

Mason Corridor Part Two: Dan Gould's Bright Idea

He'll deny it, but this former CSU vet professor is the brains behind the Mason Corridor
 BY BY TIM MADDOCKS
 FOR FORT COLLINS NOW,

It was 1993 and Colorado State University veterinarian professor Dan Gould had just given a presentation to community leaders called "The Auto-free Zone Action Plan." The plan was meant as a cure for Fort Collins traffic congestion. The remedy was to shut down College Avenue to cars and, instead, run buses powered by solar energy panels.

People, Gould recalled, were taken aback.

"People came up to me afterward and were like, 'that's so great, but we could never do that,'" said the now-retired professor.

The idea seemed lofty and utopian but when Gould helped the city figure out how to move his "Auto-free Zone" one street west to the 100 foot right-of-way running along the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad tracks, it signaled the birth of the Mason Corridor.

And in 2011 when energy-efficient buses start zipping up and down the Mason Corridor, Gould's once-offbeat idea will become a reality. Once completed, the corridor will be a \$74 million transportation/economic development spine running along Mason Street between Harmony Road and Cherry Street. It will combine

Kathleen Bracke, project manager of the Mason Corridor, said, "It was really a far reaching, visionary idea that reality is sort of catching up with."

Gould rejects any suggestion that he's responsible for that future reality, but Bruce Hendee, a transportation subcommittee member of UniverCity Connections, said there's nowhere else to put the credit.

"Dan Gould deserves full credit for the idea," Hendee said.

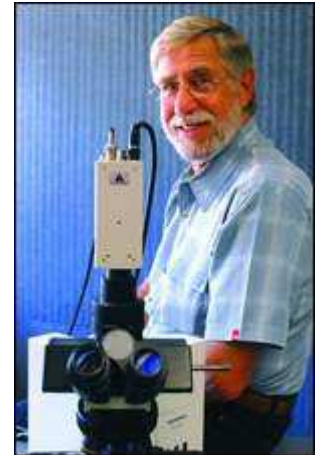
While Gould came up with his "Auto-free Zone" idea in 1993, the seeds were actually planted years before.

When Gould started teaching veterinarian pathology at CSU in 1980 he rode his bike from his home near Old Town to campus instead of driving because his working lab was at the veterinarian teaching school on Drake Road and his classes were on campus. It was easier for him to bike because even in the '80s campus traffic was congested.

Then in the late '80s Gould joined a group of bicyclists called Choice City Cycling Coalition. It started with about 50 to 60 members but ended up with about 10 or so committed cyclists.

The coalition brought simple issues to City Council, but issues that only cyclists would think of: Motion sensors on traffic lights that would detect bicyclists, bike lanes painted in the streets, simple maintenance for roadways to keep tire-puncturing debris from accumulating, and the creation of off-road trails. Eventually the group's advocacy led to the adoption of most its key concerns into city design standards. With few other causes to champion, the group dissolved.

"One thing we lamented, that wasn't addressed at the time, was that there were no good north-south bike routes. I think we even at one point fantasized about having one along the railroad tracks there," Gould said.



- Lourie Zipf



During his time in bike advocacy and with his commute every day to work, Gould was in a good position to contemplate Fort Collins' traffic problems. He analyzed the traffic system as if it were a pathological system, like a sick animal he would diagnose in his lab.

"My professional career has been the investigation of animal disease outbreaks," Gould said. "And I've always been interested in the functioning of complex systems, animal body systems, ecological systems that get out of whack. Transportation is a complex system that gets out of whack."

And Gould recognized in the molasses like-traffic flow to downtown and the campus congestion similar traffic flaws to what he saw in southern California, where he went to grad school. As three-lane traffic along College Avenue whittles to two lanes right at the heart of town—right at Old Town and CSU—the flow slows like a clogged artery.

"The development pattern of Fort Collins was on track to go like L.A.," said Gould. "The only way to get around town was by car which meant that activities would be distributed peripherally and would tend to make the older part of town obsolete."

Then in late 1992 a grant-funded community group called Challenge Fort Collins issued a call for citizens to design action plans to improve the future of Fort Collins. Gould decided that he ought to develop a plan to cure the congestion that he estimated would hurt Fort Collins in the long run.

