

December 2015

# HOT TOPIC ALERT

Prepared for NAR by Legal Research Center, Inc.

## Complete Streets

### What is a Complete Street?

The planning and design of our communities is changing. Planners are considering more factors to account for future growth and to accommodate the changing demands of residents. Design models focus more and more on the habits and patterns of life in the community rather than the level of service to move through the community. An important aspect of a planning today is “complete streets”—roads designed to accommodate different, co-existing types of use.

Whether by design or natural progression, motorized traffic dominated American streets in the 20th century. Planning revolved almost entirely around the automobile as the preferred mode of transportation. After the Second World War, for instance, the streets in many new suburban communities were [built without sidewalks](#).

In recent years, however, there has been a growing sense that streets and roads should not be designed to accommodate only cars and trucks. Other types of transportation—bicycles, public transit, pedestrian travel—should be factors in how streets and the adjacent sidewalks are laid out and built. Streets that take into account all different modes of transportation are known as “complete streets.”

What makes a street “complete?” How are complete streets different from other (incomplete?) streets? A [complete street](#) is one that is designed and operated to enable safe access and travel for all users. Pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, transit users, and travelers of all ages and abilities should be able to move along the streets safely. There is no single model that all complete streets must follow. The term may be used to refer to a set of [policy goals](#) for street design. Each design is customized to the needs of the individual community the street will serve. While the [final appearance of a street](#) is an

important factor in its design or redesign, the principal concerns of a complete street design are accessibility and safety for all users.

Complete streets [differ](#). There is no list of design features that must be included for a street to be considered complete. Some of the usual features include provision for pedestrians, such as sidewalks or shared-use paths, as well as safe street crossing places for pedestrians where appropriate. Median islands, accessible pedestrian signals, and curb extensions are popular features. [Traffic calming measures](#) slow vehicle speeds. Designers may account for bicyclists by including dedicated bicycle lanes, shared pedestrian/bicycle trails or, on rural roads, wide, paved shoulders. Transit users could enjoy safe and accessible transit stops, and dedicated bus lanes may be an important feature.

Complete streets enhance the community. [Safety](#) is one important benefit—pedestrians cross the street more safely and [slower vehicle traffic](#) reduces injury risk. Moving bicycles off sidewalks and into separate lanes away from pedestrians makes walking (and cycling) safer. Even though the vehicle traffic on a complete street is usually slower, congestion is reduced. Added practical transportation options reduces the incentive to drive a car. Fewer drivers translates into less traffic congestion.

Complete streets also yield [economic benefits](#). Property in walkable areas with access to parks and trails usually has a higher market value than otherwise comparable properties. Businesses profit from increased foot traffic, as their establishments become more accessible to passers-by.

### The Complete Street

Streets and their sidewalks, the main public places of a city, are its most vital organs. Think of a city and what comes to mind? Its streets. If a city's streets look interesting, the city looks interesting; if they look dull, the city looks dull.

**-Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities***

State and local governments like complete streets policies: rules mandating complete street design has been adopted across the country. At least twenty nine states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have complete streets policies in place at the legislative or administrative level. Many local governments also promote complete street policies, either on their own initiative or in response to state mandates. Regional authorities, such as the [Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#), often adopt complete street goals.

Policies often consist of guidelines for planners and transportation officials to follow, rather than rigid mandatory design requirements. For example, the Governor of Delaware issued an [Executive Order](#) to establish a [complete streets policy](#), and the state's [Department of Transportation](#) issued a policy that set out the policy objectives, but that did not lay out specific design criteria. Planners maintain flexibility to work out the design for each project on a case-by-case basis. Importantly, the policy has a procedure for obtaining a waiver if there are constraints associated with an individual project. A waiver procedure recognizes the individual character and needs of each stretch of road.

The days when a street would be considered “complete” just because it was graded and paved are gone. Today, completeness means that the street is safely usable by the entire community, and is usable in many different ways.

### The Complete Rural Street

Complete streets are often categorized as part of the “new urbanism” promoted in many large cities. In fact, though, nearly [one-fifth of the local complete streets policies nationwide](#) have been adopted by communities in rural areas. According to [Smart Growth America](#), the smallest community to adopt a complete streets policy is the Village of Highland Park, Florida (pop. 230). Although some design and practical considerations may vary, these smaller communities also see the advantages of complete streets.

Statistically, rural streets and roads are more dangerous than urban thoroughfares. According to the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#), 54% of all traffic fatalities occur in rural areas, but only 19% of the population lives in rural areas. With higher speed limits and no sidewalks, rural roads are [especially hazardous for pedestrians and bicyclists](#). Approximately 25% of pedestrian and bicycle accidents that result in an injury or fatality happen on rural roads. Streets and roads that are not designed with pedestrians or bicyclists in mind pose other health hazards. Children in rural areas have [higher rates of obesity and inactivity](#), yet are [less likely to walk or bicycle to school](#) than their urban counterparts.

#### Complete and Healthy Streets

Proponents say complete streets are a safer and more efficient form of transportation infrastructure. In addition to those benefits, complete streets are also healthier. According to [Smart Growth America](#), complete streets promote physical activities like walking or riding a bike. Encouraging physical activity on a routine basis is an important strategy in slowing the nation’s rate of obesity.

Complete streets also make it easier for children to stay active by making it safer for them to [walk or bicycle to school](#). Children who get regular exercise can [learn healthy habits](#) that will stay with them for years.

