

## Alternative transportation: Automobiles aside

By Karrie Carlson Change Happens, Daily Journal Media Dec. 13, 2023

Most people in this area head to their vehicle, get in, buckle up, start the engine and drive when running to the store, going to work or picking up kids at school. For the past few generations, this has become the primary means of transportation.

Jake Krohn, Fergus Falls, said, "Everyone living now has pretty much grown up in the era of the car and it has become the norm." This is especially true in rural areas that are more spread out and lack the public transportation options that larger cities have, generally leaving personal vehicles as the most popular way to move around town. The phrase alternative transportation shows where we are as a community," Krohn pointed out. "When you asked me to come in and do an interview on alternative transportation, it was like 'the alternative to what?' Driving. Driving is the standard for getting around. If you're out on a bike or even just out walking, that's seen as something different because you don't think of it as a primary mode of transportation anymore."

Krohn has been accustomed to traveling via bicycle for most of his life, as that is how he spent the majority of his '80s childhood traversing between Wahpeton destinations, much like most kids who grew up in that era. Often, the big change from bicycle to automobile comes once those bike riders get a driver's license. A large number of teens park the bike for the faster and more convenient car. This wasn't necessarily different for Krohn, but eventually, his outlook shifted.

"In college, I started thinking about (climate) more and read some books at an opportune time in my life that just kind of hit me the right way. I started thinking about the environment, transportation — just the way we build our cities and inhabit our space on the Earth and take up resources."

After living in a few larger cities while completing his education, Krohn moved back to Fergus Falls. He still tries to get to where he needs to be on bike or foot. He adds, "I'm no saint, I own two cars and can open my garage and get in a car and drive out whenever I need to, but I try — at least in town — I try to choose an alternative if I can."

The effects of vehicle operation on the environment is something that is becoming more apparent. Burning fossil fuels, mining those resources and using those resources to get the fossil fuels to consumers is a chain reaction that Krohn feels strongly about. "We're starting to see the effects of it and we are going to keep seeing the effects of it more and more. And it would be nice if we started to recognize that more and make changes to our behavior in recognition of that. It's kind of dark, but I don't think we're going to do it until it's too late. We don't like to change how we live; we don't like to change who we are and what we do until the moment is absolutely upon us to do it."

People make their own choices about what works for them as far as transportation, but Krohn explained his personal thought process. "The way I personally like to think about it is, is any business I have to do in town important enough? Do I really need to cash in on millions of years of decomposing plant matter and people mining these resources, extracting and processing this stuff just so I can haul my lazy butt to the grocery store? No, it's not really worth it. I'm not worth that. I can find another way to get down there." He recognizes that with a flexible job and schedule he is able to have the luxury of taking the extra time and planning it takes to get somewhere without using his car. Not everyone has the ability or desire to make the same choice.

One reason that driving has become the go-to for transportation in rural cities is the way the cities are built. Jake explained, "The deck is stacked against us culturally. We don't build our cities, we don't inhabit our cities, like we did 50 years ago."

There used to be neighborhood stores and corner stores that were close enough to put on your shoes and walk to get the few things you needed. That era of living, in a town like Fergus Falls, was different. With the proximity of the stores to residential areas now, people more than likely aren't going to walk to the store if they need to pick up a loaf of bread or a dozen eggs — they are going to get in their car and drive.

"Once you make that decision and get in your car and close that car door and start your car, any advantage that you may have to being close to something is kind of lost ... Well now I'm just going to drive somewhere where the price is lower and I can get everything I need all at once.

The advantage of proximity is sort of lost in the era of being able to just get in your car and drive anywhere. What's two minutes versus five minutes?"

Fergus Falls as a community has made steps toward becoming a more bicycle friendly town in recent years. Krohn stated: "Here in Fergus Falls, I think what we may be lacking in infrastructure we make up for in people that are passionate about it. There are really passionate people in the Pedal Fergus Falls community that believe in some kind of a change and want to see things that are different. And maybe it's harder to get that change to happen, but they're still good people doing good work to try to affect some change. I think there is a growing recognition of biking and walking as ways to kind of mitigate climate change — as a way to kind of push back against it a little bit."

Krohn said his one wish for the city would be that the officials and people that make the decisions for the city spend some time seeing what it's like from the seat of a bike or walking on the sidewalks for a week. He thinks a lot of eyes would be open about how the city could do better to accommodate other forms of transportation. He stated that his 8-year-old daughter has reservations about biking around town on her own due to the realities of being a small individual biking amidst moving vehicles.

"How are we designing the cities to accommodate someone like (my daughter)? How are we accommodating someone who's 10 times as old as she is, who may have issues walking down an icy sidewalk in the winter?" Compared to the experience of getting up on a winter morning after a snowfall, getting in your car and being almost guaranteed a clear route to wherever you need to go, there is a level of inequality toward those who choose, or due to circumstances can't, use a vehicle. "I wish that we would realize that and do better in making their experience as pleasurable as getting in your car and driving to the grocery store to get something." That is one way the community could get even closer to supporting people who have other ways to get around the city than on the streets in a car.

Choosing alternate methods of transportation outside of a motor vehicle is a choice that can benefit the environment, health or be driven from necessity, but it does provide a chance to see the world from a different perspective and for some, like Krohn, are in fact the preferred method of local transportation.

Jake Krohn helps riders of all ages enjoy biking through town with Cycling Without Age at the Over the River Holiday Festival in Fergus Falls.