



Minnesota's Statewide Complete Streets Law

The Complete Streets Law Directs Mn/DOT to Work with Stakeholders to Update Policies and Practices to Align with Complete Streets Thinking

Across the United States, states and local communities are pursuing Complete Streets laws and policies to ensure that the state and local transportation systems accommodate the needs of all transportation users. Minnesota adopted a statewide Complete Streets law in 2010. As of fall 2013, 27 states had adopted Complete Streets laws and/or policies or made a written commitment to do so.¹ Complete Streets initiatives provide a framework for bringing attention to the needs of pedestrians and bicyclists by promoting active transportation and improving public health by increasing physical activity.

Q: What is Complete Streets?

A: "Complete Streets" is a term used to describe transportation planning and design policies and processes that emphasize safety and accessibility for all users. A Complete Streets law or policy ensures that the needs and safety of pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and transit riders of all ages and abilities are taken into account in the design and operation of roads.²

Q: What happened to prompt Minnesota's Complete Streets law?

A: In the past few decades Minnesota's transportation system has largely focused on motorized vehicle efficiency to move as many cars



and other motorized vehicles as quickly as possible. The needs of pedestrians, bicyclists, and other non-motorized transportation users have often been a secondary concern even though they are entitled to use all parts of Minnesota's transportation system, except where specifically prohibited.³ Nonetheless, the uses and needs of Minnesota's transportation system have evolved as approximately 40% of Minnesotans do not drive; Minnesota has an aging population; more individuals have moved into urban areas; and an increased number of Minnesotans are overweight or obese.⁴

Minnesota's Complete Streets law was developed largely in response to the need to identify and address the needs of pedestrians, bicyclists, and non-motorized transportation – in addition to a growing awareness of the public health benefits of active transportation and concerns regarding environmental impacts from air pollution due in part to motor vehicle use. In 2008, the Minnesota legislature directed Mn/DOT and the Metropolitan Council to study the benefits, feasibility, and costs of adopting a statewide Complete Streets policy.⁵ Mn/DOT

Roads Subject to State Aid Design Standards

Trunk Highway System: all roads constructed, improved, and maintained as public highways by the state (MnDOT) – including Minnesota trunk highways, state highways, and interstates. The trunk highway system may not exceed 12,200 miles in length, except the Minnesota legislature may add trunk highways in excess of 12,200 miles to take advantage of federal aid.⁶

County State Aid Highways: all roads constructed, improved, and maintained as public highways by counties – including county roads funded with state aid and streets in municipalities with less than 5,000 in population where necessary to provide an integrated and coordinated highway system, which may include similar streets in larger municipalities.⁷

Municipal State Aid Streets: all streets within cities having a population of 5,000 or more that are funded with state aid.⁸



submitted the results of this study in 2009. This study emphasizes the benefits of Complete Streets, including increased health, safety, and accessibility among pedestrians; increased environmental quality; and decreased road congestion. These events and trends influenced the passage of Minnesota's Complete Streets law in 2010, which supports consideration and incorporation of non-motorized transportation, in addition to other modes of transportation, in all transportation projects.⁹

Q: What does Minnesota's Complete Streets law accomplish?

A: Minnesota's Complete Streets law directs Mn/DOT to work with stakeholders to update Mn/DOT policies and practices to align with Complete Streets thinking. The law mandates that Mn/DOT report back to the Legislature on those changes in a series of three reports in 2011, 2012, and 2014. The law also requires Mn/DOT to provide more flexibility in implementing Complete Streets principles for local

Local Transportation Project Variance Process

Minnesota law requires local governments to use specific design standards when constructing county state aid highways and municipal state aid streets.¹⁰ However, Minnesota's Complete Streets law allows local governments to request a variance from these design standards from Mn/DOT when implementing a Complete Streets project.¹¹

Minnesota Complete Streets Project Variance Process is on the [Public Health Law Center website](#).

cities and counties that are building roads subject to state aid design standards.¹² The law encourages, but does not require, local governments to adopt their own Complete Streets policies that address local needs and characteristics.¹³

Q: What does the law say?

