

## **Safer streets are good for business**

by Jay Stange, for the  
Spenard Complete Streets Coalition

In 1970s Spenard, one of my big concerns was making sure my prized yellow Sears 10-speed didn't get ripped off. I needed that bike to get to soccer and football games from the downtown Park Strip to Dimond High School. It helped me deliver the *Anchorage Times*.

I've been riding a bicycle on these streets for almost 40 years. I know the short cuts. I understand the traffic. I can safely cross a nightmarish road like Minnesota Blvd---even 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 the area's side streets. The neighborhood I love has become 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 if you are a walker or a cyclist (at Minnesota Blvd. and at Northern Lights). Most of the neighborhood streets have no sidewalks. 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 for twenty years. We had to sit out a big capital spend-fest in last year's state budget because from the point of view of Juneau, we lack consensus on how to rebuild the road.

The business district in Spenard has become a destination, a place where customers 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 or walking. They spend more time in the area, see more businesses and I believe they are spending more money, which is great for business in Spenard.

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 at the new joint and many of her customers are bicyclists. Just down the street, across the Northern Lights/Benson couplet, Bear Tooth Theatrepub flourishes; one of its owners told me the number of people traveling to his business by bicycle has jumped off the chart over the past two years.

A prominent local 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 storefronts where walkers and bicyclists might linger.

But like some well-connected business owners on Spenard, the developer is strongly opposed to making 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. She said traffic alignment changes to make Spenard safer for walkers and bicyclists 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 business owners about safety improvements. But construction on Arctic was a worst-case scenario. 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 that until someone is killed a safer streets project won't get started. Moving forward is critical, because when a car clips a bicycle it can be fatal.

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 being built, Spenard needs to become safer and easier to access for its businesses to compete.

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. Complete street designs resulted in a 40-to-60 percent increase in sales for some locals in one urban California neighborhood, according to a 2003 San Francisco State University study.

A new Federal Highway Administration report that studied projects in Iowa, Washington and California showed a 29-percent reduction in crashes when roads were narrowed to make more room for pedestrians and bicyclists. The new designs generally involve conversions of four lanes to three lanes. Such an 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.

We can make Spenard Streets safer if we don't allow fear of change to dominate the discussion. Complete streets will be good for business and complete streets are the right thing to do, if we want a safer community.