



Complete Streets in Practice: Memphis, Tennessee

LOCAL POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION BRIEF



Figure 1 - Broad Avenue, Memphis, before and after a community-led project to reconfigure the street to better serve all road users. Photos: Justin Fox Burks.

In January 2013, Mayor A C Wharton enacted a Complete Streets policy in Memphis, TN, with an executive order directing that the public right-of-way “accommodate all users . . . including pedestrians, bicyclists, users of mass transit, people with disabilities, the elderly, motorists, freight providers, emergency responders, and adjacent land users.”¹ In addition to the development of a new multimodal Street Design Guide under the executive order, the City is taking advantage of every opportunity to provide low- or no-cost on-street improvements, fully engaging with the community and changing its institutional mindset about public space. This official embrace of Complete Streets is part of a remarkable, citizen-driven turnaround for a region so long built around the automobile that it rates among the top ten most dangerous metros for pedestrians,² and a place that *Bicycling* magazine twice named one of America’s worst cities for bicycling.³

The context: A multimodal history

With its commanding position above the Mississippi River and astride major railroad and highway junctions, Memphis was a multimodal hub long before the term “multimodal” existed. Developing as one of the lower Mississippi’s major inland shipping centers, the city grew up around river traffic and built on its locational advantages into the railroad, interstate, and air travel eras.⁴ Today it’s still a transportation leader, with FedEx and the many other shipping and logistics firms headquartered there. These companies have helped make Memphis International Airport the second-busiest air cargo hub in the world⁵ and the Port of Memphis among the busiest inland ports in the county.⁶

The city’s focus on transporting goods to far-flung destinations, however, has often come at the expense of local residents, whose needs were largely addressed through transportation plans that focused only on conveying motor vehicles as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Though it once boasted an extensive streetcar network that connected outlying areas to the city core and to passenger railroads, transit service decayed after World War II as the city struggled to connect an ever-expanding, low-density urbanized region. Then came the interstates (I-40 and I-55 initially, followed by an ever-growing number of beltways and spurs), carving up central Memphis and creating physical barriers between downtown and city neighborhoods. At the same time, the highways opened a far larger area of hinterland to development. The interstates and the new

arterials that fed them hollowed out the city and encouraged outward growth that greatly outpaced population increases.⁷

Even in the multi-jurisdictional world of metropolitan politics, greater Memphis stands out for both the extent and the tangle of governmental entities it encompasses. Centered on the city of Memphis and Shelby County, TN, the Census-defined metropolitan area today spreads just over a million people across some 500 square miles in ten counties in Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas.⁸

As the metro area sprawled, the city's core entered a sustained period of population loss, economic decline and physical neglect, while people who couldn't or chose not to drive found it increasingly perilous and impractical to move around the city on transit, on foot or by bike. Deferred maintenance took its toll on sidewalks and streets, and low population densities limited transit's effectiveness and stretched municipal resources. All of this added up to a car-dependent environment, and the more sedentary lifestyles that accompany it. Not surprisingly, rates of obesity and diabetes are higher in Memphis than in comparably sized cities nationwide.⁹

Economic disinvestment, dangerous streets and the public health effects of sedentary lifestyles: a triple-whammy for residents and for the City's bottom line.

A wake-up call and a turnaround

Until very recently, Memphians had few viable alternatives to traveling by automobile. Where sidewalks even exist, they're often in very poor condition (the city was recently estimated to effectively be on a 75-year paving cycle),¹⁰ do not accommodate users with disabilities and put pedestrians right next to high-speed traffic.



Figure 2 - Boarding a Riverfront Loop trolley in downtown Memphis. Photo: John Paul Shaffer.

