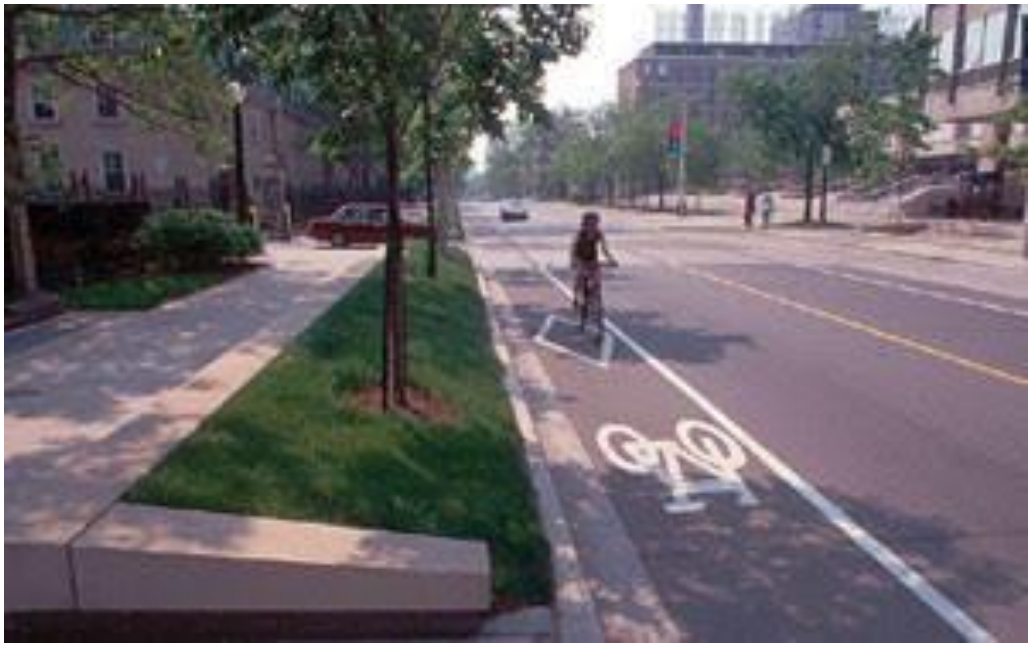
September 2021

HOT TOPIC ALERT

Complete Streets



Introduction

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 planning today is to design "Complete Streets" capable of accommodating different, co-existing types of use.

What is a Complete Street?

"Complete Streets" is the name for the public policy that roads should meet the needs of all users, such as walkers, bicyclists, and public transit riders, in addition to motorists. The policy is based on the idea that accommodating the needs of all road users reduces accidents and air pollution, increases transport efficiency, promotes physical exercise, and creates more livable communities. Transportation and zoning policies in the United States have historically prioritized the automobile over other transportation modes. The proliferation of automobile manufacturing and low-density suburban neighborhoods after World War II contributed to a state of automobile dependence in much of the country. Many see this dependence as reducing the quality of life. Automobile

commuters lose precious time in traffic jams and motor vehicle emissions are known to cause cancer and respiratory disease, among other bad health effects. Automobiles caused more than 38,000 deaths in 2020, 7% more than in 2019, even though the COVID-19 pandemic led to a 13.2% decline in driving in 2020.

But priorities are changing. Complete Streets are an attempt to alter the status of the private automobile as the primary mode of transportation. Planners are considering more factors to account for future growth and to accommodate the changing demands of residents. Complete Streets design models focus more on the habits and patterns of life in a community rather than the speed with which a motorist can travel through it.

The Complete Streets concept grew out of the sense that streets and roads should not be designed to accommodate only cars and trucks. Other types of transportation and other needs and uses should be factored into the design of streets and sidewalks. Pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, transit users, and travelers of all ages and abilities should be able to move along the streets safely. Since 2008, NAR has been an active partner in the National Complete Streets Coalition. The Coalition's mission is to advance Complete Streets policy in the planning, design, construction, operation, and maintenance of transportation networks.

