

## **Walking: Alternative Transportation**

*By Rosemary Burke*

In our auto-dependent culture, it's easy to forget that streets are not just for cars. They're for people too.

They're for children who'd like to walk or bike to school. They're for senior citizens who'd like to stroll to the store for a quart of milk and meet friends along the way. They're for people who'd like to walk for exercise, or walk to work, or simply get out and enjoy the sunshine on a beautiful summer day.

In some parts of Belmont, people can walk safely to reap the benefits of exercise, chat with friends and neighbors, enjoy their neighborhoods, *and* help to preserve the environment. In other parts of town, however, where sidewalks are nonexistent or poorly designed, citizens walk at their peril.

Across the state and across the country, the right to take a safe and pleasant walk in one's community is becoming a priority. As suburban sprawl increases the traffic passing through neighborhoods, communities are acknowledging a need to balance the priorities of the drivers who use their roads and the priorities of the people who live on those roads.

Streets, for too long viewed as the domain of the automobile, were designed to move the greatest number of cars at the greatest speed: "design speed." And as the volume of traffic has grown, engineers have sought to "improve" roads by making them wider, straighter, and flatter. But planners, engineers, and communities now recognize that this approach, successful in increasing the speed and flow of traffic, has also increased the rate of fatal accidents and hampered those who cannot or do not drive to their destination. Community planners at last realize that roads serve many essential transportation, social, and economic functions and that successful traffic management must take into consideration all different modes of transportation. Safe places for pedestrians and bicyclists are integral to the transportation management plan of a livable community.

Like many New England towns, Belmont was a farm community that, starting in the 1930s, was broken up and sold to developers. A developer would build houses on his plots, along with roads that usually did not include sidewalks. Sometimes, after the developer had sold the houses, he would give the roads to the town before they had been paved. In other cases, private neighborhoods would ask the town to accept their road and thereby be responsible for its maintenance. The last time this occurred in Belmont was in the early 1980s.

Early in the 1900s, the town recognized that the roads had to be improved to meet appropriate standards. Generally these called for roads that were 26 feet wide with 7 feet on either side, making a right-of-way of 40 feet. In each 7-foot right-of-way, the town tried to install a 4-foot-wide sidewalk and a 3-foot tree lawn. The tree lawn was to accommodate trees and, later, utility poles and fire hydrants. These lawns continue to serve the important function of absorbing some surface water runoff and helping to prevent floods on the streets.

Historically, if the selectmen determined that sidewalks were necessary for safety, the town would take financial responsibility for laying these sidewalks. This mostly concerned the areas around churches, schools, and commercial centers. Traditionally

however, if residents wanted sidewalks in their neighborhoods, the selectmen would pay a third of the cost, and the residents on both sides of the street would each pay a third.

Roads and sidewalks do, of course, need to be repaired. Usually, repairs are made on roads that have been the recipient of federal and state funding. The Transportation Equity Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (TEA-21), signed in 1998, is based on the significant changes in federal transportation policy resulting from the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991, or ISTEA (pronounced "ice tea"). These two federal laws now make bicycle and sidewalk projects eligible for funding, as they were not earlier. States continue to control project selection but look favorably on communities attempting to incorporate into their transportation plans the federal mandate to include pedestrian and bicycle access.

In Belmont, the Bikeway Planning Committee, which has worked hard to plan for a bikeway, has been temporarily stalled by the financial drain of the Big Dig. However, the Belmont Bikeway is the kind of initiative that TEA-21 and ISTEA were designed for, and we should support the Bikeway Committee's efforts in this worthwhile project.

The responsibility for Belmont sidewalk repair belongs to the Highway Department. Although most sidewalk problems have been caused by trees and their root growth, Highway Superintendent Peter Castanino confirms the town's commitment to installing and maintaining trees. Trees not only enhance the appearance of a street, but provide environmental benefits as well. The Highway Department works closely with the Shade Tree Committee in choosing and planting appropriate trees.

According to Mr. Castanino, the department currently has a list of 700 requests for sidewalk repairs and a FY 2001 budget of \$84,470. Of that amount, \$10 to \$15 thousand will go for materials, of which concrete is now the major choice. This has been true since the 1920s, when residents preferred the look of concrete even though asphalt was cheaper. Brick, used in some nearby communities, is not considered a good choice by Mr. Castanino because it is slippery when wet and requires more maintenance. Asphalt, used to make some sidewalk repairs up until the 1980s, is no longer a standard choice. (Belmont residents who are concerned that asphalt was laid too close to healthy trees may have this asphalt removed by calling the Highway Department at 489-8210.)

When a resident requests sidewalk repair, a highway supervisor assess the problem and assign a rating (1, 2, or 3, with 1 being the worst). He will then determine whether the Highway Department can do the repairs or an outside contractor should be called. Repairs that cost more than \$10 thousand must be sent out to contractors to bid on. Mr. Castanino acknowledges that his allotted budget is insufficient to address all the requests for sidewalk repairs assigned to his department.

Belmont is in the process of drafting policies about the curbing on the edge of a road, and what plants can be installed in the tree lawn by residents. Which streets will get curbing and of what kind has been a hotly debated topic. While it's believed that granite curbing adds another protection for pedestrians on busy streets by keeping cars and service trucks from driving up and blocking sidewalks, it costs \$18 a foot. Asphalt curbing installed at the standard five-inch height costs \$2 a foot. Each situation is judged individually, and decisions are based on street conditions and the amount of money available.

Communities all around the state are studying ways to manage increased traffic flows. Making a community more accessible to pedestrians and bicyclists is one factor in

this management. But adding sidewalks is not enough. We also need speed enforcement (including local residents committed to driving within posted speed limits), walk signals that respond quickly so that pedestrians are willing to obey them, and crosswalks at frequent intervals, with signs to warn drivers of the state law mandating them to stop for pedestrians. Residents deserve the choice of how to reach their destination, and any way they choose should be as safe and pleasant.

Many organizations that support pedestrian safety and accessibility have made their knowledge available on the Web. One such advocacy group, Walking in Arlington, recently had a display at the Robbins Library. You may ask to see these materials at the Robbins reference desk. You can also visit the following Web sites for suggestions on how to encourage walking in your neighborhood:

*PEDS (Pedestrians Educating Drivers on Safety)* <http://www.peds.org/links/index.htm>

*Walking in Arlington* <http://www.walkboston.org>

*TEA-21 and ISTEA information* <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/bikeped/index.htm>

*Transportation for Livable Communities* <http://www.tlcnetwork.org> (*On Line Resources*)