

---

## Introduction

**A**S I WAS WORKING ON THIS BOOK, I took a break to make a presentation at a pedestrian safety meeting held at a branch of the Montgomery County Public Library in Germantown, Maryland, just north of Washington, DC. Two girls, children of one of the organizers, were eagerly passing around “pedestrian” gingerbread cookies, as about fifty people gathered on the cold winter afternoon. But despite the refreshments, attendees found little to celebrate. The meeting had been called soon after two residents, one a high school student, had been killed while walking in what is known as the “upcounty,” the northern section of Montgomery County where decades of agriculture are giving way to spread-out, automobile-oriented development.

Much of the afternoon was spent discussing design solutions for an unmarked crosswalk on Stringtown Road, a new four-lane road designed to funnel interstate traffic to the new development in Clarksburg. A father begged for a marked crosswalk to help his children and other kids living in new homes reach Clarksburg Elementary School, which backed up to the new road. He brought photographs of women and children crossing at a T-intersection, marked only by curb cuts and a narrow median the county had installed when the road was built. County officials said a signal and a crosswalk must wait years, until completion of the cross street brings more traffic. They fear that simply painting a crosswalk will give the kids a false sense of security. One county official said she had good news for attendees: in the future, the County will stop installing curb cuts that raise expectations prematurely.

As attendees debated potential solutions, I couldn’t help thinking that the issue was one of priorities. The school has been in this location since 1909. Planners should have been aware that children would move into the new homes built within sight of the school. If their safety had been given priority in the planning phase, the County could have left the traffic heading to Interstate 270 on its original route, on Clarksburg Road on

the far side of the school. The new road could have been smaller, with fewer cars. If safe access had been prioritized during the design phase, the County could have incorporated a safe crossing while building the road. Now, the traffic-centered priorities that guided earlier decisions have made it much harder to achieve pedestrian safety: the needs of a dozen children are in direct conflict with the needs of hundreds of commuters—commuters who have no choice but to drive.

This story is repeated all across the United States. Go to a multilane road in a suburb in just about any state. One look tells you that people who are not in cars shouldn't be there. A second look tells you that they are—because they've tramped a visible trail in the grass. It probably won't be long before you spot people waiting by a bus stop or running across the street during a break in traffic. You might even see someone riding a bike, hugging the curb while passing drivers honk.

The Complete Streets movement arose to change the priorities of the transportation system that produced these roads. A broad coalition of bicycle riders, transportation practitioners, public health leaders, older Americans, smart growth advocates, real estate agents, and more came together to insist that we begin to build streets that are safe for everyone. We formed the National Complete Streets Coalition in the early 2000s to push for passage of complete streets policies. The policies—in the form of laws, resolutions, or internal agency directives—commit states, cities, and towns to building all future road projects to safely accommodate everyone using them. The movement took off: since 2005, more than half the states and close to five hundred local jurisdictions have adopted complete streets policies.<sup>1</sup> Many of the communities that have made this commitment are going on to study the long-standing gaps in their transportation network, rework their decision-making processes, write new guidance, and educate transportation professionals and citizens alike in the new approach to making transportation investments. From the state of North Carolina to the city of Chicago and from Edmonds, Washington, to Lee County, Florida, they are beginning to routinely build their roads differently: they integrate carefully engineered sidewalks, safer crossings, bicycle lanes, new types of intersections, traffic calming, and features that speed buses to their destinations.<sup>2</sup>

The Complete Streets movement has helped bring about a tremendous



burst of activity and change in the way roads are planned, funded, designed, and built. But it is far from the first to point out that roads should be safe for everyone traveling along them, or to argue for more transportation choices. Road safety campaigns go back to the dawn of the automobile age; bicycle riders and transit boosters have been pushing for multimodal accommodation since the 1970s. More recently, this movement has been driven by changing American attitudes: a 2012 nationwide public opinion poll found that 63 percent of Americans would like to address traffic congestion by improving public transportation and designing communities for easier walking and bicycling.<sup>3</sup> America's supposed love affair with the car is giving way to a romance with smart phones, which are more easily operated on the bus or streetcar. In the United States and around the world, young people are delaying getting their licenses and are driving less. The growing ranks of older adults want greater access to public transportation. Indeed, demographic trends show a certain inevitability in the desire to transition to less car-dependent lifestyles.<sup>4</sup> More citizens and their elected officials are using bicycles, public transportation, and their feet to get around, and they are working for change.

