

Address by David Burwell--Making the Connection--Now!

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Address by David Burwell President, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy at "Making the Connection" the First International Trails and Greenways Conference San Diego, California January 29, 1998

About two weeks ago I was in a room with about 5,000 transportation professionals--mostly engineers, highway officials, and materials specialists. It was the eve of Martin Luther King's birthday, and we were listening to U. S. Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater, who noted that Dr. King often said that he would not trade his place and time in history for any other; not for Moses' time; not for the time of Jesus; not for the Renaissance; not for anytime, because the 1960's, in America, was his time.

Taking the lead from Dr. King, Secretary Slater summarized several important reforms in transportation going on now--ISTEA, rail deregulation, airline safety etc. He then clasped his hands, bowed his head (he would make a great Baptist minister himself), and proclaimed that he, too, would not choose to live in any other time in history either because, for transportation professionals, our time is now.

The room erupted! These straight-laced transportation professionals leapt to their feet in a standing ovation.

I must admit, I was impressed. I have been going to this same meeting for almost 20 years and the best reaction any speaker got was polite applause, after which the crowd beat a quick exit to the "Super-pave" exhibit. Secretary Slater made us feel important, that we were part of something big.

He was right of course. Now is an important time for those of us making a living in the field of transportation. However, I left the meeting wishing Secretary Slater had delivered it here. Why? Because--and I truly believe this statement--now is really our time.

You are the face of the future of transportation in America. That is because the future of transportation is based in communities. Transportation that is the servant of community development, not its master. As transportation gets closer to the people, communities will favor small-scale, high pay-off projects that enhance landscapes, not obliterate them. As that happens, a "green infrastructure" of trails and greenways will weave its way into the tapestry of our transportation system.

Making the Community Connection

I say this with confidence because of one acronym: ISTEA.

ISTEA is a truly revolutionary law. It says, not in so many words but in intent, that transportation should serve communities, not dominate them. Trails and greenways, integrated with on-road bicycle lanes, sidewalks, and other bicycle and pedestrian facilities can become a multi-purpose “green infrastructure.” They can provide safe transportation for all of us some of the time, and for some of us all of the time. ISTEA provides the framework for building a balanced transportation system that serves many community needs. It is a law for our time.

This conference is what ISTEA is all about. You are making the connection that pedestrian and bicycle friendly communities also provide a high quality of life. While highways provide mobility at the expense of our quality of life, trails and greenways provide balance to our transportation system while enhancing our overall quality of life.

How? Trails and greenways are a new form of public space in America. I like to think of them as America’s “new front porch.” That is because they serve a similar function to front porches. They are a safe and enjoyable way to meet your neighbors and, in the heat of the summer, a cooler alternative to the backyard barbecue. In a very real sense, trails and greenways put social interaction--communing--back into community.

Making the Environmental Connection

Trails and greenways also provide a higher quality of life by serving many environmental functions. Clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, and natural places to roam are now universally recognized as necessary for a high-quality lifestyle. Trails and greenways deliver all of these benefits. In fact, they embrace so many environmental objectives that it is a real challenge to balance these benefits in the design, construction and management of trail and greenway systems. For example:

Water: Trails and greenways are great for water--both for keeping water clean and managing its flow. On the other hand, trails and greenways can also be managed for open space, for species diversification, and as migration routes for wildlife. Managing these corridors for water and for wildlife require different plants and grasses, with different root systems and characteristics. Now, here, we are making the connection between these needs. We are and finding a balance.

Recreation: Trail systems, when connected to on-road bicycle routes and sidewalks, also provide recreation services while saving energy, reducing air pollution, and contributing nothing to global warming. They also encourage pedestrian-friendly development which, by managing land more efficiently, saves habitat and further reduces the length and number of household trips. These are real environmental benefits. In fact, when the President’s Council on Americans Outdoors (PCAO) asked community park and recreation directors to rank their needs for recreational facilities, trail and trail-related facilities were at the top of the list--ahead of baseball diamonds, basketball courts and soccer fields. This is because trails and greenways serve both recreation and the environment.

Utilities: They can also be jointly developed for all sorts of public and private utility use, including water and sewer, electrical power and natural gas transmission, and telecommunications. These utilities, when planned and developed wisely, can save natural corridors that would otherwise be destroyed. We are just now making the connection between corridors of natural and utilitarian value. As Will Rogers once remarked: “buy land, they aren’t making any more of it.” The same goes for natural corridors or “linear preserves.” Now is the time for creating a new, green infrastructure for America and, in cooperation with our international partners, for the world. Now is our time!

Habitat, water purification, clean air, energy conservation, climate change, recreation, land use management, efficient co-development--these are all “free-gifts” of this “green infrastructure.” We know this. What we don’t know is how to develop and manage trails and greenways to balance all of these benefits.

That is why we are here--to make the connection between all these values and trail and greenway development. The time has come to replace linear thinking with non-linear analysis. To stop assuming that air pollution is a separate problem from water pollution, or from habitat protection, or from transportation problem-solving. Everything is inter-related, and the best solutions are ones that attack many problems simultaneously. Trail and greenway systems do exactly that. And that is why now is our time.

