

What's Up, College Station? Transcript

Season 4, Episode 38

Grace Hollowell: What's up, College Station? I'm Grace Hollowell, and today I'm joined with Carl, our staff transportation and mobility planner from Planning and Development Services. Big title! Hi, Carl.

Carl Ahrens: Hi. How are you doing?

Grace Hollowell: I'm doing well. Welcome back to the show. I feel like we're always talking about some sort of fun bike ride with y'all, which I know is part of what you do, but not everything. To kick things off today, tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do for the city.

Carl Ahrens: My name is Carl Ahrens, and I'm a transportation and mobility planner for the city. The daily scope of our work involves long-range planning efforts. We recently adopted our active transportation master plan, so we've done a lot of work with our long-range division, other divisions throughout our department, and the city as a whole. I also review development plans. As any development comes in around town—whether it's residential, commercial, or a roadway project—we review those plans to ensure they're up to code, carrying out the goals of our master plan, and achieving all those elements.

Grace Hollowell: Is this something you always envisioned yourself doing as a kid, or did you go through school thinking otherwise?

Carl Ahrens: I did, actually. I grew up playing SimCity—that was my favorite video game. My dad worked in Philadelphia, so I traveled up there to visit him on weekends a lot.

Grace Hollowell: Fly Eagles!

Carl Ahrens: Exactly! He'd fly down to spend the weekend with us, but I really enjoyed my time in Philadelphia. I was able to see how cities outside of Texas were designed. Growing up on the I-35 corridor in San Marcos, Texas, I was always fascinated with transportation planning. Back then, it was focused on how to relieve congestion on I-35. As I traveled more with my family, I realized public transportation and designing cities to be more walkable and bikeable are the ultimate ways to relieve traffic congestion. I got really fascinated with that, went to A&M for urban planning, and here I am.

Grace Hollowell: Here you are! College Station is a unique area. We have people driving cars, biking, walking, and lots of students on e-bikes and e-scooters. What you do is very important to our population here.

Carl Ahrens: It is. We have the full array of transportation and micromobility options. When I was a student at A&M, I rarely drove my car to campus. I relied on the bus system or rode my skateboard to class. Having that firsthand experience really helped shape my career at the City of College Station. I know how it feels to walk and bike around town—not just to campus, but going to the grocery store holding bags in each hand.

We have many modes of transportation, whether it's students using buses, bikes, skateboards, or scooters, or residents who don't rely solely on automobiles. However, we do live in a place where the automobile takes a front seat and is currently the main driver of how we get around. Finding a balance comes down to taking public feedback and understanding the challenges people face on both sides. We work with active transportation users, but it's equally important to listen to drivers and meet in the middle. It's an ongoing balance and makes for some fun challenges.

Grace Hollowell: What is your favorite part about your job so far?

Carl Ahrens: It's changed over time. Initially—and always—it's the public communication and interaction, whether at events or when gathering feedback for future plans. But having been here for close to four years, one of my new favorite things is seeing projects I worked on when I first started begin to take shape. Not all of them are physical construction; some are programs, like a walk and bike audit program we're bringing online. As a planner, things can be slow to materialize because you're planning well in advance, so seeing those efforts come to fruition is really cool.

Grace Hollowell: We had Heather Wade on talking about the Harvey Road corridor, and she mentioned the same thing. You start planning now, and the end result is years down the line. Seeing it come to fruition is very cool.

Today, we're talking about a fun new event. Everyone is familiar with the Cycle with Council event and the Jingle Bell Ride, but this year we're hosting a Biketober event. For those hearing about this for the first time, what is Biketober, and what can people expect?

Carl Ahrens: Biketober is going to be our fall community bike ride, organized in partnership with Sister Cities, which represents Bryan and College Station. One of their representatives attended our Cycle with Council event, and we connected over bicycling. He noted the success of Cycle with Council and suggested collaborating with Sister Cities.

The opportunity arose through our sister city in northern Germany, Greifswald. They celebrate Oktoberfest, but in northern Germany, it focuses on the arrival of autumn and the fall harvest rather than the Bavarian beer and pretzels approach we take in Texas. We realized there was grant funding available, and we were one of only two cities in the United States awarded a grant to host this event.

It's more than just a bike ride; it will lead into a spring cultural connection event with culinary aspects. While our past community rides were just people riding and hanging out briefly, this grant allows us to create a full event with food trucks, music, and activities. We want to highlight our sister city and foster cultural exchange.

Greifswald is extremely bicycle-friendly with a huge share of residents biking everywhere. We want to adopt that mindset here. We know Texas is much hotter, but it comes down to public education and mindset changes. We'll have safety events and turn the smaller parking lot into an interaction zone for kids and adults with educational booths and safety exercises. It starts early and wraps up around midday so everyone can go about their Saturday.

Grace Hallowell: I remember those rides as a kid growing up near Lake Erie. Even though I was more of a rollerblader, waking up early and biking around the lake with family created lasting memories.

The bike ride is 8.6 miles. Can you walk us through the route and what riders will experience?

