

A Bicycleable Oshkosh

So, Oshkosh has a Vision now. I'll believe it when I see it.

I was quite pleased to see the results of the Oshkosh Visioning process. We – that is, the 2000 plus people who took the survey, a group large enough to represent reasonably well the sentiments of the rest of the population – want a bicycle and pedestrian friendly city, with narrower streets, no overhead wires, trees, and an active riverfront. It's exactly the cityscape I've long envisioned. But envisioning a lovely, livable city is easy. Actually doing what it takes to make it happen – well, again, I'll believe it when I see it.

The narrower streets should be easy. After all, those will save us money, both as taxpayers and as the adjoining property owners who pay street assessments. Burying the utility lines however will be costly to those same property owner – not the lines under the street, but the connections into our houses. But if we pass most of the savings on street construction onto the property owners through lower assessments, everyone could come out ahead.

Tougher though will be making Oshkosh bicycle friendly, especially because the current plan is to do just the opposite. If you've biked around Oshkosh a lot – my guess is you haven't – the biggest challenge is traveling East-West, across those two major barriers that divide the city, the river and Highway 41. Both barriers have only a few crossings, and all those crossings involve heavy traffic.

Unfortunately, the Highway 41 crossings are soon to become more challenging, because the DOT plans to install roundabouts on Oshkosh, Witzel, and 9th Avenues on both sides of 41. Now, roundabouts may be great for cars, but the evidence suggests they are far less safe for bicyclists, and I have difficulty believing that they're not going to be less safe for pedestrians as well. But of course, no one involved in redesigning Highway 41 has been thinking about anyone but cars. No one, that is, until we got our Vision.

If we really care about that Vision – again, I'll believe it when I see it – we could fight those roundabouts. But I think there's a superior alternative.

We currently route pedestrians and bicyclists on the same heavily trafficked streets as autos, because, well, because (except for the Wisconsin Street bridge) we only accommodate pedestrians and cyclists as an afterthought. If instead we thought for a moment about what works best for noncars, we'd realize that they'd much prefer to be on quiet, low volume streets.

So, lets make it possible to cross Highway 41 somewhere other than at Oshkosh Ave., Witzel, or 9th. Let's have the DOT install some pedestrian/cyclist bike/walkways and bridges, that for example would connect Taft Avenue with Patriot Lane, and West 5th with Abbey Avenue, and perhaps Moreland Street with Dickinson Avenue. That would allow a resident of Westhaven to bike to Target, a resident on Idaho to bike to Mercy, and a resident on Sunnybrook to bike to Pollock Water Park, traveling almost entirely on low traffic streets.

Can the DOT afford it? Every year, it funds around \$19 million worth of bicycle and pedestrian related projects, spending over \$150 million in Federal money since 1993. That funding, according to their website, picked up 80% of the costs of "Koeller & Witzel Bike/Ped Improvements" (my guess, the sidewalks along Koeller Rd.) and a "USH41 and Koeller Bike/Ped Overpass" (apparently invisible!) back in 1999. Well, it's been 10 years, and we're due again. We just need to believe in our Vision, and suggest that the DOT conform to it.

So, do we actually believe in our Vision?

