



Ron Sims

An Elected Official's Perspective

Ron Sims, executive of King County, Washington, is working to make the county—which includes the City of Seattle—the healthiest in the nation. In an interview with the Active Living Network, Sims discusses the importance of designing for active living—and why he's taking it personally.

B: When did the notion of designing healthy communities first enter your radar screen, and what caught your attention about it?

RS: I think great staffing, quite frankly. It is nice to have a planner the caliber of a Karen Wolf [King County senior policy advisor]—an avid bike rider and swimmer—and when she raised the issue of how our community plans should look, it was easy to see, “why isn’t public health involved?” We are a flattening organization, and flattening isn’t just getting rid of middle managers, it is getting people to look across disciplines. You had the planning element and then you ask what else we could be doing, so you have the integration of public transportation and that is in terms of the bus service. You look at the network of trails and you look at public health organization. We were flattening and looking across sectors, and then we had the very powerful memo about whether or not we were designing our communities correctly.

It was interesting because we had decided probably not. We realized we were missing something key that needed to be turned on—and that was to put everybody in the same room. It took two years for everybody to speak the same language because public health has its view. The road and bus people have their views. We were just trying to get everybody to speak a common language. Everyone speaks his or her own discipline. We just had to flatten, break down the silos and have very well trained and educated people develop a common set of goals and principles. And then a language formed—which we could all agree on—and it worked very successfully.

AL: How has the role of promoting health played into transportation development?

RS: I will give an example that occurred just last week. Our public health department has embraced the issue of integration across disciplines. We had a forum on obesity, where we as region said that we would attack it. It involved King County, the University of Washington, public health departments and then a variety of backgrounds to come to that conference—which is the first of its kind.

It was really interesting because we no longer have to argue. One of the remarks I made in my talk was that the number one killer in America is sedentary lifestyles, lack of exercise and what we eat. That is particularly true if people are poor or of color. It is often true of the population generally, and all these heads were going up and down. People got it. I did not have to sell that idea. Because whether you are looking at the physical infrastructure, or health, or people who had

more of a sociology background—all the people there accepted the fact that how we build and plan has incredible influence on health outcomes.

When I was giving a speech down in San Francisco recently, someone asked me the question, “how do you reach African American and Latino natives from across the country that are now becoming the heads of large government? And is that going to be a continued change over the next ten years?” And I said, when I go to the meetings and talk about the need for growth management, the need for open space and trails, the need to modify their buses you have a fundamental responsibility to ensure that people in large urban areas no longer have a shorter lives and a very diminished quality of life—because you have not designed your neighborhoods with parks and trails to keep them well. You are sanctioning people to early death, and that is inexcusable for a public official.

Other people were stunned at my bluntness—and I said you have to be blunt. When I talk to my peers they tease, there are not many African Americans left. I think this is going to be my third term but they want to talk about the communities, healthcare, poor schools, social systems, and they have an incredible list of things they have to challenge.

These communities do not connect anymore. You can have safe streets by design. You can get people out of their house so they can venture to parks and places where they are safe—well-lit streets to get them out of the house and getting them moving. The number one thing they should focus on is making these things better in African American communities, Latino communities. Stores are inundated with fast food, and when you go to the store you cannot get fresh food—and that should be something that is challenged as an issue of class and race in America. If you do that you create forces for large urban areas in America. This is an issue for America.

Active Living is smart. Walking, bicycling, exercising—good buses, small tight communities where you know your neighbor—all of these things are really good. Because when you have that social network—and particularly active living communities—it is really interesting to watch how kids learn.

We can talk about why schools don’t work. It is because they are no longer community connected. So you create your community connectors. Those are the things that give a young person a sense of place and purpose. It is up to people in this country to redesign neighborhoods. We are trying to do that here.