### The Complete Streets Change Model

These trends are helping fuel the Complete Streets movement. It also continues to spread because it brings something new to the table, but not what many people think. Sure, the catchy name is helpful. But beyond the name, the movement has found three keys to unlocking change in transportation practice—and none of them has much to do with safer road design. In brief, the strategies aim (1) to reframe the conversation about transportation in a simple and powerful way, (2) to build a broad base of political support for completing the streets, and (3) to provide a clear path to follow in transitioning to a multimodal process.

The lack of a design focus may surprise anyone who is following the explosion of exciting new street design guidelines, manuals, books, and individual projects that are getting deserved attention in transportation circles these days. A new design paradigm is clearly taking shape, one that envisions a more connected, inviting, and sustainable urban fabric. Much of the discussion in transportation circles surrounds more clearly defining this paradigm, arguing for shorter blocks, a clearer relationship

between the street and the surrounding buildings, and innovative treatments that slow traffic and better protect pedestrians and people on bikes while giving priority to public transportation. Many people assume that the Complete Streets movement is just another voice in this chorus—for example, I've been asked many times to provide the ideal cross section for a complete street.

But defining the problem as a design issue—in a field already tightly bound by technical specifications—has obscured the other ingredients necessary to move a system fixated on providing for a single mode. Engineers and architects alike have been churning out innovative new design ideas for several decades, but they have only recently begun to gain traction. And in too many cities, tremendous effort has been put into promising new design solutions that have been applied to road projects a few times—and then have just sputtered and faded away.

The Complete Streets movement takes a step back and defines the problem differently. In our view, the primary problem is political and cultural. If transportation agencies are hewing to outdated design standards and still solving the problem of building roads for automobile speed and capacity, then the solution is for community leaders to be very clear that they now have a different problem for transportation professionals to solve. The day-to-day decisions made by practitioners may seem technical, but they are driven by an underlying political decision and by the priorities and values of the community. A complete streets policy initiative provides the clear direction to begin to change those decisions. The Complete Streets movement is succeeding not because it lays out a compelling design paradigm (it doesn't have one), but because it uses the three key strategies to help change the way transportation projects are chosen, planned, and built. Most of this book elaborates on how practitioners all over the country are successfully using these strategies to change their agencies, their roads, and their communities. Only by following these actions can places truly put new design ideas to use, persistently and consistently.

### Map of the Book

This book tells a story of change and embeds tips, insights, and tools about the process of converting a community's transportation investments to ensure safe streets for everyone.



In chapter 1, I'll examine the factors that explain why the US transportation planning and construction system has been historically resistant to changing its singular focus on providing for automobile travel—as well as how those dynamics are now changing. Chapter 2 elaborates on how the Complete Streets movement approached this intractable system and found a way to change it, using the three key strategies. The chapter tells the story of the initial success of the Complete Streets movement in engaging thousands of people in the transportation policy process and giving reformers a new point of leverage.

But it turns out that adopting a policy is not even half of the effort required. The rest of the book is devoted to what happens after a policy has passed, and tells the stories of many professionals—planners, engineers, landscape architects, and others—who have brought policies from paper into practice.

This focus is necessary because in too many communities, after leaders or elected officials have adopted a policy, nothing happens. The exact nature of this gap between policy and implementation is the subject of chapter 3. In some places, practitioners don't view their jobs any differently, and roads go on being built as before. In others, tremendous effort goes into writing new street design standards, but they result in only minor changes to a few projects—a sidewalk here, a bike lane there. This chapter helps readers understand why communities get stuck—and goes on to explain why the best strategy for getting them unstuck involves reframing the way agencies view and approach the mission of making streets safe.

