

# BACON'S REBELLION

The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

## Suburbia Absurdia

**Suburbs are full of sidewalks that go nowhere and nobody uses. What are people thinking? Why do we persist in building this schlock?**

By James A. Bacon

**M**Meet Buddy Besette. Buddy is handicapped and confined to his wheelchair when he ventures outside his house. But he's an independent-minded soul, and he can squeeze 20 miles out of his battery. It gets boring at home, he says, so he takes periodic trips to the mall. The people at Ukrops grocery store and other shops are always nice to him -- they give him free things to take home.



To brave the 'burbs in a wheelchair, Buddy must be the most intrepid man in Henrico County. He doesn't ride on sidewalks to get where he wants to go. The network of sidewalks in western Henrico County is so patchy and incomplete that he takes to the street.

Riding on four-lane roads where traffic speeds past at 40 miles per hour, Buddy acts as if he owns the road. It's a testament to the good nature of Henrico County motorists that no one seems to mind him slowing down traffic. People just wait for an opening in another lane and drive around. The police, he says, wave to him.

If Buddy takes his life in his hands every time he wheels off to the mall, it's not for a lack of sensitivity towards the handicapped on the part of county government. The good bureaucrats of Henrico have gone out of the way to accommodate people like Buddy... or so they think.

*Buddy crossing the street at the intersection of Gaskins and Gayton roads.*

I have an image in my head that, ensconced in the bowels of the Henrico County planning department, there sits a gnomish little man in charge of sidewalks. He has pale skin, a long, pointy nose and bulging eyes. Dressed like Bartleby the Scrivener with a high, starched collar, he wields a quill-tip pen and applies the rules with rigid consistency -- and with utter disinterest in their real-world impact. If the regulations say sidewalks must be handicap accessible, then, by Jove, they *will* be handicap accessible!

Of course, if the sidewalks are so useless that Buddy takes instead to the streets... if the sidewalks lead nowhere that *anyone* would want to go... if the streetscape is so inhospitable that even *able-bodied* citizens spurn walking... that's someone else's department.

**M**odern-day suburbia is full of absurdities. I have chronicled some of them in previous columns. (See "[Lost in Suburbia](#)," Oct. 17, 2005, and "[Pod People](#)," April 3, 2006) but I barely scratched the surface. Today, I turn my gimlet eye on sidewalks, an aspect of our physical surroundings so pedestrian (pun intended) that it warrants little public scrutiny. These Rodney

Dangerfields of our civic infrastructure are critical pieces of any transportation system, for they provide mobility for people who choose to travel on foot.

In traditional towns and cities, sidewalks are terribly useful: People walk on them to get places. Indeed, people use them quite frequently. But there are certain distinguishing characteristics of sidewalks in cities that get lost in the scattered, disconnected, low-density dystopia of American suburbia.

In cities, sidewalks connect real destinations -- houses, corner stores, restaurants, offices, and the like. In the 'burbs, sidewalks appear to be installed at random, connecting almost nothing at all.

In cities, there are buffers between the sidewalks and traffic, allowing pedestrians to feel safe. Most city streets have parking lanes, usually with cars parked in them, which provides a veritable wall between pedestrian and motorist. In the 'burbs, there typically is nothing but a curb and gutter separating the pedestrian from on-rushing cars. The walls, if they exist at all, usually consist of fences separating the sidewalk from the *houses*, not the roads!

In cities, sidewalks link destinations in a grid-like web. There are many alternative routes between two choices, most of them fairly direct. In

'burbs, sidewalks enjoy little connectivity; the path between two points is long and circuitous.

Finally, in cities, sidewalks are an integral part of a streetscape that includes trees, ornamentation and buildings abutting the sidewalk. The scale is human and the surroundings inviting. There is always something to engage the pedestrian's interest. In the 'burbs, sidewalks are not integrated into the streetscape; they are a useless appendage to roads designed for the rapid movement of automobiles.

Now, let's take a look at what I'm talking about.



Consider the intersection of the John Rolfe and Ridgefield parkways (*above*) in Henrico County, a paragon of modern-day traffic engineering.

The posted speed limit of both roads is 45 m.p.h. It's safe to say that many motorists whiz by at least 50 m.p.h. or more (I'm one of them, OK, so I ought to know.)

There is a shopping center in the corner of the intersection from which I took the photo and a gated subdivision across the way, but there are

no destinations that anyone would consider walking to, much less hobbling to in a walker or rolling to in a wheel chair. Nonetheless, someone very thoughtfully ran sidewalks in every direction and even installed handicap-accessible curb cuts.



As you can see, it's a bit of a bumpy ride for a wheel chair from the curb cut to the other side of this little traffic island. Someone neglected to extend the sidewalk here. But the distance to the next curb cut isn't far, so it would have to be a pretty querulous cripple to complain.

Now, imagine yourself as Buddy Besette, or just an ordinary pedestrian, on a stroll through the suburbs. Here's the street you have to cross.