Most communities in the US today contain at least one inefficient multi-lane road that serves as a high-speed travel route while also providing multiple entry and exit points for commercial and residential property lining the road. This road will typically have very few pedestrian crosswalks and no dedicated lanes for bicycles or public transport. These ill-planned, multi-use roads, referred to as "stroads" (a cross between a main street and a roadway), represent the antithesis of Complete Streets. Stroads are where multiple uses clash, since they are intended for high-speed motor travel but the adjacent retail and residential developments require constant merger and exit. According to experts, stroads are the worst type of street design. They fail to provide for speedy travel, and they pose traffic risks for all users.

The aging of the American population is a big factor in the need for Complete Streets policies. By 2025, about one in five Americans will be over the age of 65, and they will make up one-quarter of the driving population. As people reach old age, health problems force many to give up driving. Older adults outlive their ability to drive by an average of seven to 10 years. But it is difficult for people transition away from driving in favor of walking and public transport if streets in their communities lack crosswalks, useable sidewalks, convenient bus stops, or safe speed controls on motorists.

Safety is also one of the main drivers of Complete Streets policies. On average about 5,000 pedestrians and 700 bicyclists are killed each year in crashes with motor vehicles across the country, and thousands more are non-fatally injured. From 2010 to 2019 there was a 45% increase in people struck and killed by drivers while walking, with an average of 17 pedestrians killed every day in 2019.

A Complete Streets policy requires transportation planners to design and operate streets with a view to safety and access for all users. This includes all ages and abilities, as well as modes of transportation. This means that community and transportation planners take into account more than

just speed and convenience of motorists. Rather, they prioritize safety, the needs of various transportation modes, existing local land uses, and environments.

The push for complete streets dates back to 1971. In that year, Oregon passed a law 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.

As of June 2021, more than 1600 Complete Streets policies have been adopted in communities across the United States. Complete Streets policies are set at the state, regional, and local level. in the policies that have been adopted take many forms, such as resolutions, policies, laws, ordinances, design manuals, executive orders, and tax ordinances. State governments control many road systems and infrastructure, so state laws are an important component for organizing priorities of statewide transportation networks. As of 2018, 18 states and Washington, DC, have adopted 21 Complete Streets laws. Of these, six explicitly apply to both state and federally-funded roads. A federal Complete Streets Act was introduced in Congress at the beginning 0f 2021. It would set aside five percent of federal highway funds to support Complete Streets projects and require states to facilitate local programs. As of August 2021, the bill has not advanced out of committee.

Complete Street Model Format

There is no single model that all Complete Streets policies must follow. The term refers to a set of policy goals for street design. Approaches will, indeed, must, vary by community context in order to accomplish the goals of the policy. Each design is customized to the needs of the individual community the street will serve. For instance, in urban areas, with busy commuter traffic, it is important to integrate and encourage a variety of ways for high volumes of people to reach their workplaces, such as public transit, bicycles, automobiles (including taxis and rideshares as well as private cars), and pedestrians. Meanwhile, road networks in suburban areas have traditionally featured high speed arterials designed only for cars. A multimodal transportation network in a suburban area might also include bike paths, and bike racks on buses and rail transport lines in order to encourage a mix of uses.

Complete Streets are often categorized as part of the "new urbanism" promoted in many large cities. But rural areas and small towns can also benefit from Complete Streets designs. The needs of a rural area are very different from those in an urban area. The main commercial street in a small town is often a state or county highway meant to accommodate high-speed vehicle traffic. Residents may also value the distinctive character of their small town and fear its disruption. In 2016, the Federal Highway Administration released a guide for planners in small towns and rural areas to apply Complete Streets principles to better fit their needs. For instance, bicycling and walking may be unappealing and unsafe on state and county roadways where high-speed motorized traffic predominates. Under a Complete Streets approach, some roadways could be redesigned to provide a multimodal transportation network that incorporates safe bicycle and pedestrian use in the rural context.

Common Features

Encouraging a mix of uses is the essence of Complete Streets. A mixed-use transportation policy doesn't necessarily remove automobile use from the mix. Rather, it seeks to reduce many of the most harmful aspects of motor vehicle use in order to make room for other types of transportation and uses of the streets in a community. For instance, the traditional measure of the success of a roadway is its level of service (LoS). This is a simple measure of traffic delay based on the measurement of how long a vehicle must wait to go through a given road segment. A Complete Streets policy would incorporate other success measures in addition to LoS, such as safety and accessibility for all types of transportation.

