What Is the History of Complete Streets?
5-1. National Complete Streets Movement

The National Complete Streets Coalition evolved from a task force that united behind a basic idea that streets should accommodate all users—pedestrians, bicyclists, transit users, motorists, senior citizens, children, and persons with disabilities. The group lobbied for inclusion of a complete streets policy in the 2005 federal authorization of Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU). Unfortunately, while the passage of SAFETEA-LU in 2005 did not include a complete streets policy, it strengthened the national movement. The National Complete Streets Coalition continues to advocate for the adoption of complete-streets policies and procedures at the federal, state, and local government levels (McCann and Rynne, 2010).

Members of the National Complete Streets Coalition include practitioners from the Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE), the American Planning Association (APA), American Public Transportation Association, and special-interest groups such as AARP, America Walks, America Bikes, Smart Growth America, and Association of Pedestrian and Bicycle Professionals (McCann and Rynne, 2010). More recently, the public health community has garnered support for the complete streets movement. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), American Academy of Pediatrics, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation are proponents of active communities and policy strategies designed to address the nation’s obesity epidemic.

In a recently released report, Complete Streets Policy Analysis 2010: A Story of Growing Strength, the rapid growth of state and local complete-streets policies is documented. It reports that the number of state and local complete-streets policies has doubled over the past three years. Almost half of all states (23) states, including Delaware, have adopted complete-streets policies. More surprisingly, small suburban communities with populations under 30,000 are taking the lead in policy adoption. Within 47 states, more than 200 regional and local jurisdictions have adopted complete-streets policies in the forms of resolutions, ordinances, internal policies, and planning documents. Top-scoring local government policies include county council–approved policies in Florida and the Mountain West and city ordinances and municipal-design guidelines in the Pacific Northwest and Northeast (Complete Streets Coalition, 2011).

There is no master blueprint for a complete-streets policy. However, the National Complete Streets Coalition has identified ten elements that should be part of an ideal, comprehensive complete-streets policy. A model federal, state, or local government policy (National Complete Streets Coalition, 2010):

- Includes a vision for how and why the community wants to “complete” its streets
- Specifies that “all users” includes pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit passengers of all ages and abilities, in addition to trucks, buses and automobiles
Encourages street connectivity and aims to create a comprehensive, integrated, connected network for all modes

Is adoptable by all agencies to cover all roads

Applies to new and retrofit projects, including design, planning, maintenance, and operations, for the entire right of way

Makes any exceptions specific and sets a clear procedure that requires high-level approval of exceptions

Directs the use of the latest and best design criteria and guidelines while recognizing the need for flexibility in balancing user needs

Directs that complete-streets solutions will complement the context of the community

Establishes performance standards with measurable outcomes

Includes specific next steps for implementation of the policy

5-2. Federal Role in Completing the Streets

To date, the federal government has not adopted a complete-streets policy. In May 2011, the “Safe and Complete Streets Act of 2011” (HR 1780) was introduced to require state DOTs and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) to consider “safety and convenience” of all roadway users when planning for and developing transportation projects (govtrack.us). A Senate companion bill, the Complete Streets Act of 2011 (S 1056) was subsequently introduced later in May. While similar to HR 1780, the Senate bill also requires agencies to consider cyclists, pedestrians, and public transit when building roads with federal funds (govtrack.us). As of fall 2011, neither bill has made it out of committee review phase.

5-2-1. National and Federal Agency Publications

Although the federal government has not yet adopted a complete-streets policy, the premise to provide “routine accommodation” can be found in national and federal agency guidelines, manuals, policy statements, and publications. Many transportation documents provide a foundation for complete streets. These include, but are not limited to the following organizations’ publications:

American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO)

* Geometric Design of Highways and Streets* (AASHTO’s Green Book)
* Guide for the Planning, Design, and Operation of Pedestrian Facilities*
* Guide for the Development of Bicycle Facilities*
* Context Sensitive Design for Integrating Highway and Street Projects within the Community and Environment*
5-2-2. Federal Agency Policy Statements and Guidance

During the 1990s, the federal government began to fund the development of a more balanced transportation system with passage of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act in 1991 and the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) in 1998. With the passage of TEA-21, the U.S. Department of Transportation (U.S. DOT) issued a series of policy statements to support the integration of bicycling and walking into the transportation mainstream.

