

Framingham Makes Progress on Pedestrian Safety—One Step at a Time

By DANIEL DEMAINA

Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu wrote, “A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.” Framingham Town Manager Bob Halpin says that approach is making his community safer for pedestrians and bicyclists.

“You can start small,” Halpin says, adding that it’s not hard to identify the shared value of safety, which allows a community to start taking those first steps. “If there’s one thing everyone agrees on in Framingham, it’s that they hate traffic.”

Harnessing the shared dislike of bottlenecks into an overarching philosophy isn’t necessarily as easy. Residents and business owners can have a difficult time envisioning a less car-dependent community, and they may balk at developments that stray from minimum parking requirements.

Small steps—such as a new bike lane that makes people feel safer on the roads or a public path along the Weston Aqueduct that offers an easy way to walk to the store or the library—can help people adjust to the idea of such a change. Consider New York City’s Times Square, where a few barriers created small seating areas and set the stage for the transformation to a mainly pedestrian plaza.

“You don’t have to have it all worked out,” Halpin says. “People can be skeptical, and then they find a walkable or bikeable improvement that’s added some value to their life.” These incremental

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PHOTO BY DANIEL DEMAINA

Erika Oliver Jerram, deputy director of community and economic development, stands at crosswalk in front of Town Hall in Framingham.

improvements also set the stage for a more comprehensive approach, like the Framingham Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan, which is now close to completion after three years of work.

A Practical Plan

Despite taking a longer view, the Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan still takes incremental steps that dovetail with Framingham’s future plans, according to Erika Oliver Jerram, Framingham’s deputy director of community and economic development.

“We’re not proposing anything wacky—we don’t have any crazy lanes or big dividers,” she says. “Everything we’re doing right now is striping, painting, improving sidewalks. ... We’re not

doing anything that’s necessarily huge, but it’s huge for Framingham.”

When she came to Framingham a decade ago, Jerram recalls, the town held a walkability workshop bringing together citizens, planners and staff from the Massachusetts Citizen Planner Training Collaborative. Walking around the neighborhoods near downtown, Jerram says, the group began to notice problems even in what was considered a fairly walkable area. For example, wide driveways created areas where the sidewalk becomes a curb cut for twenty to fifty feet. Street signs and utility poles were placed in the middle of the sidewalk, making it near impossible for wheelchair users to get by.

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The more rural roads on the north side of town present a challenge to this day. Scenic, two-lane roadways are lined with stone walls that can't be touched, with no rights-of-way to add any sidewalks or lanes.

A few changes have been made since then. Notably, the rotary that sat at the center of downtown, in front of Town Hall, has been replaced with a three-way, traffic light-controlled intersection, resulting in reclaimed pedestrian space, planters and rebuilt sidewalks. Just south of Town Hall near the commuter rail station, the intersections of Route 126 with Waverly Street and Irving Street have new lane markings and traffic lights, making it easier for pedestrians to cross the busy streets and for bicyclists to navigate alongside cars. Bike “sharrows”—shared-lane markings—are visible along the main roadways throughout the downtown area.

Still, Framingham has a long way to go, Jerram says. Rather than radical changes, the steps laid out in the draft Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan follow a familiar path: incremental but “huge,” given where the community was ten years ago.

The draft plan, released in March for public comment, identifies improvements across the community that can be accomplished based upon the Department of Public Works’ existing capital plans. “We have a prioritization list, and we’re picking projects we’re going to be doing for the next five years anyway,” Jerram says. “We know we’re going to be looking at Concord Street, for instance. And the plan only addresses arterials. We could have spent five years addressing every street in Framingham. We’ll go to the next level of roadways in the next few years.”

Data-Based Approach

When Town Hall staff began meeting in the summer of 2013 to start work on the plan, Jerram says, they focused on gathering information on existing conditions, which was easier than it sounds. “We have great mapping, so it wasn’t like we had to create a lot of data. It was more,



PHOTO BY DANIEL DEMAINA

With the help of a highly visible crosswalk, a bicyclist makes his way across a busy street in downtown Framingham.

‘Let’s look at this through a new lens and do some analysis.’”

