

Santa Fe Should Look To Iceland's System

Since this is the second to last column in a seven year series, I would like to invite readers to submit questions to the email address at the end of the article. Please submit questions relating to subjects of general public interest so that I can answer them in next month's final column.

Having recently traveled as a tourist to Reykjavik, Iceland, I observed several ways that Icelanders enhance their own and their many summer visitors' experience of their city. This might be relevant for Santa Fe since our local economy is based on services to tourism and the "retirement" community. I believe it is appropriate for us to try to learn how we might integrate the sustainable practices that have been successful for Iceland into our local business development efforts.

Santa Fe's inventory of "quality of life" assets includes our many museums, galleries, restaurants, wonderful nature sites and frequent cultural events. As the summer season is now in full swing, I believe that some simple actions on the part of our civic governments, volunteer organizations and out of school student youth groups could have a major positive impact on the economy.

With proper planning, some funding, and mostly unskilled labor, we could emulate Iceland's capital, Reykjavik, where pedestrians, bicyclists and clean energy small bus riders have precedence over private motor vehicles. They have tastefully designed and built walkways everywhere which promote safety and beauty. These involve multicolor raised bike paths, paved and gravel trails with subtle lighting and adequate signage. They crisscross the city allowing people and animals to move leisurely between hotels, restaurants, recreation, shops, museums and nature.

As our glorious New Mexican weather permits almost year round enjoyment of great attractions, it seems to me that the potholes, intermittent sidewalks and lack of an easy flow between tourist locations leaves too much to chance. Signage, with directions, would be helpful. We have clean buses that are under used. Why not offer free shuttle service from downtown to Museum Hill, to hiking at the ski area, and up Canyon Road to the Dale Ball trailheads? Once the Railyard blossoms, it too could be hooked into a robust civic recreational/cultural loop. City officials and planners should be looking to lead the way in these matters.

Many people and organizations have probably already thought of these ideas, so I wonder why we are not capitalizing on our best resources. Our city planning staff, transportation, parks and recreation division may have plans in mind, but as always, the question naturally arises as to where the money will come from to put such an integrated people friendly system into place.

I do not know much about the lodging tax, how it is levied or how the proceeds are used, but I imagine that once the new convention center and parking structures are up and running, if successful, they will throw off enough money to support the kind of community enhancement steps I outlined here. In conjunction with spending some of the city's tourist budget on advertising, I think that some of these funds would be best used to design, build and landscape walk/bikeways. After all, how many other

destination spots in the U.S. can people visit and not have to rely on a car to do all the wonderful things available here in our town?

Icelanders add flavor to their city's human byways with outdoor art, which is everywhere. Santa Fe has many artists who would probably donate, at least on a temporary basis, outdoor sculpture and craft constructions to adorn public spaces. Visitors to Iceland rarely see trash on these alternate people transportation routes as pride and regular cleanups scheduled by volunteer civic groups instill a clean aesthetic sense which permeates the landscape. School groups would get appropriate lessons on civic duty by so participating.

Community gardens in Iceland are sponsored by neighborhood organizations, and they occur in medians and behind the many simple benches that regularly mark the quieter path sections. Due to the common acceptance in Iceland of the existence of "hidden people", whom we know of as elves, dwarves, gnomes, trolls and fairies, one occasionally bumps up into a wee (little) bit of wilderness right in the middle of town. Santa Fe's long history and variety of traditional dwellings would seem to lend itself to this kind of people-friendly dynamic. It would take time to gather the necessary right of ways and to define the specific steps, but besides having a salubrious effect on tourism; the process of putting such a network into place would also build some strong person-to-person and group-to-group community ties.

A common sight in Iceland are out of school students dressed in bright colored jumpsuits, wearing gloves and hats to protect them from the elements, working in groups to continuously enhance and maintain the public greenways and their pedestrian protection devices. The kids there all have summer jobs and the community benefits in so many ways.

Reykjavik takes pride in its recreation facilities and for good reason. They have an unlimited supply of geothermal hot water which allows them to operate low cost, high quality outdoor pools. Given our access to solar hot water, we could emulate their facilities which have therapeutic hot pools of different temperatures. Studies have shown outdoor baths help to keep people's health robust, especially the elderly.

What a boon that would be for our retiree community! Hiking and mountain bike trails for people of all ability levels are close at hand to downtown Santa Fe. Let's bring all of these to the table when competing with other cities for convention business and vacation planning so as to spotlight our city's human qualities. It makes good business sense to do so. We will all enjoy the fruits of the labor.

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