



Smart Growth America
Making Neighborhoods Great Together



**National Complete
Streets Coalition**

BENEFITS OF COMPLETE STREETS

Complete Streets Work in Rural Communities

By planning, designing, and constructing Complete Streets, communities of all sizes - whether rural hamlets, small towns, or booming metropolises - are able to provide the quality access to jobs, health care, shops, and schools their residents deserve, while also achieving greater economic, environmental, and public health benefits. A Complete Streets approach can provide a more effective and balanced transportation system for the nearly 49 million Americans who live in rural areas and small towns.



Photos: Dan Burden, Walkable and Livable Communities Institute

Dangerous, incomplete roads

Residents of small towns are more likely to be hurt or killed on the transportation system than those in urban areas. In 2006, 23 percent of the U.S. population lived in rural areas, yet 56 percent of all traffic fatalities occurred in rural areas.¹ Higher driving speeds on rural roads and arterials are more likely to cause fatalities: 68 percent of fatal crashes on rural roads occurred when the posted speed limit was 55 mph or higher.²

Rural communities and small towns tend to have higher concentrations of older adults and low-income citizens,³ two populations that are less likely to own cars or drive. Without safer roads, those with limited transportation options have little choice: travel along high-speed roadways with few pedestrian accommodations or stay home. In limiting mobility to automobiles alone, these citizens risk isolation from community and the economy.

Improve access

Access to jobs, groceries, healthcare, education, and other destinations is just as vital in rural communities as in suburban or urban areas. More than 1.6 million rural households do not have access to a car.⁴ Public transportation, social service van pools, carpooling, and ridesharing services to reach healthcare, employment, and other resources can be a lifeline in rural areas, especially for older adults, people with disabilities, and low-income households.⁵ 60 percent of rural areas have public transportation service, and demand for more options is growing: rural and small urban public transportation systems experienced a 20 percent rise in ridership from 2002 to 2005.⁶ And, just as in urban areas, public transportation trips usually begin and end as walking trips.

Creating safe walking, bicycling, and public transportation options for rural residents builds a more livable, accessible community for people of all ages, abilities, and income levels.

Healthy choices for children

Children need safe roads to reach school and activities. Children who live in rural areas are at greater risk for obesity and related disease than children from other areas: children in rural areas are more likely to be overweight or obese than those in urban areas.⁷ Providing safe opportunities for walking and biking to and from school is a key strategy to keep kids active and healthy.⁸ Roads that are accommodating of children and other vulnerable users will be safer for everyone.

Sensitive to rural contexts

Complete Streets will look different in rural communities than they do in more urban counterparts. For example, roads surrounded by agricultural use may be “complete” by simply providing wide shoulders to allow safe bicycling and walking and providing connections to regional trail and public transportation networks. Low-speed roads with on-street parking, well-marked crossings, and sidewalks with accessible curb cuts lining one side of the street may best meet the needs of a residential street.



Trinity Highway runs through Willow Creek, a community of approximately 2,000 nestled in northern California's Six Rivers National Forest. *Photo: Dan Burden, Walkable and Livable Communities Institute*

Powering Main Street

Complete Streets are important in helping town centers and Main Streets thrive, too, by improving street connectivity and allowing everyone, whether on foot, bike, or public transportation, to reach community focal points. Many smaller communities do not control their Main Streets; often, the state Department of Transportation does. Construction or widening of Main Streets that function as state highways takes its toll on pedestrian safety⁹ and can have a negative impact on small-town economies. In these cases, Complete Streets policies at the local level help communicate the community's vision, and policies at the state level ensure safe, accessible, and attractive streets. Creating Complete Streets can facilitate reinvestment and economic development in the heart of a small town.

Rural communities want Complete Streets

The need for Complete Streets in rural areas and small towns is clear because so many of them have adopted policies. Ulster County, in the far reaches of the New York City metropolitan area, is home to a large state forest preserve as well as communities of varying sizes, like Kingston (pop. 23,000) and Woodstock (pop. 6,200). Its 2009 resolution will create Complete Streets in each of these different contexts. An ordinance in Sedro-Woolley, Washington ensures bicycling and walking are safe, convenient options for its 10,000 residents. De Soto, Missouri's 7,000 residents will benefit from a 2008 ordinance requiring a Complete Streets approach. And the city of Manistique in Michigan's Upper Peninsula recognizes how Complete Streets "support economic growth and community stability by providing accessible and efficient connections between home, school, work, recreation and retail destinations" for its 3,500 residents.

Learn more at www.smartgrowthamerica.org/completestreets.

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- 2 Ibid; Federal Highway Administration. (2004). *Pedestrian Safety on Rural Highways*. Retrieved from: <http://www.walkinginfo.org/library/details.cfm?id=2104>
- 3 Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service: using data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2010 Current Population Survey, March Supplement. (2010). *Rural Poverty and Wellbeing*. Retrieved from: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/IncomePovertyWelfare/PovertyDemographics.htm>
- 4 U.S. Census Bureau. (2000). *U.S. Population Projections for Selected Age Groups: 2005-2030*.
- 5 AARP Public Policy Institute. (2009). *Planning Complete Streets for an Aging America*. Retrieved from: <http://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/ppi/liv-com/2009-12-streets.pdf>
- 6 American Public Transportation Association. *Facts on Public Transportation*. <http://www.apta.com/media/facts.cfm>
- 7 South Carolina Rural Research Center. (2007). *Overweight and Physical Inactivity among Rural Children Aged 10-17: A National and State Portrait*.
8. Maine Rural Health Research Center. (2008). *Active Living for Rural Youth*. Retrieved from: <http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/ihp/ruralhealth>
- 9 National Cooperative Highway Research Program (2007). *Best Practices to Enhance the Transportation-Land Use Connection in the Rural United States*. Twaddell, H., & Emerine, D. Retrieved from: http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/nchrp/nchrp_rpt_582a.pdf