

WASHINGTON CITIES USE TRANSPORTATION IMPROVEMENTS TO SET
A PATH FOR THEIR COMMUNITIES' FUTURES.

course connection

by **TED KATAUSKAS**
photographs by **JOE TOBIASON**

When Jay McGowan relocated from San Francisco to Cle Elum as a young man in the late 1960s, the commercial hub of upper Kittitas County, like a coasting rocket on a parabolic trajectory, had just nosed over into freefall, captured in an inescapable gravity well of change.

At the city's apex in the 1940s, when local coal mines and timber mills were booming, the population of this Cascades outpost, flanked by lakes and alpine forest 30 miles east of Snoqualmie Pass, had swelled to over 3,000. Cle Elum's blue-collar workforce spent their paychecks on First Street, a state highway that doubled as the city's main thoroughfare, which boasted a bakery (established in 1906), a butcher (est. 1887), a tavern (est. 1902, by a former mayor), and car dealerships representing every major domestic brand. But the last mine closed in 1963, and already by the time of McGowan's arrival, the city's population had plummeted to 1,800, where it remains today.

Joining his brother, who had moved to Cle Elum in 1965, McGowan found work as a mechanic at the Studebaker garage. That led to work as a millwright, repairing logging machinery, a career he has stubbornly maintained over a half-century, even as the city's working-class foundation crumbled around him.

"Basically, I'm the village blacksmith," says McGowan, 71, who also draws a modest paycheck as Cle Elum's mayor, serving the final year of his first term. "I chose this place mostly because I had friends here. I lived off what we had left of logging, which is pretty much gone."

Just a few months before McGowan's brother arrived in Cle Elum, in October 1964, city leaders gathered on a bypass that had been built between the city's business district and the Yakima River to celebrate the opening of Interstate 90, a

superhighway connecting Seattle with Spokane that rerouted through traffic from Cle Elum's First Street, a.k.a. State Route 903, formerly the region's primary east-west highway.

"That point there was really the beginning of the end of the traditional economy of the upper county," says McGowan, who notes that more than 40,000 vehicles a day now bypass Cle Elum on I-90 on an average Friday. "All those cars going past and not stopping has had a real dramatic effect on our town, but it's the same kind of demise that most small towns throughout the nation have been going through. Our downtown gradually faded away. We did all kinds of studies and efforts to figure out some kind of other economic base here, but nothing happened, nothing changed. The community just stalled."

The most promising of those initiatives happened in 2000, when Cle Elum's council, which by then included McGowan, workshopped a downtown redevelopment plan. The plan sought to lure pass-through motorists into town and out of their cars by revamping a half-dozen blocks of First Street, a concrete chasm that yawned as wide as a 10-story building is tall from storefront to storefront on opposite sides of the street, into a soulful small-town Main Street. But with public safety expenditures consuming half of the city's modest general fund budget, that ambitious plan went nowhere.

"Lots of people got involved; we did a whole downtown study with bulb-outs and all this stuff to slow down traffic," recalls McGowan. "It just sat on a shelf. There was no way. We couldn't get it off the ground."

Meanwhile in 2003, on a 6,400-acre tract of pine and fir forest on the banks on the Cle Elum River two miles west of downtown, developers broke ground on Suncadia, a destination resort with an inn, a lodge, a spa, swimming pools, restaurants, golf courses, and vacation homes; in 2004, 500 single-family

Cle Elum Mayor Jay McGowan with a scale model he built in 2013 of a proposed beautified downtown





From left: CWU senior Isaac Anzovar, Cle Elum Mayor Jay McGowan, City Planner Lucy Temple, and HLA Engineering project engineer Ben Annen on First Street in Cle Elum

homesites sold, generating \$125 million in gross revenue. As Suncadia was built out, within a decade the community attracted a mass migration of Seattleites over Snoqualmie Pass to Cle Elum, quadrupling the area's summertime population. Although these new part-time residents occasionally made trips into town to gas up their cars, treat themselves to bear claws from Cle Elum Bakery, and splurge on T-bones from Owens Meats, they spent more of their time (and money) in established touristy places like nearby Roslyn or Leavenworth, 50 miles north.

In 2013, hoping to attract more of these newcomers to First Street, Cle Elum's council dusted off its 13-year-old downtown revitalization plan and initiated another round of citizen workshops, reimagining First Street with broad sidewalks appointed with street furniture, shade trees, and other amenities that would encourage visitors to stroll and linger.

