

# Best Complete Streets Policies 2023



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**National Complete Streets Coalition**

# Acknowledgments

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**The National Complete Streets Coalition**, a program of Smart Growth America, is a non-profit, non-partisan alliance of public interest organizations and transportation professionals committed to the development and implementation of Complete Streets policies and practices. A nationwide movement launched by the Coalition in 2004, Complete Streets is the integration of people and place in the planning, design, construction, operation, and maintenance of transportation networks.

## Project Team

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# The state of Complete Streets policies, and the need for more progress

Since the beginning of the Complete Streets movement in the early 2000s, more than 1,700 Complete Streets policies have been adopted in jurisdictions of all sizes and contexts across the United States. Adopting Complete Streets policies is a crucial first step to reducing traffic violence, improving health equity, responding to the climate crisis, and rectifying a long history of inequitable transportation practices. The Best Complete Streets Policies 2023 report spotlights the communities that have taken that first step and outlines how they made it happen.

In the four years since the last edition of the Best Complete Streets Policies report, an additional 157 places—from towns and villages to metropolitan planning organizations and state departments of transportation—have passed new Complete Streets policies. This means that in the last couple decades, 1,740 Complete Streets policies have been adopted in the United States through 2022.

In the same four years, the National Complete Streets Coalition equipped communities to make Complete Streets a reality. The Coalition:

- Trained 49 local elected officials through the [Champions Institute](#) to effectively advocate for and support safer and more complete streets in their communities.
- Released [a first of its kind tool](#) to help jurisdictions better model and evaluate the potential benefits of Complete Streets projects.
- Helped places get safety demonstration projects on the ground across the country, from [Washington](#) to [Alabama](#).

In 2018, the Coalition [completely overhauled our framework](#) and raised the bar on what makes a strong Complete Streets policy—requiring more binding language, accountability, and focus on prioritizing underinvested and underserved communities. As expected, in 2019, scores went down when policies were evaluated against the more stringent framework reflecting these higher standards. The good news is that after five years with the new policy scoring framework in place, communities are rising to the challenge: the average score for policies included in this report was 45 out of 100, up five points from the average score of those included in the last report. The Coalition is encouraged to see this overall response but also realizes that the average score is still not high enough to have a significant impact on how a community plans, designs, and builds its streets.

**A Complete Streets policy** specifies how a community will plan, design, and maintain streets so they are safe for all users of all ages and abilities. It spells out a community's commitment to using a Complete Streets approach routinely and consistently in decision-making, identifies which specific populations in the community should be the priority for improving street safety and access, and articulates clear, accountable steps to change how decisions get made and track progress. A strong policy begins transforming a community's practices, processes, and plans.

While there is room for improvement in many of the policies, the strongest scoring policies made notable gains. The average score for the top 10 Complete Streets policies featured in this report is 89.2, compared to 71.5 for the top 10 featured in our 2018 report. The Coalition attributes this jump to the hard work of advocates, policymakers, and practitioners pushing for change and leaning on resources like our [Complete Streets Policy Framework](#) and [Best Complete Streets Policies reports](#) to develop policies with strong, implementable, and equitable language.

Having a robust Complete Streets policy is more important than it's ever been as our streets and roads continue to grow historically dangerous. According to the National Highway and Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), 2021 [was the deadliest year](#) on American roadways since 2005, with just under 43,000 deaths. [Dangerous by Design 2022](#) found that this situation is especially dire for those outside of vehicles, as drivers struck and killed over 26,000 people—disproportionately people of color and people in low-income communities—walking between 2018 and 2021. This trend was exacerbated by the pandemic, when emptier roads emboldened more drivers to drive at higher speeds. But even more worryingly, as travel volumes returned to pre-pandemic levels, fatalities on our roadways have continued to increase.

Using estimates from the Governors Highway Safety Association for 2021, [Dangerous by Design 2022](#) estimated an astonishing 4.7 percent increase in these deaths from 2020 to 2021, one of the biggest one-time jumps in recent history and the highest overall level in more than three decades. Although the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has [tried to claim an illusory victory](#) that traffic deaths overall have merely “leveled off” at these historic heights, it admits this narrative rings hollow for those outside of cars: cyclist and pedestrian deaths increased by eight and two percent, respectively, in the first nine months of 2022 compared to the previous year.

The cost of doing nothing to address this epidemic of pedestrian fatalities is exorbitant. These numbers represent real people—each one is someone's loved one. Each one is a community member. Each crash is a traumatic event for its community. Every day that passes without action is unacceptable.

Local jurisdictions need their states and Congress to partner with them to change this situation. Even the strongest local Complete Streets policies will have little impact on the state-owned or controlled roads that are still designed for speed over safety. Nearly two-thirds of all traffic fatalities in urban areas [occur on state-owned arterial roads](#). States control these roads, which also receive the lion's share of non-interstate federal transportation money. In addition, federal design standards (which set a baseline for state-level standards) continue to prioritize vehicle throughput and

**Complete Streets can't happen without prioritizing underinvested and underserved communities.**

All people should have options for getting around that are safe, convenient, reliable, affordable, accessible, and timely regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, income, gender identity, immigration status, age, ability, languages spoken, or level of access to a personal vehicle. The U.S.'s history of systemic discrimination, oppression, and exclusion, especially based on race, income, and ability, is part of the transportation context and cannot be ignored. A strong and effective Complete Streets policy requires focusing attention on the communities and places that have not been appropriately or adequately invested in. [Read more about prioritizing underinvested and underserved communities in our Complete Streets Policy Framework.](#)

speed above safety of other modes, leading to fruitless, expensive attempts to “eliminate congestion” by making roads ever wider, straighter, and faster—and more deadly.

The Complete Streets movement has successfully moved the needle at the federal level in the last few years, winning several notable new programs and provisions in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), including the \$1 billion per year [Safe Streets and Roads for All Program](#). The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) also issued [a report](#) to Congress outlining the agency’s commitment to using Complete Streets as its default approach to funding and designing roadways; following up on the report with [new guidance](#), [technical assistance](#), and [research funding](#).

