

'Walkable' community expert offeres advice, critiques

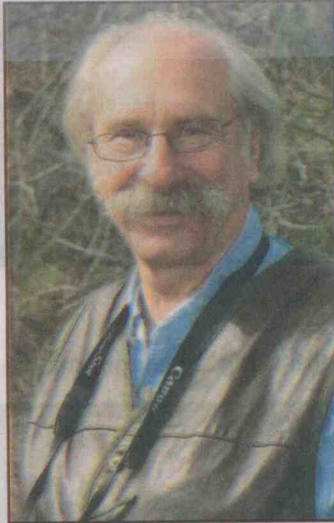
Speech at council meeting brought out local leaders

By Kollin Kosmicki
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Hollister had a visit last week from a nationally known advocate for walkable communities, and he stressed during the speech to local leaders and citizens that this area has the "bones" to thrive as a more environmentally friendly city.

Dan Burden, co-founder of the Walkable and Livable Cities Institute in Washington State, spoke to a packed Hollister City Hall chambers last week. The event was sponsored by the Free Lance and Pinnacle newspapers, the Economic Development Corp. of San Benito County, the Community Foundation for San Benito County, and the city and county. Before the talk, he spent a couple days in the area and took tours of the city and county.

Burden, a former National Geographic photographer and Florida's first



pedestrian traffic chief several years back, noted to the crowd how he is on the road most of the time doing speaking engagements and that he is home about 20 days a year. But he rarely has the chance for an introduction to a community like he had in Hollister.

He said there are a lot of cities in American that will make it, but also a lot that won't.

"You've got the right bones," Burden said, "the patterns, the history, the culture, the place."

Burden throughout the speech, which included

"You've got the right bones: the patterns, the history, the culture, the place."

Dan Burden

Advocate for walkable communities

dozens of photos on a projector, emphasized building cities that are focused on people, not on traffic. He made several mentions of the country's dependence on a decreasing supply of oil - "It doesn't matter how many wars we fight," he said - and how smaller towns that prepare for more walkable communities will succeed.

Burden used many examples from other cities - both positive and negative. He showed a photo of Friday Harbor in Washington, a crossing where streams of people had been walking, and called it that community's "100 percent location" where everybody "goes to see and to be seen by others."

As for Hollister, he noted its apparent absence. "Perhaps you know where it is and I just didn't have

enough time to find it myself."

He pointed to some other flaws here such as what he described as "overbuilt roads" - he pointed to the new bypass in particular - and also posted a photo of a residential neighborhood in Hollister and underscored the obvious, there being no sidewalks for pedestrians. In general, Burden said poor pedestrian planning means a community is under-serving about one-third of its population.

"This is stupid," he said, an adjective reiterated a few times during the talk. "You have a wonderful setting for color and pagentry, but you've got bad neighborhoods where no-

body can really walk unless they're in the prime of their life and quick to jump."

But Burden emphasized many advantages here that locals can use going forward. For one, he pointed to the luxury here of having the old cannery to work with near the downtown.

"You have the most incredible valley," he said, adding how planners have laid out Hollister streets well, how there are "waiting opportunities" for rail here, and that there are "many open acres right near downtown."

He went on: "This is real America, and you've got it."

Burden also talked quite a bit about the layout of buildings, where they are built in relation to the streets. He encouraged the development of Gavilan College's local campus downtown. And he lauded locals for keeping the San

Benito County Courthouse near downtown, though he did criticize the long setbacks from the street, in what he called a suburban design in an urban setting.

"Had you moved your county courthouse away and moved all those jobs out of town, that would have been a serious blow to the life of your town," he said. "This is rare, so hold onto that."

When Burden finished his talk, there were many people who stayed a while at city hall, according to an event organizer, Gavilan College Trustee Tony Ruiz, who referred to the setting as a "high energy level."

Ruiz marveled at one of the themes from Burden's speech.

"You don't have to have a lot of money," he said. "You have to have a vision. You have to have the businesses and investors trusting government."