"I was on the council and I worked with the citizens committee, trying to get everyone to envision a walkable downtown," McGowan recalls. "I said, 'We need to make a model!' I have a shop with saws, and I'm a pretty handy person."

Using photographs of the existing streetscape, McGowan retreated to his workshop and painstakingly created a four-square-foot diorama of an entire square block of Cle Elum's beautified downtown, an elaborate scale model every bit as detailed—down to tiny plastic pedestrians strolling along the sidewalk—as Marwencol in *Welcome to Marwen*.

After spirited debate, McGowan's diorama was shelved along with the 2000 plan, sidelined by a backlog of infrastructure projects deemed more important, including a retrofit of

First Street's antiquated stormwater system and upgrades to an I-90 interchange. Even with the dawn of opportunity brought by Suncadia, Cle Elum's revival seemed fated never to see the light of day.

Two years later, however, McGowan was elected mayor, and rejuvenating First Street became a mandate of his administration. To that end, he hired Lucy Temple, a former environmental planner from the Washington State Department of Transportation's (WSDOT) Union Gap office, as Cle Elum's city planner in January 2017, the first in a series of fortuitous circumstances that finally fast-tracked the city's moribund downtown revitalization project. Not long after starting the job, Temple was reviewing the city's plan to upgrade the stormwater system beneath First Street when Paul Gonseth, a former colleague who works as a planning engineer for WSDOT's South Central Region, phoned to let her know that the agency was scheduled to repave State Route 903 (a.k.a. First Street) in 2018. Temple told Gonseth about the stormwater project and asked if he could delay paving the road until 2019.

"I said, 'If you're going to repave, we don't want to rip it up after the fact,'" she recalls. "Paul said, 'If you do stormwater, that's the time you need to design what's above the ground.' ... Since the stormwater project needed to be in the ground before DOT paved in 2019, we put the gas pedal down."

But first, the city had to find money to jump-start the long-stalled downtown streetscape makeover.

“I WAS ON THE COUNCIL AND I WORKED WITH THE CITIZENS COMMITTEE, TRYING TO GET EVERYONE TO ENVISION A WALKABLE DOWNTOWN. I SAID, ‘WE NEED TO MAKE A MODEL!’”

—JAY MCGOWAN **MAYOR, CLE ELUM**

In fall 2016, after a planning meeting for the I-90 interchange project, Ben Annen, a project engineer with HLA Engineering & Land Surveying, the city’s longtime contract engineering firm, told one of Cle Elum’s councilmembers about the Transportation Improvement Board’s (TIB) Complete Streets Program, a fund the Legislature had established to provide grants to cities that agreed to give equal consideration to the safety of pedestrians, motorists, and cyclists of all ages and abilities in the design of infrastructure projects. In a bid to win a Complete Streets grant, at its next council meeting the city introduced and adopted a Complete Streets ordinance; in February 2017, the city received a \$125,000 TIB grant, \$100,000 of which the council earmarked to hire HLA to manage the First Street revitalization project’s public input and planning process and help the city secure funding for the project.

“What it comes down to is cash,” says Annen. “Small cities are so strapped for cash, it’s difficult to get anything accomplished. Cle Elum easily could’ve taken that \$125,000 and purchased several rapid-flashing beacons for crosswalk safety, and it would’ve been done with the money. Instead, they thought about the bigger picture: ‘How can we leverage that money and make something big with a minimum investment?’”

Temple used \$19,000 (cobbled together from her planning budget, a Department of Commerce grant, Suncadia Resort, and a private donor) to hire two interns she recruited from her alma mater, Central Washington University in nearby Ellensburg. In April 2017, with help from a CWU professor and their planning class, Temple convened focus group sessions at city hall, meeting with various community members, First Street business owners, and Suncadia residents, asking these stakeholders to articulate their vision for Cle Elum’s downtown revitalization.

“They wanted change, but not a lot of change,” says intern Isaac Anzlovar, a CWU senior majoring in public policy and geography. “A lot of citizens here didn’t want Cle Elum to lose its small-town feel and character.”

Based on that feedback, HLA’s designers and HBB Landscape Architecture sketched out three different streetscape concepts that were unveiled at a community workshop in May. Those concepts were further refined at a planning commission study session and public forum in June, which yielded a recommended plan: For six blocks, First Street’s 100-foot-wide concrete canyon would be whittled down to a roadway just 34 feet wide, with angled on-street parking and 16-foot-wide sidewalks. The sidewalks would bulb out into the right-of-way at intersections, to make crossing easier/safer for pedestrians and create funnel-like bottlenecks that slowed traffic; mid-block crosswalks

Access Granted

Q&A **CAROL WRIGHT KENDERDINE**

Carol Wright Kenderdine, assistant vice president for transportation and mobility at Easterseals, Inc., on why funding accessible public transportation should be a goal for cities large and small.



