EXPERTS TALK

Building Community Support for Complete Streets with Drew Parker

How to Engage the Public to Help Develop and Build Support for Complete Streets Installations

Complete Streets have a positive transformative effect on communities. They increase safety, expand travel options, encourage healthier lifestyles and promote community-building.

Installing or converting an existing roadway section to a Complete Street corridor often involves evaluating trade-offs and making compromises to reach an acceptable final preferred design with broad community support. Including community members at every step means the public owner and design team have a better understanding of people’s priorities and goals and can use that information to guide planning and design decisions throughout the project. Stakeholder input and support in the planning stages are critical to the success of the project and lead to a well-functioning Complete Street corridor.

Q. Why is community support critical to delivering successful Complete Streets projects?

A. We build streets for people, so they should be involved in the process from the beginning. Local residents and business owners spend the most time in the area and can share unique perspectives that inform a project team’s understanding of current needs. By engaging the daily users of the street from the beginning, there will be more community ownership of the street improvements when they are built. The local community will learn more about the benefits and trade-offs of the Complete Streets project along the way — and those stakeholders can then advocate for more Complete Streets in the future and spread the message within and beyond their neighborhood.

In Denver, for example, the city asked HDR to help develop a transportation plan for the historic Five Points neighborhood. We put together a stakeholder committee of people with roots in the Five Points neighborhood, which has been called the “Harlem of the West.” Historically the site of jazz clubs and a diverse arts scene, in recent decades the neighborhood main street had been converted to a one-way arterial street, serving more to shuttle people out of the

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city than as the walkable street it had once been. When we put together a group of stakeholders to talk about transportation issues in the area, a community leader brought up the idea of reducing the number of travel lanes on this main street to slow traffic, improve the sidewalks and provide more parking opportunities. This idea quickly developed consensus among stakeholders, and ultimately the public. If we hadn’t sought her input, that idea probably would not have made its way into Denver’s first Neighborhood Action Plan. Intentionally incorporating diverse viewpoints during the outreach stage leads to a more inclusive and equitable project. It’s important to involve as many people as possible during the outreach stage to get the most benefit out of it.

Q. What’s the best place to start gathering community support when implementing or growing a Complete Streets program?

A. We often find that safety is a unifying topic; focusing on it leads to successful programs. People want their loved ones to be able to move about safely and comfortably no matter their transportation mode of choice, whether it’s walking or cycling to or from school or walking to the bus. Fortunately, there are established programs that increase safety, including Vision Zero/Toward Zero Deaths, Safe Routes to School/Parks and neighborhood traffic calming programs. Building safety projects in key locations that have a high demand for walking and biking, or in areas with many crashes, allows residents to see how successful Complete Streets improvements can be. Some business communities, such as arts districts with a high rate of their visitors arriving on foot, are often supportive of multimodal improvements in their area. Any area where residents or community stakeholders are invested and advocating for changes to the street network is a good place to start.

Seeing these changes and telling that story of success helps build momentum and support for Complete Streets projects across a community. Not all streets are safety hot spots, but all streets can still be made safer through Complete Streets principles. When people see that Complete Streets elements can help improve the quality of life in their neighborhood, they tend to support expanding those upgrades throughout the city.

Q. How do you ensure a successful and inclusive communication process for Complete Streets projects or programs?

A. The best approach is multi-pronged. Not every approach works or is comfortable for all people. We like to host some small exploratory pop-up events to quickly connect with people in their neighborhood, at gathering points like bus stops or the grocery store. We combine those with virtual engagement strategies such as online public meetings and — pre-pandemic — the occasional large in-person event. One of our favorite strategies is pilot or pop-up implementations, because it allows people to connect with the project on their own terms and/or engage with project staff during a set time at the project site. When designing the Santa Fe Streetscaping project in Denver, this approach received significantly more feedback than we would typically hear from a traditional public open house format. It is also critical to focus on accessibility and interpretation services. From the beginning, any materials you provide to the public should be accessible and reflect the languages spoken within the local community or that of the primary facility users.
Virtual events help some people attend because they can do so on their own time when it’s most convenient to them. We’ve found that online open houses have the ability to draw more diverse participants because of those lack of barriers, although we also need to be mindful that limited access to the internet or smart phones can pose a barrier of its own.

