



Complete Streets Policies

Frequently Asked Questions



What are Complete Streets?

Complete Streets are streets designed and built for all travelers. When streets are designed for all modes, they are safer, more comfortable, and more convenient for people of all ages and abilities to walk, bicycle, take public transit, or drive a motor vehicle. A Complete Streets policy establishes the foundation for ensuring that all streets in a community serve all users, either through new construction or redesign of existing streets.

What is the difference between Complete Streets and active transportation plans?

The term "Complete Streets" refers to a systematic policy to improve all public streets, through design, construction, operations, and/or maintenance, so that the right-of-way can serve everyone. Active transportation projects and plans focus on improving specific streets or networks so that active transportation (bicycling and walking) is safe and comfortable. Complete Streets projects do more than just make active transportation improvements. They ensure that a street is able to serve all modes of transportation, as well as those who want to use the street for non-transportation purposes, such as sitting, reading, and socializing.

Related Resources:

[Active Transportation Planning FAQ](#)
[Public Transit FAQ](#)

How has the concept of Complete Streets evolved?

Historically, U.S. cities were built to serve many transportation modes, from streetcars and horse drawn buggies to people walking and bicycling. When the federal government began building the interstate system in the 1950s, communities emphasized auto-centric mobility and underinvested in facilities serving other modes.¹ By the 1970s, conditions in many cities for traveling by any mode other than driving were difficult, unpleasant, and dangerous. In response, in 1971 Oregon required that new or rebuilt roads accommodate bicyclists and pedestrians, using the term "routine accommodation." By 2000, nine such policies existed nationwide. In 2003, the term "Complete Streets" was adopted to more accurately describe the nature of streets that serve all users.² The Complete Streets movement has experienced strong growth nationwide and in Ohio, and in 2018 over 1,400 communities across the country and at least 24 in Ohio had Complete Streets policies.³

¹ U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration (2017). History of the Interstate Highway System - 50th Anniversary - Interstate System - Highway History. June 27, 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/interstate/history.cfm>.

² McCann, B. (2010). Happy Anniversary, Complete Streets! Smart Growth America. Retrieved from: <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/happy-anniversary-complete-streets/>.

³ Smart Growth America (2019). Complete Streets policies nationwide. Retrieved from: <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/program/national-complete-streets-coalition/publications/policy-development/policy-atlas/>.

What are some examples of Complete Streets improvements?

Complete Streets can be achieved using a variety of infrastructural improvements (as well as behavior change). Some of the most common improvements and their benefits are described in the table below.⁴

Complete Streets Improvement	Description	Benefits
Road diet	Removing through lanes, inserting a center turn lane, and adding bicycle lanes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little change in street capacity or vehicle throughput • Increases safety for all users • Higher bicycle safety, comfort, and use
Traffic calming	Narrowing vehicular lanes and/or shortening curb radii	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slows traffic (increases pedestrian safety) • Decreases crossing distance for pedestrians
Pedestrian Improvements	Installation or improvement of sidewalks, crosswalks (including raised crosswalks), ADA-compliant curb ramps, and curb extensions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improves access for all pedestrians and increases visibility (at crossings) • Curb extensions shorten crossing distances.



Before and after images of a Complete Street roadway reconstruction

Health: Lowered risk of chronic disease and premature death, reduced daily stress from driving, less motor vehicle congestion, improved air quality, and increased ease of active transportation trips.

Social: Increased opportunities for interaction and community building by reducing auto dependency; greater social safety from more eyes on the street; public right-of-way reallocated to people-oriented spaces, increased mobility options for all, community-wide solutions to address systemic inequalities.

Economic: Lower health care costs, lower travel costs, more money to spend on other expenditures, increased productivity, increased retail sales in pedestrian-oriented environments, reduced costs for roadway retrofits.

Environment: Influence on well-designed spaces; reduced motor vehicle emissions, more compact development with less impermeable surface and stormwater runoff.

What are the benefits of Complete Streets?

The benefits of Complete Streets are significant and wide-ranging, and are enjoyed by individuals and entire communities. By increasing physical activity, decreasing reliance on automobiles, and improving the built environment, Complete Streets can lead to health, social, economic, and environmental benefits.^{5,6}

4 Smart Growth America and the National Complete Streets Coalition (2018). Benefits of Complete Streets: Complete Streets Improve Safety. Retrieved from: <https://www.eesi.org/files/cs-safety.pdf>

5 Litman, T. (2015). Evaluating Complete Streets: The Value of Designing Roads for Diverse Modes, Users and Activities. Retrieved from: <https://www.vtpi.org/compstr.pdf>

6 Update to: Smart Growth America and the National Complete Streets Coalition (2015). Safer Streets, Stronger Economies. Retrieved from: <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/resources/evaluating-complete-streets-projects-a-guide-for-practitioners/>



What is a Complete Streets policy? Why adopt one?

