



Complete Streets Guidance for Communities From **URBAN**

By now, most of us are familiar with the idea of complete streets—streets that serve cars and trucks while being friendly and safe for transit, pedestrians, bicycles and those with mobility disabilities. The mid-twentieth-century car-dominated paradigm has been at least partially replaced by a complete streets paradigm.

Our collective success at making our streets safer for pedestrians and all modes, however, is still limited. Our challenges include limited resources and resource competition, constrained rights-of-way, narrow pavement widths, pressure to accommodate freight trucks and emergency vehicles without constraint, inertia and resistance from many community stakeholders, and dated design approaches.

We need to make faster progress if we care about all residents. It is impossible not to move to complete streets when we consider the value of human lives. Lives are destroyed in an instant when a non-complete street is a factor in a loss of life

or an injury—or more slowly and less obviously when streets discourage walking and active living, contributing to heart disease, strokes and diabetes. When we use a sustainability lens, we see that these health impacts disproportionately fall on lower-income individuals.

Many communities away from the Boston/Cambridge hub are challenged by the lack of private investment that can help fund or justify street improvements, and by a context very different from that in fast-growing urban centers. Boston's *Complete Streets Guidelines* and the *Urban Street Design Guidelines* from the National Association of City Transportation Officials are beauties to admire and emulate, and the progress made by cities such as Boston and Cambridge is remarkable. Unfortunately, that context is more urban, and experiencing faster growth, than virtually any area of the state outside of Route 128. And so these precedents provide only limited lessons for less-dense urban core areas, small cities, suburbs and rural communities.

Building Momentum

Northampton, for example, has one of the most vibrant small downtowns in New England, yet the city is so small that only a few of its streets even fall into the categories in design guidelines written for urban areas. In most of rural and suburban Hampshire, Franklin and Berkshire counties, even fewer streets are addressed in any detail by most design guidelines.

What can smaller communities, from small cities to rural areas, do to show our love for all modes of transport, not only cars? In Northampton, we employed a multifaceted approach to this problem.

Northampton's major highway commercial strip area—our “miracle mile,” with high traffic volumes, nearby dense housing and strong pedestrian desire lines—was rebuilt thirty years ago. It received new sidewalks, but not a single pedestrian signal on the entire street, something that would be unheard of today.

Twenty or so years ago, when Northampton Planning and Sustainability significantly expanded its push for complete streets, we did community

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TO RURAL

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fundraising to help pay for the street's first pedestrian signal. Later, we followed this approach and raised thousands of dollars from the community to help design ten miles of multiuse trails, an investment matched by millions of dollars of federal and state funds. These fundraising efforts not only helped to pay the bills and leverage funds, but demonstrated to policymakers and the community the enormous local support and hunger for complete streets. Simultaneously, we coordinated these investments with two decades of incremental zoning and subdivision regulatory changes to require trails, more sidewalks, bicycle parking, traffic mitigation, traffic-calmed new streets and other steps.

As our momentum grew, we built an aura of inevitability and the momentum became self-perpetuating. We have always had strong political and staff leadership and support, but without community support, that leadership can only go so far. We find that the aura of inevitability that comes with each success and show of community support is almost as important as new resources.



Shared crossings with enhancements are used to slow traffic.



Bike lanes can be buffered from moving and parked vehicles.



“Our community has embraced complete streets in part because we moved step-by-step, involving the community in each step along the way, building community excitement and understanding,” says Northampton Mayor David Narkewicz.

Every community still repaves its streets (eventually), works with the Massachusetts Department of Transportation on projects, buys maintenance equipment, and is eligible for federally and state-funded projects. Doing it right for all travel modes does not need to cost much more than doing it wrong for only some modes. The least expensive way to move a person a given distance and to give them exercise—which, after all, is what we want to achieve—is by walking or bicycling, not driving. In rural and suburban areas, most medium and long trips will continue to be by car, but optimizing roads for all modes provides options, promotes healthy living, and reduces costs.

