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### **The Story of Complete Streets**

Barbara McCann, one of the main speakers at the New Jersey Bike & Walk Summit on Saturday, February 27, is also the author of the book "Completing Our Streets: The Transition to Safe and Inclusive Transportation Networks," which describes the origin of the "complete streets" concept and the goals that are included in its mission. Below is an excerpt:

The name Complete Streets came out of an effort to help the bicycle advocates get past a technical term that was holding them back on Capitol Hill. They wanted to include a directive in federal law that bicycle facilities should be a routine part of planning for all road projects. But the term they were using for this directive, "routine accommodation policy," wasn't exactly grabbing attention — and it sounded like one of those technicalities best left to the transportation experts.

Martha Roskowski, then manager of the federal advocacy coalition America Bikes, asked me, as media manager, to come up with a new name.

In late 2003 I convened a series of brainstorming sessions and invited some of the best minds I knew who worked on communications in transportation, including David Goldberg of Smart Growth America. Over three sessions, we discussed many names and at some point David suggested "complete streets." We conducted our own informal market testing with friends and neighbors, and gradually I realized that this was more than a new name — it might be a way to reframe the discussion about transportation to include everyone using the roads.

I had followed the work of George Lakoff, the Berkeley linguist who has written extensively about the power of metaphors in the political arena. He became well-known for his discussion of the power of creating a new "frame" for an issue. The framing of "complete streets" may be most powerful in its implicit definition of its opposite. No one wants to build incomplete streets.

This was the first of the insights that emerged to help transform complete streets from a phrase used in a few inside-the-beltway policy documents to a genuine movement taken up by bicycle advocates and public health officials, mayors and transportation commissioners, local senior organizations, and newspaper editorial boards.

While complete streets can be dismissed as a cute phrase, it represents a radically new view of transportation infrastructure — at least for the transportation industry. Transportation

planning, funding, and design have always been separated by modes. A complete streets approach requires agencies to see the potential for all roads, and for all road projects and funding streams, to contribute to the goal of safely serving people whether they are driving their own cars, riding a bus, or using a bicycle or their feet. It clarifies that the roads must be safe for a variety of people, including older adults, children on their way to school, and people with disabilities.

The degree of the conceptual leap required is revealed when transportation professionals and policy makers try to fit the phrase into their framework of transportation silos, talking about “complete streets elements,” and using the term as a synonym for the bicycle and pedestrian features of a roadway. This usage perpetuates the separation of modes; in many cases, those using this terminology also assume that special funding is required to add these “amenities” to the road. In fact, complete streets require a holistic look at how a street serves everyone using it — including drivers.

By reframing the transportation safety problem to include all people traveling along a corridor, the problem itself shifts. As many as one third of the population in the United States does not drive: children, older adults, people with disabilities, and those without the financial resources to own a car. The focus must expand from the vehicle lanes to include the adjoining “goat trail” tramped by pedestrians — forcing the acknowledgement that people who are not in cars are already using the roadway. In this way, an existing safety problem becomes both more urgent and visible — and clearly the responsibility of the transportation sector.

The Complete Streets movement widens the focus even further, moving out from the individual road corridor to a jurisdiction’s entire network. It calls not for building individual complete streets but for adopting federal, state, and local complete streets policies. A majority of the policies adopted across the country are resolutions passed by city councils, but dozens of cities and counties have adopted local ordinances and their agencies have written their own internal policies; a few policies have started out as executive orders. At the state level, legislatures have passed laws, and DOTs have adopted formal internal directives.

What all the policies have in common is a simple declaration that all future projects undertaken by a transportation agency will accommodate all users of the roadway. The policy may list these users, including people of all ages and abilities who are walking, riding bicycles, and catching public transportation, as well as covering operators of public transportation vehicles, automobiles, and freight. This policy solution has helped hundreds of communities break out of a frustrating focus on individual technical fixes and take on the task of building support for changing an entrenched transportation paradigm.

The policy focus also puts fundamental transportation decision making firmly into the wheelhouse of elected officials. This has several ramifications, but in terms of reframing it gives an edge to a movement seeking to address transportation issues in a new way. Politicians are particularly good at articulating visions that help their community reframe an issue. It is powerful when a city alderman says, “I want to ensure that we design our streets to be safe, enhance quality of life, and allow people to travel freely regardless of whether they walk, bike, take transit, or drive.”

When St. Louis alderman Shane Cohn said this upon passage of a city complete streets bill, it carried weight — and it set a new standard for how the city would approach street design.

This simple and powerful vision stands in stark contrast to the complexity of many earlier

attempts to turn around a transportation industry driven more by projects than by policy. Take, for example, reforms instituted in 1991 through federal legislation ISTEA. The legislation inserted policies that tried to broaden the mission of the transportation industry, introducing 15 "planning factors" that regions using federal funding had to consider (states got twenty-three), such as the "overall social, economic, energy, and environmental effects of transportation decisions" (and that's a single factor).

But the planning factors were as vague and ambitious as the existing agency practices were specific and targeted. No one provided a way to apply these new policy goals in a system geared to building roads to solve the simple and vital problem of traffic congestion. Over time, it became clear that people inside the agencies were simply checking off boxes, indicating they had "considered" these detailed and complex planning factors. While the complete streets concept requires a conceptual shift, the policies don't ask for the moon; they merely put transportation agencies and their employees on notice that they are responsible for the safety of everyone using the road.

To the general public, the concept seems so simple that it can have a "duh" quality. Of course roads should be safe for everyone; dozens of newspaper editorial boards have said as much in articulate pieces that were an early boost to the movement. But it provides a powerful rejoinder to complaints that safety proposals will impede traffic, succinctly challenging the assumption that the movement of automobiles always takes priority. It raises awareness of road design as a factor in pedestrian crashes, which are still too often blamed on the victim.

The name has limits. When used consistently as shorthand for "bicycle/pedestrian infrastructure," or as a rallying cry by a narrow constituency, it can take on a negative taint. People in a few communities have found it doesn't work for them. But many strong policies never use the term. The name itself is far less important than pushing for a new approach for transportation planning, one that takes the safety of all users into account.