



## **BikeWalkLee Report: June 12, 2012**

### **BikeWalkLee's field trip to Fort Myers Beach's North Estero Blvd. complete streets project**

**BWL team:** Dan Moser, Ann Pierce, Darla Letourneau; with Jay Anderson and Chuck Highfield from Stay Alive..Just Drive!

**Date:** Friday morning, June 8, 2012

**Purpose of Site Visit:** BikeWalkLee was invited by the Mayor of Fort Myers Beach, Larry Kiker, to analyze the Town's North Estero Blvd. improvement project (completed in 2011) to determine if the incorporated bike/ped/transit facilities can serve as a model for the larger county Estero Blvd. improvement project, and what improvements or changes may be needed..

**Survey Approach:** Dan biked over from downtown Fort Myers and Darla biked over from Sanibel, which gave us an opportunity to experience the facilities leading up to FMB, as well as to experience the North Estero Blvd. project on bike. Ann, Jay, and Chuck drove to and along the area being reviewed and walked the North Estero Blvd. segment, thus experienced it as drivers and pedestrians.

**Background on Project:** According to local press reports, plans for the North Estero Blvd. Drainage Improvement Project began in 2007. It was designed as a utility project to address major storm water drainage problems, causing repeated flooding of the road and surrounding properties. Because the road was to be torn up to install stormwater infiltration tanks the project included complete roadway rehabilitation. The Town maintains this road and was responsible for design and funding of this project. From the beginning, this project was designed as a complete street, featuring trolley pull-offs, bike lanes, and sidewalks on both sides of the blvd., separated from the auto and bike travel lanes by landscaping. In 2007, the city gave property owners along the Blvd. 30 days to get out of the public right-of-way. Project construction began in the Fall of 2009 and was completed in the Spring of 2011, with a total project cost of approximately \$4 million. The project boundaries are from the beginning of North Estero Blvd. at Time Square, ending at Bowditch Point Park, for a total length of 1 mile.

### **BikeWalkLee Observations on North Estero Blvd.:**

- This one-mile stretch is truly a model complete street, taking into account the needs of all the users and providing safe and accessible transportation options and connections.
- The crosswalks are clearly indicated through strongly contrasting red brick pavers, and yellow warning signs signaling pedestrians are crossing.

- The sidewalks on both sides are 5 feet wide and set back from the road with a well maintained vegetation strip that includes a variety of native plantings, and we saw both city and private employees out maintaining the plants during our visit.
- The vegetation provides shade for pedestrians and cyclists as well as enhances a sense of place, and creates a significant visual asset.
- There are multiple LeeTran trolley stops with a variety of accommodations, from a large covered terminal facility at Bowditch Beach to pull-offs with shelters, seating, bike racks, trash cans, and clear signage conveying trolley schedule information.
- In the 2 hours we were there, we saw frequent trolley runs, with people getting on and off the trolley, loading & unloading bikes.
- The biking facilities are excellent, with 4 ft. wide signed and marked bike lanes on both sides of the street. There is also ample bike parking options at various points along the way. As well, here are also several places where bikes could be rented.
- The biking surface was excellent. The new stormwater drainage system is a narrow continuous grate, parallel and flush against the base of the curb, so there are no grates extending into a cyclist's path..
- As a walker and cyclist, it felt very safe both because of the facilities and the consistently low speed--25 mph. All components of the street design encouraged speed limit compliance and we observed no speeding.
- As a result of these alternative transportation facilities, we saw many people walking, biking, and taking the trolley to and from the park to Time Square and destinations in between.
- Signage is good, and includes way finding signs for the various destinations.
- The stormwater drainage system is innovative, quickly draining water away from pavement surfaces and retaining it below the surface for infiltration. The vegetation strip between the road and the sidewalk serves not only to separate sidewalks from auto and bike lanes and as aesthetic enhancement, but is a functional part of the overall drainage system.
- The character of the community was maintained as a part of the roadway design, with colorful mailboxes and painted designs on various condos. It blends well together, conveying a strong sense of place that appears to encourage people to be out and about.
- The safe, accessible and inviting accommodations built into this road make it possible for many residents and visitors to walk or bike the 1 mile distance from Time Square to the beach, reducing the number of cars on the road.
- There appears to be adequate parking for cars and it was designed to blend in with the new roadway design. Some small motels had head-in parking on the structure side of the bike lane. There are also several parking areas associated with a community park and transit terminal, as well a small private lot.
- There is a well designed pull off area for delivery trucks near Time Square, which was used frequently, allowing passage for other roadway users.
- Only two very minor suggestions were noted:

- The Town vegetation maintenance vehicle parked in the bike lane while they were working on weeding and water the vegetation. It would be helpful if they moved their vehicle off the bike lane while they worked.
- The signage for public parking at Bowditch Beach the end of North Estero Blvd. is confusing. An earlier sign says that there is public parking at the Beach but when you approach the circle you see an 'employee only' parking lot with no indication where the public lot is located (the sign is right in front of the lot, not on the street).
- This 1-mile section of Fort Myers Beach is a gem & truly a model complete street! You may want to consider "branding" this area and having signage that directs people to come visit this area. It's truly hidden and unless you're going to Bowditch Beach, many people won't know it's there.
- Unfortunately for cyclists, it is not well connected to safe biking facilities coming onto the Beach or going south on the Beach, and is too short of a distance for most people to come visit by bike unless staying in the area.
- We are often asked for a good example in Lee County of a complete street. We now have a great one to show the media, city and county staff and elected officials. We need to get people out there to see what a complete street can look like and the obvious economic and quality of life benefits they can provide.