Transit is limited almost entirely to conventional bus service, which struggles to efficiently knit together the sprawling city. A heritage streetcar system has been running vintage trolleys on short downtown loops since the early 1990s, and while it has significantly boosted overall transit system ridership and helped revitalize the area along its 2.5-mile route, the trolley has always been more oriented to shuttling tourists around the Main Street/riverfront area and to the clubs of Beale Street than to moving Memphians between the places where most of them live, work, and shop.¹¹

As for bicycles, many key routes are hostile places for cycling, and there were few alternatives on or off the street. The city didn't have a single mile of marked bicycle facilities until late 2010. Past city administrations routinely ignored public demand for bike lanes even when there was little cost involved. This atmosphere of bureaucratic neglect helped earn the city its appearances in *Bicycling* magazine's bike-town hall of shame in 2008 and 2010.¹² For some in the city, this negative national attention was a wake-up call that it was time to get serious about making streets work for everyone.

Things started to change at City Hall in 2010, when Mayor Wharton was elected on an urban sustainability platform that included plans for neighborhood revitalization, sidewalk and streetscape improvements and miles of new bike lanes. In his previous role as chief executive of Shelby

County, Wharton had spearheaded the creation of “Sustainable Shelby,” a strategy outlining specific, concrete steps for increased sustainability in numerous policy and operational areas.¹³

Wharton continued to implement this strategy in the mayor’s office, creating the city/county Office of Sustainability, hiring a bicycle/pedestrian coordinator and appointing a city engineer with a more nuanced understanding of streets’ role in a multimodal city and the public health implications of their design. By May 2012, *Bicycling* magazine was singling out Memphis as “America’s most improved bike city,” citing the significant progress the administration had already made in changing priorities on the streets.¹⁴

Just as importantly, the Wharton administration made it a point to cultivate community involvement in planning processes, and actually listen to what people said about how streets should work in their communities. This was key, because people across the region were waking up to the fact that something had to change if Memphis was to pull out of its long, slow decline, and citizens were primed to drive that change.¹⁵

The community lays the foundation for Complete Streets

An alliance between businesses and community activists

For years, dedicated Memphians had worked to improve conditions for walking, biking, and transit in the city, but the grassroots movement for safer, more vibrant streets most visibly coalesced in the Broad Avenue area in east Memphis. Originally the commercial corridor for nearby railcar manufacturing, the district had been sliced up by interstates and arterials and fallen into neglect by the 1990s. Only a few active businesses dotted a landscape of boarded up buildings, fast roads and indistinguishable sidewalks—a bleak environment where nobody would walk if they could help it.

This was the scene faced by the Historic Broad Avenue Business Association and local partners including Livable Memphis when they decided to highlight the vitality they knew was locked away under all that asphalt. Building on a series of design charrettes and stakeholder meetings, they came up with a plan to demonstrate the district’s potential as a mixed-use, multimodal corridor. In November 2010, during a two-day festival they called “A New Face for an Old Broad,” scores of volunteer organizers enticed residents out of their cars with pop-up businesses filling vacant storefronts and lots. They reconfigured the street with hand-painted restriping that added buffered bike lanes protected by diagonal parking, and further improved the pedestrian realm with slower traffic speeds, shortened intersection crossings, street furniture and landscaping.¹⁶



Figure 3 – Sarah Newstok of Livable Memphis paints a new bike lane for the New Face for an Old Broad event, November 2010. Photo: Pat Brown.

Organizers hoped maybe 5,000 people would show up over two days—they got 13,000.¹⁷ City engineers determined that the restriping (designed by local planning students and executed in exterior latex) was almost fully to code and gave the nod to leaving it in place after the event.

This application of Complete Streets design concepts catalyzed the district’s rebirth: three years after the event, the Historic Broad Business Association reports 30 properties in some stage of

“All of a sudden, people were noticing your business that had never noticed it before.” Pat Brown

renovation, with some 25 new businesses and \$20 million in reinvestment attracted to the corridor since the planning process began.

