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Guest commentary: How complete are your streets?

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Does your home town have *roads* or *streets*? While this may seem like semantics, the answer goes a long way toward defining the identity of your community. More to the point, are you able to use the streets within your town comfortably and efficiently regardless of whether you are in car, on a bus, taking a walk, or riding your bike?

“Complete Streets” is a movement that designs and operates roadway corridors promoting safe access for all users, regardless of age and ability. Roadways therefore should accommodate vehicles, transit, bicyclists and pedestrians of all physical abilities. Complete streets speak to safety, while also addressing economic development and quality of life. The design of our roadway corridors impacts more than traffic flow, but the very vitality of our communities. Roadways are a significant portion of a community’s public space and therefore say a great deal about what that community holds dear.

We’re just starting to scratch the surface of this planning philosophy. By August of this year, the Michigan Department of Transportation must adopt a complete streets policy for roadways as part of a 2010 law designed to promote safer access to our roadways. The Complete Streets Advisory Council has drafted a policy statement for Michigan, which will be discussed at a public meeting in Lansing on Thursday. It goes a long way toward fulfilling the legislation by providing a consistent statewide plan that defines complete streets and says that such roads improve safety and the quality of life in Michigan. It calls for a process to plan, fund, design, construct, maintain and operate complete streets that respect context and community values. That’s a big step and the council should be applauded for defining the value and potential of complete streets. I scarcely believe such a document could have been produced even five years ago.



A bike lane on Lafayette at Eighth St. in Detroit in March, 2012. / SUSAN TUSA\Detroit Free Press

Unfortunately the draft policy, much like the 2010 legislation itself, is only a starting point. And shows that we continue to approach the entire concept of complete streets as if it were an add-on feature to whatever project is in the works. The policy calls for an analysis that has too many ways to opt out of complete streets, as context and cost can be interpreted multiple ways depending on who is overseeing the process. It also allows MDOT to consider that parts of the road network outside of its jurisdiction might provide a more viable alternative and safer access for non-motorized users. On the surface this sounds reasonable. But there should be levels of design for every road, interstates notwithstanding, that increases safety for legal users. Ultimately, it misses the bigger opportunity for every road project to start and end with the question, “how can this road become more complete?”

Complete streets are not simply a toolbox of amenities or a checklist to be followed, but rather a philosophical statement about what a community believes in. It is a concrete (and sometimes asphalt) reflection of a community’s values in much more real terms than any mission statement about walk-ability or context sensitivity.

Roadway corridors should therefore be designed holistically. Simply providing sidewalks and curb ramps (even if designed properly) are not enough. Are the sidewalks appropriately sized for adjacent land uses, such as commercial activity or outdoor dining? Is the pedestrian experience pleasing? Have you accommodated cyclists? This is not to say that vehicles should be forgotten. Due to the multi-modal nature of Michigan’s future roadways, we must be more concerned about vehicles. The very size and shape of our roadways must be designed in a manner that promotes a safer and slower usage by drivers.

We should take advantage of any opportunity, including this draft policy, to make it clearer that the demands of cars and trucks, and the demands of pedestrians and cyclists, are not exclusive of one another. Overall, it is encouraging to see a state policy take the first steps toward shifting the emphasis of road design to people instead of steel. Now we need local and county governments as well as residents to get behind this movement. A complete streets policy on paper is a good start. But people need to understand how and why it will improve safety and the quality of life, and accept that it will mean a new way of viewing the state’s roadways.

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