**BikeWalkLee's suggestions for the County Estero Blvd. Improvement Project:**

- The city and county should strive to design the larger 6-mile Estero Blvd. improvement project similar to the North Estero Blvd. project.
- However, the issues and constraints that have to be dealt with on Estero Blvd. are more complex than the North Estero Blvd. area so it may not be a simple question of just using North Estero as the model.
- We spent some time on our field trip assessing the issues on Estero Blvd. and have the following preliminary thoughts. Without knowing the full range of options and issues on the project, we know these ideas will have to be refined when more information becomes available.
- Estero Blvd. is a constrained roadway on a narrow barrier island; therefore it is essential that the redesign of the area rely heavily on making it a pedestrian/bicycle/transit-friendly community. These are the alternative forms of transportation that are the key to improving access and safety and livability in this area.
- In order for an expansion of the successful trolley system to be effective, bike and pedestrian facilities and safety need to be enhanced since the trolley riders will be either cyclists (through bike rentals) or walkers while they're visiting the island.
- It's also essential that whatever changes are made to enhance trolley access do not come at the expense of safety and facilities for those cycling onto the island. For this area to truly have multi-modal transportation options, it must be designed in a holistic way, not taking away mobility for any one group.

- This is **what we'd like to see on San Carlos Blvd.:**
  - San Carlos Blvd., from Summerlin up to the Matanzas Pass Bridge, needs to be reconfigured so that the travel lanes are narrowed from current 14 ft. to 11 ft., adding 4 ft. bike lanes on both sides.
  - At the smaller bridge just north of Buttonwood Dr, the road surface narrows, so there may not be room for bike lanes in that one section. If that's the case, sharrows should be painted on the road to clearly indicate to drivers that they must share the lane with bicycles.
  - The sidewalks in this section are in need of repair in several areas.
  - The continuous left turn (suicide) lane needs to be replaced with access management that includes dedicated turn lanes where appropriate.
  - The roadway improvements need to be designed for a maximum 35 mph speed.
  - The area at the foot of the Matanzas Pass Bridge coming on island is very dangerous for pedestrians and especially cyclists. For pedestrians, because a sidewalk exists only on one side of the bridge, crossing San Carlos Blvd at Main St is problematic, especially since the northbound motor vehicle configuration expands to two-lanes from one before it's necessary (more on that to follow).
  - For cyclists' needs, the additional northbound lane is added too soon. If it were left as one lane a left turn lane could still be provided and a bike lane could be included in the configuration (see below).
  - The lanes on the bridge should be reconfigured to reduce the breakdown lane on the left side from an 8 ft. lane to a 4 ft. bike lane, putting the extra 4 ft. on the right side of the trolley lane for a bike lane. This will make it safer for bikes and not create the current conflicts with the trolley. To do this only requires reallocation of space which can be accomplished by re-painting the lines on the bridge. This is one thing that can be done now to improve the situation immediately (a green bike lane is recommended). Many of the following problems can be resolved by reconfiguring the bridge.
    - The signage on the bridge, coming onto the island, directing auto drivers to yield to trolleys are in the wrong place. This sign should be before or at the beginning of the shared right turn lane, which emanates from the former bike/trolley only lane, as one approaches the bottom of the bridge, instead, it is at the bottom and end of this lane.
    - In this same right turn lane shared by bike/trolley and now autos, the sign indicating that drivers should yield to cyclists and pedestrians is entirely inadequate. First and foremost, the law states that drivers are to stop, not merely yield. Signs indicating yield are outdated and dangerous. Next, the actual yield symbol, in the top-most part of the larger yellow sign board, while probably meeting state standards, is far too small in the larger context of the visual complexity and confusion the driver is faced with at that point.