What does Easterseals Transportation Group do?

We’re based in Washington, DC, and were established more than 30 years ago as a national technical assistance center funded by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and administered by Easterseals. Today, we operate as Easterseals Project Action Consulting and as the National Aging and Disability Transportation Center (NADTC) in partnership with the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging. We provide technical assistance, education, resources, information, and referrals, as well as outreach and community grants, to make sure that people with disabilities and older adults and their caregivers have access to the kinds of transportation they need.

Easterseals Project Action Consulting coordinates Accessible Transportation Community Initiative Grants. How does that program work?

Each team selected receives a \$100,000 grant from a national foundation to work with local governments to provide additional accessible transportation options in their service areas. There

are 10 teams in the US, and 3 are in Washington state.

Talk about the Washington state grant teams.

One is the Snoqualmie Valley Transportation Coalition. They initially compiled a report of existing services in the Snoqualmie Valley from North Bend to Monroe and identified gaps in service. After holding focus groups and doing surveys, they added a new transportation service, a Duvall-Monroe shuttle. It’s a pilot project that in its first few months of service gave 300 rides to people who had no way of getting between those communities; they also did a video with four riders with difficult circumstances who talk about what having that transportation means to them and why it’s needed.

Another team is the Southwest Washington Accessible Transportation Coalition.

They conducted an initial survey to identify transportation resources, as well as needs and gaps, in five southwest Washington counties (Cowlitz, Grays Harbor, Lewis, Pacific, and Wahkiakum). They’re working to beef up ex-

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Expanded sidewalks, LED streetlamps, and new benches and wastebins on First Street in Cle Elum

would reduce jaywalking. Street trees and landscaping planters would make the boulevard more inviting with a shady canopy, and street furniture from bike racks and benches to antique-looking LED streetlamps would evoke the city's logging heritage while adhering to a uniform design palette.

When Cle Elum's council unanimously adopted the plan at a session on June 27, 2017, it seemed like the entire town had come to witness a historic moment.

"It was standing-room-only, with people overflowing out of the room," recalls Temple. "It was outrageous; it was wonderful; we were very, very proud of our work and the collaboration that went into it."

The next hurdle was paying for the \$8 million project. After completing 13 funding applications and making several project presentations to Olympia-based funding programs, Cle Elum secured \$2.47 million (a combination of grants and a \$533,000 low-interest loan from the Public Works Trust Fund) to fund the first phase of the project: a single intersection at the easternmost end, anchored by three of the city's longest-tenured businesses (Cle Elum Bakery, Owens Meats, Mike's Tavern), that was completed with a ribbon-cutting ceremony in November 2018. If all goes as planned, the city will host another ribbon cutting before the end of 2019, with completion of a bookend intersection on the opposite end of downtown, plus six blocks of upgraded stormwater infrastructure. One final hurdle remains: extending the makeover from intersection to intersection so WSDOT can finally repave First Street, now scheduled for 2022, for which Cle Elum has requested \$4 million from the state Legislature's 2019 Supplemental Capital Budget.

As for the potential payoff of the Legislature's investment, Annen offers the example of a streetscape makeover HLA orchestrated for Grandview, a city of 11,000 some 100 miles east of Cle Elum.

"Going into that project, there were over 20 empty storefronts in the downtown corridor; you could go downtown on a weekend, and you may not see anybody," he says. "Two years after the completion of that project, there's one vacant storefront, and you can't find a parking spot on the weekend. It's difficult to put a number on it, but using comparatives like that, there's huge potential for Cle Elum to grow and be a thriving downtown."



A rendering of the four-acre greenspace proposed for the Grand Connection in downtown Bellevue

With a similar goal, on the rainy side of the Cascades, the City of Bellevue is mulling an ambitious \$120 million-plus plan to cover a two-square-block section of Interstate 405 in the heart of its downtown with a four-acre public park.