Hence, get people out of their cars and walking, bicycling—putting in the types of infrastructures you need. Because we do not like sprawl. Sprawl is the antithesis of what we want. We find when we survey kids—in cul-de-sacs in King County—we find that kids do not come out. They know two or three other kids in that area. You can design the communities so their friendships are much broader. And even though people may live in more stability, the fastest growing communities that we have in King County have been specifically designed to encourage walking, bicycling, and children being able to connect with other children.

The average house is being sold for \$400,000...now we are designing communities for low-income people to achieve the same thing. So everyone benefits from the sense that communities connect. And you have to create activity. Motion is the key.

Then it is interesting—people are becoming more health conscious. I live in area called Mt. Baker. But the neighborhood that I am closest to is called Columbia City. The interesting thing is that it is an area where a lot of poor people live. Because people are growing food, we try and connect it to the stores and local farmer's markets. The farmer's market in Columbia City is every Wednesday starting on May 3rd—all the way through until October. We will generate a million dollars because people want that farmer's market. It is fresh food. We can tell people that it is cheaper to buy fresh food than fast food—which people do not know. Fast food is not very good for people. But it is also expensive because you are paying someone else for his or her labor. This is a community that is transforming very nicely.

White Center will be the same kind of community—a large, urban, poor community, 173 different languages, a lot of immigrants—and a community that has been ignored by King County. When I became county executive, I said that I would not do that because it is so linked to the community I grew up in, which is Spokane, which is also very large. It allowed us to do a lot of things, to work with the housing authority on a brand new development that included trails. It was community that was getting something new—it wanted to connect.

There are now two schools in that community. We just built a technology access foundation. It is directed by an African-American woman, who was an early member of Microsoft. She will spend the rest of her life teaching young people how to program computers and interface with technology. So she started a program called CAP, which was in Columbia City, that has now been moved to a brand new building and they are constructing at White Center. You will have a walkable community. You are going to have a community of great pride and heart and trails and playgrounds both on a large scale—what we call pocket parks. We are going to have areas where people can congregate, see each other and know their neighborhoods, and move around freely. Get people from a sedentary lifestyle to being able to walk and see people.

Seattle has Holly Park, which is an old 1940s project. They rebuilt it into a walkable community with places where people can sit down. We have refined it more since then as we have learned from experience and now we have a mature concept. It is easy to redefine, but it requires work with the planning mechanisms, and you provide people with information they need so that developers and officials can see it.

And the fundamental issue of healthcare rests with the healthcare system. Obesity will last as long as we do not get people out of their cars—as long as we do not have trails and parks. And that requires us to plan—and build those trails and parks—and realize that in the end you move across race and income in urban areas. The key is that we know that exercise is the best healthcare in America.

AL: What would you say to developers regarding gentrification and active living design for areas of middle- and lower-income families?

RS: People criticize gentrification, however I speak of it as re-investment. If you are in a neighborhood that is being gentrified then for the first time older people are getting money out of their property. I used to complain that if you are a senior citizen, African American, and you own a house in the Century area; your house—in terms of square footage—will sell less than another house in a different neighborhood.

The key is not to complain about the re-investment, but to figure out how to go into areas where you have predominantly poor people—where you do not have first time home purchase opportunities—and redesign those areas. You do that by a conscious decision. The government has a great capacity to do that and everybody makes money. We've had developers—who are now doing the traditional suburban style development—who rushed in to do low-impact designs in nice, typical low-income neighborhoods. There are opportunities for first time home purchases, as well as for people who are below the 40th percentile of income in our area. Yet these neighborhoods are doing well. There is integration of State Housing Authority, State Housing Finance Commission, and grants coming from the state, grants from King County. It is all working to develop a market.

Developers are doing really well. To lose money in King County means you are trying to do it. You are not a good businessperson because everybody else in the area is making money, whether it is for low-income people or for first time home purchasers. That is the key. Don't just sit there and watch it happen and complain about gentrification, or the validity of banks and home insurance. The goal is to make a conscious political decision where you want to tackle the issue of who gets housing. We have a report on housing that comes out every year. And every year we remind people that we are building this housing for middle-income, blue collar, and first-time buyer, or people who are poor. Now it is widely discussed. It is a matter of the political systems being forced to deal with it and to move aggressively for it. It has changed.

