

What's Up Transcript (Season 4, Ep. 16)

Carl Ahrens: I believe College Station has some of the best neighborhoods for cycling. You simply share the road with vehicles.

Grace Hallowell: I agree.

Carl Ahrens: It is all about sharing the road.

Jesse DiMeolo: People are often confused about the difference between a bike lane and a bike route. Bike lanes are striped with specific markings on the pavement. A bike route is usually designated by a green sign. You might also see a "sharrow" in the street—a bicycle marking with two arrows. This indicates that cyclists and motorists must share the same space.

Grace Hallowell: I did not know that. What's up, College Station? I'm Grace Hallowell, and today I'm joined by Carl Ahrens and Jesse DiMeolo from Planning and Development Services. Welcome to the show.

Jesse DiMeolo: Thank you for having us.

Grace Hallowell: We are excited to discuss transportation and cycling. Our city has a unique setup where active transportation plays a major role. To start, tell us about yourselves and your work.

Jesse DiMeolo: I have been with the city since 2020. I started on the development review team, which provided great experience seeing the rapid growth of the city. I transitioned to the transportation team about 18 months ago. Transportation has always been my passion, especially cycling, walking, and public transit.

Grace Hallowell: What about you, Carl?

Carl Ahrens: I have been with the city for three and a half years. I attended Texas A&M University and have lived in town since 2016. I have always had a passion for urban planning and transportation. I grew up skateboarding to class and around my hometown of San Marcos. Bicycling was a natural progression. It is rewarding to see new projects, like new paths, come to fruition.

Grace Hallowell: College Station is quite flat, which must be easier for skateboarders compared to hillier regions.

Jesse DiMeolo: We were discussing Minneapolis recently. It is a very bike-friendly city despite having six months of winter. If they can do it there, we can certainly do it here with our sunny weather, flat terrain, and young population.

Grace Hollowell: What is one thing you wish people knew about your area of expertise?

Jesse DiMeolo: When people hear "transportation," they immediately think of cars. While that is a major component, there are many other ways to get from point A to point B. We are developing an active transportation master plan to encompass all modes of travel. We must balance the needs of all users.

Grace Hollowell: What is a common misconception about transportation?

Jesse DiMeolo: A "hot button" topic is medians.

Carl Ahrens: Yes, definitely.

Jesse DiMeolo: People often think the city is solely responsible for building them. We have to explain the jurisdictional differences.

Grace Hollowell: Many residents don't realize that several major roads are controlled by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), not the city. We have limited say in those areas.

Carl Ahrens: Medians aren't designed to inconvenience people; they eliminate hazardous left turns that contribute to crashes. It is a matter of balance.

Jesse DiMeolo: Exactly. We have TxDOT roads, city roads, university roads, and private roads. It requires multiple jurisdictions, including the county, working together.

Carl Ahrens: Each entity has different goals. State highways focus on moving goods and people in and out of the city, while we focus on local transportation.

Grace Hollowell: What is your favorite part of the job?

Carl Ahrens: I love getting out into the field for site visits. I enjoy riding my bike to see project sites before and after construction to see how they have changed. I also enjoy community engagement, like our recent open house for the active transportation plan.

Grace Hollowell: You are certainly an active group. Walkable paths near where people live and work are essential.

Jesse DiMeolo: You notice much more detail when walking or biking compared to driving. It provides a different perspective.

Grace Hollowell: How does your work impact the community?

Jesse DiMeolo: Traffic congestion is often a top concern in resident surveys. We use that feedback to improve the system. Again, it is a balance between maintaining traffic flow and ensuring the safety of vulnerable road users.

Grace Hallowell: What are your favorite memories from past cycling events?

Carl Ahrens: I enjoy seeing how people decorate their bikes. During a "Cycle with Council" event held on May 4, a former council member's husband dressed as Darth Vader. It was a great way to kick off the event.

Jesse DiMeolo: The Jingle Bell Ride is also great. We've had a few Santas show up for that.

Grace Hallowell: These events are a fun way to stay active and meet neighbors.

Jesse DiMeolo: We are trying to increase these events to at least four times a year.

Grace Hallowell: How can residents contact you?

Carl Ahrens: Residents can email us or visit our office on the first floor of City Hall.

Jesse DiMeolo: Our contact information is also available on the city website.

Grace Hallowell: Can you provide an overview of what "active transportation" means for College Station?

