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# 500 elevation

## Complete-streets initiative moves upward

**W**ith a quick stroke of his pen, Mayor A.C. Wharton added the city of Memphis, Tenn., to the growing ranks of communities and transportation agencies with complete-streets policies. His signature finalized the 500th complete-streets policy adopted in the U.S.

With so many policies on the books throughout the country, the complete-streets movement is an undeniable component of transportation planning and design in the 21st century. The term “complete streets” is still relatively new to the scene, with just under a decade of use, yet communities across the nation are increasingly embracing the concept. Most policies have been adopted in the past few years: Approximately 140 policies were adopted nationwide in 2011 and 130 more were formalized in 2012.

Complete streets are planned, funded, designed, operated and maintained to provide safe, accessible accommodations for all modes of transportation—walking, bicycling, driving, taking public transportation—and for all people, regardless of age, ability, income, race or ethnicity. When applied across a community, complete streets result in streets that

are easy to cross on foot, are comfortable and appealing to drive along, provide access to community institutions, homes, employment centers and commercial enterprises and are not dominated by any one mode of transportation.

### Satisfy them all

Conventional transportation planning and design in the U.S. typically emphasizes the speed and movement of vehicular travel, often without regard to the local community context. The same assumptions, design templates and performance measures have been applied with little variation to both high-speed rural arterials and small-town main streets to roads outside a community and to roads just outside elementary schools.

As a result, many cities and towns have transportation systems that fail to meet the needs and preferences of all their residents. In addition to limiting transportation choices, many transportation networks do not support current population trends and concerns, including accommodating the aging Baby Boomer generation, supporting public health through active transportation, minimizing transportation costs to individuals and agencies, responding to preferences for walkable and compact neighborhoods and adopting more sustainable practices and lifestyles.

Most strikingly, Americans have a



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transportation network that is dangerous and, too often, deadly for anyone who is traveling outside a vehicle. According to Transportation for America, more than 47,700 pedestrians were killed in the U.S. over the decade between 2000 and 2009—the equivalent of a jumbo jet of passengers crashing almost every month. Of those fatalities, 67% occurred on federal-aid roadways. Over that time, an additional 688,000 pedestrians were injured by a car or truck, which is equivalent to one pedestrian injury every seven minutes. Though overall roadway deaths fell by 2% from 2010 to 2011, pedestrian deaths increased by 3% and bicyclist deaths by 9% over the same period.

Concern for roadway safety has prompted action in Congress. In June, Reps. Doris Matsui (D-Calif.) and David Joyce (R-Ohio) introduced the Safe Streets Act of 2013, which would require states and metropolitan planning organizations to adopt policies providing for the accommodation of all users, regardless of age, ability or mode of transportation, in the planning of transportation projects that receive federal monies. A companion bill is expected to be introduced in the Senate later this year for similar reasons.

## Only the beginning

Improving road safety was a key factor in Memphis, where a number of local organizations teamed up to launch a campaign for complete streets.

“We took on this campaign because we wanted to institutionalize adding walking and biking facilities and making streets safer for everyone, rather than doing it as a piece-by-piece basis,” said Sarah Newstok, program coordinator at Livable Memphis.

Newstok’s organization worked with the Urban Land Institute’s Memphis District Council and the Memphis Area Association of Realtors to promote complete streets among voters, community organizations, elected officials and transportation staff and leadership. They worked with the local transit agency, the University of Memphis and public-health leaders to gather support for the measure and created an educational video to bring to stakeholder meetings across the community. After several years of working together, the group established a common vision for Complete Streets in Memphis, and working with the mayor’s office and city engineer John Cameron, found their vision embodied in the form of an official executive order.

As part of the next steps to actually implement complete streets in Memphis, the city’s Department of Engineering is partnering with the stakeholder group, relevant city agencies and the Memphis Area Metropolitan Planning Organization to develop a new street design guide that emphasizes the needs of all users. Kick-off meetings with the community are set to take place in summer 2013. The final product, per the executive order, must be completed by January 2015.

