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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Complete Streets



What are Complete Streets, and what is a Complete Streets policy?

Complete Streets is an approach to planning, designing, building, and maintaining streets that enables safe access for everyone, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and transit riders of all ages and abilities. This approach also emphasizes the needs of those who have experienced systemic underinvestment, or whose needs have not been met through a traditional transportation approach.

A **Complete Streets policy** specifies how a community will plan, design, and maintain streets so they are safe for all users of all ages and abilities. It spells out a community's commitment to using a Complete Streets approach routinely and consistently in decision-making, identifies which specific populations in the community should be the priority for improving street safety and access, and articulates clear, accountable steps to change how decisions get made and track progress. A strong policy begins transforming a community's practices, processes, and plans.

Why do communities need Complete Streets? What are the benefits?

A Complete Streets policy is a vital first step toward having streets that are safe and convenient for serving everyone who needs to use them, especially those who haven't been served by our traditional approach to transportation, such as people on foot, bike, or using an assistive device like a wheelchair or cane. When the street network is safe and accessible for everyone, it:

- **Reduces preventable deaths and injuries.** We are in the midst of a stunning increase in the num-

ber of people struck and killed while walking, as chronicled in Smart Growth America's [Dangerous by Design](#) report for more than decade. The total number of people killed each year while walking has gone from around 4,100 in 2009 to an astonishing 7,200 in 2021, and is likely to hit record highs when 2022 data is available. By placing an emphasis on safety instead of speed and vehicle throughput, Complete Streets also make streets safer for people driving, which has also been growing more deadly after a massive effort to make vehicles safer resulted in overall traffic deaths trending downward in the 2000s.

- **Builds and sustains local economies with a transportation network that serves everyone better.** A local economy built on a transportation network that *requires* the use of a car to participate is an economy with an artificial cap. When the transportation network serves and improves access to jobs and services for everyone—allowing more people to participate more fully in the economy—that ceiling is immediately raised. [A study of 37 Complete Streets projects](#) found that they increased property and sales tax revenue, retail and food sales (even with motor vehicle lane or parking reductions), new jobs, new businesses, and private investment. [Another Smart Growth America analysis of municipal budgets](#) showed that, when part of an overall approach to land use and transportation, Complete Streets reduced the cost of utility infrastructure including sewer and water lines by approximately 38 percent, and the cost of delivering services, such as a 20–40 percent savings on school busing and ten percent savings on emergency response. The tragic deaths noted above also incur real economic costs. [CDC estimates that for every one fatality](#), eight people are hospitalized and 100



are treated at the scene or in an emergency room—costs borne by society at large. Complete Streets projects can help reduce these costs—Safe Routes to School research found that every \$1 invested in activity-friendly routes saves \$24 in averted medical costs. These benefits start as soon as a project is complete and continue long afterward.*

- **Improves health and disparities.** Building a network of Complete Streets allows more people to make physical activity a daily part of their routine, an essential way to prevent many leading causes of death including heart disease, diabetes, and stroke—chronic diseases that are most prevalent among lower-income, Black, and Indigenous communities. In addition, the crisis of pedestrian deaths and injuries disproportionately impacts people in these communities, which is why Complete Streets policies target improvements in these communities to improve the underlying disparities.

How much do Complete Streets cost? Does this approach increase the cost of projects?

It depends. Transportation agencies often don't treat infrastructure for walking, biking, and rolling as central to the scope of many projects, whether due to their

own policies and practices or restrictions tied to their funding. When Complete Streets are treated merely as “adding-on” unplanned elements like sidewalks or crosswalks to existing projects, then they may be more expensive. But when the entire process and the scope of every project is geared around considering the needs of all modes and people to build safe and complete streets, the process becomes more efficient and additional costs are often minimal. And the economic and safety benefits can be immense, which should always be considered when spending money on a depreciating liability like a street or road, which require numerous life cycles of costly maintenance.

