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Lost in Suburbia

Virginia's transportation "crisis" is really an urban design crisis in masquerade. Broad Street in Henrico County is a case in point: The ugly, dysfunctional retail strip is truly a road from hell.

By James A. Bacon

Have you ever driven down Broad Street in Henrico County? It's an elongated stretch of suburban wasteland that snakes through the western part of the county, one gas station, one chain restaurant, one auto dealership, one shopping center and one big-box store after another. For miles and miles and miles.

No matter how much you may loathe Broad Street, you can't avoid it -- not if you live north of the James River in the Richmond region. Not even if you reside in an urban neighborhood like the Fan or Church Hill. Unless you have foresworn all material goods and moved to a monastery, sooner or later, you'll need to patronize a store that can be found on Broad Street and only on Broad Street.

The first thing I hate about Broad Street is how hard it is to find your way around. There's no lack of signage, but I'd rather take my chances of tracking down Ahmed's Camel Emporium in the Medieval streets of Markakesh than locating an auto parts store on Broad. The problem is that Broad Street has so many signs, each bigger and brighter and more neon-lit than the other, that they overwhelm the senses. When you're driving down a three-lane boulevard at 40 miles per hour, keeping an eye on traffic and throwing quick

glances over your shoulder, you have a better chance of solving a Where's Waldo puzzle on the run than spotting the store sign you're looking for.

It would help if shops and restaurants actually posted their addresses on the premises, so you could decipher if you're at least within a 10-block radius of the location. But most establishments don't bother. Of those that do, many are recessed behind acres of parking lot, front buildings or useless clumps of vegetation referred to as "landscaping." Either that, or the numbers are so small that you can't read them without squinting so long you run the risk of side-swiping the car in the lane next to you.



The other thing I hate about Broad Street is that if you're starting at Point A and want to get to Point B, you can't get there from here... Even if you know where Point B is.

The other day, I drove to Circuit City to buy a back-up storage device for my computer. After drooling over the new, 60-inch, high-definition Sony television that I'll never be able to afford, I figured I'd stop by Borders Books nearby. How hard could that be? Borders was only a block or two away, as the crow flies.

Hopping into the Mighty Usuthu, my trusty Jeep Cherokee, I wheeled onto the driveway leading out of the shopping center. It looked easy enough. All I had to do was wait for a break in the traffic and turn left.

Wrong.

Obscured by the traffic, there was a low, concrete dividing strip separating the east-bound from the west-bound lanes. A "One Way" sign made it clear that turning left was not an option.

So, right turn it was. Pulling onto Broad Street, my goal then was to dash across three lanes of traffic within a space of 50 yards in order to grab a space in the inside left-turning lane. To land in the outside left-turning lane was a fate to be avoided at all costs: The traffic flow would sweep me onto Gaskins Road and halfway to Interstate 64 before I could find a spot to turn around.

Having suffered precisely that mishap once before, I maneuvered Usuthu aggressively to the inside lane. When the light changed, I smartly executed a U-Turn to head back east.

I drove a long block to the next intersection and espied the Borders Books sign ahead on the left. I had two choices. I could proceed down Broad to the next intersection, execute another U and then look for the entrance into the Borders parking lot. That seemed unnecessarily complicated. It made more sense just to turn left right here and find the back entrance.

Committed to this course of action, I turned left... and promptly got stuck in traffic. A red car ahead of me, determined to turn left into a gas station, blocked the cars behind it, leaving me stranded in the intersection. The red car was obstructed by a line of cars waiting for the light to change, none of them seeming willing to budge.

Eventually, the situation resolved itself before I became the problem, blocking the oncoming traffic from Broad Street and triggering the car rage of some Yuppie in a hurry and a bad mood. As the congestion cleared, I nosed Usuthu down this side street in search of a cut-through to the Borders parking lot.

Uh, oh. It looked like the cut-through from Borders was one way! I'd miscalculated.

I drove past the intersection, wondering what to do when I realized that the "one way" cut-through was, in fact, the entrance to a bank, and that the Border's cut-through was immediately past it. Due to the presence of cars blocking the view, I just hadn't seen it. But by that point, it was too late to turn. I braked, hoping to turn left instead and then find a place to turn around. Cars were piling up behind me. Too bad. They'd have to wait. I didn't dare keep going straight -- who knows where I would have ended up?

I imagined myself on the Six O'clock News: *A 52-year-old Henrico County man was found wandering dazed and disoriented north of Broad Street earlier today. Showing signs of dehydration and stress, he'd apparently abandoned his car when it ran out of gas. Rescue squadman Fred Finglemeier stated that the man, still unidentified, kept muttering the*

cryptic phrase, "Must find borders... Must find borders."

