

Complete the



Streets for Smart Growth

**Planners figure
out the puzzle
to pedestrian-
friendly roadways**



By Barbara McCann

Complete the streets so everyone can use them safely and conveniently—that's the new cry of advocates, planners and elected officials who are behind a movement to fundamentally alter the way roads are planned, designed and built.

A basic tenet of Smart Growth is the creation of walkable communities that provide transportation choices. But in many cases, state and local transportation agencies have been slow to get the message. Yes, they may have spent extra time and energy on redesigning that one boulevard to include a bicycle lane and wide sidewalks, but everywhere else, they keep

churning out high-speed roads for cars with little thought to the needs of bicyclists, pedestrians and transit riders who are also using that street.

Recently, the mayor of Louisville, Ky., Jerry Abramson, joined a growing chorus that wants to change that practice. "For decades, we in Louisville—and cities around the nation—have built roads only for vehicles. That was an urban planning mistake," Abramson said in a statement. "The Complete Streets policy will help rectify that." Louisville's combined city/county government is considering adoption of a comprehensive complete streets policy that would require the city to take into account the needs of all users, every time engineers set out to change or build a street. Those users include motorists, transit riders, bicyclists and pedestrians of all ages and abilities—including older people, children and people with disabilities. The city worked with a broad advisory group to create the comprehensive policy.

Louisville is expected to soon join close to 50 other places—ranging from states to small towns—that have adopted some form of a complete streets policy. In some cases, lawmakers have passed laws or ordinances, or citizens have approved ballot measures; in others, planning agencies have written internal policies or re-written their design manuals. But, everywhere the intent is the same—to change long-standing transportation planning practices that narrowly focus on moving as many cars as possible.

In Massachusetts, a state law passed in 1996 required the state Highway Department to accommodate bicyclists and pedestrians in projects. Initially, the law was poorly implemented. But, ultimately it helped spark a citizen-led planning process that tossed out the old highway manual that had focused on improving automobile 'Level of Service'—a measure of traffic congestion. Thomas DiPaolo, assistant chief engineer for Mass Highway, says, "What we tried to do, was make it acceptable to advance projects that have purposes other than improving vehicular Level of Service for a road. For example, now supporting economic development would be a legitimate 'design control' to make a project worthwhile." The new guide, adopted in January of 2006, sets multi-modal accommodation as one of its three guiding principles—and the needs of bicyclists, pedestrians, transit users and disabled people are integrated into every aspect of design, from intersections to bridges.

About one year earlier, the city council of Colorado Springs, Colo., adopted a complete streets policy, which recently led to the inclusion of bike lanes and sidewalks on a new bridge project. But, the policy isn't just about adding extra pavement.

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Cheyenne Boulevard "was a four-lane road with on-street parking, driveways, a cross street every 400-500 feet, a transit line and hopscotch pedestrian facilities that start and stop," according to Colorado Springs Senior Transportation Planner Kristin Bennett. "There were always lots of complaints of people speeding, and people were uncomfortable using the on-street parking because cars were going 40 miles per hour." The road was put on a 'diet', with just two through lanes, a center turn lane, and bicycle lanes, as well as street parking. Many road diets also include pedestrian 'refuge' islands. On Cheyenne Boulevard, speeds are lower and residents are happy. A similar road diet on a nearby business street with diagonal parking was welcomed by business owners,

according to Beth Kosley, executive director of the Downtown Partnership. "Delivery trucks have better places to pull in and make deliveries without interrupting customers; that's a great thing, and our diagonal parking is much more accessible and safe. Apparently tempers have calmed down a lot."

Dan Gallagher, transportation planning section manager in Charlotte, N.C., learned about such transformations when he was working in Orlando, Fla. There, a road diet accomplished on the cheap, mainly with paint, resulted in reduced speeding, a dramatic reduction in crashes and injuries (down 35 percent and 68 percent respectively), and an increase in bicycle and pedestrian use (up 23 percent and 30 percent). The change helped spur economic development. "All of a sudden there are

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million-dollar condos, it has become a real restaurant row, and it wasn't before it got road dieted," says Gallagher. "Maybe some of that would have happened on its own, but it would not have been to this level without the road diet." Such economic impact may extend to residential areas—after a road diet in West Palm Beach, Fla., residents reported to planners that it dramatically increased property values.

