Smart Growth America
Making Neighborhoods Great Together

National Complete Streets Coalition

IMPLEMENTING COMPLETE STREETS

Costs of Complete Streets

An oft-raised concern about Complete Streets is the supposed added costs produced in requiring accommodation for all modes of travel. However, jurisdictions implementing a Complete Streets policy within a balanced and fiscally sound budget find that it adds little to no expense to their transportation budgets. Complete Streets are more cost effective than the alternative – streets made only for cars. In some cases, Complete Streets can help jurisdictions save money. In all cases, Complete Streets are long-term investments in the overall health of communities who adopt policies.

Right: Payton Chung. Left: Dan Burden, Walkable and Livable Communities Institute

Complete Streets policies help prevent costly delays and retrofits

Integrating the needs of all users – pedestrians, bicyclists, public transportation riders, motorists, older people, children, and people with disabilities – early in the life of a project minimizes costs associated with including facilities for these travelers. Complete Streets policies ensure early multi-modal scoping, saving money by avoiding costly project delays. Without a policy, bicycle, pedestrian, and public transportation accommodations are often debated too late in the design process and are considered a disruption rather than necessary and beneficial project features. This creates expensive design revisions, time delays and erodes public support. Furthermore, the failure to accommodate these user groups can trigger an expensive retrofit project at later date. A bridge near Cary, Illinois was built in the early 1990s without any safe way to cross it via foot or bicycle. After several deaths and a successful wrongful-death lawsuit, Illinois DOT was forced to go back at a great expense ($882,000) to retrofit the existing bridge with a side path.[1] It would have been far less expensive to construct the bridge correctly initially.

"When projects are scoped and programmed without consideration for Complete Streets, there could be extra cost over the original estimate in order to later address pedestrian, bike, and bus features."
– Gregg Albright, Deputy Director of Planning and Modal Programs, Caltrans

Require minimal to zero additional funding

The careful planning encouraged by Complete Streets policies helps jurisdictions find many effective measures that can be accomplished at little or no extra cost. Some standard infrastructure projects, such as conversion from open to closed drainage, can be enhanced with Complete Streets facilities (i.e. sidewalks) for negligible additional cost. Changing pedestrian signal timing at intersections to a 3.5 ft/sec walking speed adds nothing to the cost of a signal, and adding countdown clocks can be done for as little as $2,000 per intersection. Adding curb bulbs where on-street parking occurs reduces the time for pedestrians to cross the street, allowing more time for automobile movement; this can be a relatively low cost way to improve both pedestrian and automobile access.

Additional costs associated with the routine accommodation of bicycling, walking, and public transportation represent an immeasurably small percentage of the total budget. On a project-by-project basis, any additional money spent is actually a long-term investment in the financial and physical health of the community.

City of Decatur, Georgia

Save money through better design

Communities who adopt Complete Streets policies commit to superior roadway planning and design in new and reconstruction projects. Executing these designs can be less expensive than projects carried out under old standards and policies. In a reconstruction project, the Brown County, WI Highway Department built a three-lane street with two bike lanes on the existing four-lane roadway, and replaced expensive traffic signals with roundabouts.[2] These changes saved the County $347,515 – 16.5 percent below the original project estimate.[3]

"If a roadway is being reconstructed, rebuilding the roadway with 10-foot lanes and timing the traffic signals for 30mph will control speeds and can actually result in a reduction in costs by using a narrower overall roadway structure."
– John LaPlante, PE, PTOE, Director of Traffic Engineering for T.Y. Lin International, former City Traffic Engineer with the City of Chicago

Creating Complete Streets also reduces infrastructure costs by requiring far less pavement per user; this saves money at the onset of the project and reduces maintenance costs over the long-term. Compared to increasing road capacity for vehicles alone, investing in pedestrian and bicycle facilities cost far less; over the width of one traffic lane, walking and cycling can move five to ten times more people than driving.[4]

Complete Streets policies help with long-term savings for public transportation as well. The Maryland Transit Administration found providing curb-to-curb transit service for a daily commuter with disabilities costs about $38,500 a year. Investing in one-time basic improvements can enable that commuter and several more to access an existing fixed-route public transportation route; this singular cost is the equivalent of two months' worth of the curb-to-curb service for just one person. More extensive improvements, such as adding a lighted shelter and bench and replacing the sidewalk leading to the stop, have a one-time cost just 33 percent more than a year of curb-to-curb service for a single commuter.

Investment in the community

Complete Streets are a sound financial investment in our community that provides long-term savings. An existing transportation budget can incorporate Complete Streets projects without requiring additional funding, accomplished through reprioritizing projects and allocating funds to projects that improve overall community mobility. In such a balanced and fiscally sound transportation system, Complete Streets facilities should not be treated as additional costs to a project.

Complete Streets provide benefits to the community in many other ways, from public health to sustainability and from improved property values and economic revitalization to increased capacity and improved mobility for all. Americans expect a variety of choices, and a multi-modal system of Complete Streets provides alternatives to driving. Implementing Complete Streets allows for an efficient and optimal use of limited resources: time, fuel, land, public health, the environment, and money.[5]

"Boulder's Complete Streets approach has transformed how we look at our transportation system. The city leaders made a conscious decision to provide multimodal options, and have focused on our investments accordingly. We believe this is a sound financial approach to increasing mobility and supporting the quality of life enjoyed by those who live and work in Boulder."
– Martha Roskowski, Program Manager, GO Boulder

Learn more at www.smartgrowthamerica.org/completestreets.

1 Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.
2 (2006). *2002-2006 Transportation Improvement Program for the Green Bay Urbanized Area.*
3 Brown County Highway Department. (2004, November). Construction cost estimates www.co.brown.wi.us/planning_and_land_services/planning/county_web//forms/a_case_for_narrower_arterial_streets.pdf.
4 Ekoster, J. (1999). "Cycling: The Way Ahead for Towns and Cities."
5 Gotschi, T. and Mills, K. (2008). "Active Transportation for America." Rails-to-Trails Conservancy.