

Complete Streets Address the Needs of All Travelers

“Complete streets” refers to the concept that roads should meet everyone’s needs, not just motorists but also walkers, bicycle riders, and bus riders. A growing number of communities are using complete streets policies to reduce accidents, get people more physically active, and promote walkable neighborhoods, which have held their property values during the current downturn. Complete streets policies will increase in importance as a greater proportion of Americans reach old age and are forced to give up driving.

“Complete streets” policies set out to make road projects meet the needs of everyone using the road, not just motorists, but also people walking, riding bicycles, or catching the bus. Across the country, a growing number of communities are using this deceptively simple tool to change the way they approach transportation. Adopted as a state law, local ordinance, or even as a city council resolution, these policies set a new vision for transportation investments. More than 85 states, regions, and cities have adopted such policies, including new state laws passed in California and Illinois and policy resolutions or ordinances in major cities including St. Paul, Miami, Chicago, Seattle, Sacramento, and Charlotte. And the pace is accelerating.

Complete Streets across the Country

When tiny University Place outside of Tacoma, Washington, incorporated in the mid-1990s, one of its first priorities was adding sidewalks to the former county roads. The town started by cajoling the gas company to split costs for transforming gravel shoulders into sidewalks during gas line replacements.

They looked for opportunities to install bike lanes during re-paving projects and to put in pads to provide space for county bus shelters. Then they started making more radical changes.

“People from outside University Place comment about how much they love driving down Bridgeport Way,” says Steve Sugg, deputy city manager, describing one of the first streets to get a full complete streets treatment. “There is a sense of calm.” The redesigned road features a landscaped median, new pedestrian crossings, bicycle lanes, a multi-use path and improved sidewalks. Sugg notes that when Trader Joe’s was looking for a place to locate a store in the Tacoma region, they picked a site on Bridgeport Way, perhaps because of the extensive street improvements.

University Place has added 23 miles of sidewalks to its streets since incorporation and has installed several modern roundabouts, the first in Washington State. Now the town is working with citizens on planning a Town Center to realize broader smart growth principles.

In Jefferson City, Missouri, in March 2009, disability advocates, trail-building organizations, bicycle advocates, health groups, and even a REALTOR® spoke at a state House hearing or wrote letters in support of a complete streets bill. In Hawaii, bicycle advocates and the state AARP chapter made common cause this spring to push for a similar bill with a particularly Hawaiian twist—they’ve linked it to a Hawaiian tradition known as “the splintered paddle”—a native myth that asserts everyone’s right to travel safely. State legislators in Connecticut, Texas, West Virginia, and Maine have also introduced complete streets bills.

Complete Streets on Capitol Hill

Complete streets policies are also getting federal attention. Sen. Tom Harkin and Rep. Doris Matsui have introduced the Complete Streets Act of 2009 into the U.S. House and Senate (S.584, H.R.1443). “We need to ensure streets, intersections, and trails are designed to make them easier to use and maximize their safety,” said Sen. Harkin upon introduction of the bill. “This legislation will encourage Americans to be more active, while also providing more travel options and cutting down on traffic congestion.”

The bill would require states and metropolitan planning organizations to adopt complete streets policies to be applied to federally funded road projects. It is expected to become part of the upcoming authorization of the federal transportation bill.

Demographic Changes

Complete streets policies are gaining all this ground for fundamental reasons of demographics and safety. By 2025, nearly one in five Americans will be over the age of 65, and they will make up one-quarter of the driving population. As they age, many will face disabilities that will force them to give up driving during the last decade of their lives. Yet they may be reluctant to give up the keys when they face neighborhoods with infrequent and inadequate crosswalks, no sidewalks, poorly designed bus stops, and inadequate speed control.

A recent AARP poll found that 47 percent of older adults said they did not feel safe crossing a major street near their home. In another large survey, AARP found that nearly two-thirds of the more than 1,000 planners and engineers surveyed have not yet begun considering the needs of older users in their multimodal planning.

AARP recently issued a report based on this research, “Complete Streets for an Aging America,” that makes three broad recommendations for transforming road design to better cope with an aging population, summarized as “Slow Down, Make it Easy, and Enjoy the View.” It recommends reengineering streets for slower travel speeds, making intersections less complex while providing lower-speed routes, and reducing visual clutter.

It is no coincidence that the recent push for complete streets comes against a backdrop of a decline in the amount of driving and a rise in the use of public transportation, even as more people take part in Bike to Work Day activities every year.

Safer and Healthier Streets

Research is starting to show that a complete streets approach also leads to fewer crashes and increased physical activity. A recently released study of a new pedestrian pathway along a major bridge in Charleston, South Carolina, found that two-thirds of the users of the bridge said the new facility had led them to get more exercise.

Promoting physical activity as a part of daily life has been at the center of a strong move in Minnesota toward complete streets, with three jurisdictions adopting policies in the first months of 2009: Hennepin County (Minneapolis), Saint Paul, and Rochester. The insurer Blue Cross/Blue Shield (BCBS)

of Minnesota has been supporting “active living” initiatives across the state, based on research that shows that people who live in walkable environments, or who regularly take public transportation, are more likely to be active enough to ward off chronic disease. BCBS sponsored three Complete Streets Workshops in December to help planners and engineers understand how to broaden their scope when planning road projects to take into account the needs of pedestrians, bicyclists, and public transportation users.

Higher Property Values

For some supporters, the economic impact is a primary reason to support a complete streets approach.

Chris Leinberger, author of “The Option of Urbanism: Investing in a New American Dream,” watched the recent downward trajectory of home prices and notes that most of the dive took place in places built for “drivable suburbanism,” where the road network features high speed arterials designed only for cars. “Places that are walkable urban neighborhoods have held their value over the last two years,” says Leinberger.

An indicator of the potential importance of a multimodal transportation network to property values can be found in the real estate tool Walk Score. Walk Score uses the magic of Google Maps to give every address in the nation a score from 0 to 100, based on the number and variety of destinations within walking distance. Front Seat, the firm behind Walk Score, has commissioned research to determine if a higher Walk Score correlates to a higher home value. The preliminary results show that each additional point on the Walk Score scale correlates with increased housing values on the order of \$1,000 or more, depending on the regional market. Two major real estate Web sites, Zip Realty and Zillow, now feature Walk Score on property listings.

Walk Score is based on the crow-fly distance to nearby destinations, so it doesn’t take into account the disconnected street network common in many newer developments, or the lack of sidewalks and crosswalks that can make walking unpleasant, impractical, or dangerous.

But connected, complete streets are a prerequisite to true walkable urbanism, according to Leinberger. “If you have an eight-lane arterial without complete streets infrastructure, you will never see high-density walkable urbanism take place along that corridor. Complete streets will be a precondition before you can get walkable urban development that will help meet the pent-up demand for this type of neighborhood.”