

Complete Streets Legislation

Issue Background

What Are Complete Streets

Complete Streets are transportation corridors designed and operated to enable safe access for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, public transit users, older people, people with disabilities, and children. To improve accessibility, Complete Streets incorporate elements such as sidewalks; bicycle lanes; bus lanes; frequent crosswalks; traffic calming measures such as medians and stop signs; curb extensions; and more.

Creating Complete Streets requires changing transportation policy from a focus on single-use automobile travel to multi-use accessibility. An ideal Complete Street policy goal is to create a comprehensive, integrated, connected network of accessible transportation corridors between schools, offices, parks, residential neighborhoods, and retail destinations, improving the ability of all users to access every part of their community. However, all streets are different, and a good Complete Streets policy will balance the needs of all users with the unique needs of a particular road or community.

Why Complete Streets are Necessary

For years, transportation policy has created streets that are only safe and efficient for automobile travel. These “incomplete” streets lack sidewalks and crosswalks, have lanes too narrow to share with bicyclists, and make no room for mass transit riders. These streets make no room for the one-third of Americans who do not drive, prohibiting them from freely traveling within their communities.

A recent federal survey found that 25% of walking trips take place on streets without sidewalks, and 95% of bicycle trips take place without bicycle lanes. These dangerous conditions for pedestrians and bicyclists can lead to severe or fatal traffic accidents—more than 5,000 pedestrians and bicyclists die each year on American roads.

Finally, there are very few laws in place requiring states and localities to build Complete Streets. Although many landscape architects have experience with Complete Streets, only special projects require them to implement Complete Streets improvements. A federal Complete Streets policy would result in better designed state and local projects.

Benefits of Complete Streets

Besides improving access and safety for all users, Complete Streets can help improve a community's economic health. Integrating bike lanes, sidewalks, and other Complete Streets features into new transportation corridors can save communities the cost of retrofits later. Complete Streets can also bolster economic growth and stability by providing accessible and efficient connections between residences, schools, parks, public transportation, offices, and retail destinations.

Complete Streets are also good for air quality. By providing for pedestrian, bicycle, and mass transit use, Complete Streets allow users to use low-emission forms of transportation. This reduces airborne pollutants and can also help to mitigate climate change.

Complete Streets improve the public health. They provide residents with safe places to walk and cycle, which will encourage people to incorporate physical activity into their daily lives. This can help to combat the rising costs of obesity and sedentary lifestyles plaguing America today.

Landscape Architects and Complete Streets

With experience in site planning, design, ecology, mapping and geographic information systems (GIS), landscape architects are uniquely qualified at planning and designing transportation

corridors that accommodate all users. Landscape architects are active practitioners of the Complete Streets concept and design corridors that feature safe sidewalks, bike lanes, cross walks, clear signage and other features that safely accommodate multiple modes of transportation.

The Complete Streets Act

The Complete Streets Act of 2008, introduced by Senator Tom Harkin (IA) and its House companion bill, *The Safe and Complete Streets Act of 2008*, introduced by Representative Doris Matsui (CA), would require state Departments of Transportation (DOTs) and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) to require that all new, federally funded transportation projects comply with Complete Streets principles. Specifically, the legislation would require that agencies with design, construction, or financial responsibility for an approved transportation improvement project must certify that it complies with Complete Streets policies and makes roads accessible to users of all ages and abilities. The new rules would apply to new road construction and road improvement projects, including design, planning, construction, reconstruction, rehabilitation and maintenance projects. The bill would also require the Secretary of Transportation to issue guidance for State DOTs and MPOs on the best practices for implementing Complete Streets policies.

Exemptions

The Complete Streets legislation does not take a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Instead, states and MPOs would be able to implement a Complete Streets policy based on the needs of the community. For example, if an existing or planned population density or levels of transit service around a particular roadway were low enough so that there is a documented absence of a need for Complete Streets principles, that roadway would be exempt from the rules of the legislation.

Additionally, projects are exempt if the cost for the project to comply with Complete Streets principles would be excessively disproportionate to the need for or probable use of the street.

Community Fit

The Complete Streets Act and the *Safe and Complete Streets Act* are written to address the many needs of all communities. To further this goal, the legislation contains language that requires that Complete Streets principles be applied to fit within the context of the community. This will make sure that all communities are enhanced, and not inconvenienced, by their new road and street improvements.

Role in Economic Stimulus

As Congress plans to invest billions of dollars into transportation and infrastructure projects as part of a major economic stimulus package, it is imperative that new projects be designed and implemented to address the needs of all users. Complete Streets legislation is a unique opportunity to ensure that stimulus funds go towards not only improving roads and bridges, but ensuring that all citizens can enjoy a safe, walkable community.

Current Status

Currently, both Senator Harkin and Representative Matsui plan to re-introduce Complete Streets legislation in the 111th Congress. ASLA is asking Members of Congress to co-sponsor Complete Streets legislation when it is re-introduced.