

Guest commentary

Guest commentary: Expanding walking in St. Helena

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One of the most satisfying parts of living in St. Helena is seeing friends, neighbors and visitors walking throughout our neighborhoods and along our streets, whether to get fresh air and exercise, to head downtown for an errand, or to meet up with friends for coffee and a chat.

There are walking groups, power walkers and joggers, and those that take a regular morning or lunch-time stroll. All of these folks, young and old, participate in the life of our town, making the informal connections that create and reinforce our community, and provide a human scale against the backdrop of vineyards and our mercantile valley. We're fortunate that we live in a town where there are many safe places to walk, free from dangerous traffic, and one — the open space walking path towards the

Napa River from the end of Adams Street — is filled all day long with walkers and runners enjoying the quiet views and valuing the access to our natural world, undisturbed by cars and intersections.

There are several of us working as an ad hoc Parks and Rec subcommittee to enhance and expand these walking opportunities in our rural town. We'd like to improve and create a rich variety of options — both more walkable streets as well as untapped areas in open space for longer walks that connect to wider wandering opportunities through and within the lands around us. We envision designating (and naming) walking loops that start and finish downtown, routes that are mapped and have signage, and walks that include historical markers or education opportunities. Our goal is to allow residents and visitors another way to enjoy our town and to expand on St. Helena's many charms.

In terms of open space, we intend to focus on walking-only trails. For elderly walkers and those with the very young their advantages are the ability to use the path without fear of faster wheeled traffic. They also have the benefit of being less expensive and easier to build and maintain, are far less intrusive for neighbors, and have fewer impacts on the land itself. These paths can be a complement to more developed multi-purpose bicycle and pedestrian trails such as at Moore Creek or Las Posadas.

As we work to increase the radius of our walkable town, we will be asking the city and property owners for help. We have spoken with the Chamber of Commerce, with downtown merchants and with several owners of open space areas and have received very positive responses — and look forward to engaging many others. Working through government processes, we will first report up to the Parks and Rec Commission, looking for their endorsement, and then on to the City Council.

Recommendations may include:

1. Designate an initial set of walking loops from downtown;
2. Create signage for existing and new walking routes (in coordination with eventual new downtown signage);
3. Endorse the concept of open space walking trail access and easements in exchange for city assumption of pedestrian liability;

4. Commit to ensure current trails are kept open and publicly-accessible;
5. Create a small turn-around loop at the end of the Adams Street path, some initial trail extensions along the Napa River and Sulfur Creek corridors, and eventually an accessible trail around the city's York Creek property; and, finally,
6. Designate publicly-accessible paths as a requirement for any new private developments in town.

While the full vision will certainly take time, the idea is to take concrete steps in support of connected walks through town, to create chances to enjoy our river corridors, and to allow our open space to be accessible for all. We hope you'll join us.

David Knudsen is a member of the St. Helena City Council.

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