Carl Ahrens: We'll roll out from City Hall around 9:30 AM. I advise everyone to arrive between 8:30 AM and 9:00 AM to register and complete any quick bike checks or tire fill-ups.

From City Hall, we'll head through the Texas A&M campus—down Foster, over to Walton, down New Main, onto Bizzell, and connecting to South College. We'll follow the shared-use path down South College into Bryan. This is our first ride connecting College Station into Bryan. From there, we'll take Cavett, Hall, and Hollydale, go through the roundabout across South College, and enter Midtown Park.

At Midtown Park, we'll stop at the City of Bryan's Farmers Market for a 30 to 40-minute layover. Folks can walk around, shop, and enjoy music and festivities. After the layover, we'll take the same route back to City Hall, where we'll have music, food, games, and events until about 1:00 PM. Additionally, Sister Cities is providing bags so participants can carry home anything they purchase at the market.

Grace Hallowell: What makes this route a good introduction to cycling around Bryan-College Station?

Carl Ahrens: You get to experience a full range of cycling facilities, including shared-use paths, bike lanes, and bike routes. It's a great opportunity for people who don't normally ride or aren't used to distance. Riding in a group is a safe way to get around because it brings visibility and awareness to cyclists on the road. It shows that both cities are putting strong effort into fostering a safer, more open cycling environment.

Grace Hallowell: It provides a sense of connection, brings people together, and encourages an active lifestyle. Do participants need to be experienced cyclists, or is this accessible for casual riders?

Carl Ahrens: It's designed to be accessible for casual riders. We always remind people that it's not a race; we ride at a casual, conversational pace where you can talk to the person next to you. It's slightly longer than past rides—our Cycle with Council route two years ago was 6.4 miles—but the layover at the Farmers Market gives everyone a chance to rest, grab water, and stretch their legs before heading back.

We encourage everyone to take safety precautions: wear a helmet and perform an ABC Quick Check (checking Air pressure, Brakes, Chains/Cranks/Cassette, and Quick release levers). It's an event for families, adults, and kids alike.

Grace Hallowell: What basic safety tips should riders keep in mind for this event or general cycling?

Carl Ahrens: Wear a helmet and perform an ABC Quick Check before heading out. Test your air pressure, ensure front and rear brakes work, check your chain, and make sure quick releases are tightened down. Take your bike on a quick spin around your driveway or neighborhood to ensure nothing is loose.

I also recommend wearing bright clothing, especially at night, to stay visible. Always make eye contact with drivers at intersections so you both acknowledge each other. At night, use a functioning front headlight and a flashing rear tail light. Finally, obey all traffic laws. Bicycles on the street operate under the same rules as automobiles: stop at stop signs and use hand signals to indicate turns.

Grace Hallowell: What do you hope residents take away from the event regarding bicycling as transportation?

Carl Ahrens: I hope people see that bicycling is a viable means of transportation. You don't have to replace every car trip, but for shorter trips, riding a bike is realistic. We have the network and connections between College Station and Bryan to support it.

Additionally, we want to highlight German culture through our sister city, Greifswald, which fully embraces bicycling. Whether it's biking or walking, incorporating active transportation into daily life is the main goal of Biketober.

Grace Hallowell: For someone who relies on a car, how can they start incorporating biking into their routine?

Carl Ahrens: Start by swapping out just one trip. If you make 14 trips a week, replace one of them with a bike ride. It helps you get familiar with the network and comfortable on your

bike. After a few weeks, increase it to two trips. It's hard to break old habits, but easy to build new ones incrementally.

Grace Hollowell: Small steps lead to bigger changes. In Texas, we deal with the heat, but we rarely have snow or ice, giving us a great year-round climate for cycling. What are you most looking forward to about Biketober?

Carl Ahrens: After planning it for so long, I'm excited to see the event come to life and see the community experience a different culture. We're bringing a piece of northern Germany to Texas. We'll even have "passports" for kids and adults to get stamped as they visit different booths in the interaction zone.

Grace Hollowell: What are the registration and age requirements?

Carl Ahrens: Registration is live on our website. Participants 16 and under must be accompanied by an adult, and registration is required for everyone. We prefer online registration, but hard copies will be available the morning of the event.

Arriving between 8:30 AM and 9:00 AM on Saturday, October 10th helps us stay on schedule for our 9:30 AM rollout. Coffee, food, and drinks will be available from vendors before we ride.

Grace Hollowell: Before we wrap up, let's do a quick lightning round of bike-themed questions. Ready? Morning ride or evening ride?

Carl Ahrens: Morning ride.

Grace Hollowell: Favorite fall activity in College Station?

Carl Ahrens: A&M Football, easily. Trust the process!

Grace Hollowell: Favorite place to bike in College Station?

Carl Ahrens: I really like the Wolf Pen district because it hits close to home for me. That spot always holds a special place in my heart.

Grace Hollowell: Favorite German dish?

Carl Ahrens: Sausage and potatoes.

Grace Hollowell: One word to describe Biketober?

Carl Ahrens: Culture.

Grace Hallowell: Thank you so much for being here today, Carl.

Carl Ahrens: Thank you.

Grace Hallowell: And that's what's up!