No street is preserved in amber, either. Streets are regularly repaved and maintained, providing regular opportunities to change the configuration of a street with minimal extra cost. Complete Streets can be big and complex multi-year projects, or they can be simple changes to the lane configuration or even a temporary intervention to test out changes with low-cost materials. A Complete Streets approach is completely scalable as well, providing opportunities to intervene on individual projects or building a comprehensive program at the regional or state level.

So what kinds of streets create value and maximize the economic benefit for localities? When researching

* [For more on the economic benefits of Complete Streets policies, please see these two resources for more: Clifton KJ, Muhs C, Morrissey S, Morrissey T, Currans K, Ritter C. Examining Consumer Behavior and Travel Choices. 2013; (February):70. Garrett-Peltier H. Pedestrian and Bicycle Infrastructure: A National Study Of Employment Impacts. Amherst; 2011. www.peri.umass.edu/fileadmin/pdf/published_study/PERL_ABikes_June2011.pdf.]



37 specific Complete Streets projects, National Complete Streets Coalition found that they improved safety for everyone, increased overall amounts of biking and walking, improved property values, and boosted the economic picture, compared to other incomplete streets.

The real question should be: What is the cost of our current approach to transportation projects, which prioritizes throughput and speed for cars over safety and access for all people? Our country spends billions in federal, state, and local dollars building new roads each year, only to see fatalities skyrocket and congestion get worse, despite perpetual promises that “one more lane” will fix it. This status quo approach isn’t cost-neutral—in addition to the price tag of these projects, preventable injuries and deaths incur a heavy cost. While an estimated 7,200-plus people were struck and killed while walking in 2021, the CDC

estimates that, with every single one of those deaths, another eight people are hospitalized and 100 others are treated at the scene or in the emergency department—costs all borne by taxpayers and society at large. Our current approach also costs people the opportunity to reach jobs and services conveniently and safely, requiring ownership of an expensive personal vehicle in many communities just to participate in the workforce.

Do Complete Streets require more local agency capacity to comply with a policy?

Adopting a Complete Streets approach requires a fundamental shift from the way we have built roads and trained engineers to design them for decades. Agencies have accumulated years of institutional knowledge and practices doing things a certain way. When that is the case, Complete Streets will require upfront work to train staff to learn new practices and processes. But transportation engineers and planners are also continually learning and training to maintain their certifications. A policy merely requires them to be trained differently and for existing institutional processes—which are perpetually evolving—to evolve differently. Many jurisdictions decide to implement Complete Streets by dedicating a staff person or creating a new position devoted to Complete Streets, but that’s not a requirement either and many agencies have found different ways to do this. Once a staff and agency have gone through the process of changing their policies and processes for transportation projects, there’s no reason why compliance should require more capacity than their current approach.

Why are Complete Streets policies an important first step?

For any community that wants to reduce injuries/fatalities, build a stronger local economy, reduce health disparities, or meet any other big picture goal, the process of writing and passing a Complete Streets policy is a great *first* step for getting there, for at least four key reasons: 1) It establishes a vital foundation for changing the practices and processes that determine what gets built, where, and how; 2) it provides an organizing tool to bring everyone involved to the table; 3) it provides a mechanism for residents to hold cities

accountable for putting the policy into practice, and 4) it starts the kind of necessary institutional changes that can outlast any change in political leadership.

But a policy is just a first step, and even strong policies will fail to make change when not paired with a broad group of stakeholders—inside and outside of local government—making a clear statement of intent and then committing to a process of putting the policy into practice and ensuring that it leads to the desired outcomes.

What constitutes a great Complete Streets policy? How does CityHealth evaluate policies in partnership with the National Complete Streets Coalition?

Beginning in 2022, CityHealth started awarding medals for Complete Streets policies to the largest 40 US cities based on 13 criteria. (Previously, they awarded medals using 7 criteria. As the National Complete Streets Coalition (NCSC) has done, CityHealth has continued evolving and updating their criteria to match current best practices and standards). NCSC collaborated with CityHealth to develop and update their current 2.0 policy medal framework, which is similar to NCSC's ten elements, while emphasizing specific aspects.

