

A Citizen's Guide to Better Streets

How to engage your transportation agency

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If you plan cities for cars and traffic, you get cars and traffic. If you plan for people and places, you get people and places.

Citizens who are passionate about creating better communities must be empowered. In order to create better communities, the vision for the community must be the priority and the transportation vision planned to support this vision. The transportation priority that has existed for the last 50 years must be completely changed. Otherwise the community is only retrofitting existing streets with traffic calming measures to lessen the negative impact.

If we want our streets to be community places and town squares, they need to be planned and designed for all groups (particularly for seniors, schoolchildren and special needs individuals.) The sign of a successful street is one that is easy to get to, navigate through, welcomes many modes of transportation and pedestrians of all ages. Vital public destinations promote community commitment and involvement. The streets can be destinations and therefore the centers and individuals stores become a community and not just a conduit to travel through. Better communities can be accomplished by creating better streets and walkable communities by influencing county highway professionals (DOT) to place the most value on people and on places.

Too often community land uses are planned separately from the transportation network. Prevailing patterns of residential development in disconnected cul-de-sacs and subdivisions and the location of businesses and stores on county and state roads require nearly all traffic to be funneled onto major arterials. This creates a Johnson Ferry situation where the local residents compete for the same roadway space that through traffic travelers use daily. These residents who enjoy life in their quiet subdivisions are also commuters and shoppers at various times during the day.

A major problem is that community land uses are often planned completely separate from any transportation network. Low density, single-use development patterns discourage walking, biking and public transit is deemed infeasible. The DOT's only option to solve congestion is to widen roads. Any communities wanting to downscale/ change a planned or existing state highway should partner with DOT to solve congestion and to re-think their own rules and incentives for land uses and road design.

What can communities do to improve transportation?

Make all placemaking and far-sighted land –use planning central to all transportation decisions.

Re-think streets as public spaces. Streets encompass as much as a third of a community's land.

Maximize the ability to travel local existing roads rather than state roads for local trips.

Re-envision zoning laws which typically separate rather than combine different land uses.

Streets need to be designed in a way that encourages traffic speeds appropriate for that particular context.

Be willing to make short- term solutions as well as long-term fixes.

It is critical for the community to engage DOT, and local planners, to take a close look at the level of service performance measures selected and the growth assumptions used for traffic modeling.

A great community can be built, but only if transportation, land uses, public facilities (schools) and recreations destinations are planned in an integrated way. The community can present a community collective vision to transportation planners and modelers so they can design a system that supports it.

The Powers Ferry and the Johnson Ferry Corridor Focus Group is an example of this community involvement.

There is no substitute for designing good streets from the very beginning.

Communities and transportation professionals who seek to create streets where drivers will respect the local context (both residential and commercial) should design these streets using narrow lane widths, street trees, gentle curves and very small, if any shoulders. Creating streets in this manner will prevent the need for costly and controversial speed bumps and other traffic calming measures, after the fact.

Qualities of a great street are:

Attractions and destinations

People will return again and again, create a wide range of activities for: men, women, people of different ages, different times of day, week and year, for people alone and in groups.

Identity and Image

Keeping a place clean, well maintained, showcasing local assets, businesses, pedestrians and drivers creating a positive image

Active edge uses:

The connection should be visual, allowing passersby to enjoy the activity and aesthetics of the indoor space. These should be active year-round and unite both sides of the street.

Amenities

Successful streets provide amenities to support a variety of activities. These include attractive waste receptacles, street lighting, and bicycle racks, both private and public seating options. The importance of giving individuals the choice to sit where they want is generally underestimated.

Management

An active entity that manages the space is critical to a street's success. This requires keeping the space clean and safe, managing tenants and programming the space to generate daily activities. Events could be street performances, sidewalk sales, cultural, civic or seasonal celebrations.

Traffic, transit and the pedestrian

A successful street is easy to get to and get through; it is visible both from a distance and up close. Accessible spaces have high parking turnover and are convenient to public transit and support walking and biking. Access and linkage to surroundings destinations must be a part of the planning process. Automobile traffic can not dominate the space and preclude the comfort of other modes.

Blending of uses and modes

Ground floor uses and retail activities should spill out into the sidewalks and streets to blur the destination between public and private space. Shared street space also communicates that no one mode of transportation dominates.

Protect neighborhoods

Great streets support the context around them. There should be clear transitions from commercial streets to nearby residential neighborhoods, communicating a change in surroundings with a change in street character.