When working in communities with populations that are especially hard to reach or tend to be distrustful of government, it helps to partner with a local community organization or social service providers. They are often more familiar than project team staff with the needs of the community and the best ways to communicate with and involve those harder to reach community members. Some cities, such as Oakland, consistently integrate community-based organizations or nonprofits into the project team to be an official part of the project process.

Q. What tools and resources are available to continue building diverse stakeholder buy-in for these projects during the COVID-19 pandemic?

A. The pandemic presents an opportunity to develop online meetings and information sharing platforms that can be accessed any time. These resources can be posted on project sites and memorialize the project development and stakeholder engagement process. We have identified a number of creative ways to better engage the community through online materials and project sites. One area we’ve seen a lot of success is to partner with local community organizations and request that they include links to our project sites and materials in their digital newsletters.

This is also a great time for pilot projects. You might have noticed more people are walking and biking around their communities. They are a walking and biking potential source of input. It’s also a great opportunity to post QR code placards in the pilot installation for people to provide input on the pilot project or learn more about future Complete Streets plans.

Q. What can a project team do to help build trust with a community, to understand how a community sees itself and its core values, to help shape the direction of the project?

A. Listen first. Meet with community groups and hold open forums to discuss their goals first, and then examine how the project can help achieve those goals. Allow space to listen to the deeper, longer-running issues that might be more important to the community at the moment. Build trust — especially in communities that have historic reasons not to trust outsiders who’ve initiated projects in their neighborhood.

It is important to remember that there has been a history of racially insensitive transportation planning practices that have shaped communities in ways that reverberate today. In just about every large city in the United States, interstates were intentionally located in ways that often led to the division of historically minority and low-income neighborhoods from each other and segregated them from white areas. The effects of these projects are still felt today. And so, when planners — even those with the best of intentions — come to a community with a new project, residents have reason to view it with suspicion.

We have the ability to perpetuate this inequality or combat it with the process and outcomes of our work. By listening first and building incremental trust, we can show communities that we are here to work for their interests, not against them. Early and ongoing public engagement that respects all people at the core of the process will uncover solutions that bring the most value. These solutions create stronger, more resilient communities where the community helps to shape its infrastructure rather than the other way around.
Q. What role can pre and post data collection play in telling the story of project success with project stakeholders?

A. Pre- and post-data collection activities are a great way to tell the story of project successes and can be especially powerful when it’s coupled with storytelling. If I tell a resident that after we installed traffic calming on their street we were able to reduce overall speeds by 5 mph, it won’t be as powerful as if I were to say we were able to reduce speeds by 5 mph and now your neighbor lets her daughter bike down the street because it feels more comfortable and safe. Data is critical because it often convinces decision-makers with a focus on performance-based metrics to budget for Complete Streets work. However, looking beyond the analytical data, the storytelling and testimonials of people whose lives are improved by the project are often an equally important dataset based on the power of stories to humanize the work and allow people to put themselves in someone else’s shoes.

Also, we already have a lot of national data from studies about the safety benefits of Complete Streets projects. We’ve seen over and over that doing things like reducing the number of travel lanes, narrowing travel lanes, planting trees and installing pedestrian median refuges make streets safer in every community. If we can build similar local datasets that document the safety benefits that complete streets projects can have at a local level, then we are better equipped to help people understand how the changes might impact them, before any work is even started.
Q. How did you become interested in Complete Streets?
A. I became interested in Complete Streets about 10 years ago when I lived in Seattle. I rode my bike or the bus everywhere. At that time it seemed like North Seattle had all of the “fancy” bike lanes and buses and streetscaping. Conversely, where I lived in South Seattle didn’t have the same quality of treatment. Ever since then I’ve been committed to learning about the history of transportation inequality and developed a drive for planning and designing high quality and comfortable mobility and placemaking elements in underserved communities who tend to have more residents that walk, bike and ride transit.

Q. What advice do you have for someone just starting to work in Complete Streets planning?
A. Don’t forget who we plan for. The end user should always be forefront of your mind. It’s easy to get lost in the solution and forget about the real needs of people in our community. If you continually re-center yourself by listening to people’s needs and their goals and interests, you’ll be able to find the best design or planning solution. Also, history matters. Being a planner is an amalgamation of many careers, but often historian is the most important. Educate yourself on the history of any community you work in starting with the indigenous people and how neighborhoods and communities have existed and defined themselves for generations. Their history has long preceded you and will long outlive you.

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