A complete streets policy in a rural area will look very different from a policy in an urban area. As in any size community, planning a complete streets policy in a rural area must take into account the character and constraints found in the particular community. The main commercial street in a town is often a [state highway](#) meant to accommodate heavy vehicle traffic. Residents may also voice concerns that the distinctive character of their town will be disrupted by the change. A community may be a bedroom community for a nearby large urban area. Such a community will have needs that are different from a community located in a seasonal tourist area, with a population that waxes and wanes throughout the year.

The benefits of complete streets in a small community can justify the effort put into creating a plan. Battle

Lake, Minnesota, a rural town with a population of 875, sits in a popular summer tourism area. The city adopted its complete streets plan in 2011; the [plan](#) was directed towards improving conditions for bicyclists and pedestrians, as well as improving the flow of motor vehicle traffic through town. State Highway 78, which also serves as the town’s main street, was [narrowed from four to three lanes](#) (two lanes for travel, one for turns). Sidewalks along the highway were widened. Amenities—bicycle racks, benches, planter boxes—were added. The plan has been a success. Local businesses have reported higher foot traffic, and at least one new business—a bicycle rental shop—has opened.

Crystal City, Missouri, adopted a [nationally recognized](#) complete streets policy in 2010. The St. Louis bedroom community (population 4,855) developed a [policy](#) intended to “encourage walking, bicycling, and other non-motorized forms of transit, in addition to normal motorized transit, including personal, freight, and public transit vehicles.” Whenever practicable and economically feasible, complete streets elements become part of all transportation projects to accommodate cyclists, pedestrians, transit users, and persons of all abilities “while promoting safe operation for all users, in comprehensive and connected networks in a manner consistent with, and supportive of, the surrounding community.” Small communities can benefit from complete streets and smart transportation, just as larger cities can. Good planning can incorporate a successful complete streets program virtually anywhere.

### Origin of Complete Streets

The push for complete streets dates back to 1971. In that year, Oregon passed a law ([Or. Rev. Stat. § 366.514](#)) stating that out of any State Highway Fund money received by the Department of Transportation, or by a county or city, “reasonable amounts” must be spent for “footpaths and bicycle trails, including curb cuts or ramps as part of the project.” These features must be provided wherever a highway, road or street is being constructed, reconstructed, or relocated. Recipients may also use State Highway Fund money to maintain footpaths and trails. The minimum “reasonable amount” is 1% of the funds received.

The term “complete streets” was [coined in 2003](#), as a substitute for the then-current term “routine accommodation,” used to describe efforts to make streets accessible to bicycles.

### Ambiguous Streets

An ambiguous street sounds like someplace to avoid if you are new to the area. In reality, [ambiguous streets](#) are meant to reclaim streets for community use by humanizing and socializing the “public realm.”

Ambiguous streets are also referred to as “naked” or “shared” streets. The idea was developed by the late Hans Monderman, a Dutch traffic engineer. The streets are transformed by removing restrictions and barriers. Traffic lights, stop signs, crosswalk markings, and even curbs are removed, so that all users of the street are allowed to “coexist.” With the restrictions taken away, users of a street will regulate themselves and their behavior based on mutual respect for other users.

Monderman first tested his idea in a small (population approximately 6,000) village in the Netherlands. The village removed traffic lights, signs, and sidewalks. The result? Traffic in the village slowed dramatically, with the average speed dropping by more than half. Without signs or lights telling them what to do, drivers proceeded more carefully.

Ambiguous or shared streets have been incorporated into redevelopment projects in the [United Kingdom and Europe](#). Redevelopment projects in suburban Melbourne, Australia have also adopted the idea. Shared streets have also started to make their appearance in some U.S. cities. In Pittsburgh, the city’s [Market Square](#) was redesigned using shared streets principles in 2010. The redesign was a success. After the redesign, almost 500 new residential units and 32 restaurants appeared within a block and a half. The redesign was so successful that a similar redesign is being considered for the stretch of Liberty Avenue that forms the entrance to downtown Pittsburgh.

Ambiguous streets are not just pedestrian malls, bicycle thoroughfares, or transit ways. All uses and modes of transportation are allowed, with the main restriction being that all users are expected to accommodate and respect the others. They have been proposed for [commercial](#) and [residential](#) areas. But there are limits to where an ambiguous street would be appropriate—a major thoroughfare for heavy vehicle traffic would obviously not be a good choice. In the right area, however, a dose of ambiguity could prove to be an interesting new way to “take it to the streets.”

### National Complete Streets Coalition

Since 2008, NAR has been in the National Complete Streets Coalition. The Coalition's mission is to advance complete streets policy at each level of government: federal, state and local. There have been several pieces of legislation introduced in both the U.S. House and Senate to promote Complete Streets. However, nothing has successfully passed either chamber until this year.

In July 2015, the Senate passed a long-term surface transportation package that included a provision with complete streets policy. And in October 2015, the House included a similar Complete Streets provision in the approved transportation package. Including this provision in a long-term transportation package baseline is a major milestone for the National Complete Streets Coalition because this level of support for Complete Streets has never been achieved. There are significant hurdles Congress must cross prior to a long-term transportation plan in 2015 but this is the closest Congress has come to including Complete Streets policies at the federal level.

**QUESTIONS:**

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