Technical Assistance for Sustainable Communities:
Building Blocks

Technical Assistance Tool: Complete Streets
City of Portsmouth, NH
June 12-13, 2014

To: Rick Taintor, Juliet T.H. Walker, City of Portsmouth Planning Department
Cc: Roger Millar and Stefanie Seskin, Smart Growth America
From: Paul Zykofsky and Roger Henderson, National Complete Streets Coalition Instructors
Date: July 29, 2014
Re: Suggested Next Steps as Outcome of Technical Assistance

Background

In signing the Memorandum of Understanding for our technical assistance award with the City of Portsmouth, Smart Growth America committed to delivering a final report summarizing the workshop on Complete Streets and recommending specific strategies for implementing the Complete Streets policy adopted in 2013.

On the evening of June 12, a 45-minute public presentation provided an overview on Complete Streets, the different types, their benefits, and how to overcome some of the barriers to making streets more complete. The City videotaped the presentation so it could broadcast it more widely in the future on its public access channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYXSCtnrOCg

The all-day workshop on June 13 was an opportunity to bring together staff from different City departments, the regional planning agency, New Hampshire Department of Transportation, and members of the Parking and Traffic Safety committee to discuss candidly how to best implement Complete Streets in both the downtown as well as more suburban, outlying areas of Portsmouth. During the workshop, participants worked in small groups to discuss current practices and identify ways to better coordinate the activities of different city departments, especially Planning and Public Works.

The intent of these workshops was neither for Smart Growth America to develop the implementation strategy nor bind the community to any particular course of action, but rather to facilitate a discussion within City departments and outside partners on how best to implement Complete Streets policies.
Key Issues Addressed during the Workshop

At the start of the workshop, participants were asked to identify their key issues with Complete Streets implementation. Issues raised included:

- Accommodating big trucks, fire trucks, and transit vehicles
- Creating public awareness/changing the culture
- Collaboration across departments
- Road maintenance challenges, including aging infrastructure and lack of funds and staff
- Speed enforcement
- Special events in downtown that draw large crowds
- School safety
- Parking management, especially in downtown
- Having a common definition for Complete Streets
- Limited right-of-way
- Getting from vision to implementation

As the workshop progressed, participants focused in on the following challenges to implementing Complete Streets:

Coordination between Departments

In order to implement Complete Streets in Portsmouth, participants agreed, there is going to have to be better coordination between different departments, especially planning and public works. The fire department was also concerned that they were not in the loop on some of the discussions around Complete Streets. Challenges appear to be greatest with the Capital Improvements Program (CIP) process where projects don’t get reviewed by the public until they are close to implementation. Participants felt that the CIP process needed to be more proactive in reviewing existing projects ahead of time and adding new ones each year. The annual street-paving plan should also be viewed as an opportunity to evaluate the possibility of re-striping changes that can help make streets more complete. The National Complete Streets Coalition has found that jurisdictions that bring together different departments and stakeholders to take a more holistic view of transportation projects are typically more successful in implementing Complete Streets. This approach can also help overcome the “squeaky wheel” problem over which some participants expressed concern.

Participants discussed the need to set up staff meetings outside of the formal project development process to coordinate better and more openly between departments. The current transportation coordination meeting that takes place at the department director level might be an opportunity to bring in new voices and agencies. There was also discussion of the need to review outcomes of the decisions after they are implemented and learn from successes and mistakes.
Engaging Residents

Participants discussed the need to review and revise the project development and design process. A design charrette process should be considered in order to better engage residents, reframe the conversation, communicate the possibilities and build consensus at the start. Neighborhood groups should be encouraged to help identify the challenges and develop the vision for streets that work for everyone. Meaningful public participation can be challenging, but a growing number of resources and tools are available.

- The OpenPlans website is another useful tool to communicate with residents: [http://openplans.org/](http://openplans.org/).

Participants discussed the possibility of expanding the responsibilities of the Parking and Traffic Safety Committee to address planning issues. This might help it be more proactive rather than reactive. There was also discussion of the need to involve the Planning Board more as a way of empowering them to make good decisions.