Lasting and fundamental change will come only if a policy inspires a transportation agency to reorient its work to fully and consistently consider the safety of all users. Changing the processes used inside agencies is the topic of chapter 4. The chapter divides the task into four steps to achieve full implementation: changing decision making, updating design guidance, providing training and education, and finding new ways to measure success. It tells the stories of planners, engineers, landscape architects, politicians, and other complete streets advocates who have successfully gotten beyond project-by-project battles to lead their agencies in changing their decision-making systems. The sum of their experiences begins to provide a clear path for others to follow in converting their own systems to complete streets.

Chapter 5 explores the many and varied opportunities to begin changing systems to build complete streets. The application of these four steps will differ in communities of different sizes and types. At a large state agency, the challenge lies in getting the new approach down into the districts; in a city, it may be in getting departments to talk to each other. Growing cities will spend more time working with private developers, while older communities can focus their work on changing their current streets. Most of the chapter demonstrates that some of the most effective implementation strategies lie not in big capital improvement projects but in the most mundane repair projects and in the details of development codes. It explains the advantages of bringing about change not through big signature projects but through small, gradual improvements.

Many complete streets proponents have discovered that changing their institutions is not a straightforward fix. They realize that making the transformation requires political savvy, relationship-building skills, and inspired communication among practitioners, elected officials, residents, business leaders, and many other stakeholders—in short, the “building support” strategy of the Complete Streets movement. In chapter 6, practitioners tell stories of how they have used these skills to champion the complete streets concept, to build new alliances, and to change practice.

Complete streets proponents need tools to help them answer the most common but also the most loaded question about this initiative: how much will it cost? Chapter 7 provides four answers to this question, clarifying that the first issue is dispelling many misconceptions about what a complete streets commitment will mean. It includes examples of some of the creative and convincing ways that jurisdictions have documented the larger benefits they are gaining by building streets for everyone.

Chapter 8 is also aimed at providing tools for those who now find themselves working every day to strike a new balance between automobiles and other modes. This balance means setting new priorities in the allocation of space and resources. This chapter discusses the political and practical ramifications of those decisions and shares techniques that some communities are using to help them make those allocations in a fair way that helps meet broader community goals. The final chapter looks at how the Complete Streets movement intersects with other movements, and it asks whether the concept needs to be expanded in light of the rapid