Despite these efforts, the fundamental issues remain: USDOT’s control over federal spending is limited and Congress has maintained the approach of providing enormous flexible block grants to states with almost no requirements to prioritize safe travel for everyone. Put another way, there is a lot of progress being made at the federal level, but \$1 billion a year for Safe Streets for All will continue to be dwarfed by the \$50 billion-plus that transportation agencies have at their disposal for the status quo.

USDOT’s suite of plans, guidance, and suggested actions are indeed encouraging. But just as the Coalition took a hard look five years ago at local and state Complete Streets policies that were failing to move the needle because they were never put into practice, we will evaluate USDOT in a similar fashion: Do these ambitious plans get turned into concrete action? We urgently need a paradigm shift in transportation funding, planning, and design—of which a strong Complete Streets policy can be a catalyst.

With federal policy largely set for another 3-4 years, local and regional efforts need to be met with leadership from their state departments of transportation. Some states are taking this role seriously. For example, [Massachusetts](#), through its Complete Streets Funding program, incentivizes jurisdictions to adopt and implement Complete Streets policies—one reason why more than 60 of the 157 scored policies this year came from that state. [Washington](#), through legislation passed in 2022, requires Complete Streets consideration for all projects over \$500,000 within urbanized areas, altering fundamental DOT practices. Unfortunately, these states are the exceptions to the rule, and while their accomplishments are significant, they have decades of transportation decision-making to dig themselves out of. They only stand out due to the deadly deficiencies of their counterparts. Other states urgently need to follow their lead. Every single one of the most deadly 20 states in the country [grew more deadly](#) when comparing the five-year periods of 2011-15 to 2016-20. None got safer.

Whether their states are moving the ball forward or not, communities urgently need to pass their own Complete Streets policies or strengthen outdated or weak ones. These policies are not just documents. They represent the effort of advocates, the engagement of community members, and the investments of public officials and public sector staff. They also represent a set of processes and a commitment of resources to execute those processes so that words don’t languish on the page, but instead save people’s lives.

Every day without an effective Complete Streets policy is a missed chance to set the groundwork necessary to quickly and efficiently utilize funding when it becomes available. Every day without a Complete Streets policy is a signal to other local leaders, to state transportation officials, and to members of Congress that they don’t need to do their part. Every day without a quality, equitable, implementable Complete Streets policy is an admission that the deadly status quo is acceptable.

# Lessons learned from some of the strongest recent policies

As the Complete Streets movement evolves, the National Complete Streets Coalition seeks to feature the strongest recent Complete Streets policies, the process of policy development, and how places navigate barriers to adoption. Below are some selected lessons learned from the cities of Tucson, AZ; Howard County, MD; El Paso, TX; and Joplin, MO. The full Complete Streets policy case studies on these communities can be found at the end of this report.

**City of Tucson, AZ | Community members are experts.** The organizers of Tucson's Complete Streets movement not only engaged community members but treated them as valued participants in the planning process with their own expertise to offer. This is in stark contrast to the typical planning approach, which treats planners and engineers as unimpeachable experts in contrast to community members. By countering this hierarchy, organizers made their policy not only better but likelier to pass.

*Read the full case study on [page 12](#).*

**Howard County, MD | Take your time—great policies are not created overnight.** They require significant time and energy from a diverse group of stakeholders to ensure the policy reflects community needs. It took Howard County six years to develop and adopt this policy and the corresponding Design Manual. Although it may create a longer process, it's critical to take the time to get all the details right and build policies that benefit as many community members as possible.

*Read the full case study on [page 18](#).*

**City of El Paso, TX | Take advantage of every opportunity to share your message.** It took the coalition in El Paso two years to get their policy drafted and passed. In that time, they [created local news opportunities](#), [collected stories from community members](#), conducted street audits, had [renderings](#) done to illustrate the concepts, held [community engagement activities](#), and met one-on-one with city leaders to get their message out. These efforts were critical in gaining the support needed to get their policy passed.

*Read the full case study on [page 26](#).*

**City of Joplin, MO | There are resources out there to help you meet the moment.** Creating the case for a strong Complete Streets policy required funding and knowledge. The Joplin team benefited from funding from the state's Department of Health and Senior Services and technical assistance programs like Smart Growth America's Complete Streets Consortium, where they tapped into broader advocacy networks and strengthened relationships with policymakers. These resources helped the committee draft a top-ranking policy and develop strategies to get it passed.

*Read the full case study on [page 34](#).*

# What are Complete Streets policies and how do we evaluate them

**Complete Streets policies** are a jurisdiction’s formal commitment to fund, plan for, construct, operate, and maintain their streets so they are safe for all users, regardless of age and ability. The Coalition recognizes several types of statements in our definition of a Complete Streets policy, including legislation, resolutions, executive orders, internal policies, policies adopted by an elected board, tax ordinances, comprehensive or master plans, and design guidance.

Complete Streets **legislation** includes bills that require the needs of all users to be addressed in transportation projects by changing city, county, or state codes or statutes. **Resolutions** are non-binding official statements from a jurisdiction’s legislative branch and **executive orders** are high-level directives issued by a mayor or governor. **Internal policies** are adopted by the leadership of a jurisdiction’s transportation agency, office, or department without action from an elected body. **Policies** adopted by an elected board are statements, usually developed by a group of stakeholders, and are approved by an elected governing body via an adopting resolution or ordinance. **Tax ordinances** are a legislative or voter-approved ordinance to fund Complete Streets projects.

In addition, some communities integrate Complete Streets language within comprehensive or transportation master plans, or through updates to street design guidance and standards. These documents are not eligible for our analysis. This report evaluates the language of eligible policies based on a comprehensive policy model, the [Complete Streets Policy Framework](#).

This framework includes **10 elements**:

## Element 1: Establishes commitment and vision



How and why does the community want to complete its streets? This specifies a clear statement of intent to create a complete, connected network and consider the needs of all users.

## Element 2: Prioritizes underinvested and underserved communities



Requires jurisdictions to define who are their most underinvested and underserved communities and prioritize them throughout.

