T&E COMMITTEE #1
March 14, 2011

MEMORANDUM

March 10, 2011

TO: Transportation, Infrastructure, Energy and Environment Committee

FROM: Glenn Orlin, Deputy Council Staff Director

SUBJECT: Briefing—complete streets

The Committee chair has requested convening a panel to discuss the concept and applications of complete streets. The National Complete Streets Coalition has described the broad definition of complete streets and their benefits (©1-3) and has identified the characteristics of an ideal complete streets policy (©4-7).

Although Montgomery County has not adopted an explicit complete streets policy, many of its aspects are already being carried out to a greater or lesser degree. A few years ago the Council adopted a law and a subsequent Executive regulation incorporating some design elements of complete streets in the Road Construction Code, especially in urban areas. However, a follow-up effort—updating intersection design standards—has not yet been initiated.

The panel that has been invited to make presentations includes:

Cheryl Cort, Policy Director, Coalition for Smarter Growth

R.J. Eldridge, Director of Planning, Toole Design Group

Jim Sebastian, Bicycle Coordinator/Program Manager, District of Columbia Department of Transportation

Wayne Wentz, Chief, Bureau of Traffic Engineering and Operations, Arlington County Department of Environmental Services

Each panelist will give presentations of 10-15 minutes in length. A question and answer period will follow.

Frequently Asked Questions about Complete Streets

What are "Complete Streets" and Complete Streets policies?

Complete Streets are streets for everyone. They are designed and operated to enable safe access for all users. Pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders of all ages and abilities must be able to safely move along and across a complete street. Complete Streets make it easy to cross the street, walk to shops, and bicycle to work. They allow buses to run on time and make it safe for people to walk to and from train stations.

Creating complete streets means transportation agencies must change their approach to community roads. By adopting a Complete Streets policy, communities direct their transportation planners and engineers to routinely design and operate the entire right of way to enable safe access for all users, regardless of age, ability, or mode of transportation. This means that every transportation project will make the street network better and safer for drivers, transit users, pedestrians, and bicyclists - making your town a better place to live.

What does a "complete street" look like?

There is no singular design prescription for Complete Streets; each one is unique and responds to its community context. A complete street may include: sidewalks, bike lanes (or wide paved shoulders), special bus lanes, comfortable and accessible public transportation stops, frequent and safe crossing opportunities, median islands, accessible pedestrian signals, curb extensions, narrower travel lanes, roundabouts, and more.

A complete street in a rural area will look quite different from a complete street in a highly urban area, but both are designed to balance safety and convenience for everyone using the road.

Why do we need Complete Streets policies?

Incomplete streets - those designed with only cars in mind - limit transportation choices by making walking, bicycling, and taking public transportation inconvenient, unattractive, and, too often, dangerous. Changing policy so that our transportation system routinely includes the needs of people on foot, public transportation, and bicycles means that walking, riding bikes, and riding buses and trains will be safer and easier. People of all ages and abilities will have more options when traveling to work, to school, to the grocery store, and to visit family.

Making these travel choices more convenient, attractive, and safe means people do not need to rely solely on automobiles. They can replace congestion-clogged

trips in their cars with swift bus rides or heart-healthy bicycle trips. Complete Streets improves the efficiency and capacity of existing roads too, by moving people in the same amount of space - just think of all the people who can fit on a bus or streetcar versus the same amount of people each driving their own car. Getting more productivity out of the existing road and public transportation systems is vital to reducing congestion.

Complete Streets are particularly prudent when more communities are tightening their budgets and looking to ensure long-term benefits from investments. An existing transportation budget can incorporate Complete Streets projects with little to no additional funding, accomplished through re-prioritizing projects and allocating funds to projects that improve overall mobility. Many of the ways to create more complete roadways are low cost, fast to implement, and high impact. Building more sidewalks and striping bike lanes has been shown to create more jobs than traditional car-focused transportation projects.

Where are complete streets being built?

Many states and cities have adopted bike plans or pedestrian plans that designate some streets as corridors for improvements for bicycling and walking. More and more, communities are going beyond this to ensure that *every* street project takes all road users into account.

Among the places with some form of complete streets policy are the states of Oregon, California, Illinois, North Carolina, Minnesota, Connecticut, and Florida. The City of Santa Barbara, California calls for "achieving equality of convenience and choice" for pedestrians, bicyclists, transit users, and drivers. Columbia, Missouri adopted new street standards to encourage healthy bicycling and walking. And the regional body that allocates federal transportation dollars around Columbus, Ohio has directed all projects provide for people on foot, bicycle, and public transportation.

What are some of the benefits of Complete Streets?

Complete Streets improve safety. A Federal Highways Administration safety review found that streets designed with sidewalks, raised medians, better bus stop placement, traffic-calming measures, and treatments for disabled travelers improve pedestrian safety. Some features, such as medians, improve safety for all users: they enable pedestrians to cross busy roads in two stages, reduce left-turning motorist crashes to zero, and improve bicycle safety.

Complete Streets encourage walking and bicycling for health. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently named adoption of Complete Streets policies as a recommended strategy to prevent obesity. One study found that 43% of people with safe places to walk within 10 minutes of home met recommended

activity levels; among individuals without safe place to walk, just 27% were active enough. Easy access to transit can also contribute to healthy physical activity: nearly one third of transit users meet the Surgeon General's recommendations for minimum daily exercise through their daily travels.

Complete Streets can lower transportation costs for families. Americans spent an average of 18 cents of every dollar on transportation, with the poorest fifth of families spending more than double that figure. In fact, most families spend far more on transportation than on food. When residents have the opportunity to walk, bike, or take transit, they have more control over their expenses by replacing car trips with these inexpensive options. Taking public transportation, for example, saves individuals $9,581 each year.