There are a number of tools to address the dangers that automobiles can pose to other modes of transportation. For instance, limiting access can separate motorists from other types of users by prohibiting either nonmotorized or motorized users from certain roadways or from a single roadway at certain times of the day. Additionally, traffic-calming measures to slow vehicle speeds make the roads safer for other types of users. Common traffic-calming measures include traffic circles (round center islands at intersections which oblige drivers to slow down and change direction to get around the circle), bump outs (deliberately narrowed streets and intersections that encourage cars to slow down), and chicanes (pairs of bump outs that introduce curves into otherwise straight roads, which encourage drivers to drive 10 to 30% slower than they would otherwise).

Another option is the Road Diet which involves converting a four-lane undivided highway segment into three-lanes (two through-lanes and a center lane for left turns from both directions). According to the Federal Highway Administration, the Road Diet reconfiguration can reduce crashes by 19% to 47%. A Road Diet also frees up space for other uses, such as bus and bike lanes, pedestrian islands, sidewalks, and bus shelters.

As these measures reduce private motor traffic, however, the integration of public transit, walking, and bicycle use is essential to meet transport needs. Complete Streets measures for public transit often include dedicated bus lanes, the addition of convenient and safe bus stops with weather shelters, and bike racks on buses to encourage bicyclists to take advantage of public transport as part of their journey.

Enhancing and encouraging pedestrian street use may include measures such as wide sidewalks, pedestrian-scale lighting, crosswalks with pedestrian priority at intersections where pedestrian traffic meets other types of traffic, benches or chairs where pedestrians can relax, curb cutouts for strollers and wheelchairs, and curb "bulb-outs" to reduce intersection crossing distances.

Complete Streets designers may account for bicyclists by including dedicated bicycle lanes, bike priority at stop lights, shared pedestrian and bicycle trails, sharrows (road segments that are meant to be used by both bicyclists and drivers), wide and paved shoulders on rural roads, and sheltered bike parking stations.

Adaptive devices to support mobility for people at all levels of ability are also an important feature of any Complete Streets policy. Examples include wide sidewalks and curb cutouts, as well as wheelchair accessible boarding platforms for public transit. Mobility-enhancing features such as these are often required under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a sweeping federal law enacted in 1990 to guarantee that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else to participate in the mainstream of American life.

Another aspect of Complete Streets is recognizing that the street can be a recreation area as well as a transport corridor. For instance, in addition to being a thoroughfare, a street might incorporate a linear park, including green space for strolling, playing games, relaxing, or even gardening. The use of streets as public gathering and recreation spaces became even more appealing during the COVID-19 pandemic, when public health measures required people to observe social distancing and most indoor gatherings were prohibited. During the height of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, several cities temporarily banned traffic on certain streets and repurposed them as car-free zones in order to encourage pedestrians and bicyclists. Others extended sidewalks to make more room for pedestrians to enjoy being outside while remaining a safe six feet apart from each other.

Of course, not all roadways are appropriate for all users. For instance, in rural or industrial settings or on limited access highways, road design might favor efficient use by motorists over all other uses. Elsewhere, however, a Complete Streets approach would look at encouraging local economic activity and use by all transportation types.

Examples of Complete Streets

San Francisco's Better Market Street is a good example of a complete street plan underway. Market Street is a busy corridor in San Francisco, incorporating trams and buses as well as motorists and pedestrian and bicycle traffic. The multi-phase Complete Streets project there has received $18.4 million in federal funding. Among other measures, it will add sharrows and dedicated bus lanes in order to reduce points of conflict between bicycles and vehicles and improve crosswalk access for pedestrians. It also seeks to make Market Street more inviting as a public space.

In Chicago, Argyle Street along the quarter mile between Broadway and Sheridan Road has been redesigned as the city's first shared street. The project's goals on this heavily-used street included decreasing traffic speeds, increasing pedestrian safety, and creating a shared public space for community gathering and retail. The Complete Streets redesign, which also included stormwater capture measures, raised the road level and eliminated curbs to create a plaza-like effect and make the street fully accessible for wheelchairs. Pedestrian zones are delineated by different types of pavement, bollards, planters, and chicanes.

