

GREEN CITIES

Paving the way toward a sustainable future

by LARKIN JOHNSON

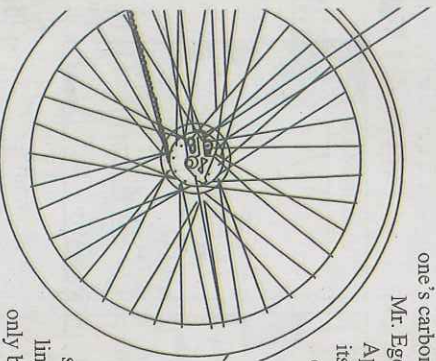
The world's cities make up only four percent of Earth's land area—yet they house more than half of the world's population, according to *National Geographic*. When we think of cities that cause little or no harm on the environment, or “green” cities, visions of weekly farmers markets or a community garden may come to mind. While these are factors that contribute to a city's “greenness,” there is much more depth when it comes to the way a city interacts with the natural world. “If we don't factor in the unique environmental conditions in a place, we've missed some of the most important systems that have to be accommodated in any successful community,” Mr. John Egelhaaf, Executive Director at Southwest Michigan Planning Commission (SWMPC), said.

Many cities, like San Francisco and Vancouver, are taking strides towards a greener future, but one city has been paving the way with sustainable solutions and climate-friendly citizens to match: Copenhagen, Denmark. One example of this can be found simply by looking down. The city's main streets are home to the “Green Wave,” a system of lights embedded in the road. As they flash, they help cyclists avoid red lights.

“Copenhagen is upgrading the green wave to respond to cycling conditions, as well as developing apps for smartphones and a system that can automatically give groups of five or more cyclists right of way at intersections,” according to the *New York Times*. This is one of the city's many efforts to encourage people to swap out their cars for bicycles—and it's working. Only 29 percent of the households in Copenhagen own a car, according to *visitocopenhagen.com*.

Mr. Egelhaaf is also an advocate for a less “automobile-centric” community.

“Over the last generations we've just defaulted to assuming that the car is necessary to get anywhere and everywhere. That isn't environmentally friendly, that isn't people friendly, it isn't climate friendly, and it unnecessarily enlarges everyone's carbon footprint,” Mr. Egelhaaf said.



Apart from its growing cyclist scene, Copenhagen is home to some of the newest green technologies: LED streetlights line the streets, only brightening as cars approach and dimming once they pass.

However, you don't have to travel across the Atlantic to find green efforts. According to Mr. Egelhaaf, SWMPC is working to improve the

nonmotorized transportation system in our community. They're also exploring additional ways for both cleaner water and alternative energy. Recently, Benton Harbor replaced all its downtown streetlights with LED fixtures. A group of business leaders have formed Michigan's Great Southwest Sustainable Business Forum with a goal is to implement sustainable business practices.

Being a true sustainable city doesn't only involve the current infrastructure. Now more than ever, planners are working to prepare for the consequences of the current environmental damage.

“That means that along with growing in a way that is sensitive to our unique environmental factors, we're also interested in being more resilient in the face of economic cycles,” Mr. Egelhaaf said. The most cutting edge urban areas are planning for potential problems incited by our warming planet: more extreme weather, like heat waves or flooding. “The difference between Copenhagen and other major cities is that they're very concrete in the short term and also look at what they need to do for the very, very long-term future,” Mr. Brian Vad Mathiesen, an associate professor of development and planning at Aalborg University, said.

For areas like Copenhagen and other cities near the oceans, the predicted sea level rise poses a major threat. Their Climate Adaptation Plan notes that Copenhagensers should expect rising seas, up to one meter, over the next century. This has sparked the implementation of many “climate changing” protection efforts, like replacing cement areas with living plants—particularly on roofs—to absorb the increasing rainfall. Additionally, planners want to direct water away from roadways, cellars, and commercial buildings and route it to places like parking lots and parks, where the water will do little or no damage.

Copenhagen aims to become the world's first carbon dioxide neutral capital by 2025. They've innovated in ways that deeply consider the environmental impacts, minimizing the input of energy and output of waste and pollution. Many communities, like St. Joseph, are following suit, even if it's at a smaller scale.

“There should be an intellectual and business rigor behind the ethical drive for green. Just arguing for the ethical side is lazy. The challenge is to construct a compelling, layered argument that cannot be disregarded. When that happens, green options won't be disregarded,” Mr. Egelhaaf said.

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