"You could anticipate that fossil fuel prices were going to go up," Gould said, adding that another challenge was that the "College Avenue core" was a very high mix of educational, governmental, entertainment and cultural facilities. "What happens when everybody's converging in their cars is you either can't move or you can't park or both. You have congestion that ultimately limits the viability of economic activity in the area because people can't get there or can't park."

Gould put together a comprehensive, in-depth blueprint to close College Avenue to cars and to run solar-powered mass-transit vehicles instead. The plan called for parking clusters, sheltered bus stations, bike trails and photovoltaic power cells to run the vehicles along the corridor.

"It would be a kind of a mall," Gould said. "Like most things, I just busted my butt for deadline, last minute. But it was putting together things I had been thinking about for a long time."

Gould's plan was one of those crazy draw-it-on-a-napkin ideas, but he went so far as to research an electric bus system used in Santa Barbara and then calculated that system's power rates with solar energy testing done on Fort Collins.

He even had his calculations crosschecked by the chief engineer for Platte River Power Authority—who said Gould's plan would work.

In the summer of 1993, Gould's "Auto-free Zone" was chosen by Challenge Fort Collins as one of its nine action plans for the community. But while other ideas—like using public schools after-hours for Community Learning Centers—came to fruition, the practicality of closing down College Avenue stopped Gould's plan short.

"It was an over-the-top kind of proposal, but a really solid proposal. They really liked the vision," he said. "People really liked the idea but they couldn't figure out how to do it."

So for awhile the grand scheme lay fallow and Challenge Fort Collins ran its course, ending its existence at the end of 1993. But Gould wouldn't let the idea rest.

In 1996, he and other former members of Choice City Cycling Coalition joined the Fort Collins Transportation Board, a committee composed of citizen volunteers.

Tim Johnson, who was on the board at that time, recalls Gould bringing his "Auto-free Zone" to the table.

"I remember him calling me about it," Johnson said. "I started to think about it and I was like, 'Geez, I kind of like it,

Dan.”

But even with the plan in front of the transportation board, the main hurdle continued to be the daunting prospect of closing College Avenue, which is a state highway, to automobile traffic.

Then inspiration struck.

“After going about in different ways, we realized that there was a 100-foot right of way along the Northern Burlington Santa Fe (NSF) rail line,” Johnson said.

The Mason Street Corridor, as it was first called, was put on the ballot by City Council in 1998. Mason Street Corridor phases one and two were passed by voters, allowing funding for the plan and for the construction of north-south bike trails from Fossil Creek to Spring Creek along the corridor. The bike trail was completed in 2006.

Chris Kneeland, who founded Challenge Fort Collins with her husband and served on City Council from 1993 to 1999, said that it was Gould's efforts that allowed for the Mason Corridor initiative.

“Really, it was because Dan was so organized and so engaged and involved in it,” Kneeland said. “He really set the ground work for it moving forward. There was no way that it could have ever been done except for the fact he was just so passionate about it. And so it was easy for the council to support because Dan had done so much work on it.”

However, Gould gives credit to the 1997 City Council for getting the Mason Corridor on the 1998 ballot, calling the council “progressive minded.”

“One of the main overarching things was the persistence,” Gould said. “But the key was the 1997 City Council.”

Once the voters approved Mason Corridor initiative on the 1998 ballot Gould said it was the perseverance of the city and transportation staff that have brought the corridor to where it is today.

Gould, in fact, gives credit to all the city employees, volunteers and council members along the way but refuses it for himself, saying that it took 17 years of effort from many people to finally get the Mason Corridor's funding and design into its current incarnation.

But Gould is one of those people, as he continued serving on the transportation board through 2002 and volunteered on various committees through the master planning process.

And it was, after all, Gould's idea.

When asked how it feels to see his idea in final stages of planning, Gould said, “It's a nice feeling.” A slight smile flitted across his face. “I've thought about the details of it for a long time. I'm really interested in seeing how final design comes out.”

Then a bigger smile crossed his face as his thoughts turned to his prized bike trail.

“And when I ride on the bike trail, which I do quite a bit, it's just great to see so many bicyclists on the trail. The other day I was riding on it and there were all kinds of people out there.

“It's great to see.”

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