

I Shouldn't Be Alive

A Year in the Life of a Lexington Pedestrian

by Andrew Wyllie

There's a great show on the Discovery channel called 'I Shouldn't Be Alive' which documents true stories about people's adventures in remote parts of the world.

The stories usually start happily enough -- a group of hikers getting ready for a week of adventure in some remote part of the world, only reachable by helicopters or float planes. Everything goes downhill from there (or uphill if you enjoy watching people get clobbered by avalanches, eaten by bears and become hopelessly diseased as they wonder around in circles completely lost from civilization).

When I was younger, I went on a number of these kinds of wilderness trips, and many times I was probably very lucky that no one got hurt, drowned, mangled or stuck under an avalanche. These days, my biggest adventure is getting the kids to school and getting myself over to UK for class which may sound easy enough but can often present its own dangers. If they made a show about my daily commute, it would go something like this:

[queue our narrator with low gravelly voice, ready for danger]

Our team of adventurers have settled on a well know route through the Ashland Park neighborhood of Lexington Kentucky. Today's journey is like most other days: a one mile walk on concrete and asphalt, occasional street crossings, and the smell of danger in the air.

Our daily trip starts out the same as most other days. Our food supply is placed in Tupperware containers and stored in a backpack with a folder containing last night's homework, and a bottle of water. We get our shoes on, get the packs on and



exit through the rear door of the house. We make our way out onto the sidewalk and to the corner beside a large tree to wait for a safe moment to cross. This newly paved street we are about to cross has many turns in it making oncoming traffic hard to see. The new pavement has removed the natural speed impediments on the road allowing traffic to move much more quickly through the neighborhood. The large tree on the corner bears the scars of automobiles going too fast to make the turn, wrapping themselves around its trunk. On the lookout for danger, westep out on to the road. All of a sudden, we spot a large SUV coming around the turn at an estimated 35 mph. I grab my seven year old daughter's hand and we quickly step back into the grass for safety.

Fact: the difference between going 25mph and 35mph can be the difference between life and death. The stopping distance and time for a vehicle travelling 35mph in normal, dry conditions is 135ft (45 yards) or almost half a football field. A car going 25mph only takes 85 feet to stop. Stats have shown that the chance of a pedestrian surviving an accident with a vehicle travelling 25mph is 89 percent. The survival rate drops to 11 percent for a vehicle traveling 35mph. This is hardly surprising. A vehicle travelling 35mph is going 40 percent faster than one traveling 25mph.

The roadway clear once again, we make

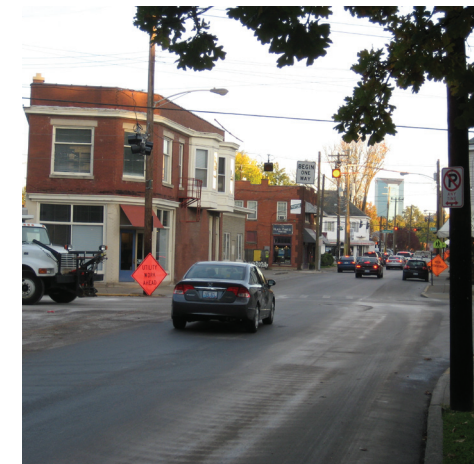
our way across and scramble up onto the sidewalk on the other side. The sidewalks in Lexington have their own perils and traps ready to leap out an attack the unsuspecting pedestrian. There are the bumps and cracks that are usually easy to spot. Then there are the trees that have branches overhanging the walk. The trees, though motionless, can catch you off guard as your eyes are focused downward looking for cracks and bumps. Tree branches tend to attack from above, snagging hair and poking out eyes. Ice build up on sidewalks can make passage impossible in the winter. Then there are the cars backing down the driveways which do not stop to look for traffic until they have crossed the sidewalk. Another major obstacle can be cars parked across the sidewalk which sometimes force pedestrians out into the street in order to get around them.

Fact: It's against the law to park a car on the sidewalk, even partially blocking a sidewalk. It may not seem like a big deal since most people can fairly easily walk around a car -- but for someone in a wheelchair or using a walker trying to maneuver their way around a car blocking the sidewalk is almost impossible. It's also the property owner's responsibility to keep sidewalks clear of debris including snow and ice (and garbage cans). 35 percent of the people in Lexington don't drive and rely on sidewalks and bike lanes to get around town.

The city does not do much for pedestrians either as they will happily close a sidewalk and leave pedestrians to their own devices. I'm not suggesting that every sidewalk closure come with an alternate route, but where conditions will require pedestrians to walk beside a closed sidewalk on a busy street, or a sidewalk will be closed for an extended period of time, some provisions need to be made. A recent example of this was at the corner of Rose and Euclid where they were ripping out the sidewalks on the corners (all four corners at the same time). This is a very busy pedestrian gateway to the University of Kentucky but during the construction, people were being forced to walk on the road along the side of Rose Street which is very narrow at this intersection. To make matters worse, the pedestrian signals at this intersection do not change unless you press the buttons but the button was unreachable due to the construction. A similar situation exists on Main St. where they have closed the sidewalk for the construction of the new Cheapside Pavilion. How hard could it possibly be to put up a couple of barricades so that pedestrians have a safe route to bypass the closure.