### Element 3: Applies to all projects and phases



Instead of a limited set of projects, the policy applies to all new projects, retrofit or reconstruction projects, maintenance projects, and ongoing operations.

### Element 4: Allows only clear exceptions



Any exceptions must be specific, with a clear procedure that requires high-level approval and public notice prior to exceptions being granted.

### Element 5: Mandates coordination



Requires private developers to comply, and interagency coordination between government departments and partner agencies.

### Element 6: Adopts excellent design guidance



Directs agencies to use the latest and best design criteria and guidelines, and sets a time frame for implementing this guidance.

## Element 7: Requires proactive land-use planning



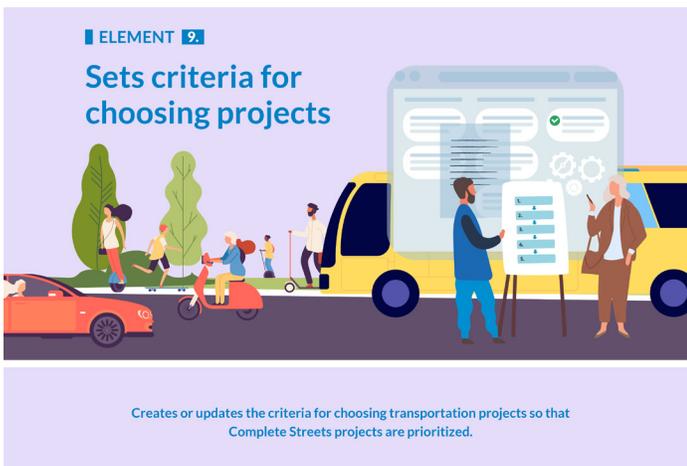
Considers every project's greater context, as well as the surrounding community's current and expected land-use and transportation needs.

## Element 8: Measure progress



Establishes specific performance measures that match the goals of the broader vision, incorporate equity considerations, and are regularly reported to the public.

## Element 9: Sets criteria for choosing projects



Creates or updates the criteria for choosing transportation projects so that Complete Streets projects are prioritized.

## Element 10: Creates a plan for implementation



A formal commitment to the Complete Streets approach is only the beginning. It must include specific steps for implementing the policy in ways that will make a measurable impact on what gets built and where.

# The Best Complete Streets Policies 2023

Since 2012, The National Complete Streets Coalition has typically evaluated all policies passed in the previous year in order to identify and feature strong policies and more broadly to track the progress of the Complete Streets movement. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Coalition was unable to release a report from 2020 to 2022. As a result, the 157 policies evaluated and included in this report were passed in the last four years. (We also scored 48 policies adopted in 2018 that were not included in our last report.) Each policy was evaluated based on the 10 established elements of our [Complete Streets Policy Framework](#). The full, detailed list of scores for all communities that have passed a Complete Streets policy since our policy framework was updated in 2018, is available [here](#).

Based on the policy evaluation, the Coalition is proud to announce the following communities have the best Complete Streets policies passed between 2019 and 2022.

THE BEST COMPLETE STREETS POLICIES 2023			
Rank	Jurisdiction	Policy score	Year adopted
1	Howard County, MD	100	2019
2	City of Rogersville, MO	98	2020
3	City of El Paso, TX	96	2022
4	City of Joplin, MO	95	2022
4	City of Tucson, AZ	95	2019
6	City of Rolling Meadows, IL	88	2020
7	City of Riverside, MO	86	2022
8	Village of Wellington, FL	80	2022
9	City of New Orleans, LA	78	2020
9	City of Sacramento, CA	78	2019



# Best Complete Streets Policies 2023 | Featured Case Studies

# Tucson, AZ

## Complete Streets is About More Than Pavement



**Caption:** Supporters and members of Living Streets Alliance outside of the city council chambers after a Complete Streets agenda item was discussed, posing with signs in support of Complete Streets.

Starting in the early 2010s, Tucson’s [Living Streets Alliance](#) (LSA) organized to change the city’s uncomfortable, unsafe streets. After successfully advocating for pedestrian safety and walkability projects to be included in a county-wide bond package—which ultimately failed at the ballot box—the organization used its newfound momentum to pursue a Complete Streets policy. Over three years, working in close collaboration with the City of Tucson Department of Transportation and Mobility, they involved community members, city staff, and subject matter experts to write a policy that had widespread support, included strong language, and was easy to quickly implement.

ORDINANCE NO. 11621, TUCSON COMPLETE STREETS POLICY   ADOPTED 2019									
Jurisdiction: Tucson, Arizona				Population: 542,629			Land Area: 227 square miles		
NCSC Score   95 / 100									
Elements									
Establishes commitment and vision	Prioritizes underinvested and underserved communities	Applies to all projects and phases	Allows only clear exceptions	Mandates coordination	Adopts excellent design guidance	Requires proactive land-use planning	Measures progress	Sets criteria for choosing projects	Creates a plan for implementation
Score									
12/12	9/9	10/10	4/8	8/8	7/7	9/10	13/13	8/8	15/15

