

Complete Streets Conference

Hosted by Active Transportation Alliance

September 17, 2015 – Orland Park Civic Center

With the US Surgeon General's recent call to action for walkable communities, implementing a municipal complete streets system is becoming more relevant to municipalities than ever. DMMC staff attended a Complete streets Conference hosted by the Active Transportation Alliance on September 17, 2015. While the benefits of complete streets have been discussed in prior DMMC publications and through presentations at various DMMC committees, this particular Conference had a significant focus on health benefits and cost effective solutions. The following are highlights from the Conference.

An Introduction

The day began with an energizing keynote speech from Mark Fenton. Mark is a national public health, planning, and transportation consultant, an adjunct associate professor at Tufts University's Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, and former host of the "America's Walking" series on PBS television.

He began by explaining that Americans continue to live considerably sedentary lifestyles. While this trend has stabilized from its upward trajectory, the issue is still substantial. For example, one in three children will acquire some form of Type II Diabetes. Previous calls to promoting an active lifestyle have not been successful. This is because they have had a basis around simply advising people that they should be active rather than helping to create environments that encourage activity. Behavior change programs are also shown to have substantial failure rates, often due to a difference between subjects wanting to participate and having to participate. Take flossing for example. For some people, their dentist can lecture the importance of flossing every day for years, which they may heed for several weeks after their most recent visit, but after a while, the advice slowly becomes a fragmented memory and the burden of flossing once again takes hold, leading them back to their previous behaviors. People are creatures of habit.

The solution to counter these issues is to create environments that encourage biking and walking. This does not simply mean restriping a road with a bike lane or adding sidewalks along a road where there were none before. Other things must be considered. Is the route safe? Is it convenient and easy to use? Particularly in terms of sidewalks, is it inviting? Does it provide an enjoyable experience? Does it provide connectivity? These are all questions that should be answered.

Some Basics

Safety

Even if every street within your community includes sidewalks and bike lanes, people will be apprehensive to use them if they don't feel safe. This typically means safe from drivers. Walking/cycling across large intersections leaves more to go wrong than smaller ones. Even the more advanced cyclists feel a little anxious riding in a bike lane on a roadway with a speed limit exceeding 45 MPH. For pedestrians, the fewer traffic lanes to cross the better, so it's best to plan pedestrian routes across roads with fewer traffic lanes. However, when crossing a wide arterial can't be avoided, certain mechanisms can be put in place to increase safety. These will be examined later in the report. On-street bike lanes need to be visible to other drivers whether those drivers are on the road or making a turn onto or off of the road. The further a bike lane is from the road, the less visible cyclists are to motorists. However, with speed limits greater than 40 or 45 MPH, side paths are typically safer for cyclists and pedestrians.

Convenience/Ease of Use

Picture a convenience store. They are designed to make purchasing basic necessities as quick and easy as possible. They are almost always located on corners, they are compact, and customer service attempts to move as quickly as possible. If a convenience store utilized none of these standard convenience store traits, it is unlikely to stay in business very long. The same can be said for transportation and complete streets. Bicycle and pedestrian facilities need to be readily accessible and employ proper signage to notify users where they can expect to find the infrastructure and where they can expect it will take them. For people with disabilities, streets need to be accessible. A simple bike or pedestrian path that runs parallel to a street requires a minute amount of explanation as to where it leads. However, an off-street path that leads through an unfamiliar park or residential area might dissuade potential users from using it due to the unfamiliarity. If information about a path's destination isn't readily available from visible signage, people may resort to what has been easiest for them in the past. For most people, that is driving.

Invitingness

One aspect of biking and walking that doesn't very often come into play with driving is how stimulating the journey is. Even with the infrastructure in place, people are unlikely to walk or bike on a route that gives them the impression that they are unwanted or that does not stimulate the senses. Walking along a path lined with a tall, blank, concrete wall or privacy fence gives the impression that pedestrians are not intended to be there, and may make them feel that they are intruding on something. On the other hand, paths that integrate something interesting to look at, whether it is storefronts, vegetation (that is well-manicured), architecture, etc., provide a visual stimulus that people want to experience. Similarly, a retail establishment can stand to gain financially by creating a path that leads to their business. To passersby it is seen as a welcoming invitation to venture to their store.

Enjoyable

People do not like to bring undo stress into their lives. Thus, they are typically unwilling to bike and walk somewhere if they do not receive some sort of enjoyment out of it. Bicycle and pedestrian facilities must provide a certain level of enjoyment to users. This can be done through providing a healthy balance of the aforementioned three elements (safety, convenience/ease of use, and invitingness).

Connectivity

So you've built the safest, most high tech, and appealing bike and pedestrian infrastructure any urban planner could imagine on several streets downtown. But, where does it go? One of the oxymoronic issues that can present itself with complete streets is the need to use a personal vehicle to get to them. Ideally, this should not be necessary. Proper complete streets are not just one or two streets that account for multiple modes of transportation; they are elements of a comprehensive system. The system does not necessarily have to account for all modes on all roads, but should allow cyclists and pedestrians to get from their homes to shopping, schools, and jobs without compromising safety or convenience. And unlike drivers, cyclists and pedestrians are less tolerant of meandering. Paths should be as direct as possible or you may find that users start creating their own shortcuts or "desire paths."

