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New Report Highlights Health, Safety Concerns on St. Pete Streets

A “Complete Streets” Initiative Offers Solutions

St. Petersburg, Fla. – Tomorrow is National Bike to School Day, but few St. Petersburg students will participate. Many streets in St. Petersburg were designed for the fast movement of cars instead of the safe movement of people, with profound implications for residents’ health, according to a new report from the Florida Consumer Action Network Foundation and Frontier Group. The report, made possible by the Foundation for a Healthy St. Petersburg, details how changes in street design could improve health and safety across the city.

“Our streets should be safe for you whether you’re eight or 80 years old, however you get around” said Lisa Frank, campaign organizer with the Florida Consumer Action Network Foundation.

Today, nearly half of adults in Pinellas County don’t get enough exercise, contributing to heart disease and diabetes. The report found that people living in neighborhoods with inadequate walking and biking infrastructure were less likely to walk or bike to work and more likely to suffer from health problems related to inactivity and air pollution.

“We’re proud of the investments we’ve made throughout the city, including the more than 100 flashing crosswalk beacons to help people of all ages cross the street safely, but we know we need to do more,” said Mayor Rick Kriseman. “That’s why we are embracing Complete Streets: a new approach to build, maintain, and operate streets that are safe for people of all ages and abilities, while balancing the needs of multiple travel modes like using a wheelchair, biking, or accessing transit.”

The City of St. Petersburg is currently working on a Complete Streets Implementation Plan, which will be presented to City Council in late 2017.

Maps included in the report illustrate disparate health and safety outcomes across the city. In 2016, nine out of the city’s 14 pedestrian fatalities were in Midtown or South St. Petersburg. Some streets, like 18th Avenue South and 34th Street saw multiple pedestrian deaths in a single year. Midtown neighborhoods like Thirteenth Street Heights also experienced higher rates of asthma, obesity, and insufficient exercise.

“Sidewalks, greenways, and walking paths that are safe and inviting contribute to greater mobility and healthier communities,” said Randall H. Russell, president and CEO of the Foundation for a Healthy St. Petersburg. “The Foundation supports efforts such as FCAN’s Complete Streets that are inclusive of all neighborhoods and bring attention to areas of our city where the need is greatest.”

Across the country, Complete Streets initiatives have reduced crashes by an average of 19 percent while increasing walking by 23 percent and cycling by 48 percent. The report found more people bike to work in cities with more bike lanes and paths, regardless of climate, socioeconomic status and other factors.

"Cities can improve public health by rethinking street design," said Alana Miller, policy analyst with Frontier Group and co-author of the report. "The experience of cities across the U.S. shows that by dedicating space for walking, biking and transit, St. Petersburg can reduce air pollution, get people moving and make streets safer."

The report found transportation to be responsible for the vast majority of air pollution in Pinellas County. Emissions from transportation in 2014 were 3.4 times higher than all other sources combined. 16 percent of schools and daycares in Pinellas County are within 500 feet of a busy road, putting children at increased risk of respiratory illness. Getting more families to walk and bike could improve air quality.

The plan will include recommendations for major streets as well as neighborhood streets. Many cities utilize a system of "neighborhood greenways" (also called bike boulevards) to provide low-stress travel routes. A neighborhood greenway is a low-traffic, low-speed street that provides people a safer and more relaxing place to bike or walk. Neighborhood greenways incorporate signage to local destinations, safe crossings at major streets, and traffic calming.

Nationally, half of all car trips are under three miles long, a distance that can be biked in 20 minutes. More than a quarter of all car trips are under a mile. The city is considering protected bike lanes, wider sidewalks, and neighborhood greenways to make it easier for residents to walk or bike for shorter trips.

In order to build a healthier and safer city, the report recommends creating a broad network of Complete Streets. Specifically, the report recommends the City of St. Petersburg:

- Make protected bike lanes standard on major streets.
- Complete sidewalks and crosswalks around schools.
- Create a city-wide system of neighborhood greenways.
- Prioritize safety over speed by encouraging slower vehicle speeds through street design.
- Implement road diets, in which lanes are narrowed or re-purposed to make space for wider sidewalks, bike lanes, bus lanes, or on-street parking.
- Continue to seek additional resources so Complete Streets are fully funded.

"By implementing these recommendations, we can make St. Petersburg a city where every eight-year-old can bike to school and every eighty-year-old can walk to the grocery store," said Frank.

The full report is available at www.fcan.org/foundation.

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The Florida Consumer Action Network Foundation conducts research and public education on Florida consumer issues and seeks to empower consumers to fight back on utilities, health care, insurance, federal budget issues, transportation, and financial services reform. FCAN Foundation also sponsors non-partisan voter registration drives, voter education, and "Get Out The Vote" campaigns. Visit www.fcan.org/foundation.