Creating a Framework

Given Northampton’s small-community context, which limits the feasibility of existing design guidelines and severely limits the availability of planning resources, we decided that complete streets required a clear framework, not simply a few specific projects. We created a framework with five steps.

First, we adopted a series of ever-stronger complete streets policies (in 2005, 2008 and 2015). Today, communities are widely adopting complete streets policies to be eligible for MassDOT funding, which is a great incentive. We wanted a more inclusive complete streets policy that involved strong community engagement. As we built momentum, our policy evolved from a strong but aspirational policy to a mandated ordinance affecting all projects. As a result, our current policy is actually weaker on paper than similar policies in many communities, but stronger in reality because, as an ordinance, it is the law. The cost of the process was minimal; it could be undertaken by any community with strong volunteers and some guidance from a regional planning agency or others.

Second, we deliberately undertook a series of strategic interventions that

developed our momentum. For us it started with a pedestrian signal, but it could equally have been a painted crosswalk that the community identified. The objective at this stage is to show success and address demonstrable needs, without spending much money.

Third, we used a variety of third-party assessment tools to see how we were doing and to share that with the community. The tools included Bicycle Friendly Community, Walk Friendly Community and the STAR Community Rating System (which covers vast areas beyond complete streets). These instruments not only helped us identify the weaknesses that we

needed to address, but, in giving us the equivalent of A- grades, they allowed us to both be proud and publicly face our warts. The cost for bicycle- and walk-friendly assessments is limited to volunteer or staff time.

Fourth, we created policies, plans and city committees that went beyond a complete streets policy. Community engagement and good planning were critical. While this process can be expensive—we spent more than \$100,000, all in grant funds, on our last pedestrian and bicycle planning process—there are

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The cost of the process was minimal; it could be undertaken by any community with strong volunteers and some guidance from a regional planning agency or others.



Medians and buffers protect bikes on busier streets and intersections.



Raised and flat pedestrian crossings are combined with signage to slow traffic.

PHOTOS: ALTA PLANNING + DESIGN

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named individual, the disclosure of which may constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy,” may allow for redacting identifying information for candidates who were discussed in executive session and did not pass preliminary screening, such as those candidates whose current positions could be jeopardized, those candidates whose future employment could be adversely affected, and those candidates whose standing in the community could be harmed. [See Attorney General v. School Committee of Northampton, 375 Mass. 127, 132 & n.5 (1978).]

Conclusion

The hiring process is not confined to recruiting and hiring the ideal candidate. Instead, municipalities must adhere to applicable requirements under the Uniform Procurement Act, open meeting law, and public records law, among others, to ensure that the hiring process is properly followed and the ideal candidate, when chosen, can be selected without unnecessary scrutiny to the process that was used. ❀

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low-cost approaches that can work in small communities. The effort can be supported by a regional planning agency, university planning studios, the American Institute of Architects’ Sustainable Design Assessment Teams (\$5,000 per team), or the New England Municipal Sustainability Network’s Design and Resiliency Teams (currently free but very competitive).

Finally, we collaborated with regional efforts to create the Healthy Hampshire regional consortium to think about a variety of active living challenges (funded by a grant from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and the Centers for Disease Control). We used this consortium to help us think about the context of Hampshire County streets from the urban center of Northampton to some of the most rural areas of the state. We then hired a transportation planner to create a complete streets guideline that would apply for all the street types in this urban to rural transect. (For guidelines and related documents, visit www.northamptonma.gov/1647/

WalkBike-Plan.) Other guides exist, but we wanted one that was localized and grounded in the reality of our unique context to help us. The guide is not a regulatory guide for private sector or public sector work, but is intended to drive conversations, build community consensus and lower the cost of local planning in each interested community.

Conclusion

In Massachusetts, state and local governments and our citizenry pride themselves on a sustainable focus. Being a national leader in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, increasing photovoltaics, preserving and restoring open space, and other measures are critically important, but they are only part of the story. Allowing people to walk and bicycle, while of course ensuring the public choice to use a car, is critical to improving public health and addressing social inequities, improving our economy, and protecting our environment. We can and should use a sustainability lens to look at our streets. ❀