Inviting, eh? A veritable Special Olympics obstacle course! No marked pedestrian pathway. Just seven lanes of traffic coming and going every which way. (*You can't see all the lane markings in this photo. Trust me, though, I counted them.*)

Placing sidewalks at intersections like John Rolfe and Ridgefield might have made a modicum of sense if they had allowed the residents of the subdivision seen in the preceding photo to access the shopping center from a convenient egress. But pedestrians get out of the gated community the same way as the cars do: through the main entrance. If you were crazy enough to try reaching the shopping center on foot, you'd have to take a round-about course through the spaghetti streets of your cul-de-sac to the entrance on Ridgefield, and then walk a couple hundred yards along the featureless parkway. Most people would just take the car.

**I**t is no exaggeration to say that many suburban sidewalks are "paths to nowhere." This pathway alongside Ridgefield Parkway (*below*) ends abruptly for no

apparent reason. Of course, as you can tell from the photo, it's not as if the sidewalk would have reached any meaningful destination even if had it had kept going. It looks as if the contractor realized the utter futility of building the thing and just abandoned the job.



You rarely see even able-bodied people using these suburban sidewalks, but there are occasional exceptions. I spotted a teenage girl walking along a long, desolate stretch of sidewalk and pulled my car into a turning lane ahead of her. Curious, I hopped out with my camera, hoping that she would tell me her story (and not bolt in fear, thinking that no one but a freak or a pervert would stop to talk to her in such an

unlikely location).

The 17-year-old girl, who identified herself only as Kelly, was on her way home from the video store. She lives in a subdivision pod disconnected from anything and everything, so she normally drives a car. Today was a different: It was literally the *first* time, she said, that she'd ever used the sidewalks. But with gasoline at \$3 a gallon, she'd thought she'd save some money and have a little adventure walking to the video store.

A friend of hers from Paris remarked on how it strange it felt to take a car everywhere she went in Henrico County, Kelly volunteered. In Paris, the friend told her, she walked everywhere. But Henrico ain't Paris. The county was designed for the mobility of cars, not people on foot.

Here's what's crazy. It's one thing to design the community around the car. But if you do, why waste your money on building sidewalks nobody uses? Tell me, would *you* choose walking on this sidewalk (*below*) on Gaskins Road as a mode of conveyance, even if it took you somewhere you wanted to go -- which it doesn't?



Ah, there's nothing like the fragrance of exhaust and the wafting turbulence of the slipstream from cars zooming past at 45 miles per hour. There's nothing quite so exhilarating as wedging between a berm and two-ton hunks of steel flying past at barely an arm's length distance!

Now, just one more example, my favorite...



No, that tiny leaf-lined strip of beige between the retaining wall and the road is not the curb -- it's a narrow sidewalk! If you think that sidewalk uninviting, do remember, it could be worse. Public Works could have lined the path with punji sticks or looped it past an open cesspool. (Uh, oh, I hope I didn't give anyone any ideas!)

Seriously, if anyone in the Henrico County planning department thinks its sidewalks are providing pedestrian mobility, they're only deluding themselves.

My purpose is not to belittle Henrico County planners. For a jurisdiction that has abandoned the city street grid pattern of development, Henrico is pretty well laid out. In any case, the problem isn't individual planners.

I've spoken to a number of them, and none of them are gnomes. They've all struck me as intelligent people motivated to build a more livable community.

The problem is the ossified compendium of zoning codes, subdivision ordinances and capital improvement plans that leaves no room for creativity or initiative. Henrico, like most every other

county in Virginia, would be well served by scrapping its codes and starting over with an new vision of what sidewalks and streets could look like.

Andres Duany and his wife Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, prominent spokesmen for the New Urbanism movement, describe modern parkways as "automotive sewers" designed solely for moving an endless flow of cars. As an alternative to these sterile sluices, the two architect-planners offer the traditional street-lined boulevard.

"Instead of an intimidating four-laner," they write in their 2000 book *Suburban Nation*, "this boulevard is a twelve-laner: six lanes of traffic and six of parking. Yet this roadway is so charming and comfortable, thanks to its avoidance of high-speed geometrics, that residents pay good money to sip coffee at curbside cafes."

Sipping coffee on Ridgefield Parkway? Not unless the cof-

fee is in a foam cup and you're behind the wheel. If Henrico County were concerned with building better places rather than moving more cars, it could do no better than to seek inspiration in nearby Richmond. Monument Avenue is not only one of the grandest boulevards in the South, a place where houses sell at a premium to face the thoroughfare, but it moves thousands of cars in and out of downtown Richmond every day.

Protestations to the contrary, there's no shortage of paved surface in Virginia's suburbs. The scandal is that these assets are so poorly arranged, that parkways destroy real estate value not enhance it, that so much investment is wasted on sidewalks leading nowhere, and that so much roadway is tucked away in cul de sacs where no one but a handful of families ever touch tire to asphalt.

Buddy Besette has adapted to his Kafkaesque surroundings. But he's more resilient than most of us. We need to find a better way.

-- **May 1, 2006**

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