While CityHealth focuses on large cities, the National Complete Streets Coalition evaluates Complete Streets policies from nearly every type and size of jurisdictions

across the country—state, county, regional, tribal, city, town, and village.

What or where are the best Complete Streets policies?

~1,600 jurisdictions have passed some form of a Complete Streets policy, though the quality ranges along a spectrum from ineffective to strong and impactful. The National Complete Streets Coalition (NCSC) tracks the Complete Streets policies that have been passed at all levels, including those recognized by CityHealth. NCSC also regularly evaluates all policies against our 10-element framework and recognizes the very best—at any level of governance—to serve as a model for other communities. NCSC also works hand-in-hand with many communities who want to develop and pass their own policies, and then put them into practice. These policies are regularly recognized in our [Best Complete Streets Policies report](#), released every few years.

What kinds of places pass Complete Streets policies?

Any jurisdiction that has any control or oversight over any streets can pass a policy. Policies exist at the state level all the way down to the smallest township. While the details of these policies vary from place to place because the context of each community is different, the core elements of a strong policy are always the same. The strength of a policy is that it's created by



and tailored to a specific community—it's never a one-size-fits-all solution.

What format do Complete Streets policies take?

Complete Streets are most often achieved by passing binding **ordinances, laws, and resolutions** to specify how a community will plan, design, and maintain streets so they are safe for all users of all ages and abilities. Policies can also be embedded within an adopted plan, such as a local comprehensive plan, or adopted internally within a specific agency, such as via an executive order. A strong policy begins transforming a community's practices, processes, and plans.

Some forms are stronger than others. Typically, a legally binding ordinance is the strongest, compared to a resolution. Any policy that has to go through a legislative process tends to be stronger (and has greater consensus as a result.) Executive orders can certainly have a strong impact, but can also be later easily overturned. This is why, in addition to a strong policy, strong leadership (political and civic) is still crucial, regardless of the strength of the policy. National Complete Streets Coalition has never seen a strong policy passed without at least one political champion (or more), and ongoing political leadership is also a vital part of ensuring that the policy is put into practice in a way that makes a difference.

What is the difference between Complete Streets and Vision Zero?

The National Complete Streets Coalition has formally endorsed Vision Zero and is committed to the shared goal of eliminating traffic injuries and fatalities, particularly for the most vulnerable users of the road. In some ways, the difference between these two is history and geography: The Vision Zero movement began in Europe just a few years before the Complete Streets movement got going in the US. Both share the goal of making all streets safer for everyone, with a focus on the most vulnerable people.

These complementary approaches have much in common, including a paradigm shift away from the status

quo in the transportation planning world that treats fatalities as a foregone conclusion and speed as the main goal of transportation design. Many of the places experiencing the greatest successes with reducing fatalities/injuries and creating streets that better serve everyone have adopted both approaches, which work well in tandem.

When it comes to their differences, Complete Streets policies expand beyond the shared goal of safety into many complementary goals and outcomes: land use (where and what we build shapes our transportation networks, and vice versa); health benefits (getting around in other ways can reduce chronic disease); equity (prioritizing underserved and underinvested communities first); environmental impact (trees, watersheds, reduced CO2 emissions); and economic development, to name just a few. While making a full commitment to Vision Zero also entails crafting a plan,



a Complete Streets policy is always prescriptive in requiring an implementation plan for changing institutional processes for designing and building streets. Any city that's truly committed to the goals of Vision Zero should consider also passing a Complete Streets policy to help them get there, and vice versa.

How does a “Safe Systems approach” relate to Complete Streets?

Similar to the previous question on Vision Zero, Safe Systems is a complementary approach with roots in the engineering and planning world. Unlike historic safety approaches which were concerned only with human error, Safe Systems focuses on both human mistakes AND human vulnerability by designing a system with many redundancies in place to protect everyone, especially the most vulnerable road users.