Making the Connection to Healthy Communities

Public Health: Trails and greenways provide yet another important benefit in the modern world, a world where every seven seconds another Baby Boomer turns 50 and the fastest-growing segment of the population is the over-80 age group. This benefit is promoting health and fitness.

Health is big business these days. Modern medicine places an increasingly heavy emphasis on habits and activities to keep people healthy. We smoke less, we eat better, and we realize the benefits of exercise. Unfortunately, when it comes to exercise, we are doing more talking than walking. A new study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that people in their sixties can reduce their chances of getting cancer or having a heart attack by half by walking just one mile per day. However, more than two-thirds of us in the United States (and our foreign guests will be shocked to hear this) get less than 20 minutes of exercise a week. A week! But think about it. Is this really so surprising in our car-based, sprawled-out society, where there are fewer and fewer places to walk, hike and bicycle close to home? Without safe, convenient and enjoyable places to exercise it is impossible to create healthy communities full of healthy, happy citizens.

Friends, now is our time! What better way to promote healthy communities than by creating a network of safe, multi-use trails and greenways for hiking, bicycling, walking, jogging, skating, cross-country skiing and nature appreciation? What better way to meet our neighbors in a safe and non-threatening manner than by trading 4000 pounds of steel and glass for a good set of walking shoes? Think about it: what cities are most envied for the healthy, active lifestyles of

their citizens?--Portland, Minneapolis, Seattle, Boulder, Toronto, Amsterdam. What do they all have in common?--highly-developed trail and greenway systems.

Call it what you want--voluntary simplicity, a sense of place, livable communities. Sustainable development. It's all pretty much the same thing. Communities that make sense, that hold together, that have a feeling of continuity, are the communities that make the connection between all these values by creating trail and greenway systems. Like canaries in the mineshaft, trails and greenways are becoming indicators of community health.

Sounds great. But it isn't easy. Trails don't just happen. You have to fight for them. This is not news to the people in this room. Unfortunately, as we all know, trails and greenways have opponents. However, we all know, from long experience, that the greatest opponent to trail and greenway development is fear.

It has been said that the definition of a cynic is not so much a person who is embittered by the past as it is a person who is prematurely disappointed in the future. These people are easy to spot: their prevailing attitude is one of fear. They trust no one. They see the hidden flaw in every proposal for public action. Their sense of civic engagement or obligation is non-existent. Instead of building picket fences around their homes they build gated communities. The number of these "fortress America" enclaves have grown from less than 1,000 in the 1960's to more than 100,000 today, walling in more than eight million citizens. These people have little hope. They only want to "hunker down."

Dr. Robert Putnam of Harvard identified this social trend in his essay "Bowling Alone." Noting studies showing the total number of people bowling going up, while participation in bowling leagues going down, he saw that Americans are becoming increasingly disconnected from their communities and each other, thus depleting the "social capital" on which democratic government depends. We no longer work together in teams, in communities of action. We are "bowling alone."

But not us. Not here. This is our time. We come here today out of hope, not fear! While we are here to celebrate a great milestone--10,000 miles of open rail-trail--we are even more interested in what comes next, whole communities linked by trails and greenways. And not just communities, but an entire nation--with connections around the globe. We are here to help make this future a reality, to leave something of real value behind for those who come after us. That is our dream, and now is our time.

Now is Our Time

I started by talking about the highway era. A time when transportation policy was measured in money, concrete and asphalt. When we didn't need environmental impact statements or public hearings because we already knew--or thought we knew--the answer to every transportation problem: build a road. When the highway agencies had the power and money to act: no questions asked.

Times are no longer so simple. In her book *The March of Folly* Barbara Tuchman observed that, too often, “the power to act is accompanied by the failure to think.” We no longer have the luxury of acting without thinking. As a British Member of Parliament announced during Battle of Britain: “Gentleman, we are out of money. Therefore, we will have to think!” Trails and greenways are the thinking person’s answer to community development for the simple reason that, unlike so much of our public infrastructure, they serve so many community functions.

Friends, now, this day in history, is our day. This time is our time. This conference, with more trail and greenway advocates than have gathered in any one place anywhere in the world at any time, is our conference. All of us, whether we are from America, Europe, Asia, or elsewhere know the importance of this resource to our communities and our countries. So, let us begin.

The French General, Field Marshall Leyoutey, once asked his gardener to go out and plant a tree. The gardener protested, saying that the tree was slow-growing and would not blossom for 100 years. “In that case,” replied the General, “plant it today.”

That is our charge, and our challenge. Let’s make the connection. Let’s plant the seed of this global trail and greenway system today. Let’s rebuild our sense of community by connecting our neighborhoods with trails. Let’s reconnect our country and, indeed, our planet, with a global system of greenways. Let’s leave our children and grandchildren with a legacy we can all be proud of.

And let’s do it today. Why? Because now is our time!