

Complete Streets must benefit all users. A comprehensive street design program will allow Complete Streets to vary by context. A suburban parkway for example will have a different configuration and modal emphasis than a downtown main street.

As Complete Streets are implemented and the benefits realized, public acceptance is likely to follow. This appears to be the overwhelming experience, even in cities with auto-oriented land use patterns.¹¹¹

Lagging Acceptance of Changing Professional Standards

Many traffic engineers interviewed, while understanding the potential for Complete Streets, expressed caution in utilizing techniques that are not required by city ordinances or sanctioned by official traffic engineering manuals such as those provided by ITE, AASHTO, Caltrans and the Federal Highway Administration.

In the UC Davis survey described previously, the Caltrans Highway Design Manual was frequently cited as an impediment to Complete Streets, even though the standards were intended for highways and not local streets. This finding was confirmed to some extent locally but more often traffic engineers cited concerns about deviating from locally adopted standards and policies, which were often derived from the HDM.

In 2012, Caltrans substantially revised the HDM to support Complete Streets. Nevertheless, caution persists even as the laws and professional street design standards change. Fortunately many California policy initiatives in the last few years support greater inclusion of Complete Streets approaches to urban planning, transportation facilities, and environmental review (Chapter 3). Additionally, Complete Street techniques have been publicly endorsed by all of the professional transportation engineering organizations and the state and federal transportation agencies. Concerning liability, risks are often overemphasized. Clearly documenting the decision process when exceptions to previous standards are made allows adequate legal protection.¹¹²

These changes in policy and professional standards have allowed for the implementation of Complete Street projects, at least on a pilot basis. Interestingly, while no one interpreted the existing standards as authorization to begin converting streets into Complete Streets, neither did they report that existing city standards prevented Complete Streets from being implemented.

Lack of Training in Complete Streets Concepts

Knowledge and enthusiasm for Complete Street concepts varies widely among local transportation engineering and planning staff. Many transportation engineers would welcome the opportunity to implement more Complete Street projects and are making an effort to educate themselves on the latest techniques. Others feel that the existing functional based system and emphasis on vehicular LOS is perfectly adequate. (We respectfully disagree.)

On the whole, interest is growing, but the other barriers need to be addressed before the transportation engineers and planners will be in a position to take ownership of the change process. Often, the response to a new concept, like multi-modal LOS, will be to adopt a “wait and see” position. It is easier to let other jurisdictions test the new CEQA guidelines, for example, than to risk a legal challenge over the adequacy of a traffic analysis.

Out-of-Sync Environmental Priorities

Several high profile corridor improvement projects such as the University Avenue Mobility Project and the Mid-City Rapid Bus Project will have been in planning, design and environmental review at least a decade before breaking ground. Much of the delay can be attributed to the extensive design and review to which these projects have been subjected.

By contrast, during a two year period, the City of New York completed over a dozen Complete Street projects, including several innovative cycle tracks, two operational BRT lines, and the conversion of Times Square into a pedestrian plaza. In 2008 alone the City added 90 miles of new bicycle lanes contributing to an unprecedented 35% single-year increase in bicycle commuting. All of this occurred in an exceedingly dense, highly constrained and fully “built-out” area.

Chapter 4 discusses various ways to minimize delays due to CEQA. In general, the best approach is to establish clear goals and policies in primary policy documents, and conduct environmental review of these documents.

Suboptimal Complete Street Implementation

While not an actual barrier, it is worth noting that some projects described as Complete Street projects fall short of their potential. This can happen, for example, if the multi-modal system is not truly integrated, if corridors are missing key components, if bicycle lanes are not designed to meet the safety concerns of ordinary riders, if the available funding is used primarily to reduce vehicle congestion, or if design integrity is seriously compromised. A corner shaved here or there can render a carefully-designed element completely ineffective.

Without comprehensive transportation plans, funding for active transportation could easily be absorbed into the current process without producing the transformative result needed to increase pedestrian safety, enhance community livability, and improve access to public transit. Unless these goals are realized local public support for Complete Streets may not materialize and funding could eventually be curtailed.

Under-appreciation of the Multiple Benefits of Complete Streets

Another factor that did not show up in surveys, but which contributes to the lag in Complete Street implementation, is the lack of a mechanism for forecasting the potential economic, health, and quality of life benefits of Complete Street projects. This can be addressed in part by instituting Health Impact Assessments for individual projects, plans, or policies. This approach is being taken by some leading California cities including Richmond and Encinitas, and is being tested by SANDAG.

Conclusions

Surveys of municipal traffic engineering and planning staffs throughout California and in the San Diego reveal a consistent set of barriers to Complete Streets implementation. The barriers and their potential solutions are summarized in Table 9-1.

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Table 9-I. Summary of Complete Street Barriers and Potential Solutions

| Barriers to Complete Streets | Potential Solutions |
|---|---|
| Funding | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local maintenance funds • TransNet local streets and roads allocation • SANDAG Active Transportation Grants • SANDAG Smart Growth Incentive Program • Mitigation for private developments |
| Inconsistent Council Direction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish comprehensive Complete Streets program through General Plan policies or stand-alone policy (Chapter 3). • Provide regular education and updates to City Council • Institute an annual transportation “report card” for City Council |
| Initial Citizen Skepticism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate pent-up demand for more walking, biking, and transit through advisory committees, surveys, workshops, etc. • Emphasize safety and health benefits, and (if applicable) travel time benefits • Implement improvements incrementally • Lead with Safe Routes to School, main street revitalization, or other popular project |
| Acceptance by Engineering Department | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep abreast of state and federal policies and guidelines; seek buy-in from elected officials. |
| Need for Technical Training | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend trainings offered by SANDAG, ITE, WalkSanDiego, APA, Caltrans, and others. Include staff training line item in departmental budgets. |
| Environmental Review | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chapter 5 lists several ways to minimize delays and costs related to CEQA review. |
| Suboptimal Implementation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create comprehensive plans and accountability processes for measuring progress • Evaluate key streets for opportunities to apply low-cost solutions, e.g. crosswalks, road diets, bicycle lanes. |
| Undervaluing Benefits of Complete Streets | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize new analysis tools such as Health Impact Assessments |

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