Pat Brown, a longtime area business owner, also credits the reconfigured street with boosting retail in the district. When the project began, “everyone was concerned bikes would take away from business, and we quickly saw it was helping

business twofold,” Brown says. “You did have people biking, but it also helped narrow the street and slow people down. All of a sudden, people were noticing your business that had never noticed it before because they were speeding by at 45 or greater.”¹⁸

Building a regional coalition to craft a Complete Streets policy

Broad Avenue is just part of the story. By 2011, a wide-ranging coalition of stakeholders from across the region had begun to lay the groundwork for a formal Complete Streets policy. Business, neighborhood and non-profit partners came together as the Memphis and Shelby County Complete Streets Coalition, and the local chapter of the Urban Land Institute and Livable Memphis sponsored a National Complete Streets Coalition Complete Streets workshop for practitioners and advocates in the city. The workshop brought together more than 40 professionals together and two national experts in the field to learn the fundamentals of developing and implementing a Complete Streets policy and to work through the nuts and bolts of the process, planning and engineering involved. The workshop helped grow the coalition to include representatives from regional transportation and engineering departments, transit providers, architects, large institutions, utilities, developers and urban designers. Many neighborhood, public health, and bicycling/walking advocates were also at the table.

Also driving the regional coalition was the Memphis Area Association of Realtors (MAAR), a chapter of the National Association of Realtors® (NAR). MAAR had a history of illuminating the benefits of Complete Streets and smart growth for their members, having previously supported community charrettes and member education on the tangible value of walkable, well connected neighborhoods. In 2012, MAAR secured a \$15,000 NAR Smart Growth grant to help fund the local coalition’s outreach, policy development, and education work.

The workshop resulted in the formation of a policy development committee chaired by John Cameron, the City Engineer, and Rusty Bloodworth, a local developer and real estate investor. The committee went to work helping City staff draft a strong Complete Streets policy—adopted under Mayor Wharton’s executive order in January 2013, a year and a half after the group’s formation.

The coalition’s current task is the ongoing preparation of a street design manual incorporating Complete Streets principles, to guide future planning and engineering efforts. Sarah Newstok of Livable Memphis says that even though the manual will officially be a document of the City of Memphis, it’s being developed with help and input from many regional voices so it will employ street typologies that are useful for jurisdictions throughout greater Memphis. That way the work’s value is potentially multiplied far beyond what it does for the city.¹⁹

Implementation by increments

And then there’s actual day-to-day work of remaking the streets. The sprawling city didn’t get built in a year, and it won’t get fixed with a few policy documents, no matter how forward looking. Creating Complete Streets in Memphis is only possible through what Kyle Wagenschutz, the city’s

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new Bicycle-Pedestrian Coordinator, calls “a mindset—through incremental changes over time we can begin to redefine the public space.”

Wagenschutz, whose position the City created in 2010, says that implementing a Complete Streets policy in a relatively poor city like Memphis has been “a work of innovation, a work of patience,” but that the city is already reaping demonstrable benefits through a series of inexpensive changes—and more importantly, a change in mindset about how to do the work of making streets function better for everyone. “Complete Streets, for us, doesn’t mean expensive streets. We want a policy that’s affordable now, but sustainable in the future.”

Memphis’ success in implementing Complete Streets so far has sprung from community engagement, incremental change, and making the most of opportunities when they present themselves, such as piggybacking on routine sewer or repaving work. And the market takes notice when things happen. “We’ve been able to install more than 50 miles of new bike lanes over a 24 month span, all of those without a single line item in our local budget.” The Broad Avenue area “has seen 25 new businesses open, millions in private reinvestment . . . and we haven’t even built [the new bike lane] yet,” says Wagenschutz.²⁰

Community engagement is central to the process. In planning how to build out the burgeoning bike network, for instance, the City reaches out to a network of community and neighborhood groups for their ideas on where new facilities should go, and this input forms the basis of future plans. That way, built projects begin their life with a group of local champions. By the same token, an isolated city bureaucracy isn’t decreeing new bike lanes in places where nobody wants them.

The City is careful to prioritize projects so as to maximize connections between modes, leveraging existing infrastructure and services while working toward a more connected and accessible whole. Several notable projects are currently in the works.