A: Minnesota's Complete Streets law:

- Defines Complete Streets as:

“...the planning, scoping, design, implementation, operation, and maintenance of roads in order to reasonably address the safety and accessibility needs of users of all ages and abilities. Complete streets considers the needs of motorists, pedestrians, transit users and vehicles, bicyclists, and commercial and emergency vehicles moving along and across roads, intersections, and crossings in a manner that is sensitive to the local context and recognizes that the needs vary in urban, suburban, and rural settings.”¹⁴
- Requires Mn/DOT to implement a statewide Complete Streets policy that will affect virtually all phases of road activity on trunk highways — from planning to maintenance — and on county state-aid highways and municipal state-aid streets when a variance is requested.¹⁵ Before Mn/DOT implements the policy, it must consult with stakeholders, regional agencies, and local governments about ways to integrate Complete Streets principles into design solutions. After this consultation, Mn/DOT must:
 - Address procedures, guidance, standards, requirements, and training used to implement the Complete Streets policy that are relevant to these consultation discussions; and
 - Integrate principles of “context-sensitive solutions” (design solutions that allow for flexibility depending on the needs of the

community where a transportation project is planned, discussed below).¹⁶

- Encourages, but does not require, local governments to adopt Complete Streets policies. The law also allows local governments to adopt Complete Streets policies that include more plans, programs, and projects than are in the state policy.¹⁷
- Ensures that any local government seeking to implement a Complete Streets project may request a variance for that project. The law also requires Mn/DOT to evaluate all variance requests regarding Complete Streets principles using specific Complete Streets guidance publications.¹⁸ When evaluating a variance request, Mn/DOT and its variance committee must consider the latest edition of *A Policy on Geometric Design of Highways and Streets*, published by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO). When evaluating a variance request for an urban area project, Mn/DOT and its variance committee must consider the latest edition of *Context Sensitive Solutions in Designing Major Urban Thoroughfares for Walkable Communities*, published by the Institute of Transportation Engineers. If Mn/DOT denies a variance, it is required to provide a written explanation of why the variance was denied.¹⁹
- Requires Mn/DOT to report to the legislature on its implementation of the Complete Streets policy in January of 2011, 2012, and 2014. These reports must include identification of legal obstacles and changes to the variance process (2011), development of ways to track performance (2012), and recommendations for carrying out the policy (2012, 2014).²⁰

Q: How does Mn/DOT use “context-sensitive solutions” to implement the Complete Streets law?

A: Integrating context-sensitive solutions (CSS) into the Complete Streets law requires Mn/DOT to consider the unique needs of a specific community when deciding whether or not to approve that community’s variance request from the state standards for a local transportation project.²¹

Context-Sensitive Solutions (CSS)

Designing Walkable Urban Thoroughfares: A Context Sensitive Approach defines CSS as a collaborative, interdisciplinary process that involves all stakeholders to design a transportation facility that fits its applicable setting and preserves scenic, aesthetic, historic, and environmental resources while maintaining safety and mobility. CSS respects design objectives for safety, efficiency, capacity, and maintenance while integrating community objectives and values relating to compatibility, livability, sense of place, urban design, cost, and environmental impacts.²²

Although the publication uses this definition, it also notes that there are many definitions of CSS, including definitions from various state departments of transportation.²³

A few examples of context-sensitive design principles that Mn/DOT could consider when evaluating a local transportation project include whether the project:

- Satisfies the purpose and needs identified by a full range of stakeholders;

- Exceeds the expectations of both designers and stakeholders and achieves a level of excellence in people's minds; or
- Involves efficient and effective use of the resources (time, budget, community) of all involved parties.²⁴

Q: How common are local Complete Streets laws and policies in Minnesota?

A: As of September 2013, 43 Minnesota towns, counties, and regional planning organizations had adopted a wide range of Complete Streets resolutions and policies.²⁵

Q: What does a good local Complete Streets policy include?

A: Local Complete Streets resolutions and policies differ depending on the characteristics of the local community. However, the National Complete Streets Coalition and Smart Growth America identified the following key components that top Complete Streets policies included:²⁶

- Vision and intent;
- All users and modes;
- All projects and phases;
- Clear, accountable exceptions;
- Network and Jurisdiction;
- Design;
- Context sensitivity;
- Performance measures; and
- Implementation next steps.

National Complete Streets Leaders

The National Complete Streets Coalition and Smart Growth America teamed up to examine and score every Complete Streets policy passed in 2012 to provide information to communities on how to develop their own Complete Streets policies. These groups are dedicated to researching and advocating for community development that designs and constructs streets with all transportation users in mind, similar to the goals of Minnesota's Complete Streets law.²⁷

Q: Have any Minnesota communities been recognized for their local Complete Streets policy?