We have busing authorities here that have used their powerful domain well and discretely. They have formed partnerships. They are now the mechanism—and you can provide housing for first-time home purchasers, low-income families, as well as people who are disabled and senior citizens. We have a group called Home Site, which does the same thing, and all of them are now accepting the fact that it is not just density that you want—but also walkability. Not just getting stuff built, but connecting people is very important, and for people to get out of their units—whether they are townhouses, single-family dwellings. Their goal is to get people out of the home, which is fantastic. We do not have to fight anymore. It really helps that we guarantee the city of Seattle's loans, but when you have two governments saying, “we do not want to guarantee housing for housing's sake, we want to know how this fits into an overall plan that we have for livable and active communities to lower health risk—make people feel safe”. Home Designs are really nice and the walkable element in all of them is really great.

AL: How can the nonprofit sector work with private developers and government agencies to help increase access to parks and get people out of their houses?

Nonprofits add value. What's nice about all of the jurisdictions is that they're beginning to look at the number of parks they have per capita. I remember a project we were working on where the people demanded a park, and the people came back and said we're not going to require a park in that area because they have more parks per capita. But there are other areas where they don't have them. So people are beginning to move their investments.

The nonprofit community is the developer's best friend. Nonprofits have the capacity to generate funds that the developer's don't. If I were a developer I would clearly go out and make contacts, with TPL [Trust for Public Land], with the Cascade Land Conservancy. There are all of these groups out there that are very active; looking at trails; looking at parks. I ask them, what do you need, what are you looking at? Is it just a green belt? Or is it looking at a building that needs to be torn down because the neighborhood is devoid? That's how we change neighborhoods in big urban areas.

And it doesn't have to be a basketball court all the time. We had a program here years ago where we asked kids what they like to do after school, and do you go to the neighborhood community centers? Four out of five said they weren't going to community centers. And when we asked why, they said, "We're not ballers." These are kids whose athletic promise is nonexistent. That was the only alternative. They were saying, "What else can we do?" It was really interesting. They wanted to be tutored. Where? In a library. So people began to go to tutor programs in libraries. They liked computers but they didn't want computers in a community center, for the same reason. They think only athletes go there. You put them in a Boys and Girls Club or a YMCA and then you can sell those programs.

You can do something else. You can have them just go out and go throw a ball around, kick a ball around, walk, ride, camp, whatever. And those programs are beginning to do that. They're not concerned with competition. You can go out and play basketball and not be on a league or on a team. You can do that with baseball. They're exploring what kids wish to do as a matter of their physical health. I wouldn't be surprised at the number of kids who got rejected going to community centers because they weren't exceptional athletes.

Now, through the nonprofit community organizations that are out there, those kids having access. They are moving away from government-sponsored programs, which is very fascinating. So I would, again, if I were a developer, give voice to funding infrastructure for the nonprofit community based organizations dealing with a variety of kids and a variety of settings—offering more whole and complete programs—and work with them to build parks and trails. I'd do that on the basis that developers can do it far more imaginatively.

Instead of trying to use up every square inch of block, figure out where the platform areas are that give people a sense that this is their community—so they can see. One of the most important

things now is for people to be able to feel that the community doesn't overwhelm them—that they are a part of it. So scale is really important. And if you can't control scale you've got to figure out what other features you can put in that allow them to feel that they're not going to live and die and go unnoticed, but they're a part of the fabric of the community.

AL: After many years of effort and leadership, the Sammamish Trail has opened. In your view what are the challenges to building new parks and trails?