Accommodating Bicycle and Pedestrian Travel: A Recommended Approach – This U.S. DOT policy statement has become the basis of many initial complete-streets policies nationally. It states that bicycle and pedestrian accommodations are to be included in new construction and reconstruction projects in all urbanized areas except under three conditions—on roadways with laws prohibiting bicycles and pedestrians, where costs are excessive, and where there is an absence of need. The policy statement also calls for paved shoulders on rural roads and accessible designs so all pedestrians, including people with disabilities, can travel safely and independently (FHWA, 2008).

Policy Statement on Integrating Bicycle and Walking into Transportation Infrastructure – This policy statement was issued by FHWA in 2000 to provide guidance on accommodating bicyclists and pedestrians in the design of new and improved transportation facilities.

ADA Standards for Transportation Facilities – In 2006 the U.S. DOT adopted new standards, based on U.S. Access Board guidelines, for transportation facilities covered under ADA. The standards apply to bus stops, bus and rail stations, equivalent accommodation, accessible routes, curb ramps as well as other transportation facilities constructed or altered after 2006.
These measures are intended to improve accessibility for persons with disabilities while facilitating compliance (U.S. Access Board).

**Updated Guidance on Bicycle and Pedestrian Provisions of Federal Transportation Legislation** – A revised statement was made by FHWA in 2008 to reinforce the need to fully integrate bicycling and walking as travel modes into transportation planning, design, and operations. This guidance affirmed in all federally funded transportation projects and programs that non-motorized users need to be safely accommodated and considered during the planning, development, and construction phases. In addition, transportation-improvement projects should plan for the presence of bicyclists and pedestrians on all highways and transportation facilities. The guidance stressed that, “improving conditions and safety for bicycling and walking embodies the spirit and intent of federal surface transportation law and policy to create an integrated, intermodal transportation system [that] provides travelers with a real choice of transportation modes…” (FHWA, 2008).

**Updated Bicycle and Pedestrian Accommodation Regulations and Recommendations** – This update of the U.S. DOT policy statement was issued in March 2010. It stresses that every transportation agency has the obligation “to improve conditions and opportunities for walking and bicycling and to integrate walking and bicycling into their transportation systems.” The statement advises state DOTs to (U.S. DOT, 2010):

- Treat walking and bicycling as equals with other transportation modes.
- Ensure convenient access for people of all ages and abilities.
- Go beyond minimum design standards.
- Collect data on walking and biking trips.
- Set a mode-share target for walking and bicycling.
- Protect sidewalks and shared-use paths the same way roadways are protected.
- Improve non-motorized facilities during maintenance projects.

**5-3. State Leadership Role in Complete Streets**

While policy approaches differ, all states share an important role in developing policies and designing multimodal transportation systems that serve users of all ages and abilities. According to a recent report, *Complete Streets Policy Analysis 2010: A Story of Growing Strength*, states should provide leadership and guidance to local governments on complete streets. State DOTs can explain technical aspects of the need for multimodal design of complete streets. In terms of state policy leadership, several states, including Minnesota, Michigan, and California, have adopted laws that now require inclusion of complete-street principles in general (comprehensive) plan updates by local governments (National Complete Streets Coalition, 2011).
In addition to the previously mentioned federal policy statements, there are two specific federal directives that require state DOTs to address the need for non-motorized transportation. First, states are required to use a portion of federal funds to hire a state bicycle and pedestrian coordinator under Federal Statute 23 USC 217. Second, the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) states that DOTs, in cooperation with metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), must develop and adopt multimodal transportation plans with non-motorized and public transportation components (FHWA, 2008).