Jesse DiMeolo: It refers to replacing vehicle miles traveled with other modes, such as biking, walking, or scootering. It can be human-powered or battery-assisted.

Carl Ahrens: It also addresses the "last mile" of a commute. If a bus drops you off blocks away from your destination, active transportation fills that gap.

Grace Hallowell: Why is it important for a growing city to invest in micro-mobility?

Carl Ahrens: With a major university and a young population, we have a unique opportunity. Many students don't drive to campus. By connecting our existing facilities, we can alleviate traffic congestion and provide residents with transportation options that don't rely on personal vehicles.

Jesse DiMeolo: Available land is being developed rapidly. Building more travel lanes and parking spaces consumes a lot of space and often encourages more driving—a concept known as induced demand. Other modes help alleviate that pressure.

Grace Hallowell: Can you explain the Active Transportation Hub?

Jesse DiMeolo: It is a one-stop webpage for bike maps, pedestrian trails, and event information. It is a great resource for planning trips.

Grace Hallowell: How does the city use data to plan improvements?

Jesse DiMeolo: Our work is data-driven, combining quantitative data like crash maps with qualitative data from public surveys. This helps us identify and fix "hotspots" where accidents frequently occur.

Grace Hallowell: Public feedback is vital. Can you share an example of how it has influenced a project?

Carl Ahrens: We recently conducted feasibility studies for corridors like Anderson Street and Holleman Drive. At open houses, residents suggested shifting crossings or changing bike lanes to shared-use paths. Their input directly shapes the final designs.

Grace Hallowell: What infrastructure is included in the network?

Carl Ahrens: We have bike lanes, vertically separated lanes along George Bush Drive, and off-street paths through our park systems.

Jesse DiMeolo: And bike routes. As I mentioned, these are signed routes where cyclists share the road with motorists.

Grace Hallowell: How is the city connecting neighborhoods to parks, schools, and the university?

Jesse DiMeolo: Our master plan uses four levels of "traffic stress." Level one is the lowest stress, suitable for children. We aim to create better connectivity for all ages and abilities to key destinations.

Grace Hallowell: What are the biggest challenges in designing a system for drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians?

Carl Ahrens: Safety at intersections is the biggest hurdle. We work to eliminate blind spots and ensure pedestrians have enough time to cross safely using features like pedestrian islands.

Jesse DiMeolo: We have to prioritize safety over convenience. This might mean optimizing signals to give pedestrians and cyclists a head start before vehicles are allowed to turn.

Grace Hallowell: The "Cycle with Council" event is coming up. What should people expect?

Carl Ahrens: The event is May 2, starting at City Hall. It's a chance for residents to meet council members and the mayor while highlighting new projects, like the shared-use path on Lincoln Avenue.

Jesse DiMeolo: This is the first time we are starting the event at City Hall.

Grace Hallowell: It is a free event. Do participants need to bring their own bikes?

Carl Ahrens: Yes, you must bring your own equipment. We encourage any form of micro-mobility, including scooters or skateboards.

Grace Hallowell: What are the main goals of the Active Transportation Master Plan?

Jesse DiMeolo: The goals are safety, connectivity, and encouragement. We want to support these modes as primary transportation, especially since owning a vehicle can cost around \$12,000 annually.

Grace Hallowell: What does success look like in five to 10 years?

Carl Ahrens: A more cohesive, connected network and a significant reduction in crash data.

Jesse DiMeolo: We've seen about 120 crashes involving active transportation users over the last five years. Success is seeing those numbers trend downward.

Grace Hallowell: Let's end with a rapid-fire round. Solo ride or group ride?

Carl Ahrens: Solo, so I can listen to music and go fast.

Jesse DiMeolo: I enjoy group rides to Lick Creek Park.

Grace Hallowell: Favorite post-ride meal?

Jesse DiMeolo: Coffee.

Carl Ahrens: Blackwater Draw.

Grace Hallowell: Dream biking destination?

Carl Ahrens: Albania.

Jesse DiMeolo: A tour of all of Europe.

Grace Hallowell: Advice for beginners in College Station?

Carl Ahrens: Just start. It becomes a habit quickly.

Jesse DiMeolo: Study the maps first so you can find safer, low-traffic alternate routes.

Grace Hallowell: One myth about biking you'd like to bust?

Jesse DiMeolo: That it is for recreation only. It can be a daily lifestyle and a primary way to commute.

Grace Hallowell: Thank you both for being here. That's what's up!

