

Seattle's Complete Streets Program

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A national movement to tip the scales back toward walking, bicycling and public transportation—called Complete Streets—has taking root in many cities and states throughout the nation. Complete Streets refers to policies and actions that are aimed at producing streets that are safe, accessible and convenient for all users. To date, more than 130 jurisdictions have adopted Complete Streets policies or made a written commitment to do so.

Major groundwork was laid at the federal level in the Transportation Equity Act of 1998 (TEA-21) that asked states to consider bicycle and pedestrian travel. The U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) followed up in 2001 with a design guidance document, "Accommodating Bicycle and Pedestrian Travel," stating that "bicycling and walking facilities will be incorporated into all transportation projects unless exceptional circumstances exist."¹ In March 2010, the U.S. DOT released a new policy statement demonstrating support for active transportation networks:

The DOT policy is to incorporate safe and convenient walking and bicycling facilities into transportation projects. Every transportation agency, including DOT, has the responsibility to improve conditions and opportunities for walking and bicycling and to integrate walking and bicycling into their transportation systems. Because of the numerous individual and community benefits that walking and bicycling provide—including health, safety, environmental, transportation, and quality of life—transportation agencies are encouraged to go beyond minimum standards to provide safe and convenient facilities for these modes. (U.S. DOT, 2010)

The DOT recommendations for implementing this policy in states and communities align closely with the objectives of Complete Streets. Key recommendations include treating non-motorized modes as equals to motorized modes and ensuring convenient and safe access for all.

A Strong Foundation for Complete Streets in Seattle

The underpinnings of a Complete Streets policy in Seattle have been in place for some time and are clearly articulated in the Seattle Comprehensive Plan:

"Part of Seattle's growth strategy is to encourage people to use cars less than they do today. One way to do that is

through the urban village strategy's goal of concentrating most new housing, jobs and services near one another in small areas, so that more trips can be made by walking, biking or transit." (Seattle Comprehensive Plan, 2006)

Seattle's urban village land use strategy supports the concept of Complete Streets: people live, work, and can access basic services in centers that support walking and bicycling. Denser, mixed-use centers are connected by transit, and incentives are in place to make driving alone a less attractive alternative for most trips. Seattle also has a number of mechanisms that direct new development to contribute to the urban village form. An example is the Pedestrian Designation—a zoning designation applied to neighborhood business districts, most of which are within urban villages, that dictates ground floor uses, design details, and amount and location of parking in order to create pedestrian supportive buildings.

Seattle's Complete Streets Policy

In 2006, a number of events placed the City of Seattle on the path to adopting a Complete Streets policy:

- Former Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels set the direction that Seattle would be the most bicycle and pedestrian friendly city in the nation.
- Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) embarked on a citywide Bicycle Master Plan with involvement and support from elected officials, Seattle's vocal and well-organized bicycle advocacy groups, and the general public. Early in the plan's development, a strong interest was voiced around reexamining the "routine accommodation" policy language included in the 2005 update to the department's Transportation Strategic Plan and developing a more robust Complete Streets policy in its place.
- The City had success at the polls in November 2006 with the passage of a transportation funding measure that generates \$545 million over nine years for transportation investments, including a quadrupling of the resources for bicycle and pedestrian improvements and the creation of a citywide Pedestrian Master Plan. Simultaneously, voters passed a countywide funding measure to increase resources for transit service and facilities.

As a result of these and other actions, the Mayor and City Council adopted Ordinance 122386 in 2007. The ordinance



The 45th Street Corridor has high transit and pedestrian volumes. Converted to a three-lane section in 1972, a recent Complete Streets update for the corridor added bus bulbs, expanded tree pits with "sidewalk extensions" and shared lane markings for bicycles.

defines Seattle's Complete Streets policy and outlines the guiding principles and practices to ensure that transportation improvements are planned, designed and constructed to encourage walking, bicycling, and transit use while promoting safe operations for vehicle and freight opera-

tors. SDOT's design, operations, and maintenance staff are responsible for implementing their projects and programs consistent with the Complete Streets policy.