Complete-streets policies at the state level take many forms, including policy directives, resolutions, state legislation, funding appropriations, design guidelines, and/or executive orders. Effective state implementation strategies for a complete-streets policy include (McCann and LaPlante, 2009):

- Institutionalizing complete-streets policies by revising state DOT policy and procedures to serve all modes
- Using complete-streets principles as the basis for revising state DOT design manuals
- Retraining state DOT planners and engineers on how to implement complete-streets policies through implementation strategies and decision-making tools such as checklists, scoping procedures, and design directives
- Developing and implementing performance-based measures for complete-streets projects to ensure roadway networks serve all users

Educating and partnering with other state agencies, advocacy groups, MPOs, and local governments can also advance a state’s complete-streets policy. State DOTs can collaborate with partner agencies and jurisdictions to actively adopt complete-streets policies, encourage local governments to develop comprehensive plans that support active and healthy community initiatives, and adopt policies and practices that contribute to smart growth and a safe environment for non-motorized transportation alternatives.

5-4. Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) and Complete Streets

As federally mandated and funded transportation-policymaking organizations, MPOs are charged with planning and coordinating the investment of federal transportation dollars. MPOs provide a federally required public forum for transportation decision-making to ensure that expenditures of federal transportation funds result from a continuing, cooperative, and comprehensive (3-C) planning process. MPOs have taken an active role in assimilating complete-streets principles when planning transportation projects and in coordinating transportation policy (FHWA, 2008). FHWA has clearly outlined the role of MPOs in implementing complete-streets principles to include (Smith, Reed, and Baker, 2010):

- Developing land-use, economic-development, and transportation (or other infrastructure) plans in a coordinated manner, with all elements supporting a common vision
• Facilitating alternative-transportation modes through land-use goals and design standards

• Connecting transportation projects and programs to public and private investments so they complement each other and support broader community goals

• Accommodating the flow of freight while avoiding or minimizing negative impacts on residential areas, city centers, and other users of the transportation system

• Considering a range of strategies, tools, and modal options to support complete streets and similar livability goals and activities

5-5. Local Governments and Complete Streets

While transportation planners and engineers are now directed to design streets with all users in mind, towns and cities have authority for local plans and policies, and they may not be totally in sync. Local jurisdictions need to incorporate complete-streets principles within comprehensive plans, regulatory policies, community-design guidelines, and facility-maintenance practices. In addition, local government policies should be consistent with state policies, address community needs and transportation-related issues, and include common policy elements recommended by the National Complete Streets Coalition. Successful local government complete-streets policies need strong political and community advocacy, partnerships among and between other agencies and organizations, local government leadership and staff support, and a demonstrated need for change in the transportation environment.

According the National Complete Streets Coalition’s Complete Streets Policy Analysis report, the strongest policies address the need for (National Complete Streets Coalition, 2011):

• A clear vision—to create a safe- and well-balanced transportation system that promotes community livability

• A strong statement of intent—to articulate the goal that all street and road projects will be designed, planned, reconstructed, rehabilitated, maintained, and operated to meet the needs of all users

• Accommodation of all users and modes—to specify that the transportation system will fully integrate, equitably accommodate, and safely facilitate all users (i.e., ages and abilities) and modes (i.e., bicyclists, pedestrians, transit riders, motorists, emergency responders, and freight carriers).

• A connected, integrated network—to recognize that an integrated approach to street-network development is needed

• Partnerships—to ensure continuity of connected, integrated roadway networks across jurisdictional lines or boundaries
• **Phased continuation**—to integrate complete-streets planning into all future phases of road-improvement projects

• **A process that provides exceptions**—to clearly state when a policy exemption will be granted and under what circumstances

• **Guidance on design standards**—to support the design of a transportation network that is flexible and follows generally accepted or adopted design standards

• **Context sensitivity**—to recognize that complete-streets principles are flexible and consider the type of roadway and context of existing and future land use

• **Performance measures**—to evaluate the success of a complete-streets policy

• **Policy implementation**—to provide clear direction on how plans will be accomplished