



National Complete  
Streets Coalition



To: Mayor Edward Kennedy, City of Lowell  
From: Emiko Atherton, Director, National Complete Streets Coalition, Smart Growth America  
Mike Jelen, Vice President, VHB  
Date: January 12, 2017  
RE: EPA Technical Assistance Report and Suggested Next Steps

## Overview

In 2016, Smart Growth America awarded the City of Lowell a technical assistance workshop to support the development of Complete Streets Policy Implementation. Lowell was one of the select communities nationwide selected to receive one of Smart Growth America's 2016 [free technical assistance workshops](#). The program, made possible through a five-year Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Office of Sustainable Communities, seeks to develop local planning solutions that help communities grow in ways that benefit families and businesses while protecting the environment and preserving a sense of place.

Smart Growth America selected Lowell for the workshop because of their commitment to Complete Streets. Lowell is a dynamic and diverse city. Known for its university (University of Massachusetts — Lowell), affordability, and proximity to Boston, it serves as an important community in Massachusetts. At the same time, Lowell observes and maintains a cultural legacy as one of America's first industrial centers.

Smart Growth America believes Lowell can use Complete Streets to create a transportation network for all users that maintains the character and context of this vibrant community.

## Workshop and Public Meeting

On December 6 and 7, Emiko Atherton of the National Complete Streets Coalition and Mike Jelen, Vice President at VHB, traveled to Lowell to deliver a two-day day workshop focused on Complete Streets implementation.

Key transportation and planning, law enforcement, National Parks Service, public works, and community advocates attended both days of the workshop.

## Key issues addressed during the workshop

Discussion. Day one of the workshop consisted mainly of lectures delivered by NCSC to prime the participants for brainstorming. Day two involved a review of current planning, processes, and procedures, as well as case study oriented breakout groups. In addition, a case study of the Dutton Street corridor, an area requiring urgent attention according to the community, was used as a conversation starter to assist in identifying overall challenges and opportunities for the Lowell Complete Streets program.

Below is feedback from the discussion groups regarding the existing Complete Streets framework in the City, as well as identified challenges in implementing Complete Streets and recommendations for improvement.

### 1. Key Takeaways

- a. The key decision makers for land use and transportation in Lowell are:
  - i. City Council
  - ii. Land Use Boards
  - iii. Historic Boards
  - iv. City Administrator
  - v. Department Heads – DPD, DPW, Engineering, Law
  - vi. National Park Service
  - vii. Residents
  - viii. School Committee
  - ix. Private Developers
  
- b. The current transportation and land use planning process:
  - i. Is undocumented and relies on “institutional memory”
  - ii. Defers to the Northern Middlesex Council of Government (NMCOG)’s:
    1. Unified Planning Work Program
    2. Regional Plan
    3. Transportation Improvement Plan
  - iii. Is tied to the City’s Capital Plan – “Practical Needs”
  - iv. Considers the Congestion Management Plan – 3 major corridors identified
  - v. Does not have a project selection criteria that is based on active transportation needs
  
- c. Transportation and land use performance measures are:
  - i. Largely undocumented
  - ii. Performance Based – Departments set their own goals regarding:
    1. Number of outstanding DPD online complaints

- 2. Miles of roadways, sidewalks repaired
- 3. Miles of streets swept
- 4. Number of planning board reviews
- 5. NMCOG:
  - a. Traffic counts
  - b. Pavement condition
  - c. Project specific goals
- iii. Customer Driven – make the City Council happy
- d. Design Guidance
  - i. MASSDOT Standards
  - ii. ROW Manual
  - iii. MASSDOT Functional Classification System
  - iv. Subdivision Code
  - v. Zoning Rules & Regulations

## 2. Challenges

- a. Lowell “Vision and Purpose” are subject to interpretation.
- b. There is no shared definition/understanding of Complete Streets (CS) in the Lowell community.
- c. The City relies mainly on “institutional memory” to plan and budget work. The current leadership team collaborates well, but citizens are concerned both about transparency, consistency and continuity in the event that a key staff person leaves.
- d. “Who do you go to for what?” The City has no roadmap for a project planning, programming, budgeting and execution. Residents, and sometimes even city staff, don’t know who is responsible for what.
- e. The current Complete Streets Policy lacks enforcement:
  - i. Planning Board has no formal Complete Streets elements in its Subdivision R&R
  - ii. Zoning Code has no Complete Streets elements or checklist
  - iii. Complete Streets policy doesn’t require various Board regulations to be updated.
  - iv. No performance metrics
  - v. No educational/outreach component
- f. Snow – The City doesn’t shovel sidewalks but does store road snow on sidewalks in some areas.
- g. Funding – Budgeted funds for basic items such as signage and pavement markings have been subject to rescission in many years.
- h. Transit – The local transit provider, National Park Service and UMass each have customized transit programs for specific needs; providing a more unified transit system is a challenge.