- We noticed quite a few pedestrians cutting across Estero Blvd. at the foot of the bridge coming on island, which is very dangerous as well as disruptive to the flow of traffic. We recommend that a "low fence/railing", like you find in Washington, DC to keep the tourists from crossing on the Mall except at crosswalks, be installed from the parking lot by the bridge all the way back to the crosswalk so that pedestrians are directed to cross appropriately.
  - Once you are **on island, the reconfigured Estero Blvd. needs to have:**
    - 4 ft. bike lanes on both sides or sharrows where there's too limited ROW
    - dedicated left turn lanes vs. continuous left (suicide) lanes that are designed in a way that allow emergency vehicle access
    - Although a vegetation buffer between sidewalk and roadway similar to the one on North Estero Blvd. is desirable, there may not be enough ROW to do that here.
    - The speed limit in "downtown" FMB should also be 25 mph, going to 35 mph when the commercial area with heavy bike/ped traffic is less dense.
    - Trolley pullouts with seating, bike parking, and signage similar to N Estero Blvd are needed.
    - Since, unlike North Estero, which is a dead-end street, this is a thoroughfare, the traffic is much heavier and pedestrian crossings may need to be more than just the warning yellow sign. For example, flashers or lights in the sidewalk itself, along with black and white regulatory signs should be considered (an example is Old 41 in downtown Bonita Springs).
    - Stormwater drainage fixes will be more complicated than on North Estero since all the water will have to be treated under the road vs. running off into the bay. However, the system used there should be used if practical.
  - While the overall improvement project will take several years, there are some **inexpensive things that can be done now to improve the road for cyclists and pedestrians:**
    - They can use paint and put up flexible bollards to inexpensively turn the suicide middle lane into a functioning turn lane.
    - Some strategic enforcement could help address some of the bike/ped safety issues we observed.
    - Some of the crosswalk improvements could be done now, even if the roadway is to be torn up in the future. Consider doing this "on the cheap", using paint and signage.
    - Very bold and high contrast paint could be used to make all pedestrian crossings more eye-catching, including chevrons and other pre-crosswalk markings that signal to drivers to slow when approaching a crossing.

- As mentioned above in the San Carlos Blvd. section, the lanes on the bridge can be reconfigured now to immediately improve the safety for all users by simply re-painting the lines on the bridge, and painting the bike lanes green. At the same time, the signage and pedestrian safety "fencing" issues at the entrance and exit of the bridge could be addressed. (see above for details)

BikeWalkLee looks forward to being part of the Estero Improvement project public outreach effort. We believe that the project should be a joint partnership between the city and the county so that this project, which is the very heart of Fort Myers Beach's identity and community character, be consistent with what the community wants. This is much more than a road project--it is a redesign of the public space at the heart of this community.

To maximize the community involvement in this project, we suggest that the project team consider the use of innovative online interactive tools, such as MindMixer (<http://www.mindmixer.com/>). This is an exciting new community engagement tool, which acts as a virtual town-hall allowing community planning to happen online. I invite you to check out the Burbank, CA website, which used this tool to develop their "Comp Plan" amendments: <http://www.burbanktownhall.com/about>. We understand that Lee County staff is considering this tool for engaging the public in the Comp Plan amendments process.

BikeWalkLee thanks the Fort Myers Beach Mayor for inviting our input on this important effort.

### **Addendum:**

### **BikeWalkLee supports a roundabout as part of Estero Blvd. improvement project in Fort Myers Beach**

June 14, 2012

Mayor & Vice-Mayor,

I wanted to expand on one issue that wasn't covered in our report. In our report ([http://www.bikewalklee.org/BWL\\_PDFs/BWL\\_facts/061212fmbBWLreport.pdf](http://www.bikewalklee.org/BWL_PDFs/BWL_facts/061212fmbBWLreport.pdf)), we mentioned the serious safety problem for pedestrians dashing across the street right as you come off the bridge into FMB and we suggested that it might be helpful to have a low fence or railing installed in front of the parking lot by the bridge. While this might improve pedestrian safety on a temporary basis, it is not the best permanent solution. The long term solution needed is a well designed roundabout as you come onto the island, which could greatly enhance pedestrian safety among many other benefits. Dan Moser mentioned this in his interview last night that was aired on NBC-2 News.

(<http://www.nbc-2.com/story/18783560/study-may-allow-for-safer-ft-myers-beach>)

A roundabout at this location would also benefit motorists, who are now forbidden from making left turns at this intersection from three different directions. A roundabout would allow many motorists to more easily reach their destinations without delaying other drivers or “driving around the block” as they do now.

As the Institute of Transportation Engineers "Designing Walkable Urban Thoroughfares: A Context Sensitive Approach" guidance states, "The benefits [of roundabouts] include improved safety, speed reduction, reduction in certain types of vehicle crashes, opportunities for aesthetics and urban design, and operational functionality and capacity." Studies conducted by FHWA indicate that "modern single-lane roundabouts in urban areas can result in up to a 61 percent reduction in all crashes and a 77 percent reduction in jury crashes when compared with stop-controlled intersections." (see p. 190 of ITE guidance.) The report also points out that in high pedestrian volume areas (such as FMB), it is important to provide adequate crosswalk widths and island dimensions to serve the volume of pedestrians moving around the roundabout.

We know that roundabouts have been considered at this location in the past and we hope that everyone involved in the project--the town, the county, FDOT, project team, and the citizens--will continue to give this serious consideration. Extensive documentation is available in town records about the roundabout and related street improvements near this critical location. Both Clearwater and Sarasota are leaders in successful use of roundabouts and we believe that it would be beneficial for a team of officials, staff, and other stakeholders to do a field trip to experience those projects on the ground and to talk to the officials up there. FDOT District 1 Secretary, Billy Hattaway, is a strong proponent of roundabouts and recently took his FDOT engineers on a site visit up there. Billy can also an excellent resource for everyone involved in planning this project.

Thanks again for giving us an opportunity to provide input on this important effort.

Darla