



Complete Streets

By Douglas Shinkle

Complete streets policies help balance transportation project design.

Complete streets address both traffic and health concerns.

Streets that accommodate only cars may not meet other transportation needs.

Traffic congestion. Pedestrian safety. A lack of physical activity. A graying population. These seemingly disparate but ultimately connected issues have led to a policy movement called complete streets, which seeks to balance the needs of a variety of users—bicyclists, people with disabilities, automobile drivers and pedestrians—in transportation project design. As policymakers view the aforementioned trends collectively, there has been a shift toward considering complete streets policies.

Nationwide, traffic congestion continues to increase, reducing worker productivity, wasting fuel and impeding an efficient economy. According to the Federal Highway Administration, almost 5,000 pedestrians die each year in the United States, and pedestrian accidents are twice as likely on streets with no sidewalks.

Obesity and obesity-related diseases, which are exacerbated by a lack of physical activity, continue to increase dramatically—one-third of American children and adolescents and 66 percent of adults are overweight or obese. Already, states typically spend about 30 percent of their budgets on health care. California, for example, spends \$7.675 billion annually on obesity-related medical conditions.

Furthermore, as the U.S. population ages, senior citizens who are unable to drive will need alternative transportation options. Today, 20 percent of Americans over age 65 do not drive, and this age group will grow by 27 million in the next 20 years.

What Are Complete Streets? Walking a few blocks to a local restaurant along a busy thoroughfare with narrow sidewalks, nonexistent crosswalks and a generally unwelcoming environment can be daunting. Unfortunately, this is a common situation for many residents nationwide. Complete streets can help resolve such problems by integrating the needs of all transportation users into one plan to create a balanced, multi-faceted transportation system.

Because streets often are built with only cars in mind, they may not meet the needs of residents who want to use alternative transportation. For example, many streets may not safely accommodate residents who walk to work or ride their bicycles to the store. In addition, by mandating

Complete Streets Tools

Although no single complete streets model exists, several tools can be used to design roadways that are welcoming, safe and efficient for many types of transportation users.

- “Road diets,” which include reducing a four-lane road to two or three lanes and adding features such as bicycling lanes, middle-of-the-road pedestrian refuges, or center turn lanes to decrease traffic congestion, improve safety and allow other transportation use;
- Bicycle lanes that are physically separated from auto traffic;
- Audible pedestrian signals for crosswalks; and
- Special bus lanes or bus pullout areas.

or encouraging state departments of transportation or local planning entities to consider all users during the planning and construction of new transportation infrastructure, complete streets policies can reduce the need for costly infrastructure retrofits—which may involve making bridges and roads pedestrian- and handicap-friendly.

Complete Streets Benefits. Studies show that people are more likely to bike or walk in neighborhoods where it is safe to do so. Raised medians and redesigned intersections can significantly increase pedestrian safety. Bicycle and pedestrian pathways also can foster economic development. Trails and pathways not only attract income from the burgeoning bicycle tourism industry, but also may increase the value of commercial or residential property adjacent to a trail. A 2002 National Association of Realtors study revealed that trails and sidewalks were the second and third most important amenities for recent homebuyers.

State Action State complete streets programs can take several forms. The state department of transportation may choose to insert language in its official policies to require that all future transportation projects consider the needs of pedestrians, bus riders, bicyclists and others. The state also can mandate or ask that local planning authorities include these users in transportation plans. Ten states—California, Florida, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, Vermont and Virginia—have some form of complete streets policy, either in their department of transportation or in legislation. Department of transportation policies in Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Tennessee encourage development of complete streets. In 2007, California, Illinois, Iowa and Oregon considered legislation either to strengthen existing complete streets laws or to create new policies; the Illinois legislation was enacted.

In 1971, Oregon passed the nation’s first complete streets legislation, which states: “Footpaths and bicycle trails, including curb cuts or ramps as part of the project, shall be provided wherever a highway, road or street is being constructed, reconstructed or relocated.” Perhaps the most all-encompassing of complete streets laws, it requires that all roads—not just those built by the state—include paths. The law designates that at least 1 percent of highway funds be used for walkways and bikeways, although a bill currently under consideration would increase that amount to a minimum of 2 percent.

In 1983, Florida passed legislation that states: “Bicycle and pedestrian ways shall be given full consideration in the planning and development of transportation facilities.” This has helped create on-road bikeways on 63 percent of the state highway system. On-road bikeways are less common in urban areas—often due to space constraints and parking requirements—but the law does emphasize such projects within one mile of urban areas. Bikeway construction adds approximately 3 percent to the cost of an existing project.

Federal Action In 2000, the U.S. Department of Transportation adopted a policy that states, “Bicycling and walking facilities will be incorporated into all transportation projects unless exceptional circumstances exist,” in hopes that state and local entities will adopt it. However, federal funds have not been directly allocated for this effort.

Contacts for More Information

Douglas Shinkle
NCSL—Denver
(303) 364-7700, ext. 1482
Douglas.shinkle@ncsl.org

Barbara McCann
National Complete Streets Coalition
(202) 207-3355
barbara@bmccann.net

NCSL Healthy Community Design website
www.ncsl.org/programs/enviro/healthycommunity/index/htm

Paul Zykofsky
Local Government Commission
(916) 448-1198
zykofsky@lgc.org

National Complete Streets Coalition website
www.completestreets.org/faq.html

People are likely to bike or walk where it is safe to do so.

Ten states have some form of complete streets policy.

Federal policy encourages but does not fund complete streets.