

Safer Streets in Spenard are Good for Business

by Jay Stange

Spenard Complete Streets Coalition

In 1970s Spenard, one of my big concerns was keeping my prized yellow Sears 10-speed from getting stolen. I rode it to soccer and baseball games across significant distances in Anchorage. It helped me deliver the *Anchorage Times* newspaper in the Woodland Park area, where I recently bought a home I am renovating.

I've been riding a bicycle on these streets for almost 40 years, so I know all the short cuts. I understand the flow of traffic to the point where I can safely cross even nightmarish roadways like Minnesota Blvd. at rush hour.

But if I had children I would not want them walking or riding their bicycles on Spenard Road, or on many of its smaller streets. My beloved neighborhood is one of most dangerous places in Anchorage to walk or ride a bicycle.

According to 1998-2002 state Department of Transportation statistics compiled by Access Alaska, Spenard Road has two of the five most dangerous intersections in Anchorage (at Minnesota and at Northern Lights Blvd.) for walkers and bicyclists. Most of the neighborhood streets have no sidewalks and kids walk narrow roads unprotected from big pickups speeding in excess of 35 mph.

We can fix this, but efforts to rebuild Spenard Road have continuously sputtered in the last two decades. We had to sit out a big capital spend-fest in last year's state budget because we lack consensus on how to rebuild the road.

The business district in Spenard has become a destination, a place where customers now patronize multiple locations on one trip. Because it's sometimes hard to find parking, and because they like the freedom of being carless in the area, many people are using bicycles and they are walking. They spend more time in the area, see more businesses and I believe they are spending more money, which is great for Spenard business owners.

Rebecca Mohlman, a quick-witted local entrepreneur, recently moved the Tap Root, her live music venue, from South Anchorage to the old Fly By Night Club on Spenard Road. It's busy there and many of her customers are bicyclists. Just to the north across the Northern Lights/Benson couplet, the Bear Tooth continues to flourish; one of its owners told me

that the number of people traveling to his business by bicycle has jumped off the chart in the past two years.

One developer renovated an almost derelict Spenard Road hulk into a modern building with several charming retail businesses. One is a coffee shop; two others are retail storefronts where walkers and bicyclists might linger.

But like some well-connected business owners on Spenard, the developer is strongly opposed to making any changes to the road. She told legislators gathered at a public meeting in June her tenants can't afford to endure an agonizing construction season and that traffic alignment changes to make Spenard safer for pedestrian and bicycle traffic would impede motorists from turning into her tenants' businesses.

Construction delays on Arctic Boulevard a few years ago contributed to an atmosphere of fear and skepticism among Spenard businesses about making safety improvements. But Arctic was a worst-case scenario and phased construction and backdoor access routes will minimize the inconvenience in Spenard.

Neighbors, organizations and businesses in our safety advocacy group, the Spenard Complete Streets Coalition, worry the loss of a life might be the price we pay to get started. Moving forward is critical and we need to:

- 1) manage the construction so it's as painless as possible for merchants,
- 2) develop parking solutions in some locations, and
- 3) create separated sidewalks, bike lanes, and disabled access to ensure safety.

Separated sidewalks and bike lanes improve conditions for existing businesses and attract new development. With modern complexes like Tikahtnu Square and South Anchorage malls coming on line, Spenard will need to be made safer and easier to access in order to remain competitive.

Communities from Madison to Minneapolis and from San Francisco to Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, have employed "Complete Streets" concepts to increase walking and bicycle activities and calm traffic. Such concepts result in a nicer community and a corresponding 40-60 percent increase in sales for some locals in one urban California neighborhood, according to a 2003 San Francisco State University study.

A just released Federal Highway Administration study in Iowa, Washington and California showed a 29-percent reduction in total crashes when roads were narrowed to make more room for pedestrians and bicyclists. These generally involve conversions of four lanes to three lanes. This type of alignment on the south end of Spenard Road between

Northwood Drive and Tanglewood Street carries 36 percent more traffic, but the four-lane north end of the road has 52 percent more accidents,

Assemblyman Ernie Hall has, thankfully, taken the initiative to resume public meetings on Spenard Road and is working hard to find consensus on a plan. The next meeting will include Mayor Dan Sullivan's senior staff and state Legislators. It runs from 5:30 pm to 7 pm on Monday, July 12, in the Mayor's 8th Floor Conference Room at City Hall.

Let's make Spenard Streets safer and not let fear of change dominate the discussion. It'll be good for business and the right thing to do for our community.