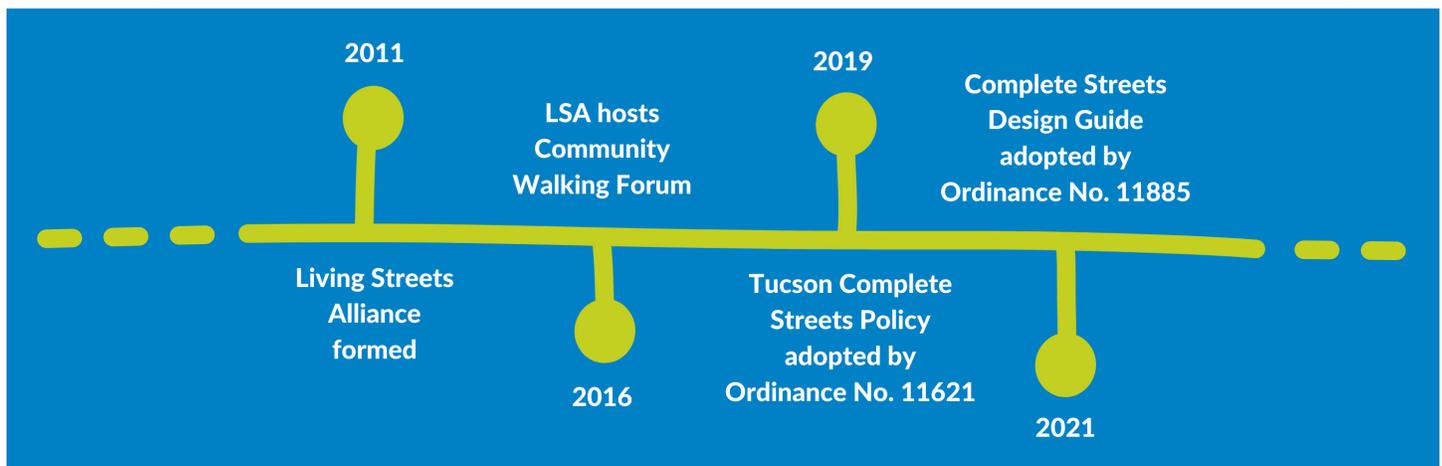
## Part I: Background

A city of over half-a-million people, Tucson, Arizona lies just over 100 miles southeast of Phoenix in Pima County, between the state’s capital city and its southern border with Mexico. It hosts the University of Arizona’s main campus, its non-white Hispanic/Latinx population makes up 44 percent of the city, and the median household income is \$43,425.

Tucson’s Complete Streets journey started in the early 2010s with the Living Streets Alliance (LSA), but LSA’s initial goal wasn’t to write a Complete Streets policy. The organization was initially formed by a group of advocates who recognized that there was a disconnect between what people wanted to see on their streets and what was getting built. The founding members were also inspired by and wanted to expand on the city’s very first [Cyclovia](#), now a bi-annual event where select streets are temporarily made car-free. In 2012, shortly after being formed as an organization, LSA launched a Pedestrian Safety & Comfort Campaign with the goal of “making the simple act of walking safe, comfortable, and convenient in the greater Tucson region.” One of the strategies identified in the campaign was to create a funding source for pedestrian infrastructure improvements.

To help achieve this, LSA turned its attention to a county-wide bond measure in 2015 and forged numerous partnerships to successfully advocate for funding to be allocated in the bond package for pedestrian safety and walkability projects. Although this bond measure failed, the energy created around it expanded their coalition and drew supporters together for a Community Walking Forum in 2016. At that forum, attendees decided to pursue a Complete Streets policy. Less than three years later, there was a Complete Streets policy on the books in Tucson. So how did they get from Complete Streets not being fully on their radar to passing one of the stronger policies that we scored and receiving national attention for their policy, including a [Complete Streets Gold Medal from CityHealth](#)?

## Part II: Road to Adoption



**Image description:** A timeline highlighting key points in Tucson’s Complete Streets work—the formation of the Living Streets Alliance in 2011, hosting of the Community Walking Forum in 2016, the adoption of Tucson Complete Streets Policy by Ordinance No. 11621 in 2019, and the adoption of the Complete Streets Design Guide by Ordinance No. 11885 in 2021.

Tucson's Complete Streets policy was unanimously adopted by Mayor Regina Romero and the City Council in February 2019. Crafting such a policy requires work and time, which typically means money. Thankfully, a chance encounter with the then-Director of the National Complete Streets Coalition, Emiko Atherton, helped LSA learn about grant opportunities from [Voices for Healthy Kids](#). After securing this funding, the organization was able to support staff and engage the resources necessary to work closely with both the public and city staff to deliberately develop Tucson's policy from the ground up over those next three years.

LSA's first step was bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders—individuals from city agencies and external organizations covering topics like affordable housing, public transit, disability rights, green infrastructure, and food justice—to guide their outreach efforts and initial frameworks for the policy and serve as the city's [Complete Streets Task Force](#). The task force grew out of an earlier and smaller body, referred to by Evren Sönmez, LSA's Director of Strategic Policy and Practice, as a "brain trust." The brain trust helped LSA think through how to get started with a Complete Streets policy and center it around equity. The task force helped craft the policy and also became a sounding board, weighing in repeatedly on drafts of the policy prepared by LSA and city staff in order to iterate and steadily improve the policy.

Simultaneously, LSA [engaged](#) the broader community to ensure that lived experience shaped the policy in addition to formal credentials. Through working with process design consultants, LSA developed a "Rethinking Streets" workshop built upon an ["appreciative inquiry approach"](#) and hosted a series of workshops with various neighborhood and community groups. During these workshops, participants collaborated to articulate their vision for Tucson's streets and arrive at shared themes and recommendations to help guide the policy. This approach integrated the critical expertise each community member brought to the conversation and broader movement.



This collaborative process also ensured that broad swaths of the community—whether they were an engineer employed by the city or somebody who showed up to a meeting having never heard of Complete Streets—actually held a stake in the policy. Although time-consuming, the extensive outreach that accompanied the policy's development built relationships that helped affirm that investing in safer streets was a broadly shared value and that the opposition represented an outlying view. The policy was also championed by elected leadership, including Tucson Mayor Regina Romero.