Overton-Broad Connector

The Broad Avenue corridor is the keystone of the planned Overton-Broad Connector, a two-way protected cycle track that’s part of the city’s work with the Green Lane Project, a campaign to increase the number of protected bike lanes and spread the technical tools for their implementation across the US. The 2.5-mile Connector provides the crucial on-street link between the Shelby Farms Greenline—a popular multiuse path on abandoned CSX railbed, opened in 2010—and Overton Park, a classical urban park that’s the gateway to the Midtown street grid. Though the ends of the route currently see more use by recreational riders, the Connector opens the entire length to cyclists of all skill levels and creates a safer, more practical route from the city’s eastern reaches into the urban core.

Among the challenges faced by bicycle riders in Memphis are the number of active, at-grade rail crossings and the very wide, fast arterials that cut through the city. In its two-mile length, the Connector crosses three active railroads and two major arterials, deploying bicycle-specific signals and signal phases and extending crossing times to increase safety at these conflict points. Throughout the bikeway’s length, high-visibility pavement markings will highlight areas where foot, bike, and auto traffic mix. Connected routes, like the 6.5-mile Shelby Farms Greenline, are already

using pedestrian hybrid beacons and crossing islands where non-motorized paths cross roadways.

Main Street to Main Street

In June 2012, USDOT awarded a \$14.9 million TIGER IV grant for a project to build ten miles of multimodal connections and roadway improvements within Memphis and across the Mississippi River to West Memphis, Arkansas. The Main Street to Main Street Multi-Modal Connector (or Main to Main) will link existing transit hubs as well as improve street conditions for walking and biking by fixing drainage issues and road hazards, upgrading sidewalks and marking bikeways.

The centerpiece of Main to Main is the repurposing of abandoned roadway on the 1916 Harahan railroad bridge as a walking and bicycling connection across the Mississippi (and the state line) to West Memphis, creating an entirely new set

of modal links between the two economically intertwined downtowns. In addition to the TIGER grant, the \$37 million connector relies on a mix of public and private funding from both sides of the river. The cross-jurisdictional endeavor capitalizes on the revitalization that the trolley and pedestrian mall have brought to Memphis' Main Street area, and business and political leaders are enthusiastic about the project's economic and livability benefits.²¹



Figure 4 - A pedestrian hybrid beacon and crossing island on the Shelby Farms Greenline multi-use trail. Photo: John Paul Shaffer

Greenprint regional planning

City, suburban and rural stakeholders from across the metropolitan area are lining up to take part in a regional planning effort called the Mid South Regional Greenprint. Conceived in 2011 with help from a \$2.6 million HUD Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant, the Greenprint is engaging public and private stakeholders to set out long-range plans for land use, housing, transportation, and green space. The process is bringing together groups and interests that haven't always gotten along, says Livable Memphis' Newstok, but the chance to meaningfully collaborate on this shared vision for the region seems to be bringing out the best in everyone at the table. The kind of jurisdictional competition that often characterizes regional efforts seems to be remarkably absent so far in this one, and if the process suffers from anything, Newstok says, it's an excess of ideas and enthusiasm.²² That's a good problem to have.

Keeping the ball rolling and reaping the benefits

Memphis has made an amazing turnaround in just a few years. The environment for Memphians traveling outside of cars is unquestionably improving. Better intersections, street crossings, and sidewalks are appearing all over the city. In May 2013, Mayor Wharton announced plans to further expand the city's bicycle facilities beyond the current 50 miles of marked lanes, including construction of 15 miles of new protected bike lanes over the next two years.²³

But all those new bike lanes, sidewalk improvements and crosswalks can feel like just a drop in the bucket in a region as extensive as Memphis, says the City's Wagenschutz. Though bicycling is already up 400% since 2011,²⁴ it understandably may be some time before the city sees measurable changes in safety or public health as a result of Complete Streets policy. In the

meantime, district-level success stories like Broad Avenue are showing how quickly both individuals and the market can react to an environment that puts people's needs before cars'.

At this point, perhaps the most important changes in Memphis have been the ones in the realm of process, which is the DNA of public entities. With the push for Complete Streets coming from both the top of the administration and the public, the need to always consider all users and modes on the streets is beginning to permeate city departments. Over time, that can't help but make a better city, one street at a time.

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