Complete Streets foster strong communities. Complete Streets play an important role in livable communities, where all people - regardless of age, ability or mode of transportation - feel safe and welcome on the roadways. A safe walking and bicycling environment is an essential part of improving public transportation and creating friendly, walkable communities. A recent study found that people who live in walkable communities are more likely to be socially engaged and trusting than residents of less walkable neighborhoods. Additionally, they reported being in better health and happier more often.

An Ideal Complete Streets Policy

- 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, as well as 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 both 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.

Sets a vision

A strong vision can inspire a community to follow through on its complete streets policy. Just as no two policies are alike, visions are not one-size-fits-all either. In the small town of Decatur, GA, the Community Transportation Plan defines their vision as promoting health through physical activity and active transportation. In the City of Chicago, the Department of Transportation focuses on creating streets safe for travel by even the most vulnerable - children, older adults, and those with disabilities.

Specifies all users

A true complete streets policy must apply to everyone traveling along the road. A sidewalk without curb ramps is useless to someone using a wheelchair. A street with an awkwardly placed public transportation stop without safe crossings is dangerous for riders. A fast-moving road with no safe space for cyclists will

discourage those who depend on bicycles for transportation. A road with heavy freight traffic must be planned with those vehicles in mind. Older adults and children face particular challenges as they are more likely to be seriously injured or killed along a roadway. Automobiles are an important part of a complete street as well, as any change made to better accommodate other modes will have an effect on personal vehicles too. In some cases, like the installation of curb bulb-outs, these changes can improve traffic flow and the driving experience.

Creates a network

Complete streets policies should result in the creation of a complete transportation network for all modes of travel. A network approach helps to balance the needs of all users. Instead of trying to make each street perfect for every traveler, communities can create an interwoven array of streets that emphasize different modes and provide quality accessibility for everyone. This can mean creating bicycle boulevards to speed along bicycle travel on certain low-traffic routes; dedicating more travel lanes to bus travel only; or pedestrianizing segments of routes that are already overflowing with people on foot. It is important to provide basic safe access for all users regardless of design strategy and networks should not require some users to take long detours.

All agencies and all roads

Creating complete streets networks is difficult because many agencies control our streets. They are built and maintained by state, county, and local agencies, and private developers often build new roads. Typical complete streets policies cover only one jurisdiction's roadways, which can cause network problems: a bike lane on one side of a bridge disappears on the other because the road is no longer controlled by the agency that built the lane. Another common issue to resolve is inclusion of complete streets elements in sub-division regulations, which govern how private developers build their new streets.

All projects

For many years, multi-modal streets have been treated as 'special projects' requiring extra planning, funding, and effort. The complete streets approach is different. Its intent is to view all transportation improvements as opportunities to create safer, more accessible streets for all users, including pedestrians, cyclists, and public transportation passengers. Under this approach, even small projects can be an opportunity to make meaningful improvements. In repaving projects, for example, an edge stripe can be shifted to create more room for cyclists. In routine work on traffic lights, the timing can be changed to better accommodate pedestrians walking at a slower speed. A strong complete streets policy will integrate complete streets planning into all types of projects, including new construction, reconstruction, rehabilitation, repair, and maintenance.

Exceptions

Making a policy work in the real world requires developing a process to handle exceptions to providing for all modes in each project. The Federal Highway Administration's guidance on accommodating bicycle and pedestrian travel named three exceptions that have become commonly used in complete streets policies: 1) accommodation is not necessary on corridors where non-motorized use is prohibited, such as interstate freeways; 2) cost of accommodation is excessively disproportionate to the need or probable use; 3) a documented absence of current or future need. Many communities have included their own exceptions, such as severe topological constraints. In addition to defining exceptions, there must be a clear process for granting them, where a senior-level department head must approve them. Any exceptions should be kept on record and publicly-available.

Design criteria

Communities adopting a complete streets policy should review their design policies to ensure their ability to accommodate all modes of travel, while still providing flexibility to allow designers to tailor the project to unique circumstances. Some communities will opt to re-write their design manual. Others will refer to existing design guides, such as those issued by AASHTO, state design standards, and the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines.

Context-sensitive

An effective complete streets policy must be sensitive to the community context. Being clear about this in the initial policy statement can allay fears that the policy will require inappropriately wide roads in quiet neighborhoods or miles of little-used sidewalks in rural areas. A strong statement about context can help align transportation and land use planning goals, creating livable, strong neighborhoods.

Performance measures

The traditional performance measure for transportation planning has been vehicular Level of Service (LOS) - a measure of automobile congestion. Complete streets planning requires taking a broader look at how the system is serving all users. Communities with complete streets policies can measure success through a number of ways: the miles of on-street bicycle routes created; new linear feet of pedestrian accommodation; changes in the number of people using public transportation, bicycling, or walking (mode shift); number of new street trees; and/or the creation or adoption of a new multi-modal Level of Service standard that better measures the quality of travel experience. The fifth edition of Highway Capacity Manual, due out in 2010, will include this new way of measuring LOS. Cities like San Francisco and Charlotte have already begun to develop their own.

Implementation

Taking a complete streets policy from paper into practice is not easy, but providing some momentum with specific implementation steps can help. Some policies establish a task force or commission to work toward policy implementation. There are four key steps for successful implementation: 1) Restructure procedures to accommodate all users on every project; 2) Develop new design policies and guides; 3) Offer workshops and other training opportunities to planners and engineers; and 4) Institute better ways to measure performance and collect data on how well the streets are serving all users.