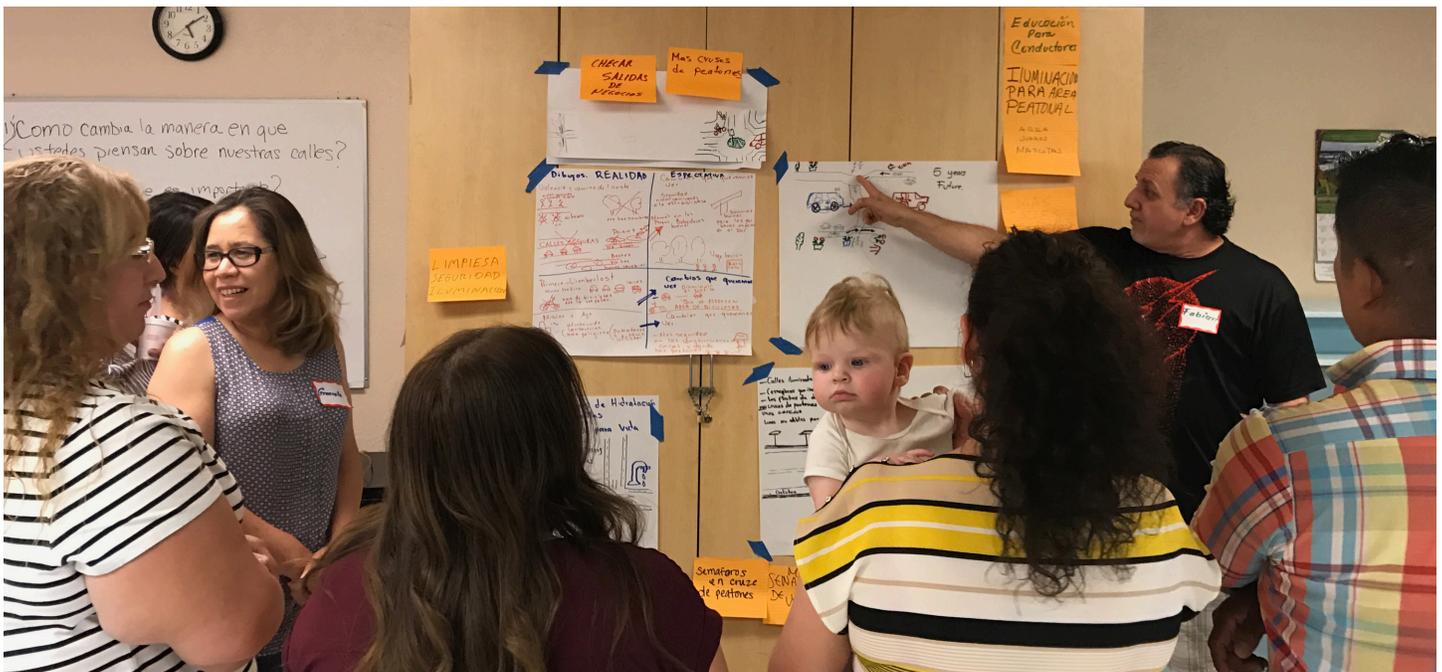
**Caption:** Post it notes containing themes that came out of a Stakeholder Workshop.

### Part III: What makes Tucson’s policy great

Tucson’s organizers intentionally aimed to emulate the National Complete Streets Coalition’s [Complete Streets Policy Framework](#) and the effect is clear: the city’s policy received one of the highest scores that we have awarded since revising the framework in 2018, earning full points in eight out of the 10 components. This was especially rare for the 10th and final element: [creating a plan for implementation](#). Tucson was one of only four jurisdictions in this round of grading to be awarded all fifteen points for this element because of their incredibly clear plan for putting the policy into practice, which included steps to keep residents and agencies involved through the Complete Streets Coordinating Council (CSCC), add new staff, and draw up legislation to officially establish the makeup of and set rules for that council within 90 days.

In addition, equity was defined and woven into the policy’s implementation language. Section 3 of the policy committed to investing, involving, and prioritizing the underserved, historically excluded, and vulnerable, stating that “the city shall incorporate equity criteria into the project prioritization process...and develop an inclusive community engagement plan”.

The policy’s writers built off this initial commitment in the sections that detailed how the policy’s goals would be pursued. In Section 7, a paragraph on the need to preserve affordable housing is how Tucson became one of the few communities to get two points for mitigating unintended consequences as part of its [land-use planning](#). The integration of equity into performance measures mentioned in Section 8 and the project prioritization tool mentioned in Section 9 are how the policy received full points for [prioritizing underinvested and underserved communities](#), [measuring progress](#), and [setting criteria for choosing projects](#). Through these measures, the policy doesn’t just mention equity, but operationalizes it.



**Caption:** Community members crowd around a cabinet with community traffic priorities during a dialogue session. Photo courtesy of Living Streets Alliance staff.

## Part IV: Putting the policy into practice

These labors bore immediate fruit as the paradigm shift to Complete Streets took place. Projects which began just a few months after the policy was passed included design elements shaped by the new mobility priorities for the community outlined in the policy. Which projects overall get advanced has been slower to change, but according to Tucson Complete Streets Program Coordinator Patrick Hartley, the next projects the city undertakes “will be fully conceived and designed with Complete Streets in the forefront.” The three years of nonstop work to craft an impactful policy resulted in strong language that is binding and clear. Engaging with everyone who would have a hand in putting the policy into practice ensured that city staff were able to focus time on implementation and not interpretation.

Due to the specificity of the policy’s [plan for implementation](#), a Complete Streets Program Coordinator, Patrick Hartley, was quickly hired, the CSCC was rapidly set up, and shortly after the city created a [design guide](#) for future projects that it then passed in [an ordinance](#).

In addition, by establishing the CSCC in their policy, organizers ensured that an accountability mechanism is built in. There is no need to irregularly summon city agencies and unexpectedly interrupt their work in order to provide testimony or reports to local elected officials. The CSCC collects information about the implementation process and uses it to oversee the responsible agencies, preparing reports on implementation progress every two years.



**Caption:** Tucson residents paint the street orange, green, blue, and white during a block party to create a quick-build Complete Streets demonstration project. Photo courtesy of Living Streets Alliance staff.

[Project selection criteria and process](#) were also quickly impacted. In Fall 2021, the city passed its transportation master plan, [Move Tucson](#), which included a list of projects to be funded. Thanks to the Complete Streets policy, the Coordinating Council was involved and potential projects were prioritized using criteria plainly laid out in the ordinance. Organizers’ deliberation ensured that the policy changed not just what was built, but where it was built as well.

Passing a Complete Streets policy did not mean that Tucson’s transportation problems were suddenly solved. In addition to road-widening projects approved in a 2006 ballot measure now beginning construction, some documents required by the policy—such as an implementation plan—haven’t been completed. This means that there aren’t deadlines associated with the tasks outlined in the “Implementation Chart,” which is a potential loss of accountability in the long term. Advocates feel strongly that progress can still continue to be made despite this.