As defined by USDOT, it's a holistic and comprehensive approach that builds and reinforces multiple layers of protection to both prevent crashes from happening in the first place *and* minimize the harm caused to those involved when crashes do occur. It shares Vision Zero's assumption that humans will make mistakes, and using design to ensure that those mistakes are not fatal is a key strategy for improving safety.

To give a concrete example, adopting a Safe Systems approach would mean prioritizing *design* changes to bring about slower vehicle speeds in any area with complexity or people walking or biking in the same space, rather than focusing solely on a traffic *enforcement* solution. It could also mean changing the way that speed limits are set and basing them on factors like crash statistics, the number of people walking and biking, and the context of the street, and then using the design to shape driver behavior, rather than the current practice of letting the fastest drivers determine the limit. (*Strong Towns wrote a terrific explanation of this 85th percentile rule for setting speed limits, in addition to this Wall Street video to which the NCSC and Smart Growth America contributed.*)



How can I ensure my Complete Streets policy has an impact? What can I do to help support change?

A strong Complete Streets policy always includes steps for putting that policy into practice in ways that make a measurable impact on what gets built and where. This is where local leaders, residents, and advocates need to focus their energy: holding everyone involved accountable, and ensuring the policy is institutionalized and brought to bear on the process for transportation projects.

For local elected leaders, the importance of your leadership continues long after policy passage. Putting a policy into practice requires upending practices that are deeply ingrained and require time and effort to transform. Your leadership will be needed as you continue to visibly support the policy (which could take the form of standing up publicly for specific, new projects), hold your transportation agencies accountable for institutionalizing the new policy and changing practices, keep the public informed on the progress, and perpetually consider how the policy itself or the resulting processes can be iterated and improved upon.

For local advocates and residents, you can help provide political support to the policy’s champions and remind everyone of the implications of the policy at every available turn. Many policies will create a Complete Streets advisory board that represents the needs of the entire community, providing an opportunity to give direct feedback on the policy and how it’s being implemented. Advocacy groups can help elevate and publicize the performance measures used to evaluate the policy’s effectiveness and issue annual reports evaluating the policy’s progress and spelling out what still needs to be done.

Why have two decades of Complete Streets policies failed to stem the tide of pedestrian injuries and deaths?

In the 2010s, it became clear to the National Complete Streets Coalition (NCSC) that many of the policies that were being passed in the first decade of the movement were failing to have the desired effect. One reason was that these early policies lacked accountability measures to ensure they were fully put into practice. And second, these early policies failed to require the incredibly difficult work of institutionalizing the new approach and training agency staff, like traffic engineers and project managers. This was why the NCSC released an updated framework for Complete Streets policies in 2018 to require binding language and more accountability to ensure that any policy produces tangible changes and prioritizes equity.

But the most direct answer is that we’re trying to solve a problem we spent 70 years creating and are perpetuating every day with thousands of decisions. Strong policies or specific design interventions have successfully reduced fatalities in communities all over the country. But the scope of this problem is immense, with 70 years of dangerous and incomplete streets to retrofit. For this reason even strong policies alone have failed to stem the tide. Change has been incremental, as states and cities without policies (or with weak policies) are also building new incomplete streets at a furious pace that have all the same old issues.

Every strong policy is a win but we need a transformation in the entire system, sustained for years at the scale of this enormous problem. We will fail to reverse

this tragic trend until we fundamentally change the status quo of how we approach planning, designing, and operating our roads across every transportation project—precisely what a Complete Streets approach aims to do.

What’s the role of the federal transportation program and spending?

The federal government needs to take the lead on prioritizing safer streets, both through their spending and the policies governing it, and the design guides and standards that are used to design, build, and maintain street networks at all levels. It’s important to understand that federal dollars and policies helped create the unsafe streets we see in communities around the country today. Federal dollars have been the primary source of funding for nearly every state-owned multi-lane road project for decades, not just the interstate system. Beyond these dollars, transportation engineers at every level rely on federally approved design guides, standards, and measures that have prioritized moving as many vehicles as fast as possible at the expense of the safety and convenience of all other users of our streets. The federal government needs to create a policy and funding framework for our highway and road system that prioritizes safer streets and holds state and local decision-makers accountable to that goal.