At last, a break in the traffic allowed me to turn left -- onto the street leading to Borders, but in 180 degrees in the wrong direction. That's OK. I was getting close. I could feel victory within my grasp.

OK. All I needed to do now was turn around. Of course, that was easier said than done. The utility road was too narrow. So, I pulled Usuthu into the first parking lot available: the Bassett Furniture lot.

I managed to execute that maneuver without incident. The next task was to turn around in the Bassett parking lot and come back out. That task, too, was easily accomplished. I simply wheeled around a cluster of parking spaces and went out the way I came in.

Mirabile dictu! I was now heading in the right direction, and the Border's Books building loomed straight ahead.

I worked my way through the curiously congested little intersection and pulled into the utility road behind Border's. I was getting close now!

But I wasn't there yet. There were plenty of random parking spaces, but there was no entrance to Border's on this side of the building -- unless you counted the loading dock.

True story: At this point, an elderly gentleman and his wife stopped their car and asked me for directions! *Me!* The pitiful fools were asking *me!* They were looking for "a tile place near Costco," they said, and hadn't been able to find it. They had been driving around, quite lost. Sadly, I told them I could be of no help. I had no idea where

anything was located...

... except for Borders. And I knew where it was because I literally could see it, even if I could not yet find a way inside. My pulse quickened. I was in the home stretch now. Skirting the back of the Border's building, I finally came upon my destination: The front entrance of Border's, with row upon row of parking spaces. *Yesss! High fives all around!*

There is a lesson to this story. My wife would tell you the lesson is that I am navigationally challenged. I don't dispute that. But there is a larger lesson. Our suburban roads are designed with one goal in mind -- to move cars -- which they do with great efficiency *if* your measure of achievement is maximizing the throughput of cars along thoroughfares like Broad Street... but not if your measure is getting logically from Point A to Point B.

Everything in suburbia is disconnected. Retail establishments are jammed in coagulated clumps, accessible only by automobile. The clumps aren't integrated with the residential communities around them, nor even integrated with each other. All stores are located in their own little pods, surrounded by husk-like parking lots, berms or landscape barriers. And, like their residential cul de sac counterparts, they empty onto a main thoroughfare, through which every car must travel in order to get anywhere else. There is no underlying logic to the where things are located and there are few visual cues on how to get from one place to another.

Henrico County traffic engineers might well congratulate themselves on all the cars they can pump through Broad Street. But how much of that traffic consists

of people driving in the direction opposite of the way they want to go? How much of it consists of people making U turns and back-tracking to get somewhere because the median strip had blocked them from turning? How much of it consists of people wandering up and down the strip, fuming and cursing because they can't find the location of a wretched tile shop?

Getting lost in suburbia is not a phenomenon unique to Henrico County. It's scary to contemplate, but Henrico is actually one of the better designed localities in Virginia! I've seen worse horrors on Chesterfield's Midlothian Turnpike, Norfolk's Military Highway, Charlottesville's U.S. 29, and Fairfax's Route 7. The disorder can be traced to zoning codes and comprehensive plans that jam retail establishments into densely packed corridors and set rules for cut-throughs. But for all the rules that are required, local governments overlook one thing: connectivity.

Local governments tell property owners what kind of businesses can be located in a commercial zone, how much square footage they may build, how far back from the road the buildings must sit, and how many parking spaces they must have. But no one tells developers to build an alleyway or utility road that would link a string of stores together so shoppers can navigate from one to the next without going back onto the main street. How crazy is that?

Some of Virginia's legislators and business leaders insist that Virginia faces a "transportation" crisis, and that the state needs to raise tolls and taxes to the tune of \$5.4 billion a year over the next 20 years or descend into statewide gridlock. What Virginia really has is a "design" crisis. We separate land uses --

homes, offices, shopping -- from one another spatially. Then we spread them out so that everyone must use a car to get anywhere. And then we devise a set of regulations that unplugs everything from everything else.

I suppose that raising taxes and building more roads is one way of dealing with the problem. But I'm one of those people who prefer to keep my money rather than give it to the government unless I know there is no alternative. In this case, there *is* an alternative: Better zoning and better design.

The art of building better communities is getting the nitty gritty details right. Unfortunately, the details don't make good sound bites for politicians. "Improved Cut-Throughs for all Virginians. Vote for Delegate Crank!" is not likely to inspire many voters.

Even so, cut-throughs and navigability are something we need to get right, and we have no business raising taxes until we at least try.

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Note: This article was adapted from the original version published on the Internet. For production reasons, the photographs have been deleted.

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