## Part V: Lessons learned

Tucson advocates and policymakers understood that Tucson’s community members had critical Complete Streets expertise and that their policy needed to address every aspect of the community, not just its streets.

**Community members are experts.** The organizers of Tucson’s Complete Streets movement not only engaged community members but treated them as valued participants in the planning process with their own expertise to offer. This is in stark contrast to the typical planning approach, which treats planners and engineers as unimpeachable experts in contrast to community members. By countering this hierarchy, organizers made their policy not only better but likelier to pass.

**If it’s not operational, it’s not equity.** LSA made sure that equity wasn’t just a goal, but a component of every single process and product. This ensured that, when it came time to write “Move Tucson,” the values in the city’s Complete Streets policy actually turned into planned investments instead of languishing on the shelf.

**Complete Streets is about more than pavement.** From the start, LSA made clear that Complete Streets is about more than pavement. Organizers believed that what roads look like can’t be disconnected from the social infrastructure around them, nor the processes or people who decide what those roads look like. The inclusion of the elements that described how the built environment impacts the way Tucson residents feel on a day-to-day basis—whether using shade as a metric or mentioning perceived safety and comfort levels—improved the policy and ensured it was sensitive to Tucson’s context in particular.

*Thank you to Evren Sönmez and Emily Yentman at Living Streets Alliance, as well as Patrick Hartley at the City of Tucson, Arizona, for their time and expertise in producing this case study.*

# 📍 Howard County, MD

## Creating Complete Streets: A Collaborative Effort



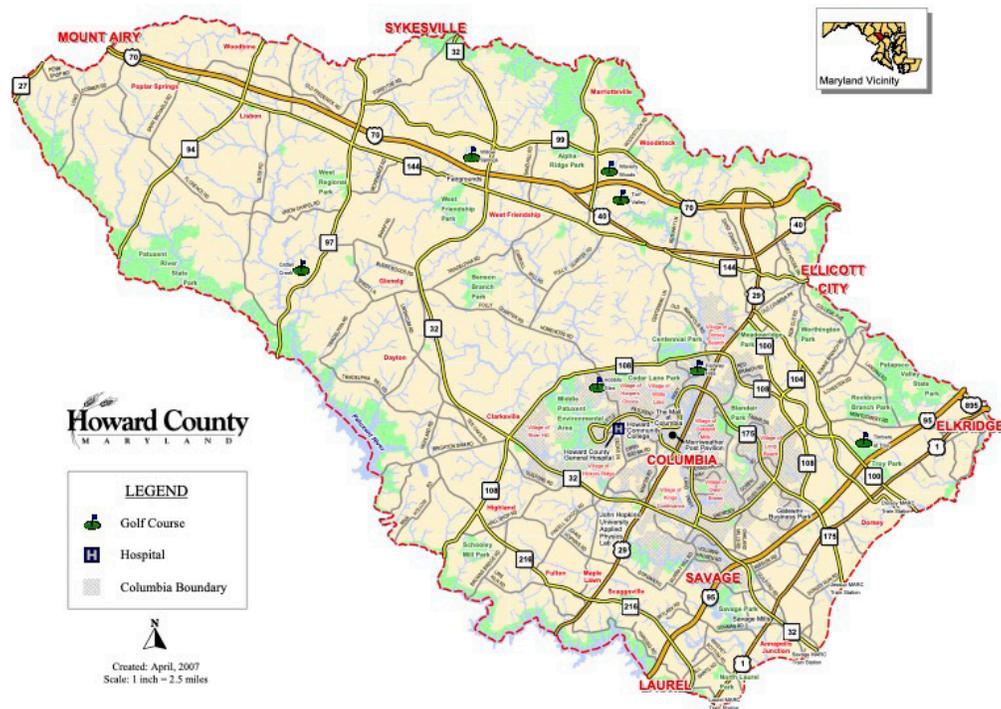
**Caption:** Howard County residents biking on a tree-lined trail in Columbia, Maryland. Photo courtesy of Howard County, Maryland.

Howard County, Maryland carved out an identity of its own over the last few decades as it developed from a once largely rural county to a locus of suburban and urban growth between Washington, D.C. and Baltimore, MD. A groundswell of local advocacy for safer streets, paired with philanthropic support and county leadership, resulted in perhaps the strongest Complete Streets policy the Coalition has seen.

<b>RESOLUTION 120-2019   ADOPTED 2019</b>									
<b>Jurisdiction:</b> Howard County, MD				<b>Population:</b> 334,529			<b>Land Area:</b> 253 square miles		
<b>NCSC Score   100 / 100</b>									
<b>Elements</b>									
Establishes commitment and vision	Prioritizes underinvested and underserved communities	Applies to all projects and phases	Allows only clear exceptions	Mandates coordination	Adopts excellent design guidance	Requires proactive land-use planning	Measures progress	Sets criteria for choosing projects	Creates a plan for implementation
<b>Score</b>									
12/12	9/9	10/10	8/8	8/8	7/7	10/10	13/13	8/8	15/15

## Part I: Background

Howard County, located in between Washington, D.C. and Baltimore, MD, is one of the [wealthiest communities in the country](#), with a median income of about \$130,000 and more than half of residents holding at least a bachelor’s degree. It is also a [racially diverse place](#)—as of 2021, 20 percent of its residents are African American, 20 percent Asian, and 8 percent Hispanic. In the last few decades it has evolved from a largely rural county to a locus of suburban and urban growth.