What federal funding is available for Complete Streets?

Nearly every single dollar conventionally described as a “highway” or “road” dollar is available to build and execute Complete Streets. No special program or funding is required to build streets that serve the needs of everyone who needs to use them. States—the biggest recipient of these federal dollars—are completely free to spend their federal dollars to build safer, Complete Streets. Cities are also now allowed to adopt and use safer, more modern street design guidelines approved by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), such as those from the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO), even if a state has prohibited cities from doing so.

2021’s Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) provided an ongoing massive new infusion of federal

transportation spending. While the infrastructure law has been touted as a way to improve safety, it merely *allows* more spending on safety. This flexibility cuts both ways, also allowing *less* spending on safety, at the discretion of state and local leaders. This is one reason why binding state and local Complete Streets policies are incredibly important as this massive influx of cash flows into projects planned and executed by those agencies.

Transportation for America, another program of Smart Growth America, produced [this explainer on the available funding and programs for safety and Complete Streets in the 2021 infrastructure law](#).

Is there a federal Complete Streets policy?

None that would substantially require state departments of transportation (DOTs) and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) to consistently plan for all people who use the street, including the most vulnerable users, with every federal dollar spent. Nor does the federal government provide them with the tools and training they need to create transportation networks that serve all users.

It's important to understand that although the gas tax is collected, managed, and distributed by the federal government, the money is largely sent back out to state DOTs as a block grant with few requirements for how to spend it. And for every new small "safety" focused program, there are billions given to states and metro areas without any requirement that safety be the top priority. Despite some positive steps in the last decade with these new safety focused programs, that still needs to change.

I want to pass a Complete Streets policy, where do I start?

Adopting a policy may seem overwhelming, so consider these six big picture steps as a guide for getting started, after some research into your community's stated policies and practices for transportation projects.

- 1)** Identify a broad set of the right partners, which will include people inside and outside government, and spanning a range of issues that may not be directly connected to transportation, like public health agencies.
- 2)** Build a coalition and discuss the goals for your policy to set your foundation and ensure everyone is on the same page.
- 3)** Draft your policy using the [Complete Streets Policy Framework](#), based on nearly two decades of real-world experience and best practices.
- 4)** Determine the best policy format, whether an ordinance or a resolution, aim for something that is binding and requires government agencies to change their approach.
- 5)** Identify the steps for passing the policy.
- 6)** Adopt your policy and celebrate the win with your coalition and community.

What's next after passing a policy?

In some ways, the hard work has really just begun. A strong **policy** is the first step in a much longer process to change the **practices** used for street design, which is key to making a Complete Streets approach the default. Those practices determine the **projects** that get built and how, which are the building blocks of creating a complete **network** to serve everyone and connect more people to destinations safely and efficiently.

A policy that never gets implemented to shape practices and projects is just a piece of paper. This is why the last element of a strong policy is a clear plan for implementation; a plan for departments of transportation to change the way they operate, their project development process, design guidelines, and perfor-



mance measures. This also provides a process for both residents and officials to hold them accountable for doing so over time.

For a longer version of these steps toward passing a policy and putting it into practice, you can [read this version](#).

How can we tell whether a Complete Streets policy is successful?

First, a strong policy will have a tangible impact on the process for developing and choosing transportation projects, on the contours of specific projects themselves, and on the outcomes that are produced by our

transportation network related to injuries, fatalities, health, equity, economics, and others. So at the simplest level, you should see changes to the process, you should see different projects selected for funding, and you should see improvements in the kinds of measurable things related to your transportation network.

Second, what gets measured is what matters and what gets done. That's why a strong policy always also establishes specific *quantifiable measures* that line up with the policy's goals. These measures are designed to measurably reduce disparities and should be regularly reported on to the public in a way that's clear, understandable, and transparent. Begin by looking at the specific performance measures required by the policy and start evaluating your jurisdiction's progress.