

Ideal Complete Streets Policy Elements and Gap Analysis regarding Maryland State Law and Policies

From <http://www.completestreets.org/changing-policy/policy-elements>

Policy Elements

Regardless of a policy's form, the National Complete Streets Coalition has identified ten elements of a comprehensive complete streets policy.

An ideal complete streets policy:

- Includes a vision for how and why the community wants to complete its streets.
- Specifies that “all users” includes pedestrians, bicyclists and transit passengers of all ages and abilities as well as trucks, buses and automobiles.
- Encourages street connectivity and aims to create a comprehensive, integrated, connected network for all modes.
- Is adoptable by all agencies to cover all roads.
- Applies to both new and retrofit projects, including design, planning, maintenance, and operations for the entire right of way.
- Makes any exceptions specific and sets a clear procedure that requires high-level approval of exceptions.
- Directs the use of the latest and best design standards while recognizing the need for flexibility in balancing user needs.
- Directs that complete streets solutions will complement the context of the community.
- Establishes performance standards with measurable outcomes.
- Includes specific next steps for implementation of policy.

Sets a vision

A strong vision can inspire a community to follow through on its complete streets policy. Just as no two policies are alike, visions are not one-size-fits-all either. In the small town of Decatur, GA, the Community Transportation Plan defines their vision as promoting health through physical activity and active transportation. In the City of Chicago, the Department of Transportation focuses on creating streets safe for travel by even the most vulnerable – children, older adults, and those with disabilities.

Maryland's vision statement says, "Maryland will be a place where people have the safe and convenient option of walking and bicycling for transportation, recreation, and health. Our transportation system will be designed to encourage walking and bicycling, and will provide a seamless, balanced and barrier-free network for all."

MDOT's 20-Year Bicycle and Pedestrian Access Master Plan, October 2002, page 3.

Specifies all users

A true complete streets policy must apply to everyone traveling along the road. A sidewalk without curb ramps is useless to someone using a wheelchair. A street with an awkwardly placed public transportation stop without safe crossings is dangerous for riders. A fast-moving road with no safe space for cyclists will discourage those who depend on bicycles for transportation. A road with heavy freight traffic must be planned with those vehicles in mind. Older adults and children face particular challenges as they are more likely to be seriously injured or killed along a roadway. Automobiles are an important part of a complete street as well, as any change made to better accommodate other modes will have an effect on personal vehicles too. In some cases, like the installation of curb bulb-outs, these changes can improve traffic flow and the driving experience.

"MDOT makes use of a wide array of State programs to develop the bicycle and pedestrian network. The Neighborhood Conservation Program and the Sidewalk Retrofit and Bicycle Retrofit programs are used to integrate elements such as "pedestrian-and-bicycle friendly" street designs, sidewalks and bike paths, transit shelters and other facilities, shoulders, curbs, lighting and street amenities to create a safer and more welcome environment for all users of the State highways – pedestrians and bicyclists as well as motorists and transit users. Design, management and maintenance practices of the Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA) have evolved to provide a greater degree of accommodations for all users of the State highway system, including walkers, persons of limited physical abilities, and bicyclists."

MDOT's 20-Year Bicycle and Pedestrian Access Master Plan, October, 2002, page 8.

Creates a network

Complete streets policies should result in the creation of a complete transportation network for all modes of travel. A network approach helps to balance the needs of all users. Instead of trying to make each street perfect for every traveler, communities can create an interwoven array of streets that emphasize different modes and provide quality accessibility for everyone. This can mean creating bicycle boulevards to speed along bicycle traffic on certain low-traffic routes; dedicating more travel lanes to bus travel only; or pedestrianizing segments of routes that are already overflowing with people on foot. It is important to provide basic safe access for all users regardless of design strategy and networks should not require some users to take long detours.

Goal 1: Facility Integration and Expansion – Integrate and expand the State’s bicycle and pedestrian facilities, creating a connected network of on-road, off-road and transit-related accommodations that will encourage and facilitate increased levels of bicycling and walking and improve access for individuals with disabilities.”

MDOT’s 20-Year Bicycle and Pedestrian Access Master Plan, October, 2002, page 13.

All agencies and all roads

Creating complete streets networks is difficult because many agencies control our streets. They are built and maintained by state, county, and local agencies, and private developers often build new roads. Typical complete streets policies cover only one jurisdiction’s roadways, which can cause network problems: a bike lane one side of a bridge disappears on the other because the road is no longer controlled by the agency that built the lane. Another common issue to resolve is inclusion of complete street elements in sub-division regulations, which govern how private developers build their new streets.

“The General Assembly finds that it is in the public interest for the State to include enhanced transportation facilities for pedestrians and bicycle riders as an essential component of the State’s transportation system, and declares that it is the policy of the State that:

- (1) Access to and the use of transportation facilities by pedestrians and bicycle riders shall be considered and best engineering practices regarding the needs of bicycle riders and pedestrians shall be employed in all phases of transportation planning, including highway design, construction, reconstruction, and repair as well as expansion and improvement of other transportation facilities.”*

Annotated Code of Maryland Transportation Volume, Title 2, Subtitle 6, Section 2-602, Public Policy.

While Section 2-602 is declared to be State policy there may be questions as to how well it is carried out within local jurisdictions and within subdivisions.

All projects

For many years, multi-modal streets have been treated as ‘special projects’ requiring extra planning, funding, and effort. The complete streets approach is different. Its intent is to view all transportation improvements as opportunities to create safer, accessible streets for all users, including pedestrians, cyclists, and public transportation passengers. Under this approach, even small projects can be an opportunity to make meaningful improvements. In repaving projects, for example, an edge stripe can be shifted to create more room for cyclists. In routine work on traffic lights, the timing can be changed to better accommodate pedestrians walking at a slower speed. A strong complete streets policy will integrate complete streets planning into all types of projects, including new construction, reconstruction, rehabilitation, repair and maintenance.