We could have opened the trail much earlier had we agreed to put the bicyclers in a dangerous position. So the idea was to stay true to what trails are—safe places for people to get active. There's a lot of litigation. The other side spent over a million dollars—Federal Court of Appeals twice, Federal Court three times, State Supreme Court twice, State Court of Appeals four times. It just required us to stay on our goal. This was a publicly owned trail with a very, very, very good view that we thought was an important connector—a trail that we needed.

We should not retreat from the goal. We should look at the goal as a marathon, not as a sprint. Not as something for political gain, but as something future generations would appreciate. There's no question in my mind that future generations will not know of the fight—will not even care about that—but will very much appreciate the trail. It's an active trail. It's packed now. Everybody's on that trail, which is what we said would happen. You build the trails and people will fill them up.

The other thing that helped us on that trail was to realize that you need a stakeholder—and you get them early—so you get people that are proponents of bike and pedestrian trails on board. You talk about the health benefits to commuters because they want them. And now we're focused on not only acquiring another eight miles of trail, but also finishing off some trail improvements. We have 175 miles of trail. We'll finish off those improvements and then add another hundred miles to the trail. And then you connect them to communities. What's interesting is that if you get a trail that's strategically important to people you know they're going to connect to it. We have a negotiation going on now on a trail that runs north and south in King County that connects every trail. It will be the grandparent of all trails. It's just so strategically located. Seize the opportunities.

Atlanta, Georgia, has seized the opportunity on a trail that's going to cost a lot of money. But I would tell anyone in Atlanta that the amount of money you spend will pale—because of the benefit you'll have. A loop trail is what they're going to have in their communities. Any elected official—when the railroad says to you that they have an abandoned railroad to sell—should buy it. I'd buy it, I really would. It's just really well worth it. A lot of trails being bought now are for a bus route for transit. If I were going to have a bus route for transit—with clean buses on it—I'd also have it built for bicyclists as well. That's where L.A. is. They're buying BART. But their bicycle system, quite frankly, is not very good. They have rich opportunities. They have far more capacity for bicycle trails. Here we're lucky because the bicycle community was very strong early.

So the retrofit of the next 520 bridge—which runs from UW [University of Washington] over to east King County—will have bicycle capacity. It will have some lanes for bicycles. That's going to be very important.

But the Sammamish trail just reminded us of what's important. For whatever reason people wanted to walk around and see their neighborhoods, it hasn't happened. East Sammamish Trail is for everybody. But the citizens of Sammamish have taken personal ownership because it's their way of being able to walk up and down and see a neighbor they haven't seen in awhile, or seeing their neighbors, or seeing a friend they didn't even know was in their community. It was a great investment. Stakeholders—when we do it now—get our public information, because the press likes contact support.

So you have to get your message out to the public. So no matter what the opponents say, you have a constant message going out to the public about why you're doing it. And that's why we had strong public support—no matter what the papers wanted to do. Now, we talked to the reporters, which helped a lot, and they began to write about the potential, and its possibility, and why it needed to occur. And that became a selling point. But if we didn't have the Cascade Bicycle Club and Cascade Land Conservancy we would never have done this. And this goes to a partnership. The Cascade Land Conservancy bought it. We bought it from them. They had the money to do it much more quickly. Had we tried to be the purchaser of it we would have been probably still trying to acquire it today because the political forces were not necessarily reflective of the community interests. It would have been very challenging. So the nonprofits came in and got the work done and came back to us with an opportunity to partner with them. It's a great trail, a great trail, right along the lake.

On active living, I'd like to say is that it's going to be a natural outcome. It's not the inevitability of change. I don't think that's true. I think every community is different and needs a catalyst, a reason. In ours it was this convergence of trying to address public health needs on the obesity epidemic, healthcare costs, smarter land use decisions, connectivity—which is key—having an efficient transportation system, trying to make growth management work so we had a definitive urban/rural line to have sustained force agriculture here—and do that all at once. I think we're really close to doing it right.