Communities that pass or adopt Complete Streets policies establish a foundation for shifting ongoing transportation investments to support all users. Such policies direct a community's transportation planners and engineers to routinely design and operate the entire right-of-way to provide safe access for people of all ages and abilities. A policy also gives transportation professionals political and community support that help make active living possible.

A Complete Streets policy assumes that facilities for people to walk, bicycle, and use public transit are needed rather than requiring planners and engineers to prove the need.

How can I help my community adopt a Complete Streets policy?

1. Learn how transportation projects happen in your community.⁷

- » Determine the decision-making process for transportation project scoping and funding. Be specific (list names and departments who make decisions).
- » Identify supportive individuals within the decision-making process. These people are typically found in departments such as planning or public works, or in elected positions.
- » Assess what existing plans and policies say about accommodating all users. Consider how a Complete Streets Policy could strengthen those policies.

2. Based on the results from Step 1, determine the most appropriate policy for your community.

- » Ideally, the policy should have the force of law, but different Complete Streets policies make sense in different political and fiscal contexts. A policy could take the form of a resolution, city policy, law or ordinance, plan, design manual, department policy, or executive order.

Advocates should ensure that a Complete Streets policy in their community includes:

1. A vision and intent (reasons for pursuing Complete Streets)
2. Consideration of all users and modes
3. Consideration of all projects and phases
4. Specific criteria to prioritize funding for Complete Streets projects
5. Clear, accountable exceptions
6. Network connectivity
7. All jurisdictions and a plan for jurisdictional coordination
8. Inclusive, flexible design guides
9. Context sensitivity
10. Performance measures
11. Implementation steps
12. Equity considerations

Adapted from Smart Growth America documents.

- » Consider how you can change policy now and how you can most easily develop support for Complete Streets.
- » Identify how Complete Streets outcomes can be incorporated into existing street design, construction, maintenance, and reconstruction processes. This can help build support from staff who would implement the policy.

3. Work with your community to compile a unique vision based around the needs and desires of the community.

- » Personalize your communication of Complete Streets benefits to individuals, community groups, and agencies. (For example, if a political leader is concerned about health care costs in the community, focus on promoting Complete Street's capacity to lower health costs).

⁷ Seskin, S., & McCann, B. (2012). Complete Streets: Local Policy Workbook. Retrieved from: https://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/complete_streets-policyworkbook.pdf?1436996056



- » Work with stakeholders to craft a policy that accepts that those using a specific mode often have different needs. Therefore, the ideal street is designed for all ages and abilities.
- » Work with community members and organizations to proactively address equity concerns. For example, some communities have come to associate bike lanes and community beautification efforts with gentrification and displacement of low-income and communities of color. Working with existing community-based organizations can increase community involvement and trust.

How can we implement our Complete Streets plan?

1. Plan for implementation by:⁸

- » Strengthening relationships between stakeholders,
- » Designating a champion (an individual, agency, or committee) that can implement projects,
- » Creating an accountable advisory committee that connects people from different backgrounds, and
- » Creating a detailed implementation plan.

2. Positively change procedures, processes, and outcomes by:

- » Reviewing and updating existing codes, plans, manuals, and decision-making processes to ensure consistency with Complete Streets policy,
- » Updating maintenance and operations procedures for consistency with Complete Streets improvements,
- » Updating the agency's project selection criteria to benefit Complete Streets projects, and

- » Formalizing decision-making processes through checklists; specify and limit exceptions.

3. Offer training and education opportunities by:

- » Holding workshops to train transportation planners, designers, and engineers,
- » Changing position descriptions and hiring criteria to reduce ongoing training needs, and
- » Working continuously with elected officials and the public to ensure that these groups understand the importance of Complete Streets; providing training for newly elected or appointed officials, especially to city councils and planning commissions.

4. Measure performance by:

- » Setting accurate baseline figures,
- » Coordinating across departments to track a consistent and diverse set of performance measures (for example, using the public health department to monitor air quality or the police department to monitor crashes around new facilities),
- » Determining appropriate outcomes measures, and
- » Establishing achievable short-term goals and a process to update goals.

Remember that Complete Streets is a process aimed at gradually creating a network of complete streets over time. Complete Streets is often implemented opportunistically, whether through a reconstruction project or a maintenance project. Be flexible and open to implementing smaller-scale pilot projects that may encounter less resistance, require fewer funds, and can be bundled with preprogrammed maintenance projects, such as roadway resurfacing.

⁸ Update to: Smart Growth America and the National Complete Streets Coalition (2023). A strong Complete Streets policy requires a plan for implementation (element #10). Retrieved from: <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets-element-10/>

Where can I find out more?

- » National Complete Streets Coalition. <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/program/national-complete-streets-coalition/>
- » US Department of Transportation. Complete Streets Policies. <https://www.transportation.gov/mission/health/complete-streets-policies>
- » Ohio Department of Transportation. (2017). Make Your Community Safer and Healthier with Complete Streets. http://www.dot.state.oh.us/Divisions/Planning/LocalPrograms/LTAP/Documents/Complete_Streets.pdf

