

# OpenSource

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Does LimeWire hold the key to better streets?



Mark Gorton is not a planner. Yet Gorton, who may be best known for creating the LimeWire file-sharing program, is making a surprising impact in the planning world. In the past decade, he and his growing team of software developers, journalists, and videographers have advanced the livable streets movement, engaged the community in the public process, and set the stage for a coordinated, regional approach to federal transportation policy.

Gorton's inspired leap from hacking the digital landscape to shaping our physical landscape can largely be found in the open source software world—and the power of the many: in the same way that many developers working on a public code will produce a better piece of software, many people working on the public streets will produce a better city. This

private-sector efficiency and innovation, coupled with strong democratic idealism and civic-mindedness, make Gorton an incredibly effective champion of the public interest.

The goal of The Open Planning Project (TOPP) that Gorton founded in 1999 is, in effect, to make lay planners out of anyone interested. Several of its initiatives suggest that many people are excited to get involved. Open Plans, an initiative launched by TOPP in 2005, currently hosts more than 570 social activist groups, all using the site's tools to organize

more effectively. “You need tens of thousands of planners, not one per neighborhood,” Gorton says. “A one-block-long strip in the city might have to have 20 or 30 little things done to it in order for it to work right.”

This means that Gorton is never alone in his crusades. A few years ago, Gorton joined forces with Aaron Naparstek (MA Journalism, 1994) to advance the causes of the livable streets movement. While writing a piece on Mayor Bloomberg's congestion pricing initiative, Naparstek met Gorton, a long-time critic of the City's transportation problems. Trying to determine the best lead-in for the piece, Naparstek realized that there were so many angles that the singular story looked more like a missing beat in the journalism world. Having connected with Gorton during the research process, he re-approached him with the idea of creating an entire blog dedicated to these overlooked issues.

“Open Source speaks to a single person's ability to change things in the world, to be an active producer instead of a mere consumer.”

The idea of Streetsblog resonated with Gorton on many levels. As a cyclist, Gorton finds it socially unconscionable that city streets allocate such a significant portion of space to private automobiles, while the vast majority of New Yorkers do not own vehicles. As an entrepreneur, he finds it ridiculous that New York City seems to equate traffic with economic activity. And as a highly trained engineer, Naparstek explains, “if [he] ran LimeWire like that, nobody would be able to download anything.” With TOPP providing the technological framework, Gorton enthusiastically offered to fund Streetsblog under the umbrella of the New York City Streets Renaissance Campaign, with Naparstek as editor-in-chief.

Since its launch in 2006, the role of Streetsblog has evolved considerably, starting out as a watchdog for the Department of Transportation. In the beginning, it was easy. “The MTA

would say slow buses and congestion were the product of New York City’s ‘vibrancy,’ or [former DOT Commissioner] Iris Weinshall would say Central Park’s Loop Drive is a ‘critical transportation link for commuters,’ as if she were talking about the BQE,” Naparstek says. “I didn’t even have to make an editorial comment,” he laughs. “It’s just like, ‘Are these people fucking kidding? I’m just going to put their words online and let people see.’”

Since then, the blog has quickly become part of the catalyst for what Naparstek calls a “tectonic shift” in transportation policy. Site diagnostics indicate that city agency officials make up a large portion of visitors to the blog. This link between city agencies and the public is exactly what the team was aiming for, and both Gorton and Naparstek laud the responsiveness of the DOT and particularly Mayor Bloomberg, an intelligent believer in efficient government and someone who is “not threatened by new ideas.” As owner of Lime Brokerage and hedge fund Tower Capital, LLC (where he derives the financial backing for his planning nonprofits), Gorton—like Bloomberg—also brings a business-minded approach to attacking New York City’s infrastructural problems.



Despite the positive changes in city policy, the blog is maintaining its critical stance; its relevance and momentum depends on its ability to adapt to the rapidly reforming world of transportation policy. With the launch of Streetsblog L.A., the team is shifting focus from local politics to the national level, where a unified voice is necessary to fight for federal funding.

This fight has taken on an increased sense of urgency with the transportation act SAFETEA-LU (Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users) up

for renewal in September 2009. To build on the current momentum they hope to “franchise” several more Streetsblogs across the country before year’s end, paving the way to Washington with coalition-building.

But for the team, it is not enough to change public policy. Although Gorton laughs at the idea that he has a master plan for New York, he does have the visionary trait of keeping close tabs on the immediate goals, while focusing on long-term progress. That’s why educating the public about these policy shifts is important—not just for consensus-building in the political realm, but to build lasting change rooted in the way we interact with our environment. This collective campaign is critical to the progress of the livable streets movement.

Also to this end, the redesigned Streetsblog 2.0 features a wiki highlighting best practices around the world. A schools blog is also in the works, as well as the formation of an educational curriculum schools can use to get the next generation thinking about planning on an everyday scale. Recalling the recycling movement as an example of how quickly reforms can embed themselves in the social fabric, Gorton is optimistic that the ideas and principles behind the livable streets movement can be incorporated into our consciousness. The Open Planning Project and its many tentacles allow people’s plans to grow, merge, and change collaboratively. “That’s what makes democracy great,” says Gorton. “People making their own world better.”

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Moglen, Eben. *Freeing the Mind: Free Software and the Death of Proprietary Culture*. June 2003.

Naparstek, Aaron. Interview. The Open Planning Project, New York: February 20, 2008.

**The Open Planning Project**  
<http://topp.openplans.org>

**Streetsblog**  
<http://www.Streetsblog.org>

**Streetfilms**  
<http://www.Streetfilms.org>

**Open Plans**  
<http://www.openplans.org>