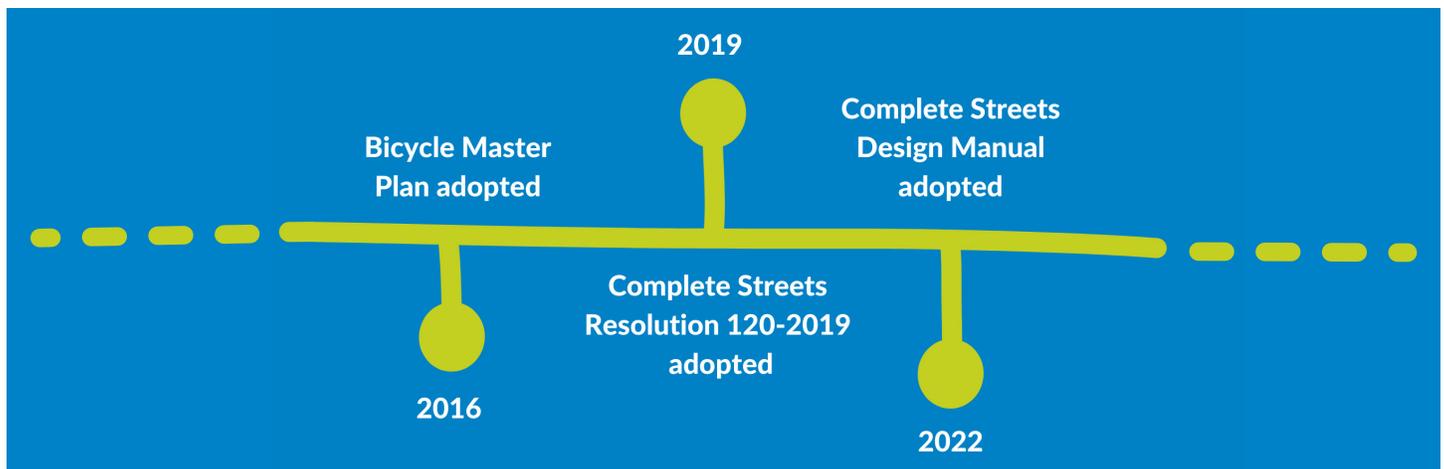
**Image description:** A map of Howard County— notable landmarks include seven golf courses, a hospital, and several highways that run throughout the county.

Safety is a major concern in Howard County—underfunded bike routes, incomplete bus stops, unsafe intersections, and nonexistent sidewalks meant that mobility in Howard County primarily served motor vehicles. The network that did exist for bicyclists and pedestrians had critical gaps, especially when it came to accessing essential destinations like schools and transit stations. As a result, [very few people](#) were choosing to take transit, walk, or roll to get where they needed to go.

When asked about Howard County’s transportation options, Larry Schoer, advocate and chair of the County’s Multimodal Transportation Board, reflected that people living in the county often don’t realize that their “choice” to travel by car is actually compelled by the lack of better multimodal facilities. Making a safe, accessible, multi-modal system a reality in Howard County was a driving force for advocates, county staff, and elected officials alike who worked in partnership to develop the Complete Streets policy.

## Part II: Road to adoption

*“The continuous, connected network of Complete Streets that will result from this policy will have significant benefits for the residents of Howard County, including improved safety, more travel options, reduced transportation costs, improved access to goods and services, enhanced equity, and even better health.” - Howard County, MD Resolution 120-2019*



**Image description:** A timeline of Howard County's Complete Streets work, the points from left to right are: the adoption of the Bicycle Master Plan in 2016, the adoption of Complete Street Resolution 120-2019 in 2019, and the adoption of the Complete Streets Design Manual in 2022.

The Howard County Council [unanimously](#) adopted its Complete Streets policy in 2019. To get there, the County took a slow and thoughtful approach to the development of the policy because they wanted it to be transformative and reflect the needs of the community. Meeting these requirements takes time, and in the end, it would take approximately three years to pass the policy, and an additional three to update their design manual.

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***“I think a lot of people become skeptical when the public sector says it's going to take a year and a half to two years to enact real policy change. I get that and know it is frustrating to everyone because they want to see change immediately, but a deliberative process really is necessary to do something meaningful.”***

— Bruce Gartner, Office of Transportation Administrator for Howard County

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For Howard County, the process started in earnest in 2016, the same year it adopted its [Bike Master Plan](#), and consisted of organizing and promoting a lot of community events and meetings, and providing opportunities for feedback.

Bringing a policy to life requires both real lived experience and technical expertise. There were a number of key players that were crucial to the development of the Complete Streets policy including [Streets for All](#), a coalition led by [Horizon Foundation](#), AARP Maryland, and the American Heart Association that all organized around the goal of making mobility safe, easy and comfortable in Howard County.

This coalition also included a diverse range of voices, like the local realtor’s association, an elementary school PTA, an autism association, and bicycle shop. Together this group provided invaluable input to the policy creation process. Coalition members like the Horizon Foundation also organized pop-up events where they temporarily closed off streets to cars to reimagine those spaces, as well as walk audits to evaluate safety and accessibility.

Dr. Calvin Ball, current County Executive, and a councilmember during the period of the policy’s development, notes the depth of expertise that went into drafting the actual policy language. “The Complete Streets Implementation Team possessed both a strong technical expertise and community knowledge, and were charged with drafting a stellar policy and an excellent Design Manual that relies on best practices from around the country,” said Dr. Ball.

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***“Having community members stand alongside elected officials and people running for office, saying ‘This is really important to us,’ was really important for the Complete Streets movement in Howard County.”***

— Nikki Highsmith Vernick, President & CEO | The Horizon Foundation

“Some of the most defining elements of the plan, such as how modal priorities are identified for a given project, were suggested by community members and refined by staff,” said Senior Principal Engineer Jeffrey R. Riegner, a consultant who helped Howard County staff develop the policy, and is also the current chair of the National Complete Streets Coalition.