## Recommendations

1. Develop a Complete Streets best practices primer for Planning Board and Zoning officials.
2. Develop a Complete Streets design checklist for land development and City projects.
3. Update snow removal policies and practices on priority bike and pedestrian corridors.
4. Develop a comprehensive multi-modal transportation plan with these minimum elements:
  - a. Master parking plan that identifies the best mix of City lots and curbside spaces, with a goal to free up curbside parking space for other uses.
  - b. Transit master plan that better aligns the various systems in the City, that better aligns bus routes with ridership, and identifies opportunities to improve “first/last mile” access to transit. This may culminate in a Memorandum of Agreement between the City, NPS, UMass and LRTA.
  - c. Priority bike, pedestrian, delivery and snow removal corridors.
5. Dedicate funding for essential elements of the Complete Streets program.
6. Develop a simple planning, programming, budgeting and execution process flow chart for staff and residents to better understand how projects are conceived and delivered.
7. Develop Memoranda of Agreement with local citizen/business groups for:
  - a. Maintenance of landscaping and street furnishings.
  - b. Assistance with data collection.
  - c. Complete Streets information and education network.

## Next Steps

Based on the discussions at the workshop, the project team recommends that Lowell should do the following over a one-year time period:

1. Document the current transportation planning process to identify opportunities and barriers to Complete Streets implementation.
2. Develop a Complete Streets implementation plan.
3. Develop a Complete Streets best practices primer for Planning Board and Zoning officials.
4. Develop a Complete Streets design checklist for land development and City projects.
5. Hold communities meetings to educate residents on the benefits of Complete Streets.
6. Brief the City Council and Transportation Committee on Complete Streets.

## Appendix A: Complete Streets Resources

### General implementation

- Complete Streets Implementation Resource Hub, includes examples of plans, policies, and programs that support changing process and procedures, offering training and educational opportunities, reviewing and updating design guidance, and measuring performance.  
[www.smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets/implementation](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets/implementation)
- Taking Action on Complete Streets: A Toolkit for Implementation, a 2013 report from the National Complete Streets Coalition:  
<http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets/implementation>
- Complete Streets in the Southeast—A Toolkit, from the National Complete Streets Coalition and AARP, features best practices in policy development and implementation from the Southeast United States. It also includes customizable outreach tools, such as letters to the editor and op-eds.  
[www.smartgrowthamerica.org/documents/complete-streets-southeast-toolkit.pdf](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/documents/complete-streets-southeast-toolkit.pdf)
- Completing Our Streets: The Transition to Safe and Inclusive Transportation Networks.
- [www.completingourstreets.com](http://www.completingourstreets.com). Barbara McCann's book on the Complete Streets implementation process told through the stories of practitioners.

### Costs

- Complete Streets Guide to Tackling the Costs Question. Guide with companion PowerPoint file. [www.smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets/implementation/cost-concerns](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets/implementation/cost-concerns)
- Shapard, J. and Cole, M. (2013). "Do complete streets cost more than incomplete streets?" Proceedings, Transportation Research Board Annual Meeting, 2013. Paper 13-4283. <http://amonline.trb.org/2ve3qr/1>

### Funding priority systems and programs

- Project Solicitation & Evaluation: Scoring criteria. Mid-America Regional Council (Kansas City, MO region).  
[www.smartgrowthamerica.org/documents/cs/impl/mo-marc-evaluation.pdf](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/documents/cs/impl/mo-marc-evaluation.pdf)
- New Jersey Complete Streets program, with links to Local Assistance program:
- [www.state.nj.us/transportation/eng/completestreets/implementation.shtm](http://www.state.nj.us/transportation/eng/completestreets/implementation.shtm)
- Atlanta Regional Commission Livable Centers Initiative. See case study in The Innovative DOT. [www.smartgrowthamerica.org/the-innovative-dot](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/the-innovative-dot)

### Street design and typology examples

- Urban Street Design Guidelines. Charlotte, NC.  
<http://charmeck.org/city/charlotte/transportation/plansprojects/pages/urban%20street%20design%20guidelines.aspx>

- Implementing Complete Streets: Major and Collector Street Plan. Nashville, TN.
- [www.smartgrowthamerica.org/documents/cs/impl/tn-nashville-streetplan.pdf](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/documents/cs/impl/tn-nashville-streetplan.pdf)
- Right-of-Way Improvements Manual. Seattle, WA.
- [www.seattle.gov/transportation/rowmanual/manual/](http://www.seattle.gov/transportation/rowmanual/manual/)

### Road diets

- Federal Highway Administration. (2010). "Evaluation of Lane Reduction 'Road Diet' Measures on Crashes" [Summary report]. Publication Number FHWA-HRT-10-053.  
[www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/research/safety/10053/10053.pdf](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/research/safety/10053/10053.pdf)
- Federal Highway Administration. (n.d.). "Proven Safety Countermeasures: 'Road Diet.'" Publication Number FHWA-SA-12-013.  
[http://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/provencountermeasures/fhwa\\_sa\\_12\\_013.htm](http://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/provencountermeasures/fhwa_sa_12_013.htm)
- Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center. (2013). "Road Diet Conversions: A Synthesis of Safety Research." Reported prepared for the Federal Highway Administration DTFH61-11-H-00024. <http://bit.ly/14KJfJq>

### Policy development

- Complete Streets Local Policy Workbook. Provides a step-by-step guide to the 10 elements of an effective complete streets policy.  
<http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/guides/complete-streets-local-policy-workbook>
- Complete Streets Policy Analysis Report (issued annually) ranks every written policy in the United States.  
<http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/documents/cs/cs-policyanalysis.pdf>
- The Coalition also provides downloadable PowerPoints that explain Complete Streets as a concept, policy adoption and policy implementation, as well as fact sheets on the benefits of Complete Streets.  
[www.smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets/a-to-z](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets/a-to-z)