A: The Minnesota community of Northfield was included in the list of "The Best Complete Streets Policies of 2012." The National Complete Streets Coalition and Smart Growth America named Northfield's policy the fifth best in the nation in crafting comprehensive policy language to serve as a model for communities across the country.²⁸ An example of strong policy language from Northfield's and other communities' policies can be found in the report located on Smart Growth America's website at smartgrowthamerica.org.

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Endnotes

- ¹ *Policy Atlas*, NAT'L COMPLETE ST. COAL., <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets/changingpolicy/complete-streets-atlas> (last visited Sept. 5, 2013).
- ² See MINN. STAT. § 174.75.
- ³ MINN. STAT. § 169.222. See also Minn. R. 8810.0050 (prohibiting pedestrians, bicycle, and non-motorized vehicles on any entrance and exit ramps to national interstate or defense highways in Minnesota).
- ⁴ MINN. DEP'T OF TRANSP., MINN. LOC. ROAD RES. BOARD, RES. SERVICES SEC., *Complete Streets Implementation: Resource Guide for Minnesota Local Agencies* (Feb. 2013), available at <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/research/TS/2013/2013RIC02.pdf>.
- ⁵ 2008 MINN. SESS. LAWS SERV. CH. 350, art. 1, sec. 94 (H.F. 3800).
- ⁶ MINN. STAT. § 160.02, subd. 29. See also MINN. CONST. art. 14, § 2.
- ⁷ MINN. STAT. § 160.02, subd. 18. See also MINN. CONST. art. 14, § 3.
- ⁸ MINN. STAT. § 160.02, subd. 21. See also MINN. CONST. art. 14, § 4.
- ⁹ See MINN. STAT. § 174.75.
- ¹⁰ See MINN. STAT. §§ 162.02, subd. 1, 4, 162.09, subd. 1(c), 6.
- ¹¹ MINN. STAT. §§ 162.02, subd. 3a, 162.09, subd. 3a.
- ¹² MINN. STAT. §§ 162.02, subd. 3a, 162.09, subd. 3a, 174.75, subd. 5.
- ¹³ MINN. STAT. § 174.75, subd. 4.
- ¹⁴ MINN. STAT. § 174.75, subd. 1.
- ¹⁵ See MINN. STAT. §§ 174.75, subd. 5, 162.02, subd. 3a, 162.09, subd. 3a.
- ¹⁶ MINN. STAT. § 174.75, subd. 2.
- ¹⁷ MINN. STAT. § 174.75, subd. 4.
- ¹⁸ MINN. STAT. §§ 174.75, subd. 5, 162.02, subd. 3a(a), 162.09, subd. 3a(a).
- ¹⁹ MINN. STAT. § 174.75, subd. 5(a), (b).
- ²⁰ MINN. STAT. § 174.75, subd. 3.
- ²¹ See MINN. STAT. § 174.75, subd. 5.
- ²² *Designing Walkable Urban Thoroughfares: A Context Sensitive Approach*, INST. OF TRANSP. ENG'RS (2010), at 206, available at <http://www.naturewithin.info/Roadside/ITE%20Walkable%20Urban%20Streets.pdf>.
- ²³ *Designing Walkable Urban Thoroughfares: A Context Sensitive Approach*, INST. OF TRANSP. ENG'RS (2010), at 211, available at <http://www.naturewithin.info/Roadside/ITE%20Walkable%20Urban%20Streets.pdf>.
- ²⁴ *Principles of Context Sensitive Design*, FED. HIGHWAY ADMIN., <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/context/qualities.cfm> (last visited Sept. 6, 2013).
- ²⁵ *Examples of Complete Streets policies, plans, or resolutions*, MINN. DEP'T OF TRANSP., <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/planning/completestreets/examples.html> (last visited Sept. 6, 2013).
- ²⁶ *The Best Complete Streets Policies of 2012*, NAT'L COMPLETE ST. COAL. & SMART GROWTH AM. (Apr. 2013), at ii, available at <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/documents/cs-2012-policy-analysis.pdf>.
- ²⁷ *The Best Complete Streets Policies of 2012*, NAT'L COMPLETE ST. COAL. & SMART GROWTH AM. (Apr. 2013), at 2, available at <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/documents/cs-2012-policy-analysis.pdf>.
- ²⁸ *The Best Complete Streets Policies of 2012*, NAT'L COMPLETE ST. COAL. & SMART GROWTH AM. (Apr. 2013) available at <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/documents/cs-2012-policy-analysis.pdf>.