Train Staff / Revise Standards / Performance Measures

One of the keys to implementing Complete Streets is to make sure that staff is trained and up-to-speed on innovative street design and to institutionalize these approaches by revising design standards and manuals. The City is in the process of developing a Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan ([http://planportsmouth.com/bike-pedestrian-masterplan2014.html](http://planportsmouth.com/bike-pedestrian-masterplan2014.html)) and a Safe Routes to School Action Plan ([http://planportsmouth.com/saferoutestoschool.pdf](http://planportsmouth.com/saferoutestoschool.pdf)). Both plans should help staff identify new tools and techniques to make streets more “complete.” Participants also discussed the need for ongoing training, not only on design issues but also project management. One way to accomplish this would be to bring together staff from different departments for mutual learning and cross-discipline discussions.

Participants recognized the need to review standards and regulations to make sure that they are in line with Complete Streets. There was general consensus, for example, that the design standards for subdivisions are outdated and need to be revised. Participants also discussed the need to revisit the street classification system and to develop a more context-sensitive approach. This will help develop a clearer understanding of how to accommodate different modes of travel in older as well as newer parts of the City. The ITE Recommended Practice *Designing Walkable Urban Thoroughfares: A Context Sensitive Approach*, developed with the Congress for the New Urbanism and available as a free download, might be helpful in this process: [http://ite.org/css/](http://ite.org/css/) or [http://www.cnu.org/streets](http://www.cnu.org/streets). Additional best practices in street design have been identified in the

A Complete Streets approach also requires changing how we measure their performance. Focusing on vehicular capacity and levels of service fails to recognize the diverse roles that our streets play. Communities are increasingly using performance measures that evaluate a wide range of safety, economic, health and quality of life benefits. Participants in the workshop agreed that new measures should be developed but were concerned about how to do this without adding to burdens on staff.

**Actions/Policies/Strategies to Address Key Issues**

Participants discussed the next steps to address some of the issues discussed above:

**Staff Coordination**

- Bring staff from different departments together on a regular basis to discuss Complete Streets implementation.
- Provide more support and training for staff doing project management.
- Consider using a project checklist to frame a multi-disciplinary project development and design process.

**Parking and Traffic Safety Committee**

- Expand PTS Committee role and roster to be more proactive on Complete Streets planning.
- Provide informational updates to PTS on Complete Streets implementation.
- Consider changing the PTS mandate to address broader planning issues.
- Establish performance measures that relate to broad goals, collect data, monitor results, report trends, and celebrate progress.
- Develop snow clearance policy and establish priorities (e.g. sidewalks on routes to school, arterials).
- Make snow clearance policy available to residents so they know which streets and sidewalks get cleared first and why.

**Community Engagement**

- Try a charrette process.
- Engage the Planning Board on Complete Streets.
- Conduct Complete Streets workshop with the Planning Board.

**Capital Improvement Program**

- Improve the process through broader staff participation and more transparent lead-up process.
- Review annually and involve each department.
• Communicate better with residents.
• Improve residents’ understanding of how projects get on CIP (put online?).
• Conduct “after” studies and evaluate before and after data, especially relative to your established performance measures.

Staff Training

• Conduct ongoing training for staff in different departments.
• Identify opportunities for cross-discipline discussions.
• Subscribe to monthly webinars offered by the Association of Pedestrian and Bicycle Professionals, and invite staff, the PTS and Planning Board, and citizens (http://www.apbp.org/events/event_list.asp?show=&group=&start=4%2F11%2F2011&end=&view=&cid=4146).
• Additional ideas can be found on the National Complete Streets Coalition’s policy implementation hub: http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets/implementation/providing-ongoing-education.

Design Standards

• Drop current subdivision rules and regulations; reference regulations that are more appropriate and revise the subdivision rules and regulations. http://www.planportsmouth.com/application/subdivisionrules.pdf
• Identify resources to revise rules and regulations
• Develop new street design standards

Performance Measures

• Start by having someone collect data on pedestrian/bicycle circulation, possibly in partnership with university classes or programs
• Include action-oriented, objective metrics that provide specific guidance to staff but are not necessarily subject to outside factors (e.g., install # of [improvement] by [year])
• Track progress and publish reports, per Complete Streets policy

Time frame for accomplishing actions

60-90 days after workshop:

• Send thank you to all workshop participants, and let them know next steps.
• Develop action plan at the next transportation committee.
• Schedule quarterly or bi-annual discussions similar to the workshop discussion and keep everyone involved.

6 months after workshop:

• Prepare report to City Council in October. Identify issues that might require legislative action.
• Conduct Complete Streets workshop/training with Planning Board.
• Update the mandate of PTS committee.

1 year after workshop:

• Revise CIP process starting with next cycle. Work incrementally; start with public works department, and then engage other departments.

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