

Main Streets and Transportation Policies

Smart Growth
Tools
for Main Street



Enhancements Project, Petoskey, MI



Anywhere, USA

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Transportation policies have great impacts, both positive and negative, on the economic vitality and quality of Main Streets. Poorly planned by-passes can spawn edge-of-town sprawl that lures businesses away from downtown. One-way road pairings can lead to increased traffic speed, turning Main Streets into speedways. And bans on on-street parking can make it hard for local Main Street businesses to accommodate their customers. For these reasons, downtown revitalization leaders should pay close attention to local transportation plans. Unfortunately, many citizens are unaware that they have a right to influence transportation projects – or that state transportation agencies have an *obligation* to respond to their concerns.

Transportation policy differs markedly from state to state, making it hard to generalize about precise rights and obligations in specific cases. Some states are responsive to local concerns about the community impacts of transportation projects; other states are not. In any case, Main Street advocates should understand the basic transportation planning process so that they can influence it when their interests are affected.

Transportation Planning Basics

Under federal law, every state must prepare a Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP), a multi-year list of projects proposed for federal, state, and local transportation funding. Similarly, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) are required to prepare a Transportation Improvement Program (TIP), a 3-to-5 year list of transportation projects for the MPO region. STIPs are compilations of TIPs, but they also contain project information for non-metropolitan areas of states that are not covered by MPOs, including smaller cities, towns and rural areas. Used as forums for regional planning and decision-making, MPOs are designated for metropolitan areas with populations larger than 50,000 that conduct regional transportation planning. Both STIPs and MPOs are public documents.

Transportation planning should be conducted openly and be accessible to all citizens and local communities. Citizen participation in the planning process should take place early and be continuous. To make sure that transportation projects benefit downtowns – or at least do no harm to them – Main Street leaders should establish relationships with local and metropolitan planning agencies as well as with the state transportation agency. Regular communication with state legislators can also help citizens find out about transportation proposals affecting their community.

State transportation agencies are obligated to take community views into account when planning projects. Letter-writing campaigns and calls from elected officials can be effective if a state agency is unresponsive. When transportation projects threaten to cause harm, the National Environmental Policy Act or state-level analogues often provide a

legal hook for challenging projects. (For more information on these laws, contact the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Law Department at 202/588-6035.)

Enhancements

Besides guarding against inappropriate, or insensitively-designed road projects, Main Street leaders should know how to compete successfully for "transportation enhancement funds" authorized by the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991. This act authorizes each state to set aside ten percent of its surface transportation budget for enhancements projects. Under the Enhancements Program, state funding is available for a variety of transportation related projects, including downtown streetscape improvements, bicycle and pedestrian paths, traffic calming and the restoration of historic facilities with a relationship to transportation. Projects that enhance the experience of traveling – including pedestrian amenities and façade restorations of significant historic buildings along Main Streets – may also qualify for funding under this program.

Enhancement programs differ widely from state to state. So do project selection procedures and the amounts of money that individual states devote to each of the eligible enhancement activities. Many states spend most of their enhancements funds on bike paths, while others focus on preservation projects. In Kentucky, the state transportation agency, in cooperation with Renaissance Kentucky, has dedicated a significant percentage of enhancement funds to streetscape projects and downtown revitalization. Through this program, **Carrollton, Ken.**, created a more pedestrian-friendly downtown and reestablished its Courthouse Square as a downtown focal point. **Frankfort, Ken.**, replaced sidewalks, curbs, streetlights and benches, and **Paducah, Ken.**, installed underground utilities, added bike racks and replaced trees.

Road Design Standards

Road design standards can also have a tremendous impact on Main Streets. These standards determine matters such as how wide lanes and sidewalks can be, whether or not trees can be planted along streets, and whether or not curbside parking is allowed. The standards can have a profound effect on the pedestrian friendliness of a town. Insensitively designed road and bridge projects can destroy street trees, sidewalks and other features that make a Main Street attractive and walkable.

Too often, road designers and transportation engineers emphasize increased traffic speed at the expense of everything else, including the qualities that make a place visually appealing and walkable. As Philip Slater wrote in *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, "Our approach to transportation problems has had the effect of making it easier and easier to travel to more places that have become less and less worth driving to." In an attempt to address this problem, the U.S. Department of Transportation has urged state transportation agencies to take advantage of recently authorized flexibility in standards. Referred to as "Context Sensitive Design," this new approach to road design is intended to protect and enhance the livability and special features of communities.

Five state transportation agencies – in **Maryland, Connecticut, Kentucky, Minnesota** and **Utah** -- are currently participating in a national pilot program aimed at finding the best ways to implement the principles of Context Sensitive Design. **Vermont** adopted new road standards in the mid-1990s that seek to protect the state's small Main Streets and county roads. States like **New Jersey** are training state engineers and planners in this approach, while other states are beginning to incorporate public participation and community impact assessments into their planning processes.

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To ensure that progressive transportation principles are applied locally, Main Street leaders can--and should--organize community meetings with their mayor, town council members, state legislators and state transportation officials. Elected officials may not be aware of these new progressive approaches, but once educated, they can become strong advocates for Main Street-friendly transportation policies.

The safe and efficient movement of goods and people should not come at the expense of community livability and quality of life. The side effects of road building on the character and values of a town can and must be taken into account before transportation projects are approved. Communities have a right to expect this and should take all steps necessary to ensure that it does.

Resources

- *Community Impact Assessment*, a Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) explanation of how the transportation planning process is supposed to work and what citizens can expect from it. The overall message of this publication is that community livability and economic vitality are just as important as mobility. Communities do not have to stand for the injuries that accompany insensitively planned transportation projects. The publication is available through the FHWA Office of Environment and Planning (call 202-366-0106).
- *Take Back Your Streets: How to Protect Communities from Asphalt and Traffic*, a citizens guide on how to oppose unwanted and harmful highway projects. The guide is available from the Conservation Law Foundation in Boston (go to <http://www.clf.org> or call 617-350-0990)
- *A State Highway Project in Your Town? Your Role and Rights: A Primer for Citizens and Public Officials*, an excellent guide for citizens and public officials who want to modify road construction plans that could harm their communities. Written by Jim Wick, the primer is available from the Preservation Trust of Vermont. Go to <http://www.ptvermont.org/books.htm> or call 802/658-6647.
- *A Citizen's Guide to Transportation*, a primer on the transportation decision-making process by the Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration

of the U.S. Department of Transportation. Publication # FHWA-EP-01-013 HEPH/3-01(15M)E. Go to www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/planning.htm.

- *Kentucky Takes the Road Less Traveled: Kentucky Historic Preservation and the Transportation Enhancement Program*, a publication of the Kentucky Heritage Council. Go to www.kyheritage.org or call 502/564-7005.
- *Residential Streets*, by Walter Kulash. This publication explains some of the more progressive thinking regarding street designs and advocates road standards that allow streets to retain their walkable, intimate character. Go to www.uli.org and click on bookstore or call 202/624-7000. Ask for ULI Order No. R38.
- *Street Design Guidelines for Healthy Neighborhoods*, by Dan Burden. Go to www.planning.org

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