Tying it All Together

With these basic components, how is everything tied together? How does a community find a balance in implementing these basic traits? The answer is the triple bottom line. Essentially the triple bottom line is an accounting practice that takes into account not only financial benefits of a project, but environmental and social benefits as well. The more you can balance all three, the better. A project that costs little to construct, reduces pollution, and provides a desirable alternative to vehicle transportation is ideal.

Strategies

How to

Knowing *how* to implement a project can be just as important as knowing *what* to implement. Implementing a complete streets system will involve many stakeholders, including local businesses, neighbors, the general public, transportation infrastructure industry leaders, engineers, planners, and local government officials. A one size fits all approach to managing each group of stakeholders is not recommended. It is best to cater to each individually. Using presentations filled with engineering jargon will certainly please engineers, but will do little to inform neighbors who may be concerned with how a complete streets project will affect their quality of life.

Regarding concerned neighbors, one mechanism that can be utilized to help the general public, neighbors, and local businesses understand the benefits of a complete streets system is to lead a

walkability audit of the plan area. A walkability audit is a handy form of public involvement where a walking tour of the proposed project area is given by a complete streets expert. During the tour, participants are asked to consider current assets and how they could be improved.

One common concern regarding implementation is whether local zoning codes will allow complete streets systems to exist or flourish. The answer typically lies in overlay districts. An overlay district is simply a sub-region within a municipality in which additional requirements are applied to properties. It is particularly helpful in encouraging a built environment that complements complete streets.

Projects

There are many different types of projects that can make your community safe for all types of transportation. These include:

- Sidewalks – Safe and convenient places to walk.
- Bike lanes – Exclusive space on the road for bikes that encourage safe bike travel.
- Road diets – A strategy where lanes and lane widths of vehicle lanes are reduced on a roadway to convert space into bike/pedestrian facilities and to slow traffic.
- Crosswalks – Provides a visual cue for designated pedestrian crossings.
- Traffic calming features – Including roundabouts, diverters, and speed bumps, traffic calming features reduce speed of car traffic to allow for safer passage by bicycles and pedestrians.
- Transit shelters – Make riding transit more appealing by providing a place for passengers to escape the elements.
- Raised median islands – Provides a buffer and protection for pedestrians crossing a wide or busy street.
- Curb extensions/bulbouts – Can be used to slow traffic and create a shorter distance for pedestrians to cross the street.
- Raised/tailed crosswalks – Slows traffic and makes pedestrians more visible.
- Traffic signal countdown timers – Indicate the amount of time a pedestrian has to cross a street. These provide pedestrian safety, particularly to the elderly and people with disabilities.
- Accessible pedestrian signals – Uses audible cues to assist people who are visually impaired.
- Lighting – Increases safety by increasing visibility. Indicates that an area encourages pedestrians.
- Wayfinding signage – Provides distance, destination, and directional information to guide cyclists along a bike network.

Projects only have to be expensive if you want them to be. Many projects can be completed for little money. The next time a road needs restriping, adding a bike lane (if there's room) or shared route arrows are an easy way to welcome bicycle traffic. Extending the walk time on a crosswalk signal is a simple solution to assisting pedestrian traffic. Projects that integrate complete streets from the start save time and money by avoiding more expensive retrofits later on.

Benefits

The benefits of implementing a complete streets system are many. Below are just a few:

- Increased transportation options allowing greater access to destinations, especially for those whose transportation options may not include a car (seniors, youths, the disabled, low-income residents).
- Complete streets make roads safer for everyone, even cars.
- Nearby property values increase due to increases in quality of life and the desire to live in places that are walkable.
- The aforementioned quality of life benefits tend to attract employers, promoting economic development of the community.
- Biking and walking provide health benefits that driving cannot.
- Without being constrained to driving, households can divert transportation funds to other things.
- Complete Streets provide a boost to local businesses as people who visit on foot/bike/transit tend to come more frequently as they typically live or work close by.

In Conclusion

This of course is merely an introduction to the world of complete streets and how they can benefit your community. Many publications online resources exist that discuss the proper implementation of complete streets systems. Some of these are as follows:

- Urban Street Design Guide - The National Association of City Transportation Officials: <http://nacto.org/publication/urban-street-design-guide/>
- Complete streets Complete Networks: A Manual for the Design of Active Transportation – Active Transportation Alliance: <http://www.atpolicy.org/Design>
- Designing Walkable Urban Thoroughfares: A Context Sensitive Approach: An ITE Recommended Practice – Institute for Transportation Engineers: <http://www.ite.org/css/RP-036A-E.pdf>
- The National Complete Streets Coalition website: <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets>
- Complete Streets Toolkit – CMAP: <http://www.cmap.illinois.gov/programs-and-resources/local-ordinances-toolkits/complete-streets>