

## Planning Complete Streets for an Aging America

**America needs streets designed to be safe and convenient for travel by automobile, foot, bicycle and transit regardless of age or ability. As the nation ages, Complete Streets planning presents an opportunity to increase the safety and availability of older adults' travel options.**

More than 80 states and localities have adopted Complete Streets policies. But, less than one-third of these explicitly address the needs of older road users. Road design consistent with a Complete Streets approach can help planners and engineers balance the sometimes conflicting needs of older drivers and pedestrians.

### Safety on America's Streets is a Major Concern for Older Adults

In a poll conducted for this study, 40 percent of adults age 50 and older reported inadequate sidewalks in their neighborhoods. More sobering, nearly 50 percent reported they cannot cross main roads close to their home safely. Half of those who reported such problems said they would walk, bicycle, or take the bus more if these problems were fixed.<sup>1</sup>

These concerns are borne out by statistics showing older adults are more likely to be victims in both motor vehicle and pedestrian fatalities.

### Roads Built Today Need to Serve Tomorrow's Needs

By 2025, one in four U.S. drivers will be age 65 and older. Surveys show today's generation of older Americans drive farther and more often, but the aging process makes driving safely more difficult for some. At the same time, increasing frailty puts older road users at greater risk of serious injury and death. Proper road design can make roads

safer for users of all ages. Because of the time it takes to plan, design, fund, and build capital projects, communities need to begin retrofitting their infrastructure now to be ready for the age wave.

### Do planners and engineers consider the needs of older road users?

Since the conclusion of World War II, transportation planning has emphasized vehicular mobility, often without attention to the needs of those traveling by foot, bicycle, or public transportation, or those experiencing reduced function due to age.

An online survey conducted for this study of more than 1,000 transportation planners and engineers revealed that nearly two-thirds have not yet begun considering the needs of older users in their multi-modal planning.

### Complete Streets Help to "Right the Balance"

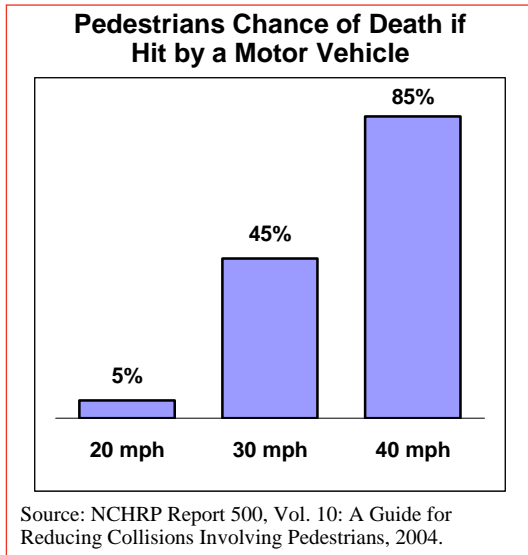
Complete Streets initiatives encourage local, regional, and state planning agencies to change policies and procedures so that non-auto forms of travel become a routine part of project development. Complete Streets can also address the needs of older drivers and pedestrians. Three basic planning and design principles can simplify the road environment and increase its safety for all users:

#### Slow Down

*Reduce vehicle travel speeds in areas where vehicles and pedestrians interact and where older drivers and pedestrians need more time to make decisions and execute changes.*

Speed matters. This is especially true at intersections where vehicles and pedestrians

<sup>1</sup> Laura Skufca. *Is the Cost of Gas Leading Americans to Use Alternative Transportation?* AARP Knowledge Management, August 2008.



interact and where older drivers need more time to react to traffic and execute turns. Half of all older driver deaths occur at intersections.<sup>2</sup> Roads can be engineered for slower speeds through changes to curb radii, lane widths, or replacement of typical intersections with roundabouts.

### Make It Easy

*Make the physical layout of transportation systems easy to navigate for older drivers and pedestrians who have lost some of their dexterity.*

Intersections can be improved by providing travelers with a connected network of streets with lower-speed routes that are easier to maneuver. This type of network spreads traffic across many streets rather than channeling it on to just a few arteries. Protected left turn lanes with green arrows can cut left turn crashes in half.<sup>3</sup> They should be used where pedestrians are present and in areas of high traffic volume.

### Enjoy The View

*Make it easy for older drivers and pedestrians to notice, read, understand, and respond to visual cues and information.*

Design improvements can make roads easier to navigate, including: reduction in sign

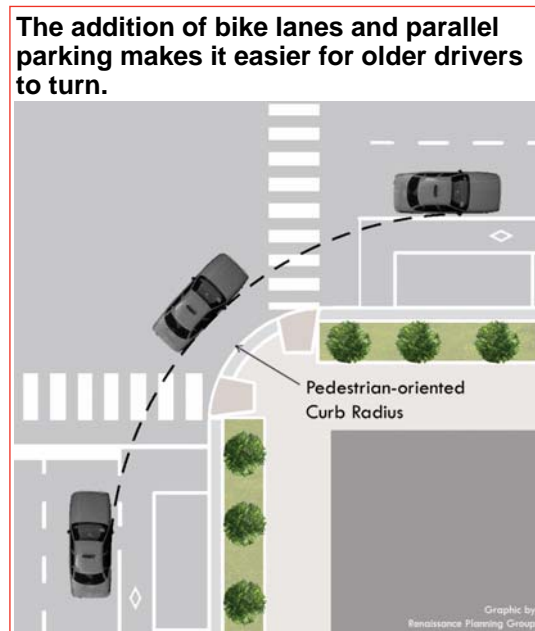
<sup>2</sup> TRIP, 2003

<sup>3</sup> USDOT FHWA and ITE, *Toolbox of Countermeasures and Their Potential Effectiveness to Make Intersections Safer*, April 2004.

clutter; better placement of driveways and medians; use of larger sign fonts; reflective signs and pavement markings; and improvements to landscaping and lighting.

### Balance Competing Needs

Application of these design principles often requires that engineers balance the competing needs of different road users. While older drivers benefit from a rounded curb, it increases turning speeds and pedestrian crossing distance. One way to address this is to provide bike lanes and parallel parking. This increases the effective turning radius without reducing the safety and comfort of pedestrians. The figure below provides an example of how road designers can balance the needs of older drivers and pedestrians using a Complete Streets approach.



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