While Memphis works to develop this guide, the city continues to make on-the-ground changes to its road infrastructure. Following a successful temporary demonstration project that brought trees, expanded sidewalks, pop-up shops and protected bike lanes to Broad Avenue, the city committed to a project called the Overton Broad Connector. Considered one of the city’s signature projects, it includes a two-way bicycle track to connect off-street trails and parks with the central city and will feature angled parking, high-visibility crosswalks and curb extensions. Memphis has already completed 45 miles of on-street bikeways in the past two years and committed to additional facilities in





**Above:** Many communities find it easy to make a number of simple, low-cost changes to their streets, improving facilities for all users incrementally and with each project.

**Below:** Memphis has already completed 45 miles of on-street bikeways in the past two years and committed to additional facilities in coming years.



coming years, including 15 miles of protected bike lanes.

## Road to good health

Safety is not the only reason Memphis has adopted complete streets policies in recent years. Public health also is a concern—for Memphis and other cities.

“Memphis is a town that suffers from a lot of poverty, from high rates of obesity and high rate of diabetes,” said Cameron. “But bicycling provides an opportunity for a more active lifestyle. If we can make that convenient and safe for our citizens, we can provide transportation options for those who are impoverished, and we can provide opportunities for exercise and more active lifestyles for those who might have health issues.”

In New Orleans, the Louisiana Public Health Institute hired a transportation engineer specializing in nonmotorized modes who is a full-time advisor to the city as its pedestrian and bicycle engineer. In California, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health brought workshops and transportation experts to a number of communities interested in expanding opportunities for walking and bicycling for recreation and transportation. As a result, several municipalities in the L.A. region adopted comprehensive complete streets policies. In addition, a new design resource, the “Model Street Design Manual for Living Streets,” was created for adaptation, adoption and use by any community in the country—for free. Similarly, a public-health initiative in the Chicago region supported complete streets efforts by Cook County, the city of Chicago and many surrounding suburban communities.

## It’s a process

The National Complete Streets Coalition, a program of Smart Growth America that brings together leading public interest groups and transportation professionals, believes that the process of implementing complete streets begins with a comprehensive, high-level policy statement. Such a document sets a clear goal for the community: accommodate

all users on all projects, with specific exceptions. Policies should include or refer to current best practices in transportation planning and design, such as context sensitivity, connected networks, multimodal design approaches and performance measures that do not overemphasize speed and movement of vehicular traffic.

Developing and adopting a policy is an important first step. Including community stakeholders in this process in a meaningful way helps to illuminate the challenges and needs of the public to the transportation staff, and vice versa. The process also fosters community support and political will for a new approach to transportation, supporting transportation professionals as they work to balance the needs of all users in each project.

While many community members and leaders will be eager for quick changes to a community's streets upon adoption of a policy, complete streets are not about immediate retrofit or a series of high-profile projects. As Nashville's Major and Collector Street Plan states, complete streets "should be understood as a process, not a specific product." The most successful agencies make changes to their everyday decision-making processes, plans and programs, resulting in more and better streets incrementally over time.

The process outlined in the "Urban Street Design Guidelines" used by Charlotte, N.C., exemplifies the complete-streets approach by withholding final-design decisions until the variety of needs and opportunities are understood. The process starts by evaluating the existing land use and transportation context of the project; moves on to identifying gaps and deficiencies and defining future objectives; and then recommends a street classification and deliberates the tradeoffs that might need to be made.

Working within this framework, many communities find it easy to make a number of simple, low-cost changes to their streets, improving facilities for all users incrementally and with each project. When adjusting signal timing, for example, a community can provide more time for people crossing on foot.

A transportation department can review its paving plan and assess whether the right-of-way could include bike lanes, angled parking and better crosswalks—all for the cost of paint, which would need to be added anyway.

Complete streets is an approach, not a rigid design prescription. That's a key part of why the concept is so popular. A complete-streets approach can be

applied in suburban towns, rural areas or in larger cities with limited rights-of-way. While the built designs may be different in each place, the overall goal of complete streets remains the same: providing safe access to destinations, for all modes and users. **R&B**

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