A community-based visioning process undertaken with a grant from the Central Transportation Planning Staff of the Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization, and with their staff support, helped develop the goals that ultimately went into the plan and informed the town’s approach to an action plan. That provided the organization, but the passage of Framingham’s “complete streets” policy by the Board of Selectmen in January 2015 really got things moving, Jerram says.

Data from the DPW, planning and community development staff led to rankings of the community’s arterial roadways, based on factors such as proximity to schools, public buildings or shopping areas, population density, and safety issues. Those rankings were then used to prioritize projects, in concert with the DPW’s capital plans, and to develop recommended treatments for each section of those roadways.

“We’re also not taking the top ten projects and doing those,” Jerram says. “We took the top fifty and said, ‘What can we move forward in the next five years?’”

Buy-In From Top Down

The multi-disciplinary aspect of creating a comprehensive Pedestrian and Bicycle Plan for a community naturally requires buy-in from all municipal departments. Jerram says the DPW staff has been “exceptional” in changing the way they view and plan projects to accommodate bicycle and pedestrian improvements, and in working to implement Framingham’s complete streets policy, which was ranked ninth in the country by the non-profit Smart Growth America in 2015.

The DPW, Jerram says, is “really on board with the ideas we have to put forward. We can push back on [roadway] standards and what MassDOT has always recommended in the past.”

That kind of buy-in starts at the top.

“I’d give Bob Halpin credit for talking the talk and walking the walk,” Jerram says.

One of the inspirations for Halpin was Jeff Speck’s book *Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time*, which, the town manager says, “makes a pretty compelling case” that changing demographics and attitudes about quality of life are affecting real estate values and spurring economic development.

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“Companies like GE are leaving suburban campuses for downtown locations that have walkability, bikeability and a certain quality of life attached to them,” he says. “Framingham is reasonably walkable, but is still somewhat dominated by a post-World War II development pattern and is car-centric.”

The top-down advocacy helps to inspire town employees to take ideas and run with them, despite limited resources, Jerram says. An argument could be made for hiring a consultant to build out a pedestrian and bicycle plan, but Framingham did not have the funding to make that happen.

“[Halpin] was proselytizing this Jeff Speck book and [wanted] all of us planners to do it,” she says. “When it’s coming from the top down, you’re getting the message that it’s important, that nobody thinks it’s a bad idea.”

Buy-In From Grassroots

Framingham also has to balance the passion of biking and walking advocates with trepidation from car-loving residents and some within Town Hall. Framingham’s vocal Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee has been an integral part of rallying the public and getting the word out about the process—and soliciting as much feedback as possible.

Some of the advocates, however, would like to see the plan take a longer stride than the initial steps outlined so far. “A lot of them are bikers, and they say, ‘This doesn’t go far enough,’” Jerram says with a laugh. Meanwhile, another seg-



PHOTO BY DANIEL DEMAINA

A pedestrian uses a crosswalk in Framingham.

ment of the community “is never going to give up their cars, and they don’t care.”

To achieve balance, Jerram says, the plan not only focuses on physical improvements such as lane striping and bike lanes, but also on education. It’s about making drivers aware of cyclists and pedestrians and enforcing the rule against bicycling on sidewalks downtown. It’s about casting a skeptical eye on creating more cul-de-sacs, and letting people know why stormwater grates need to be designed a certain way. It’s about creating an understanding that it’s actually OK to have congestion in a downtown, because it’s not a highway. “It’s those little things that add up to a system,” Jerram says.

It all starts with a mindset, Halpin says, that asks town employees to keep

the dimension of walkability and bikeability in mind, and not defaulting to the basic concept of pushing as many cars as quickly as possible through an area.

It takes effort to get a community to view drivers as just one group of users in an area. Jerram advises finding the advocates in the community and using their voices, their expertise and their passion to move the issue to the forefront of everyone’s mind.

“It’s planning, it’s DPW—operations, not just engineering—it’s the building department, it’s the Board of Health because they care about public health and getting people out there more and moving,” she says. “If you can marshal everyone moving in the same direction, you’ll have this buy-in across the town that really gets things changed.” 🌟

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