Once we reach the intersection of Ashland Ave and Main Street we witness another kind of problem. The pedestrian lights here, as in many other parts of the city, will not change unless the button is pushed. The walk symbol, once it comes on, only stays lit long enough for you to get half way across the street then switches to a red flashing hand. Annoyingly, if the button does not work, and there are no cars going the same direction you are, the light will never turn green.

The next part of our journey takes us up the west side of Ashland Ave. The speed



limit on this road is unsigned which apparently means “as fast as you want to go” in this part of town. The danger here lies in crossing three streets, all of them one-ways. The sidewalks here do not go to the corners but are about six feet in. The stops signs are on the corners, past the sidewalks, so drivers tend to stop at the corner instead of the crosswalks. People coming out of these streets looking to make right turns often only look for traffic coming from the left and often do not look to the right to see if anyone is coming. Rarely will a week go by without a close call at one of these crossings.

Finally, we get to the school where we find a large pickup truck parked completely across the crosswalk (even though there is tons of street parking available). For us, it means that we need to make our way around the truck and across the street. The problem of course is that there is quite a bit of traffic coming down this street and it's very hard for them to see us, as well as for us to see them. A lot of drivers are just oblivious to pedestrian crossings and don't know what to do when they see people riding bikes. It's not like the police are going to do anything about it either. I recently had a conversation with a police officer who parked his car on the corner of Broadway and Short streets – right in front of the Opera House. His car was parked on the sidewalk in such a way that nobody using the sidewalk could get by him without walking on the street. There were a lot of people trying to get around him as there was a show on at the Opera House. He told me that he was on traffic duty (probably for the basketball game at Rupp Arena). I suggested that he might want to park somewhere else, like in the median on Broadway so that he was not blocking the sidewalk, but he just rolled up his window and refused to say anything else until I walked away at which point he cracked his window and said “Have a Nice Day!”. I didn't respond – at least not audibly.

Our one mile (not even) journey finally comes to an end. My daughter is now safe

at school until later on this afternoon when we make our journey back home along the same route. We are veteran pedestrians, we know what to look out for and we expect

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that most drivers are oblivious to our existence even though we have as much right to use the streets as anyone in a car. Just because we are walking does not mean that we are any less important, or not in a rush, or too poor to drive a car as one woman in an SUV, who almost ran me over, yelled at me the other day said.

We walk because it's often faster, it's

healthy and it's more social as we often say “hi” and sometimes even stop to pet a dog or chat with a neighbor. It's amazing how much more aware you are of your environment when you are on foot. It's unfortunate how many people drive all the time, especially to school, where they wait in the pick-up line for 15 (or more) minutes so that they can rush home and get their kids in front of their video games or off to some other after school program.

A lot of the excitement around developments in downtown Lexington has to do with the city becoming more accessible to people who are not driving in their cars. Making the city more accessible requires more than just infrastructure items like striping bike lanes, adding bike racks, building pedestrian malls and better sidewalks. We need to have a different attitude as well which includes citizens and business owners keeping sidewalks which cross their property clear, getting bylaws in place which require alternate and safe routes to be provided for pedestrians when sidewalks are being ripped up and finally enforcement of laws with respect to sidewalks, crosswalks, and people speeding and running stops signs in residential areas.

But for now, as I make my way back down towards UK, I'm back in alert pedestrian mode and I once again make the realization – I shouldn't be alive. ■



Ped Progress in Lex

While my day-to-day commute can be a harrowing experience, there are a number of great projects in progress which will make it easier to get around town on foot or by bike.

Streetscaping plans on South Limestone are making progress and now there is new work on Main and Vine streets which will include new sidewalks and rain gardens. The work on these projects should be done by the beginning of August. The Fifth Third Bank Pavilion, which will be the new home for the Lexington Farmer's Market as well as other events like Thursday Night Live, is opening this Friday, April 16 with a ribbon-cutting at 5:30PM. This is an exciting project as it really helps define the Cheapside Park area and gives the city a much needed pedestrian only area in the heart of the city.

Construction has officially started on the Legacy Trail which is a 12.5 mile recreational trail that will connect downtown Lexington to the Kentucky Horse Park. The first two phases which will connect the Horse Park to the Northside YMCA on Loudon (near Newtown Pike) should be completed on time for the Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games. In addition to the beautiful landscape, the trail will showcase a number of public art installations. More info about the trail and the Legacy Center at: <http://legacycenter.ning.com/>

Second Sunday bike rides will continue on the Second Sunday of every month. Cyclists can meet at the Old Courthouse downtown at 2pm for a police escorted ride to a new destination each month arriving back at the Old Courthouse by 4pm. It's a great way to get out for a safe ride around the city. The big event in October will all types of activities that promote healthier living. More info at: <http://www.2ndsundayky.com/>

These are not the only projects. The Lexington BPAC (Bike and Pedestrian Advisory Committee) has over fifty ongoing projects to build/improve sidewalks, build new bike trails and install new bike lanes around the city. The BPAC meets on the first Friday of every month. More info at: <http://www.lexareampo.com/BikePed/BikePed.htm> ■