



Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

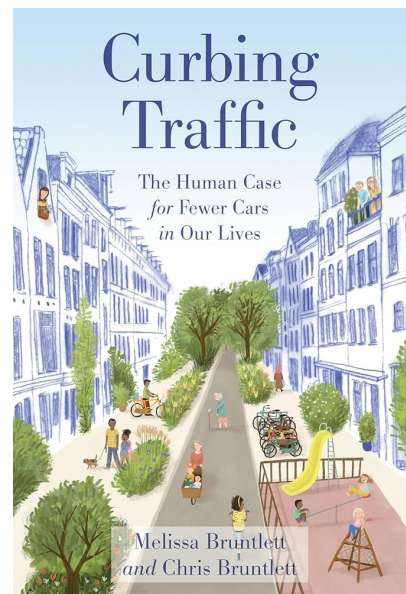
Curbing Traffic: The Human Case for Fewer Cars in Our Lives By Melissa Bruntlett and Chris Bruntlett

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on June 3, 2026 to discuss *Curbing Traffic: The Human Case for Fewer Cars in Our Lives*. Melissa and Chris Bruntlett are Canadian authors who live in the Netherlands.

This is a book about what the Bruntletts and their children found when they moved to a city that had become a world leader in creating alternatives to automobiles. The city is Delft, a midsize city between Rotterdam and The Hague.

What did they find? A safer, kinder, quieter, more affordable, less polluted and more connected city than where they had lived in Vancouver. They felt comfortable letting their children, ages 10 and 13, explore the city on bicycles. The family shopped, commuted to work and traveled to schools and other cities on foot, aboard bikes or by transit. In their first five years in Delft, the Bruntletts report, they rented a car only once, to return a bed to an IKEA store.

Curbing Traffic, then, is a vision of what a “car-light” or “low-car” urban area looks like and how it works. Atlantans have little experience with such places, so *Curbing Traffic* can help them visualize life in a place where a third of all trips are made by car, a third are on transit, and a third are made on foot or on bicycle. (In the U.S., 90 percent of daily trips are made by cars, with transit, walking and cycling dividing the remainder.)



The book also explains how Delft got to this place. Surprisingly, until the 1970s, Delft and the rest of Holland were headed down the same road toward car-dependency as the U.S., Canada or Great Britain. *Curbing Traffic* explains why the Netherlands took a different path (the safety of children walking to school was a major motivation) and how they did it, by making it much easier to walk and bike in cities.

The book's final purpose is to show how the pieces fit together. Transit, cycling and walking are the way most trips are made in Holland because of good planning and strong political support. And here's an important lesson for Atlanta: It's not enough simply to build bike lanes or pedestrian-friendly streets. The lanes and streets must lead to places people want to go.

The Dutch have become world leaders in designing walking and cycling infrastructure that delivers people efficiently to work, shopping and schools. They are also among the best at helping transit work *with* bikes and walking, not against them.

Five Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are five big ideas drawn from *Curbing Traffic* that we believe Urban Atlanta could benefit from:

- The key to creating alternatives to cars is the right physical infrastructure that connects the right places. This means safe routes for pedestrians and cyclists, but it also means routes that people can take to work, shopping and schools.
- We will need compelling reasons for change. In the Netherlands, one reason for the investment in cycling and pedestrian infrastructure was the fear that cars endangered children walking or cycling to school. For Urban Atlanta to create mobility options, we will need our own compelling reasons for change.
- The Netherlands shows us that cars, transit, bicycles and pedestrians can co-exist and even benefit one another. For instance, traffic on Dutch highways moves much easier than in the U.S. because there are fewer cars on the roads. In Atlanta, motorists would benefit from fewer cars, as well.
- As the book makes clear, alternatives to driving have another benefit: much greater mobility—and personal freedom—for children, the elderly and people with disabilities. These are people who cannot drive or would prefer not to. But they could take transit, walk or cycle, if there were safe and convenient ways of doing so.
- The Dutch experience shows us that transit and cycling are collaborators, not competitors. Bikes can solve one of transit's greatest problems: the first-mile/last-mile problem. Holland's integration of bikes and transit shows us how.