Dubbed the Grand Connection, the project was inspired by successful downtown freeway "lid" projects like Klyde Warren Park in Dallas, a 5.2-acre public space over Woodall Rogers Freeway that connects that city's commercial center with its arts district and includes a performance pavilion, parks for dogs and kids, a network of trails, and a 6,000-square-foot restaurant that pays for 20 percent of the park's operating costs. Since its completion in 2012, Klyde Warren Park has catalyzed over a billion dollars of nearby private real estate development, hosted over a thousand annual events, and boosted public transportation use in Dallas by 61 percent.

For Bellevue, the Grand Connection promises to be more than just another economic development project or a transportation initiative: it represents a step toward combining the best of urban living with the welcoming feel of traditional suburbs.

"It's about placemaking and community-building; it's about becoming the city of the future," says Community Development Director Mac Cummins. "If you look nationally, a whole bunch of suburban communities are reinventing themselves to stay relevant. It's a change in trajectory."

Currently, Bellevue's downtown office district is thriving. Home to corporate giants such as Microsoft, PACCAR, and Amazon and a cluster of video game development companies, it boasts a workforce of 50,000, but most who work there have homes far from the city center. Just across I-405 from downtown's office towers, however, is Wilburton, a low-rise commercial district with a few big-box stores surrounded by surface parking lots abandoned by departed auto retailers. In the heart of Wilburton, the city owns Lincoln Center, a demolished former coworking space and business incubator on 2.4 acres.

Bellevue would like to redevelop Wilburton, which will be a station stop on Sound Transit's under-construction East Link light-rail line (which also will include a station serving the city's



convention center and Bellevue City Hall just across the highway), as a high-rise residential district that could be home to some of those 50,000 office workers across the freeway, many of whom undoubtedly would like the option to walk or bike to work. But other than driving (or as of 2023, riding light rail), there's currently no convenient way to get across I-405 directly from Wilburton to downtown.

Enter the Grand Connection. As envisioned in its Grand Connection Framework Plan, which Bellevue's council adopted in December 2017, early concept art showcases a lid park that will revolve around a four-acre greenspace of rolling and sculpted

terrain spanning the highway between NE Sixth and Eighth Streets and include an observation deck, a playground, a climbing wall, and exercise stations, as well as a daylighted creek and a stormwater treatment plant that would double as an environmental education center and interactive art display. Tree-lined promenades would connect the park to the city's downtown and Wilburton's Eastside Rail Corridor, a former rail line King County is converting to a rec path connecting Bellevue with Woodinville to the north and Renton to the south. In addition to the lid park design, the Grand Connection Framework Plan includes less ambitious alternate designs (a conventional pedestrian bridge, and a "sculpted" linear park) that could be built for half the cost, but city leaders, currently debating which option to build, are captivated by the prospect of a crossing that would cap the freeway.

"In a word, it's transformational," says Cummins. "For the land use planning we are doing on either side of the freeway, going from single-, two-, and three-story buildings to up to 40 with at least 10 or 15 to 20 times the current density, there's going to be a need for a grand public open space where all of these businesspeople will want to congregate and community-build. That's the reason to want to do the park. . . . We also believe it will be the type of place that our children and grandchildren are going to want, but more importantly are going to need, to be competitive in the future."

As evidence, he points to a *Harvard Business Review* article from September 2017 and its lessons for city planners from an analysis of Amazon's HQ2 secondary headquarters search. At the top of the list of qualities deemed essential for cities to participate in the growing digital economy was "connected and sustainable placemaking," including "promoting walkability and connectivity between densely clustered buildings through sidewalks, bike lanes, trams, metro, bus, light rail, train, and additional creative options."

Not coincidentally, Bellevue's Grand Connection would satisfy many of these requirements.

"When we talk to companies, this is the type of amenity they say they want in a city—this is why they want to locate

isting volunteer driver programs where there is no public transportation to help older adults and people with disabilities get to where they need to go, at no cost.

What's one potential gap that group identified?

The coalition is exploring whether transportation for incarcerated individuals upon their release is also an issue in the region, and if so, whether funding to address their transportation needs can help these individuals be successful and avoid reoffending.

Washington's third grant team is a coalition of seven cities from Whatcom County; what's their primary initiative?

They wanted to ensure that their bus stops were accessible, so that's what they're concentrating their efforts on. It's a really creative model of how they formed a coalition of nontraditional partners—not just human services providers, but medical providers and mayors from all of the cities—and worked together to provide access to transportation.

What's the reality for rural communities when it comes to providing public transportation?

We all know that large cities are where public transportation is concentrated, but when you are in a small rural area with long distances and low population density, it's difficult to provide transportation for one person who needs to get dialysis three times a week. How do you find people to provide

that service and make it affordable?

