston’s METRO, who offered his insights via Skype into the data-driven transformation of Houston’s transit services to dramatically improve local bus service at no additional cost to taxpayers.

With dazzling PowerPoint slides (yes, it’s true, it can happen), video, and maps, all three provided tantalizing details of what we could have in this county now. If only. If only.

Jim kicked off the discussion with a simple visual that looked like something out of one of our children’s science projects, but it did the trick. Using water and milk jugs, he demonstrated what happens when individuals make routing decisions, and how we get to gridlock. He talked about Braess’s Paradox. The paradox occurs when gridlock actually increases with an increase in a road network, as each individual driver seeks the optimum route. According to Wikipedia, the Paradox occurs when:

“For each point of a road network, let there be given the number of cars starting from it, and the destination of the cars. Under these conditions one wishes to estimate the distribution of traffic flow. Whether one street is preferable to another depends not only on the quality of the road, but also on the density of the flow. If every driver takes the path that looks most favorable to him, the resultant running times need not be minimal. Furthermore, it is indicated by an example that an extension of the road network may cause a redistribution of the traffic that results in longer individual running times.”

Vinn White spoke about ‘Beyond Traffic,’ DOT’s ‘Blue Paper’ that was discussed in this column last week. DOT envisions a near future, in 2045, only 30 years from now, when traffic and transit could run smoothly. Given existing technology, for example, autonomous cars can travel much closer to one another, reducing required space, and reducing traffic accidents as each car’s technology senses the other’s location and speed. For the ‘Blue Paper’ USDOT reviewed regional, state and local case studies, looking at trends and ‘how we move.’

Adrian Guan’s talk in some ways was the most tantalizing. While the technology does sound like something out of the Jetsons, it is here now. Autonomous cars are on the road. Apps can summon public transit for individuals, and monitor real-time movement of public transit vehicles like buses. On the near horizon are: vehicle-to-vehicle communication. Automated cars. Smart cities.

Chris Spieler, our third speaker, worked with stakeholders in Houston and in less than two years they transformed the bus system, with very little money. Houston went from a 19th-century bus route system and schedule to a modern grid system that picks up people at their convenience. His organization looked at the question, why is bus ridership dropping? One answer: infrequency. Buses ran infrequently and were not on time. The routes were legacy routes from the 19th century and had been changed ad hoc but not systemwide. The system was too complicated. It was too difficult to figure out how to get from Point A to Point B on the bus. Riders were going too far out of their way to get to their destination. The answer was to set up a new grid, using simpler east-west, north-south routes.

One fascinating conclusion from Monday's meeting is that a rigid schedule is not going to work. It's over. And, we don't need rigid schedules that dictate where and when we have to meet public transit anymore. That system is left over from the 19th century. We can discard it and leapfrog ahead. The technology is here for flexible responsive public transit that accommodates us, our individual schedules and demands. We have the apps, we have the smartphones. We have the crowdsourcing information. We have the technology for V-2-V, for smart cities. It's available now. The disconnect seems to be coming from the county government, whose members can't see what is here right now. An old saying goes, we don't know who discovered water, but we know it wasn't fish. That's where our government is. The residents want the new transit. We can see it. But our government can't.

What came out of this meeting for most of us was both a sense of hope and a sense of despair. As the meeting broke up and people informally discussed these tantalizing options, faces fell when we realized we can't have a good public transit system. That's for other communities. Not us. No soup for us. Why? Because our elected officials refuse to see what is visible to all of us who care passionately about public transit and this county. We are in a rut.

A dear friend of mine once explained that the reason our roads are the width they are is because in ancient Rome roads were built to accommodate the width of two oxen. The width has never changed since that time.

We at the Civic Fed think it's time for a change. We encourage people to contact your elected officials and make it plain that what we want modern 21st century transportation now. We don't need to spend billions. In Houston, a dramatic transformation was achieved with much, much less than that. AT USDOT and ISTA, modern public transit is on the horizon. We have the technology. We can do this.