Now, Gallagher is making sure that Charlotte's complete streets policy changes the way his department does business. Traditional measures such as 'Average Daily Traffic' and Level of Service are considered—but they do not drive the process as they did in the past. The new "six-step" design process starts with questions about where a road is located and who is using it. The third step is to identify deficiencies—with the intent to fill in gaps in the street and sidewalk network for bicyclists, pedestrians and transit users.

By providing for these diverse users, complete streets can improve safety and health. A recent Federal Highway Administration assessment of what safety features are effective in protecting pedestrians listed many items found on a complete street—sidewalks, raised pedestrian medians, better bus stop placement, measures that slow or 'calm' traffic and treatments for disabled travelers. On the health front, public health officials fighting the obesity epidemic are calling for complete street networks with continuous sidewalks that allow children to walk to school and adults to walk to destinations, getting essential physical activity along the way.

Complete streets also improve mobility for transit vehicles and the people who use them. A study in Houston found that sidewalks are not provided between home and the nearest bus stop for three out of five disabled and older residents; nearly three-quarters said streets near their homes also lack curb ramps and bus shelters. As a result, few take the bus. Transit advocates point out that better access to transit stops will help reduce the number of times disabled people will need specialized (and expensive) door-to-door paratransit service.



After: Bridgeport Way in University Place, Washington

Complete streets policies can also spark new cooperation between transit agencies and public works agencies to include design features that help buses operate more smoothly.

A broad coalition has formed to urge adoption of complete streets policies at the local, state and federal level. The National Complete Streets Coalition has brought together bicycle advocates—who have been fighting for complete streets the longest—with those working on behalf of pedestrians, disabled people, seniors and transit.

But, the Coalition does not stop at such “user groups.” Transportation professionals, such as the Institute of Transportation Engineers and the American Planning Association, are actively involved, as well as groups working on wider development issues, such as the Congress for the New Urbanism and Smart Growth America. All see different benefits in complete streets.

“Walking, bicycling and easy access to transit are all important elements of a livable community that works for older Americans,” says AARP’s Elinor Ginzler. “Complete streets help get us there.” AARP is an active supporter of the national coalition, and AARP’s Honolulu state office recently joined with Hawaii bicycle advocates to pass a complete streets amendment to the Honolulu City Charter.

Thomas DiPaolo of Massachusetts says involvement from outside groups led the way in Massachusetts in changing the set ways of the transportation agency. “We had a lot of pushes from outside. It is hard to change from within, we really do need outside organizations, as well as people in very high positions saying this is what we want to do.” The bicycle advocacy group, the Thunderhead Alliance, is training advocates across the country to push for new complete streets legislation. The National Complete Streets Coalition maintains a growing Web site (www.completestreets.org) to share best practices on complete streets. Many members of the Coalition have developed presentations and training materials aimed at planners, transit operators, engineers and advocates on how to advance complete streets—whether from the outside or from within transportation planning agencies. The Coalition is also working with members of Congress to craft a federal complete streets bill that would require that federal transportation spending support complete streets.

Elected officials and agencies have sometimes objected that building complete streets will cost too much. But, Dan Burden of Glatting Jackson and Walkable Communities Inc., questions that logic. “It is a matter of what we value,” says Burden. “We spend all the money on intersections, and it is considered a normal cost of doing business. But, when it comes to walking or bicycling, that’s a frill; we’ll tax you [to pay for] that. It is not quite fair. It says one mode is more important than the other.” Complete streets policies are about ending that inequity—and making sure the public right-of-way really works for everyone.

Barbara McCann serves as Coordinator of the National Complete Streets Coalition. She also writes on transportation and land-use issues and is the co-author of the book “Sprawl Costs” from Island Press.