So how does a small city make that happen?

You have to have a lot of coordination; you have to make sure everyone is working together so what little transportation is available isn't going to the same place at the same time; you can't have duplication of service.

Why is it important for small, rural communities to support public transportation?

It used to be that families stayed concentrated in the same area; that's not true anymore. Families move away, so you no longer have nuclear families where adults can depend on their children for rides. Also, baby boomers want to age in place: they don't want to move to a large city when they grow old just so they can get transportation service. You want to make sure that service is available for them to take advantage of so they can continue to live where they established their lives.

What's one question all city leaders should be asking?

What can we do together to make sure our community is ready for our aging population and people who are not able to drive? It's not just older adults. People don't drive for a whole variety of reasons: they might have a disability, they might not be able to afford to drive. We want to make sure our communities are accessible to all. Providing transportation is the number one way we can do that.



Bellevue Mayor John Chelminiak (left) and Community Development Director Mac Cummins at a viewpoint overlooking Sound Transit's under-construction East Link light-rail line into the city

“IF YOU KNOW YOU HAVE THE RIGHT PLAN AND YOU STICK WITH IT, YOU CAN MAKE IT HAPPEN. . . . GREAT THINGS TAKE TIME.”

—JOHN CHELMINIAK
MAYOR, BELLEVUE

here,” says Bellevue Mayor John Chelminiak of the Grand Connection. “There’s a story about one CEO from a big corporation who said they had a \$5 million check from Texas asking them to relocate. We can’t do that in Washington, but what we can do is invest smartly in our communities.”

Chelminiak believes the smartest investment for Bellevue is the Grand Connection’s lid park design, despite its cost.

“The lid park connects not just places, but people. It instills a sense of pride in the city. It attracts people to come to your city, and when they come and enjoy it, they spend money, and that helps your tax revenue,” he explains. “One thing Bellevue has done well is set a large goal. If you know you have the right plan and you stick with it, you can make it happen. . . . Great things take time.”

Case in point: the revitalization of Cle Elum’s First Street, a plan 19 years and more in the making that’s already beginning to change the trajectory of the city’s fortunes.

“Cle Elum put itself on the map by the 1940s with coal mining and logging, and then for decades it was just a sleepy town with not a lot going on,” says Lucy Temple, who says that has shifted in the two years she’s worked there as city planner. “There weren’t any homes being built or people coming who needed them. Now people who were in Seattle are moving to Issaquah, and the people who were in Issaquah are moving to North Bend, and the people who were in North Bend are moving to Cle Elum.”

People like Shannon Weaver, who relocated from North Bend to Cle Elum in 2017 and purchased Mike’s Tavern, renovating the First Street landmark inside and out.

“It’s great for the city,” she says of the new paving, street furniture, and streetlights outside her business. “It’s been positive all around.”

What’s more, the nascent revitalization of First Street, with just one intersection complete, already has yielded unforeseen dividends.

“We’re seeing buildings that sat vacant or weren’t being used—all of a sudden they’re being sold or renovated,” says Temple. “We’re not sitting around and waiting for things to happen: things are happening now. It’s pretty incredible.”

The Cle Elum Downtown Association, inspired by the work in progress on First Street, has drafted a 93-page Downtown Master Plan. Developed in partnership with Washington State Department of Archaeology’s Main Street Program, it provides a blueprint for extending streetscape enhancements throughout Cle Elum’s business district, including a pair of pocket parks and a façade-improvement grant program—and significantly, wayfinding signs for tourists, who, instead of passing Cle Elum by for Roslyn and Leavenworth, are starting to stop and discover a mining and logging town reborn as a base camp for outdoor recreation.

“There are a lot of people coming from the west side of the mountains to recreate here. This is the first stop over the Cascades, there’s a huge lake, Lake Cle Elum, and creeks and rivers,” says Temple. “The real change has been a shift from an industry that no longer exists to recreational tourism.”

Which is fine by Mayor McGowan.

“When I moved here, this was a working town: there was work to do, fixing harnesses, welding stuff,” he recalls. “Really, all this community has to offer anymore is the outdoors. Cle Elum is the first sunny spot on this side of the Cascades. Once you blast out of Seattle, it takes 90 minutes to get here. People are bailing from Seattle and will start hanging out here.”

And like the shade trees soon to be planted along downtown Cle Elum’s pedestrian-friendly sculpted sidewalks, before long, he hopes, they’ll start putting down roots. **C**