Why Do These Things?

Curbing Traffic offers a vision of a car-light city and spells out the benefits for citizens. The book also makes clear that this will require that governments and individuals make changes. Why should they do this? Here's why:

- Fewer cars make city streets safer, especially for children.
- A city with safe and plentiful cycling infrastructure would allow children and teenagers to experience cities in a way few of them can today.
- Fewer cars mean less pollution and a quieter city.
- Transit, cycling, and walking can help with traffic congestion. Fewer cars mean those who do drive get to their destinations sooner and more safely.
- The ability to live without a car—or a second car—makes cities more affordable.
- More access to transit, cycling and walking opens the city to those who cannot drive or prefer not to drive. It would help the elderly and disabled safely reach stores, doctors and public places.
- Less car travel and less automobile parking means better use of land. This will improve the quality of our neighborhoods and commercial districts.

What Are the Obstacles? What Are Our Strengths?

Even the most worthwhile efforts create opposition. Our members discussed some of the obstacles or barriers that the big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- We have to change the thinking about roadway design and purpose. For a century, transportation planners have thought of our streets and roads as the exclusive domain of automobiles and designed them to move cars at the highest possible speeds in the greatest volumes possible. It will not be easy to change this mindset.
- Outside of the Beltline, we do not have much experience in Urban Atlanta with highly successful walking and cycling infrastructure.
- One reason cycling is so dangerous in Atlanta is that we regard bicycles as vehicles and, therefore, competitors of cars. This vastly understates the vulnerability of cyclists and explains why we need streets and paths that protect bikes from cars.
- There is an entire industry that is invested in automobile ownership and use, from car dealers to drive-through eateries. These interests will not share their privileged use of urban infrastructure easily.
- A century of mistakes in land use, such as building suburbs where single-family housing requires car trips for the simplest necessities, will make it hard for cycling and pedestrian infrastructure to be built or used. We have many of these suburban-style neighborhoods in Urban Atlanta.
- Many of our streets and roads are so poorly designed or in such poor shape, with potholes, metal plates and storm grates, that it will be hard to use them for cycling. There's a similar problem for pedestrians: narrow, broken or nonexistent sidewalks.

Urban Atlanta has strengths that could help us with some of the obstacles. We discussed Urban Atlanta's strengths. Here are a few:

- We do have streets and roads that could accommodate protected bike lanes.
- More and more people are cycling, inspired by the Beltline and encouraged by other pedestrian and cycling trails.
- Our "Streets Alive" events, where streets are blocked off from auto traffic and people are invited to walk and cycle, have shown many people the potential for mobility without cars.
- We have good advocacy groups promoting cycling and pedestrian safety, including [Propel ATL](#) and [Go Georgia](#).
- Our community improvement districts have a vested interest in improving mobility and reducing parking. They could help, and some—like the Midtown CID and Buckhead CID—have been effective in encouraging mobility alternatives.
- Neighborhood associations also have an interest in less traffic, since cars endanger children and pedestrians.
- There are grassroots efforts in Atlanta to encourage cycling for children, including "bike bus" events, where parents and children organize group rides to schools.

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles and impressive strengths. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming the barriers, using our strengths:

- We would benefit from more—and more innovative—forms of education about mobility alternatives, why we need well-designed cycling and pedestrian infrastructure, and the benefits of a car-light city. We need the education delivered in different forms for citizens, civic leaders and transportation professionals.
- We need to change the rules for roadway design. There are manuals that transportation professionals use for designing streets and roads. We need the manuals to incorporate what the Netherlands has learned about mobility.

