

Step out of your car comfort zone



Katie Breckheimer

Every time we announce Strive Not to Drive Week, I hear some snickers. If we say that May is National Bike Month, it seems more acceptable, but Strive Not to Drive is more than that. It has to do with getting out of our cars, and that just seems impossible for some.

The thing is, we're not asking you to completely do without, just try something different. See what's out there for getting around — something other than your single-occupancy vehicle.

Personally, I've always loved this event because it's so multifaceted. We get to think about how our community is planned and ask how we can design it better for walkers, cyclists and those who don't have a car. The fact is, many local communities are hard at work developing formal plans for providing safe, well-connected facilities for bicyclists and pedestrians.

But a plan is just a plan. The money it takes to provide sidewalks, bikeways and greenways can be complicated and expensive. Our transportation budgets provide some, but not very much, for alternative modes of transportation. That's why it's important to bring the cost, and who pays for facilities, to the public's attention through a focused event like Strive Not to Drive Week.

The week is also a time to focus on the health effects caused by spending so much time in our cars. If we strive to drive less, and get around under our own steam, we are choosing a more active

lifestyle. Almost half of us don't exercise enough, according to the Henderson County Health Assessment from 2015. It showed only 53.5 percent of us meet the recommended physical activity level.

Also, pertaining to health, Strive Not to Drive gives us an opportunity to talk about air quality and the role the internal combustion engine plays. I was pleased to see the March report provided by state and local agencies that said our air quality is continuing a trend of improvement.

"This is emission reduction at work," said Mike Abraczinskas, director of the N.C. DAQ in Raleigh. "The 2002 Clean Smokestacks Act had a dramatic effect on cleaner air, as well as continually stricter EPA standards for ozone and particulate pollution, lower emissions from the Duke Power Plant, the decrease in emissions from alternatively powered vehicles, such as biodiesel and electricity, and community programs that encourage the use of carpooling, public transportation and walking and biking to work and school."

I've lived here long enough to remember a time when we didn't provide public transportation for our residents. Strive Not to Drive is a time to celebrate Apple County Transportation. Our bus system operates Monday through Friday from 6:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. It costs 75 cents for adults to ride, 35 cents for those with Medicare, and is free for children under 12. To find a bus route near you, go to www.hendersoncountync.org/planning/actransit/mapsandschedules.html.

Some of us can't afford a car, but we still need to get around. According to a 2016 American Automobile Association report, the average annual cost to own and operate a vehicle is \$8,556.

If we're all out there sharing the road, it's important for everyone to understand the rules and have respect for each other. BikeWalk NC is a good place to look up state laws as they pertain to cyclists and pedestrians (www.bike-walknc.org). BikeWalk NC is a membership-based, state-wide advocacy organization promoting non-motorized transportation choices.

A walkable and bikable community can raise property values and attract visitors. We need to talk about our experiences from the week and do some things to make getting around easier and safer. The return on our investment can prove profitable.

Our communities have been designed for cars — we're a car-centric society. But for the week of May 12-19, we can strive for something else. We can carpool, telecommute, work a four-day week, take the bus, order lunch in for your staff, combine your trips, walk, run, skate or use your bike. Have you been on the Oklawaha Greenway yet? This might be a good week to check it out!

For some local organized activities, go to www.strivenottodrive.org/hendersonville.

Strive Not to Drive Week is a regional event, sponsored locally by MountainTrue, the Blue Ridge Bicycle Club, Friends of the Oklawaha Greenway, the Land Of Sky Regional Council, the Hendersonville Community Co-op, Sierra Nevada Brewing, Henderson County and the city of Hendersonville.

Guest columnist Katie Breckheimer is board president of MountainTrue, a member of the Friends of the Oklawaha Greenway and a steering committee member for the local Strive Not to Drive event.