Other examples include Homewood, Alabama's North 18th Street, which is being transformed from a "sea of asphalt" with multiple traffic lanes to a tree-lined avenue with medians and reconfigured street design that will include wheelchair accessible sidewalk ramps and pedestrian gathering zones, as well as space for retail displays and restaurant tables. In Charlotte, North Carolina, the $9 million Shamrock Drive Complete Street upgrade project is underway to add turn lanes, sidewalks, bike lanes and crosswalks in order to better serve bicyclists, pedestrians,

motorists as well as connecting neighborhoods and businesses. The project corridor will also include public art and storm drainage improvements.

Meanwhile, Arlington, Virginia, established a Neighborhood Complete Streets program in 2016 to improve safety and access on local streets and to complement earlier improvement projects on arterial streets. The project would clear sidewalks of obstructions, add streetlights, create safe roadways for bicycles, and create more curb ramps that comply with the ADA. Kansas City, Missouri, has adopted a Metropolitan Transportation Plan to use as a blueprint for managing the region's transportation system through 2050. The hope is to increase ease of travel by adding choices, such as developing regional bicycle networks, increasing bus routes, and creating a metro walking trail system.

Advantages of Development

Complete Streets have many advantages over traditional road configurations. Instead of pitting private motorists against pedestrians, bicycles, and public transportation, an integrated policy accounting for all users increases safety, health, and efficiency for all. Complete Streets policies have a huge range of benefits: they reduce motor-vehicle related injuries and fatalities, encourage physical activity such as walking and bicycling, and reduce human exposure to transportation-related emissions, to name just a few. Complete Streets also create more livable communities by expanding transportation choices beyond the private automobile. For instance, wide and attractive sidewalks and well-designed bicycle routes encourage physical activity among residents. A variety of available transportation options encourages residents of all ages and abilities to get outside and stay connected to their neighborhoods. Complete Streets can also revitalize local economies. Integrating land use and transportation makes a street a more attractive and vibrant place for people to visit local businesses such as shops and restaurants. This in turn raises property values. According to one study, even a small increase in the walkability of a neighborhood increases area home values.

REALTOR® Advocacy and Research

NAR has been involved in advocacy for Complete Streets and Smart Growth policies. For instance, the Memphis Area Association of REALTORS (MAAR) got involved in advancing a Complete Streets policy for Memphis, Tennessee. MAAR received a $15,000 Smart Growth Action Grant from NAR. This enabled MAAR to contribute to the advocacy efforts of the coalition working to adopt a Complete Streets policy in Memphis and Shelby County. The result was far reaching. It included an executive order directing all new road facilities and major renovations in Memphis to accommodate all users and all modes of transportation, a multimodal Street Design Guide, and expansion of the city's bicycle facilities, including hundreds of miles of new protected bike lanes. In May 2021, NAR hosted a Complete Streets Issues webinar where panelists discussed implementation options and benefits. NAR has also partnered with the American Association of Retired People (AARP) to integrate AARP's Livability Index into NAR's Property Resource website and app, which enables users to consider people's needs as they age when searching for a place to live.

NAR also conducted a Community and Transportation Preference Survey in 2020 to gauge changes in American lifestyles and migration trends, which can inform policy makers on how to implement smart growth changes. NAR has conducted community preference surveys for more than 20 years, providing precious data on how people live and how they would like to live. The 2020 survey of 2,000 adults in the 50 largest metro areas of the United States found that one in five people living in a detached home would prefer to live in an attached home in a walkable community with a shorter commute to work. This represented some shift in favor of detached homes due to COVID-19 health concerns. But the survey also found that people who live in walkable communities continue to be the most satisfied with their quality of life.

Other Organizations and Efforts

National Complete Streets Coalition – Launched in 2004, this member of the Smart Growth America Coalition promotes the development and implementation of Complete Streets policies and professional practices.

American Association of Retired People (AARP) – A multi-service nonprofit, this organization empowers people to choose how they live as they age.

American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) – This is the professional association for landscape architects in the United States.

American Public Transportation Association (APTA) – This nonprofit association of more than 1,500 public and private sector organizations advocates for federal and funding as well as providing research and technical expertise.

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