- We need “pilot projects” that let people experience good cycling and pedestrian infrastructure. Streets Alive are temporary experiences. We need some of our pilot projects to be permanent.
- We should find new ways of encouraging people to try riding bikes. This could involve subsidies for bicycle purchases, but it could also include classes for children and adults who want to give cycling a try.
- A far more extensive bike-sharing system would help greatly. But not just more bikes. We need rental bikes to be available where they can do the most good, at transit stations and near bus stops so riders can use them for “last-mile” trips. Finally, we need easier ways of paying for shared bikes. The best payment system would use transit cards and apps, since that encourages people to use both transit and bicycles.
- Greater use of bikes and walking would mean less car parking, which would have multiple benefits for the city and landowners. But as we reduce car parking, we must plan for bicycle parking. We need better designs for incorporating bike racks into shopping areas, offices, transit stations, entertainment venues and parks. A good place to start is along the Beltline. Let the Beltline show us how to build bicycle parking that is convenient and attractive.

A Synopsis of *Curbing Traffic*

Curbing Traffic: The Human Case for Fewer Cars in Our Lives is 218 pages, including an introduction, conclusion and 10 chapters. There are also authors bios, acknowledgments and a bibliography. It was published in 2021.

Melissa and Chris Bruntlett are Canadian authors who live in the Netherlands, where they work for organizations involved in urban mobility issues.

As mentioned above, the book about what the Bruntletts found when they moved Delft, a Dutch city that has become a world leader in developing alternatives to car travel. So the book serves as a vision of a “car-light” or “low-car” city and how it works for its residents.

The book has two other purposes. The first is to tell us why the Netherlands chose a different path to mobility than the U.S. and Canada, and how this new path made transit, cycling and walking so effective and popular. The second is to show how cycling and pedestrian infrastructures relate to one another, how they deliver people to places they need to go, and how they connect seamlessly with transit.

So why did the Netherlands turn against the car and toward bikes, transit and pedestrian travel? It began in 1970 when there were rising concerns about children’s safety in streets. Delft’s answer was a mobility plan based, the Bruntletts write, on “the fundamental idea that every child should be able to walk safely to school, a shop or a friend’s house without crossing a busy (and dangerous) arterial road.”

The plan created separate but interconnected networks for bikes, transit and cars. The best way to keep children safe, planners felt, was to keep most cars out of neighborhoods. So, they made it easy to drive on outer ring roads but difficult to cut through residential areas. Once they were in such places, motorists found that speeds were slow, streets were winding, and drivers had to yield to pedestrians and cyclists. The Dutch planners called this “filtered permeability.”

And as they were making it harder to drive through neighborhoods, planners made it much easier to cycle through them, with bike lanes painted bright red that were wide enough so people could ride two abreast or pass slower cyclists. They also installed signs warning motorists that cyclists and pedestrians were the main users of these streets, so motorists should act accordingly. Again, “filtered permeability.”

Eventually, Delft developed three types of cycling infrastructure, called “urban,” “district” and “neighborhood” networks. Urban networks were for trips of two miles or so and were aimed at getting people to work. The district networks were for a trips of a mile or so and were for shopping trips. Neighborhood networks were for journeys of a half mile or so. They were aimed at getting children safely to school and back.

A key was building the infrastructure that connected these networks, using tunnels, bridges and roundabouts designed for cyclists, not cars. The result: a huge upsurge in cycling, which allowed Delft authorities to turn unused car parking spaces into hundreds of bike racks.

The Bruntletts make it clear that none of this came about without careful planning, a high degree of public participation and extensive collaboration among public agencies.

Example: How transit accommodates—and rewards—cycling. If you cycle to a bus stop in Delft, there’s a good chance there will be bike parking there. You cannot bring your bike on buses or trains—that would cause delays and inconvenience to other riders—but at your destination there will almost certainly be bike-sharing facilities. So you can begin on your bike, continue on transit and complete your journey on a rented bike that’s available for a few Euros.

And if you cycle to the main train station in Delft, where you catch trains to Rotterdam or The Hague, you’ll find a cyclist’s paradise, enough indoor storage for nearly 11,000 bikes. Having a problem with your bike? There’s a service desk at the station offering repairs to private bikes while you’re on your trip.