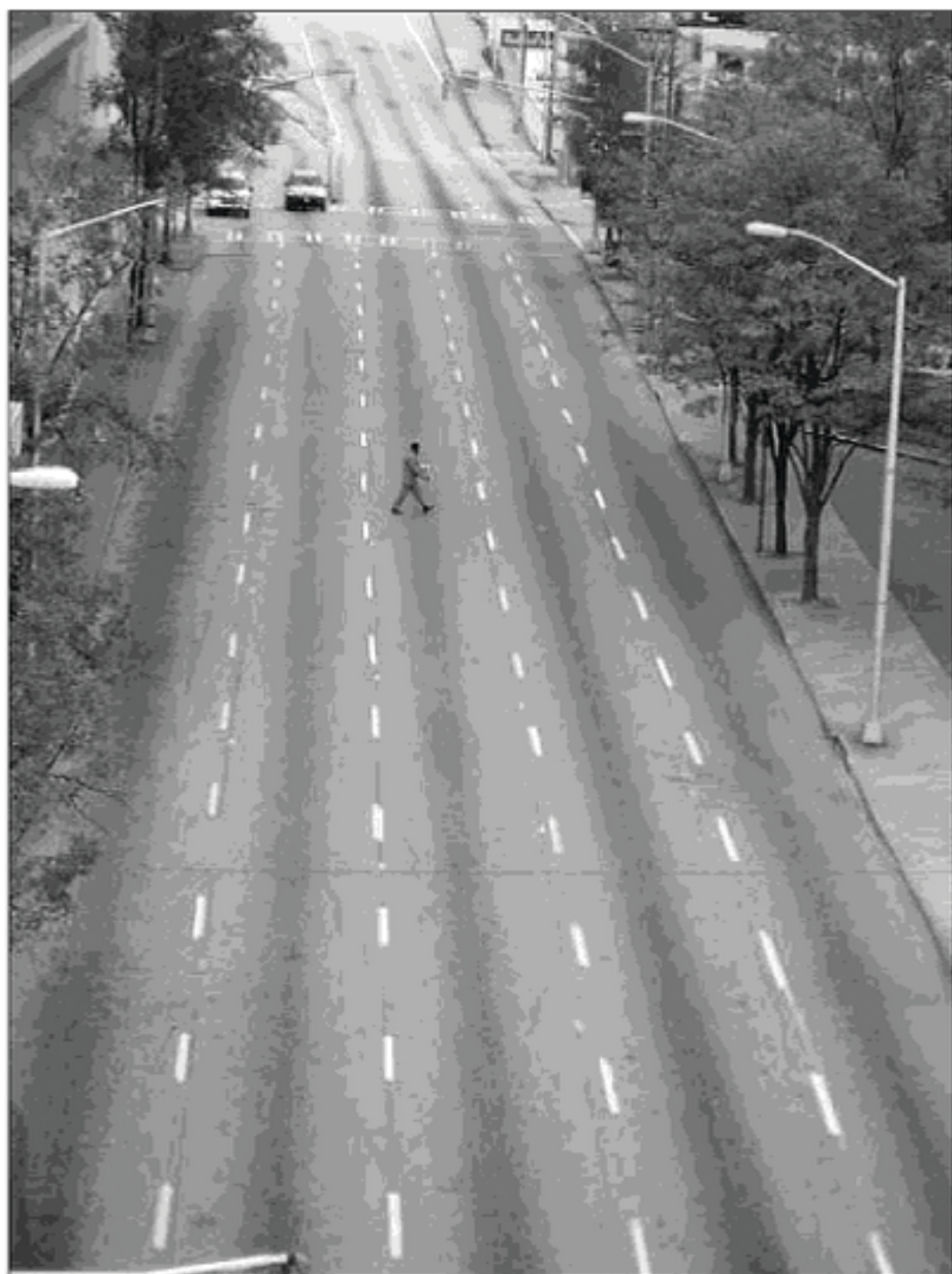


evolution of thinking about how we build sustainable communities for the next century.

This book uses many examples from places and people across the country that are intended to illustrate the principles discussed. These examples are not intended as prescriptions to follow or even necessarily as best practices. I return to the same places several times to help readers understand the variety of activities that are under way. Although the book does not include full case studies, you can find a list of such profiles in appendix A. That list includes places mentioned in the book as well as some of the many communities that informed the conclusions in this book but that I did not have the space to name. I'm sorry I was unable to write about every place taking an innovative approach (but that's a nice problem to have).

Some places pursuing complete streets are taking baby steps while others are striding toward a totally new approach—and there is something to learn at both ends of the spectrum. Most of the ideas I present are not visionary. We already have plenty of visionary thinking to tap. Instead, I am seeking to help practitioners and advocates move toward completing their streets, and I hope I have conveyed the process of discovery that I and others went through in unlocking the keys to change. In Rochester, Minnesota, and Seattle, Washington, the discovery came as practitioners read through every planning document they had—and then systematically realigned them all to a complete streets vision. In Salt Lake City, it was the revelation that the city could quickly install many miles of bike lanes—if they worked with the right department at the right time. For the State of New Jersey, it was realizing they needed to give engineers the permission to put down their manuals and look at every street in a new way. For me, it was listening to everyone's stories—and understanding the power of getting the right people in the room.

Complete streets policies won't instantly end needless pedestrian deaths or create multimodal nirvana. But over time, they will transform the systems that keep creating difficult safety problems like Stringtown Road. My hope is that this book will help jurisdictions take the idea of safe streets for all from paper into everyday practice.



Many roads in the United States are built for one purpose.  
(Photo by Barbara McCann.)