One of SDOT's goals is to apply Complete Streets principles to the entire street network so that all streets in the city accommodate all users to the extent practical. Consistent with the national Complete Streets movement, Seattle's policy "differs from typical bicycle and pedestrian plans in that [it is] not limited to roads that are part of designated bicycle or pedestrian networks, but covers all roads, or at least all major roads, in the system."²

The ordinance also defines situations where Complete Streets principles must honor the limited truck access in some parts of Seattle, as Seattle's freight operators are a key component of the economic health of the region. While in most cases freight can peacefully coexist with other modes, corridors designated Major Truck Streets are designed with the needs of freight movement as the highest priority. A few exceptions to the Complete Streets policy are also defined and in-



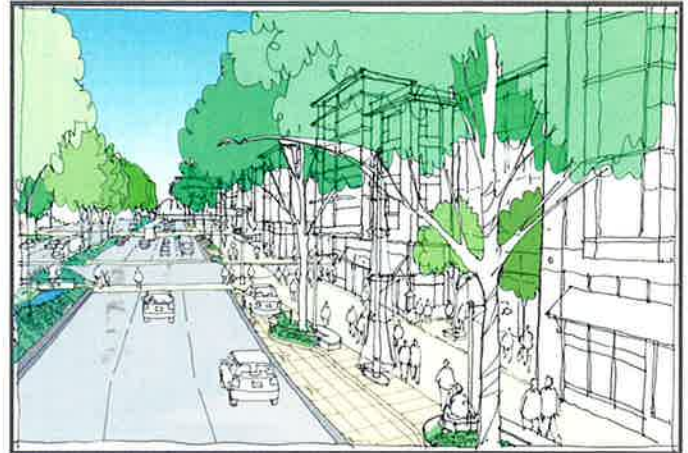
Converting one car parking space to fourteen bicycle parking spaces in one of Seattle's neighborhood business districts

clude basic street maintenance activities (such as sweeping, mowing and spot repair); repairs to roadways made through the private development process or utility repair; and situations where a Complete Streets improvement would be contrary to public safety, when the cost of the improvement would be disproportionate to the need or probable use, and where other factors indicate an absence of need.



Signage where a multi-use trail crosses through an industrial route alerts cyclists that freight traffic is to be expected

to Mercer, will become a two-lane minor arterial street along the south edge of Lake Union, with parking and bicycle lanes. Both streets will have widened sidewalks with planting strips, ranging from 16 to 21 feet wide. Curb bulbs will be added at all intersections, except at one corner in order to prioritize truck movement at the intersection of two Major Truck Streets. Loading zones were also taken into consideration. In addition, this project addresses Complete Streets by incorporating significant utility improvements.



Artist's rendering of the future improvements for the Mercer Corridor. This project will be under construction in the summer of 2010.

Examples of Complete Streets in Seattle

Active implementation of Seattle's Complete Streets policy has led to Complete Streets improvements on dozens of corridors since 2007. A few recent examples of Seattle's Complete Streets policy in action are described below.

Martin Luther King Jr. Way South Complete Street.

Formerly a roadway with a very high pedestrian crash rate, Martin Luther King Jr. Way South is a main corridor in southeast Seattle. With the addition of regional light rail along this street, the roadway has wider sidewalks, plazas at station locations, lighting and public art at stations, over 20 new signalized pedestrian crossings, and an upgraded concrete roadway. The Chief Sealth Trail, which runs parallel to the Martin Luther King Jr. Way South for much of its length, is the main bicycle connection. This street is also a Major Truck Street, and the vehicle travel lanes are designed to support freight movement. This project was completed prior to light rail opening in July 2009.