“Strategy 1A – Integrate Bicycle and Pedestrian Facilities into Routine Roadway Development Policy

Future roadway planning, engineering, design, and construction will continue to strive for a more balanced transportation system that includes a seamless, safe and accessible bicycle and pedestrian network and encourages bicycle and pedestrian travel wherever possible. Meeting this strategy requires that bicycle and pedestrian needs are identified and addressed in the development of all road and bridge projects, with the exception of interstates and freeways, including those managed by the Maryland Transportation Authority.”

MDOT’s 20-Year Bicycle and Pedestrian Access Master Plan, October, 2002, page 13.

Exceptions

Making a policy work in the real world requires developing a process to handle exceptions to providing for all modes in each project. The Federal Highway Administration’s guidance on accommodating bicycle and pedestrian travel named three exceptions that have become commonly used in complete streets policies; 1) accommodation is not necessary on corridors where non-motorized use is prohibited, such as interstate freeways; 2) cost of accommodation is excessively disproportionate to the need or probable use; 3) a documented absence of current or future need. Many communities have included their own exceptions, such as severe topographical constraints. In addition to defining exceptions, there must be a clear process for granting them, where a senior-level department head must approve them. Any exceptions should be kept on record and publicly-available.

“While it is SHA’s intent to provide the preferred accommodations on all projects, it is understood that projects will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis. If it is determined that the preferred bicycle and pedestrian accommodations as described in this document cannot be provided, a design waiver must be requested and approved. A project can only proceed to advertisement and/or construction if the project provides SHA’s preferred accommodations or has been granted a design waiver.

A design waiver may be considered for such things as impacts to right of way, utilities, structures (such as bridges or drainage structures), cost and environmentally or historically sensitive areas. The need to provide safety or capacity improvements to the roadway may also be considered. A waiver should not be requested until all reasonable alternatives to provide SHA’s preferred bicycle and pedestrian accommodations have been exhausted. The documentation of these alternatives will be required to support the design waiver request.

Design waivers are not intended to exclude the implementation of bicycle and pedestrian facilities as part of a project. Even with a design waiver, a project should be designed as close as practical to the preferred design accommodations.

Design waivers are not intended to waive the requirements for American (with) Disabilities Act (ADA) facilities as described in the latest SHA and/or ADA guidelines.”

SHA Memorandum, Bicycle and Pedestrian Access Guidelines for Accommodating Bicycle and Pedestrians on State Highways, from Neil Pedersen, SHA Administrator, August 22, 2003, page 1.

Design standards

Communities adopting a complete streets policy should review their design standards to ensure their ability to accommodate all modes of travel, while still providing flexibility to allow designers to tailor the project to unique circumstances. Some communities will opt to re-write their design manual. Others will refer to existing design guides, such as those issued by AASHTO, state design standards, and the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines.

The Bicycle and Pedestrian Design Guidelines was published by SHA in May 2007.

Context-sensitive

An effective complete streets policy must be sensitive to the community context. Being clear about this in the initial statement can allay fears that the policy will require inappropriately wide roads in quiet neighborhoods or miles of little-used sidewalks in rural areas. A strong statement about context can help align transportation and land use planning goals, creating livable, strong neighborhoods.

“Maryland SHA has been a national leader in a new initiative called, “Thinking Beyond the Pavement” in which context sensitive design programs seek to build and improve facilities to meet the needs of the entire traveling community. Projects on the primary and secondary road network are increasing incorporating bicycle and pedestrian enhancements such as curb cuts, wide sidewalks, pedestrian crossings and signalization, wider shoulders, wide curb lanes and marked bikeways.”

MDOT’s 20-Year Bicycle and Pedestrian Access Master Plan, October, 2002, page 8.

Performance measures

The traditional performance measure for transportation planning has been vehicular Level of Service (LOS) a measure of automobile congestion. Complete streets planning requires taking a broader look at how the system is serving all users. Communities with complete streets policies can measure success through a number of ways: the miles of on-street bicycle routes created; new linear feet of pedestrian accommodation; changes in the number of people using public transportation, bicycling or walking (mode shift); number of new street trees; and /or the creation or adoption of a new multi-modal level of service standard that better measures the quality of travel experience. The fifth edition of Highway Capacity Manual, due out in 2010, will include this new way of measuring LOS. Cities like San Francisco and Seattle have already begun to develop their own.

MDOT’s 20-Year Bicycle and Pedestrian Access Master Plan lists ten performance measures. SHA’s FY 2008-11 Business Plan lists seven performance measures relating to

pedestrian safety and 16 performance measures relating to pedestrian and bicycle facilities.

MDOT's 20-Year Bicycle and Pedestrian Access Master Plan, October, 2002, page 28. SHA's FY 2008 Through FY 2011 Business Plan, July 3, 2007, pages 6, 7 and 11.

Implementation

Taking a complete streets policy from paper into practice is not easy, but providing some momentum with specific implementation steps can help. Policies can guide communities to adopt complete streets principles in plans, develop new design guides, institute better ways to measure performance, or offer workshops and other training opportunities to planners and engineers. Some policies establish a task force or commission to work toward policy accommodation.

MDOT's 20-Year Bicycle and Pedestrian Access Master Plan lists 14 bicycle and pedestrian related projects that were being implemented as the plan document was being prepared and 12 bicycle and pedestrian related projects that were described as coming soon. Seven years later the vast majority of these projects have been completed.

MDOT's 20-Year Bicycle and Pedestrian Access Master Plan, October, 2002, page 30.