This, in a nutshell, is the collaborative approach toward transportation that the Dutch have become so good at. The Bruntletts write of transit officials, “rather than treating the bicycle as a competitor, it is seen as an ally—one that connects passengers to their origin and destination; a critical component of the seamless door-to-door journey.”

What are the benefits of living in a car-light city? The authors list them. It’s safer. In streets designed for bikes, bicycle accidents are less serious than in places where curbs are high and cars whiz by. And then there are the lives saved by not having so many cars. In the U.S., for every 100,000 residents, 10.6 are killed every year in traffic fatalities. In the Netherlands, it’s 3.4 deaths a year. If America had Holland’s fatality rate, the Bruntletts write, it “would save 20,000 American lives per year.”

It’s quieter. There’s less noise in places where bicycles predominate and cars are rare. It’s healthier. The exercise that cycling offers is good for your physical and mental health, the Bruntletts say. It facilitates endorphin production, the “feel-good chemicals our brain requires.” Also, being outdoors (as opposed to being in cars) connects us with nature and others, reducing feelings of isolation.

It makes life more affordable for families. In the U.S., cars cost owners an average of \$12,544 a year in payments, insurance and maintenance, and car debt is rising fast. Living in a place that allows you to have one less car could easily save families a thousand dollars a month. It accommodates aging in place and people with disabilities. Cycling infrastructure works as easily for wheelchairs, scooters, e-bikes and adult tricycles as for conventional two-wheel bicycles.

It uses land in better ways than parking cars, and less parking makes urban areas livelier and more interesting. They point out that in Los Angeles County nearly half of the land is devoted to car transportation and parking. Surface parking lots alone take up 100 square miles of land there or four times the land mass of Manhattan. The Bruntletts add dryly, “That’s a lot of public space that could otherwise be used for public parks.”

Two other interesting facts from *Curbing Traffic*. First, the Dutch have not eliminated cars. About a third of trips there are made by private automobiles, a third by transit, and a third by walking or cycling. Still,

that's vastly different than in the U.S., where five percent of trips are made by walking or cycling, five percent by transit and 90 percent by automobiles.

Second, the Dutch approach to traffic engineering—routing cars away from neighborhoods and onto what are called “flow roads”—actually speeds up auto trips. One reason: There aren't that many drivers, so when you hit a flow road where you can legally go 60 miles per hour, that's how fast you actually go. It is, the Bruntletts note, “the textbook definition of a win-win scenario.”

Are the Dutch highly trusting people, and does this explain why they've accepted so many changes to mobility so freely? Yes and no. International surveys indicate that the Dutch do have high levels of social trust, and the Bruntletts say it may have something to do with how cyclists communicate, with a head nod before making a turn. This constant silent dialogue and cooperation by so many people does build trust, they add.

But it doesn't mean that the Dutch accept government decisions easily. One of the most interesting stories in *Curbing Traffic* is about how city officials removed parking from the center of Delft, where many restaurants and stores were clustered around a historic market. The city wanted to remove 150 parking spots, replacing them with places for outdoor dining.

Restaurant owners and shopkeepers were outraged. Who would want to sit outside in the winter months when it is cold and wet, they wanted to know. “We're not the Mediterranean,” they protested.

So city officials made a clever suggestion: Let us run a six-month experiment on one side of the square, where they would remove a few parking spots and replace them with a dozen or so tables. If shopping or dining sales declined for any reason, they promised, they would bring back the parking spots.

Result: The tables were hugely popular, even in the winter. Restaurants set up propane heaters, lent woolen blankets to diners and installed retractable awnings. Sales soared. Soon, all the merchants around the square wanted more tables and fewer parking places. The Bruntletts added, “The rest is history.” Delft's historic “living room” had become entirely car free.

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define “urbanism” broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn't to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at atlantaurbanist.com.