Mercer Corridor Project. A main connection to and through the South Lake Union neighborhood, the roadways in the Mercer Corridor will receive a major Complete Streets makeover. Mercer Street will change from four lanes one-way to three lanes in each direction and a median with left-turn lanes at major street intersections. The median will provide safe pedestrian refuge, and signals will give pedestrians adequate time to cross. Mercer will also have short-term parking on both sides of the roadway, street furniture, and pedestrian scale lighting. Valley Street, which runs parallel

South Columbian Way Complete Street. This project shows another side of Complete Streets—reallocation of existing vehicle travel lanes, from a four-lane roadway to a three-lane roadway section, in order to provide more space to accommodate bicycle lanes, walkways and landscaping. In addition to the bicycle lanes, the project is repaving the entirety of the roadway, adding curbs and curb ramps, reconstructing the sidewalks, and adding street trees consistent with the existing boulevard designation. Bus pads are being added at the main entrance to Veteran's Hospital to preserve the pavement where transit use is heaviest. This project began as a repaving project, and the Complete Streets checklist defined a broader scope of design items to meet program goals. The resulting design supports Complete Streets and meets the needs of the adjacent community, as the bicycle lanes add an important connection that will result in better access from this historically underserved community to Seattle's light rail system.

North Linden Avenue Complete Street. North Linden Avenue is located in an area that has recently expanded to serve a growing senior population in Seattle's north end. The street is currently a two-lane roadway with limited sidewalks and streetscape elements. This project will improve pedestrian safety and enable residents to have greater access to transit and neighborhood businesses and make it easier to walk for recreation and health. When complete, the project will result in a two-lane roadway with bike lanes, sidewalks on both sides of the road, and a center turn lane. Natural

drainage and improved landscaping will also be incorporated into the right-of-way. This project is the first phase of a more comprehensive corridor improvement.

Walking the Talk: Consistent Implementation of Complete Streets

Complete Streets practices are based on consistency—every time we build or reconstruct a road, we expand on its multi-modal features unless exceptional circumstances exist. With political support firmly in place, the success of Seattle's program rests on consistent policies, practices, and reporting tools within SDOT to deliver Complete Streets:

- Long-range facility planning for all modes enables SDOT to focus on streets where modal priorities overlap to develop creative solutions that include Complete Streets elements citywide.
- A system of Street Types describes desirable street design features consistent with a roadway's classification and adjacent land use.
- A Complete Streets checklist for project managers, designers and planners requires documentation of how each SDOT project is planned, designed and built consistent with the Complete Streets policy. The checklist is an effective tool to ensure that all projects are reviewed for Complete Streets elements and fosters intra-departmental collaboration.
- A regular update cycle for design standards allows design practices to remain nimble and responsive; the most current addition is a citywide standard for bus bulbs.
- Performance measures for transit speed and reliability, as well as implementation of a bicycle and pedestrian system through the modal plans, contribute to a better understanding of how SDOT is meeting multi-modal network goals and communicates progress to the public.
- Dedicated funding for implementation of the Bicycle Master Plan, Pedestrian Master Plan, and transit corridor

improvements provides SDOT with resources to further Complete Streets implementation and to begin addressing the gaps in the bicycle and pedestrian networks.

One of the biggest challenges to implementing Complete Streets consistently is that Seattle is both blessed and cursed with narrow streets. Narrow streets mean shorter crossing distances for pedestrians, but they also limit the range of Complete Streets elements that can physically fit within the right-of-way. For example, a large majority of Seattle's arterial roadways are 60 feet from property line to property line. Two standard width sidewalks with planting strips are 24 feet. Two bike lanes with parking add an additional 24 feet. Two vehicle lanes that accommodate transit and freight add 24 feet, already exceeding the 60-foot right-of-way. In almost every case, wide sidewalks, significant green space, bike lanes, transit-only lanes, wide lanes for freight, center left turn lanes for business access, and vehicle lanes compete for right-of-way space. Tradeoffs among modes are often necessary, and Seattle continues to coordinate roadway design with land use in order to identify the priorities for each roadway in the network.

Even though Seattle has taken great strides in establishing the policy direction and action steps needed to implement Complete Streets, there is more to be done. Changing the culture of transportation professionals and policy makers does not happen overnight, and there are still many voices in the community who are strong advocates for automobile priority. With a Complete Streets policy firmly in place, Seattle will continue to offer options for getting around the city, with and without cars, and get the added benefits of keeping Seattleites active, getting us in touch with our neighborhoods and our neighbors, and building a 21st century transportation system.

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¹ Ibid, P. 19.

² McCann, Barbara, "Complete the Streets!" *Planning Magazine*, p. 19, March 2005

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