



This multi-use sidepath on College Rd. in Fairbanks, AK, is maintained and used for transportation year-round. Photo courtesy of Donna Gardino, FMATS.

#### IMPLEMENTATION BRIEF

## **The Last Frontier: Complete Streets in Alaska**

Complete Streets is a policy and engineering approach based on the idea that our streets should be consistently designed with all users in mind, regardless of who they are or how they get around. It seeks to put the safety and convenience of all users of the public right-of-way on equal footing, whether they are walking or using a wheelchair, riding bicycles or transit, or driving an automobile. More than 600 jurisdictions have formally adopted Complete Streets policies, and many more have incorporated these principles into the planning, design, and construction of the public way.

In February 2014, Senator Mark Begich of Alaska introduced the Safe Streets Act (S. 2004), which requires states and regions to adopt Complete Streets policies for federally-funded transportation projects. At first glance it might seem strange that a Senator from the nation's coldest and most rural state would be sponsoring legislation that supports walking, biking, and transit, but Complete Streets aren't just for big cities or mild climates. Smaller cities and towns across the country are embracing Complete Streets, and policies have been adopted in 48 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia.

In Alaska, communities as far north as Anchorage and Fairbanks are putting Complete Streets to work as they recognize that cars and trucks aren't the only way residents want to get around. All these efforts are paying off. Beyond its extremes of climate and geography, the state ranks high on some surprising measures, like being top in the nation in the proportion of people who walk or bike to work and per capita funding for non-motorized transportation infrastructure, and third lowest in fatality rate of people walking or biking.



Front Street roundabout in Juneau, AK. Photo courtesy of ADOT.

## Design flexibility and Complete Streets

The safer, multimodal transportation networks Alaskan communities are building reflect the unique local demands of geography and climate.

With encouragement from the Alaska Department of Transportation (ADOT), cities are replacing traffic signals with modern roundabouts, helping cut congestion, emissions and crashes while moving traffic more smoothly. Donna Gardino of the Fairbanks Metropolitan Area Transportation Study says ADOT's new "roundabouts first" policy can be less expensive in the long run than building traditional signalized intersections: "if you can have the same safety and capacity with the reduced maintenance (no signal to maintain or fund), it seems like the right choice."

Fairbanks is reconfiguring downtown streets to improve the overall efficiency of the street network and create a better environment for people on foot and bicycles. Fairbanks is widening sidewalks, adding bike lanes and reducing lane widths on key downtown arterials and bridge approaches, thereby slowing speeds and making travel safer for all users.

Multi-use trails and sidepaths, traveled year-round for both transportation and recreation, are primary links in Alaska's transportation networks. Alaskan cities' multimodal plans consider not only walking, biking and transit, but also cross-country skiing, dog sledding, snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles. The standard design section for in-town state roads includes a paved sidepath, and many locales have extensive off-road trail networks to accommodate these modes.



Paved sidepath on an Anchorage road. Photo courtesy of Lori Schanche, Anchorage DPW.

### Planning for a high quality of life

Cities across Alaska are incorporating Complete Streets principles into their transportation design processes and comprehensive plans. Fairbanks, Juneau, and Anchorage are working to revamp plans and processes so that all users and modes are routinely considered, and Anchorage has dedicated staff for non-motorized transportation. Several communities are working towards adopting formal Complete Streets policies.



In downtown Fairbanks, wider sidewalks, street furniture and plantings, new bike lanes and narrowed travel lanes will make the streets safer for all users. Image courtesy of FMATS.

Though formal Complete Streets policies have yet to be adopted in any jurisdiction, community organizations across the state are pushing for building Complete Streets as a matter of routine. A consortium of bicycle commuters, environmentalists and community advocates recently worked with the National Complete Streets Coalition to host a Complete Streets workshop in Anchorage. In 2013, consultants from Coalition members Kittelson & Associates took Complete Streets on the road with their Alaska Transportation Education Series for transportation professionals, and Kittelson's Anchorage office is involved in a number of the Complete Streets projects and planning processes currently underway.

## Winter maintenance: Keeping everyone moving through the winter

Winter maintenance is high on the list of priorities for Alaskan transportation networks. In Anchorage, which averages more than six feet of snow a year, half of the City's street maintenance budget goes to snow removal. While a municipal fleet of almost 60 graders, sanders, and dump-trucks keeps the local roads clear, a second set of narrower tractors takes care of the City's extensive side path and trail network—clearing snow from the sidepaths for people on foot and bicycles and packing trails for skiers, dog teams and snow vehicles. The local transit agency, People Mover, clears more than 1,100 bus stops and shelters. After everything is plowed, a second pass collects piled snow in dump trucks to keep the right of way as clear as possible.



A skid steer snow sweeper clears sidewalks in North Pole, AK. Photo courtesy of Donna Gardino, FMATS.

Since 2009, the Fairbanks region's interagency Seasonal Mobility Task Force has studied the seasonal travel barriers faced by people who don't get around in cars. Like other cities, Fairbanks has a growing population of older adults and people with disabilities, making winter maintenance of pedestrian routes and transit access ever more important.

Around Fairbanks, which is under snow almost half the year, the community of North Pole now uses modified skid loaders to sweep and blow snow from sidepaths, and the City of Fairbanks clears sidewalks with nimble articulated tractors.

## Making way for tourism

While the state's economy has traditionally been built around the energy and fishing industries, tourism is growing in importance, especially on the temperate southeastern coast. In ports of call like Juneau and Sitka that see thousands of tourists from cruise ships, keeping pedestrians and bicyclists safe and comfortable is just good business.

Juneau, where more than one million cruise ship passengers disembark annually, has comprehensive wayfinding signage to help visitors navigate the city on foot.

The harbor city of Sitka has 9,000 residents in a land area of 2,870 square miles (four times the area of the City of Houston) and is accessible only by water or air. But the former Russian fishing outpost's compact urban core has remained convenient for people without a vehicle including both residents and thousands of cruise passengers. Outside of downtown, Sitka has added more than 50 miles of multi-use trails, with plans on the books for 100 more.

National recognition is another dividend. Sitka and Juneau have both been designated Walk Friendly Communities, and along with Anchorage, honored as Bicycle Friendly Cities.