Commuting After Coronavirus

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Commuting After Coronavirus, with Transportation Engineer Dr. Patrick Singleton

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Dr. Singleton is a self-proclaimed “transportation social scientist who found his way into an engineering department.” He knew he wanted to study transportation since he was in high school, but chose to go into civil and environmental engineering. Even though his degrees are all in engineering, he was trained in environments where being a social scientist was a value and informed his thinking. A variety of job opportunities in the public and private sector exposed him to a lot of different areas, but he remained attracted to studying how people travel. According to Dr. Singleton “transportation… is mostly about humans. How we travel and our decision making needs to be understood when discussing infrastructure. With 30-40 percent less traffic on Utah roads, will COVID-19 affect how we get around in the future? Today’s episode of Instead tackles how the pandemic is currently impacting how humans are getting places, and how transportation could be very different in the future. Our guest today is Dr. Patrick Singleton, assistant professor in transportation engineering at USU. His research spans travel behavior, transportation planning and travel demand modeling, but he specializes in walking and bicycling.
When asked about what changes we could see in transportation in the wake of COVID-19, Dr. Singleton’s first inclination is that we are going to revert a lot to what we did before in terms of travel patterns and how we travel. However, it could be an impetus for noticeable change in use of technology and doing activities that don’t involve travel. For example, he believes there will be a sustained increase in telecommuting, even if just for one or two days a week. It will also most likely help the already increasing trend of online shopping.
There could be sustainable damage done to public transportation, more likely in the short term than long term, as people most likely won’t be willing to be in cramped public spaces. Additionally, a lot of funding for public transportation comes from sales tax revenue. With not many people out there contributing to the economy, this revenue will drop dramatically and could potentially be a big hit to funding public transportation.
While there has been a lot less driving observed, walking and biking have stayed around the same observed level. There is still the need to be socially distant, but Dr. Singleton believes a good idea would be to turn a few travel lanes into bikes or walking lanes. Since Utah tends to operate with Right of Way laws rather than have designated pedestrian or biking spaces, this shift could flexibly accommodate the current needs of users, with more places for people to safely and effectively get around.
Our conversation with Dr. Patrick Singleton didn’t stop there. His study of transportation has led him to research topics such as teleportation and self driving cars. You can listen to this episode of Instead on your favorite podcast app. We’re grateful to Dr. Singleton for taking the time to share his research and insights with us.