Once in awhile you make an error. But when you look at the foot of Snoqualmie Falls, which is a magnificent falls, you see the hillside and you realize that was all going to be developed until we worked out an agreement with the developer to buy all of that property. Then we were able to buy another parcel earlier than we planned. If you look at the Raging River, which is a wonderful, cold river surrounded by forests here, you realize that all of that was going to be developed along I-90. And we were able, again, to work with the developer to buy the Raging River property.

I flew over the Hancock property, which used to be a tree farm owned by Weyerhaeuser, and then they sold it to the Hancock Timber Company. It's 95,000 acres and we bought the conservation and development rights off of the property for \$22 million. But when somebody tells you it's

twice as large as Seattle's footprint, or five times as large as Bellevue's, you don't think about it until you fly over it, as we did last week. Then you realize that a lot of it is flat and a lot of it has access to the road. So we perceived it as a potential development threat—that we were going to have a large, magnificent forest with 17 lakes developed. When you fly over it you wonder who is going to get up there. But then you see that they had already started developing it. You fly east of the city of Carnation, and when you get through the Cascades, you see this wonderful valley, which takes you to Skykomish—the far northeast corner of King County. And we shoot down the north side of the Hancock forest and see the border of Snohomish County, which is totally developed. And then you have your forest just to their south. It's just extraordinary.

This tells you that you can make really great decisions. But you need to make those in perpetuity so you can have active cities. So our story is you have to hold the line—but you don't hold the line for line's sake. You have to put in the infrastructure that allows people to enjoy a number of amenities. But the key amenity, really, is just a health one. Get out of your house. You connect when you're out of your house. You talk to your neighbor when you're out of your house.

You look across this bay and you see Alki. That's public ownership all along the shoreline. I don't know who did that. But in the end if you look at the West Seattle community, or, if you're a bicycle rider, everyone's been to Alki because the best view of Seattle is from the other side of Seattle. But someone bought it up. They probably weren't thinking about health benefits, but my God, they're there by the ton.

I live in a neighborhood where you start at the Mount Baker beach and you can go for three miles until you reach an area called Seward Park, which is 1.8 miles around, again all shoreline. When the Olmsteads came out here—which were a family with a vision—their architects had this vision to conserve land. They probably weren't thinking at the time either about community connections, or active living, at all. But if you look at the area it's one of the safest bicycle routes. You have people walking it and jogging it all of the time. You see that stuff and you say, "What is our contribution, what is our commitment?" You know years from now when people look at our parks, or they look at our boulevards, our trails, will they look at our generation as a generation that was talented, that learned from and embraced the past? Those approaches to getting people out of their home and living healthy and feeling that they are a part of their community—mental health values, physical health values—it's good for the soul. The neighborhoods are better off and we'll be gone and all of the kids will be happy.

AL: What's the legacy we're trying to leave for our kids?

RS: We want a healthy population. Anybody who lives here, we want them to have good health. Type 2 diabetes is the greatest threat to American healthcare and American healthcare can't afford it. We can't afford it. It's a tremendous cost. It will break the back of the American healthcare system.

The federal government will soon arrive at the same conclusions as we have as public health officials realize, that the investments we've made in parks and trails and trying to keep people

physically fit and giving them access to healthy foods is far, far cheaper. I'd like our legacy to be for people who come here to have clean water and clean air and are able to sustain their health. I'd like to be able to believe that the quality of life will be good for not only me as a senior citizen, but for other senior citizens. We can learn that walking and exercise is a way to avoid the early onset of type 2 diabetes—and have a good quality of life in the future. And that we can look our kids and smile, and see kids that have had a chance—the opportunity to make changes to their health. Will every kid do that? Probably not. But the reason should not be that they were denied the opportunity to do so. The opportunity should always be presented. It should not be a hurdle they are going over. It should be a door that they're able to walk through.

Ron Sims is a dynamic leader who has embraced active living in his role as an elected official and in his personal life (he's training for the Seattle to Portland Bicycle Classic in July).