Ways to the West: How Getting Out of Our Cars Is Reclaiming America’s Frontier

by Tim Sullivan

xxv + 324 pages, illustrations, notes, index.

In Ways to the West, planner and writer Tim Sullivan reflects on the importance of transportation in the contemporary American West. Sullivan argues that efforts to penetrate and map the vast landscapes of the West have shaped the human relationship with the region since its inception. The preeminence of transportation as an organizing principle continued throughout the automobile era, and the West’s cities were built as automobile-centric networks. While the automobile network still critically informs the American West, Sullivan argues, it is time for residents, planners, and decision makers to demand more diverse transportation options. Ways to the West offers several helpful illustrations for how a transportation revolution is already happening in this automobile-dependent region.

Sullivan takes to the road in order to make his transportation-themed argument. Mostly eschewing the car, though, the author walks, bikes, buses, trains, and boats through the West. Indeed, in its very structure, the book is reminiscent of a road trip. The fifty-six vignette chapters in the book are grouped into six legs of the author’s three-week journey between Las Vegas, Salt Lake City, Denver, Phoenix, and Boise. For example, the first part of the book features seven vignettes that chronicle Sullivan’s journey through Las Vegas and his road trip to St. George, Utah, while the next section features eleven vignettes between St. George, Salt Lake City, and Rock Springs, Wyoming. While he travels within and between these western cities, Sullivan observes how transportation is impacting each of these urban regions and talks with planners and transportation activists in order to access local on-the-ground knowledge.

The road-trip structure of Ways to the West provides a compelling narrative framework that invites the reader into an often rollicking adventure. Whether fixing flat bike tires in rough weather in the remote Arizona Strip near the Utah-Arizona border, paddling the length of the Wasatch Front’s Jordan River, or interacting with any number of colorful characters on a late-night Greyhound bus trip, Sullivan seems to always have a story to tell. Books about transportation planning are not known for their high readability, but Ways to the West is quite simply a fun book to read.

But Ways to the West is not simply entertaining travel literature—it is also a thoughtful and well-informed reflection on the history and future of transportation in the West. As an experienced urban planner and keen observer of the American West, Sullivan is able to use his journey to illustrate details and insights that can help anyone interested in learning more about the urban West. Indeed, Ways to the West is at its best when Sullivan is navigating a city—such as when he is exploring the emergence and operation of bus rapid transit in Las Vegas, light rail in Salt Lake City, or transit-oriented development in Denver. Readers interested in intelligent reflections of transportation planning in the urban West will not be disappointed.

Curiously, despite Ways to the West’s many similarities to a road trip, the book has very few visual elements. Each section of the book is accompanied by a map or two, but these provide only very basic information about the location of the places where the author is traveling. A bit more attention to mapping would have been very helpful. Perhaps even more curious, Ways to the West has no photographs. A few simple images of Phoenix’s sail-like Valley Metro rail-line stations or Boise’s Greenbelt riverfront parkway that Sullivan is so enthusiastic about would have helped readers who may be unfamiliar with these particular landscapes. I found myself fairly often searching the Internet for more information and images to try to place these fascinating discussions.

Ways to the West will be a very useful book for both scholars and westerners who are interested in the changes that are happening around the region’s cities. Urbanists will find that while Sullivan’s ideas about the importance of transportation in the urban West are not wholly new (nor do they claim to be), Sullivan has provided a set of rich case studies that stimulate thinking on these important issues. Readers who are not steeped in regional transportation trends will find a captivating and thorough introduction to the transformation of transportation in the American West.

Reviewed by Jeremy Bryson, assistant professor of geography, Weber State University, Ogden, Utah.