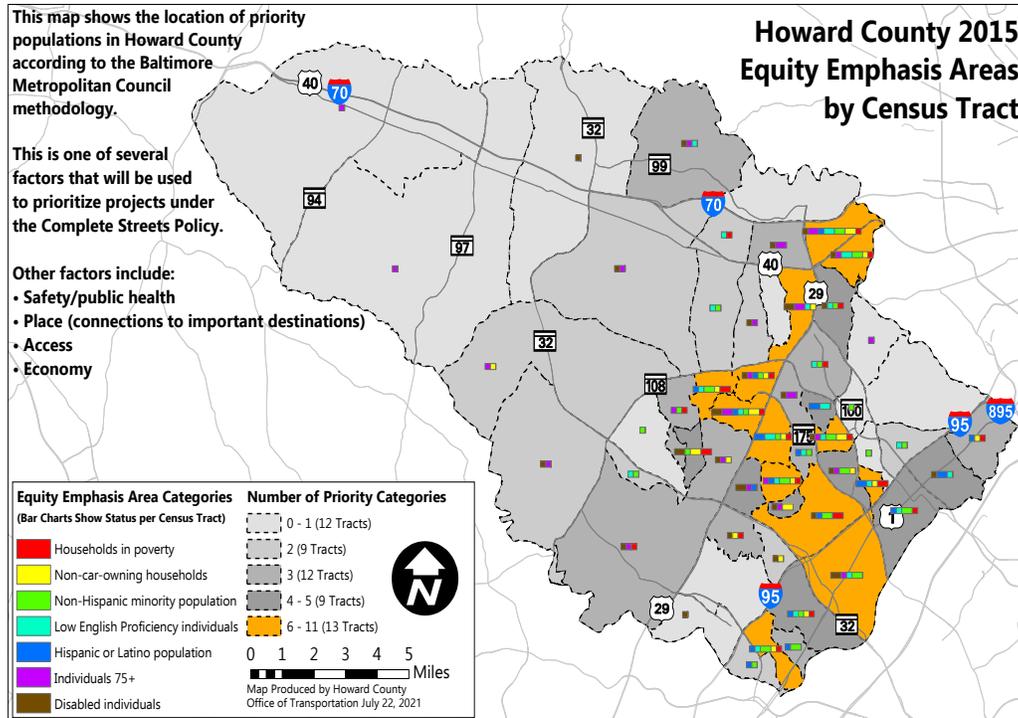
The policy’s adoption would not have been possible without elected officials invested in its success; critical champions included Dr. Ball on the county council as well as then-County Executive and current Councilmember Christina Mercer Rigby.



**Caption:** A crowd of Howard County residents bike along a winding path in a forested area during the 2016 Horizon Open Streets Event on Little Patuxent Parkway in Columbia, MD. Photo courtesy of The Horizon Foundation.

## Part III: What makes Howard County’s policy great

It wasn’t a coincidence that Howard County earned a perfect score on our Complete Streets Policy Framework: “We used [guidance](#) from the National Complete Streets Coalition to ensure that Howard County had a best-in- nation policy,” said Vernick with The Horizon Foundation.”



The policy does a particularly good job when it comes to [prioritizing equity](#) because it is embedded—with binding language—throughout the policy. For example, the policy clearly states that safety for “vulnerable street users,” (defined in the policy as pedestrians, bicyclists, children, seniors, and people with accessibility needs) is the highest priority during project selection, implementation, and evaluation.

The policy also clearly defines which communities are underserved and commits to prioritizing them in their [project selection process](#). To

**Image description:** A gray map of Howard County highlights areas in orange where underserved populations live, including disabled individuals, seniors, racial minorities, non car-owning households, and households in poverty.

do this, they used methodology developed by the [Baltimore Metropolitan Council](#), which pinpoints areas that face more barriers to transportation access based on income, race, disabilities, and other factors. This framework ensures that Howard County will prioritize historically disinvested communities, particularly communities of color, for biking and walking infrastructure. It also ensures the county will use this framework in the development of [performance measures](#) to track implementation progress.

Lastly, the policy does a great job of [defining exceptions](#), where many otherwise strong policies fall short. If there are too many exceptions allowed or the policy’s language on exceptions is vague, it is often easy to move away from the other values established within the policy like equity and accessibility. Not only does Howard County’s Complete Streets policy demonstrate best practices by only including a specific and limited list of exceptions; it also outlines the approval process, requiring exceptions be shared publicly prior to review, and designating who is responsible for reviewing and approving proposed exceptions.

## Part IV: Putting the policy into practice

One of many successful aspects of the policy is that it required an update to the community's [Design Manual](#), a technical document that guides the design of Howard County streets so that it centered the goal of safer, more complete streets.

The policy also required that the process for updating the Design Manual include community input, effectively ensuring it reflects community priorities. So from 2019 to 2022, Howard County held 37 virtual meetings and received over 900 comments that shaped the final version of their Design Manual which was finalized in 2022. Experts from the engineering firm Whitman, Requardt & Associates also played a significant role in the development of the manual by managing meetings and methodically evaluating and considering input, while maintaining engineering and design best practices.

Having a good manual in place is key for everyone to be on the same page, according to Abdul Akbari, Chief of Bureau of Engineering, Transportation and Special Projects Division at the Department of Public Works. "It's great that we have Complete Streets integrated in our Design Manuals, so it's clear for all our designers, engineers, project managers, and everyone to know exactly what's needed and that we need to provide and accommodate all modes, bikes, pedestrians, and vehicles," noted Akbari.

Additionally, the Howard County Complete Streets policy mandates training opportunities for planning and design professionals, county staff, and community members to ensure a collective understanding of the changes to the Design Manual.

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***"When this Design Manual was adopted, there were training sessions to ensure everybody was aware of the revisions. This helped our project managers, consultants, and engineers implement the changes into their projects since they were knowledgeable on the content of the Design Manual."***

—Abdul Akbari, Chief of Bureau of Engineering, Transportation and Special Projects Division at the Department of Public Works | Howard County

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The updated Design Manual has helped engineers and other professionals implement projects with a Complete Streets approach. Some design elements that have already been included within projects include green bike lane markings, bike boxes, and sidewalk retrofitting.



**Caption:** Left: a bicyclist on the Oakland Mill Road cyclist track in Fall 2022. Photo courtesy of Howard County. Right: Sidewalk construction on Doncaster Drive in Ellicott City, MD in 2019. Photo courtesy of Howard County.

The update to the Design Manual also included the development of a robust community engagement plan. Now located within the Manual itself, the plan details how engineers and design professionals using the manual will work with community members to make sure future projects reflect community needs. Specific goals laid out in the plan include building stronger relationships with a range of community stakeholders and county entities, increasing awareness about Complete Streets, creating more equitable access to engagement opportunities, and formalizing feedback processes. Additionally, the community engagement plan calls for specific performance measures to evaluate whether or not these goals are being adequately implemented, adding a critical layer of accountability.

## Part V: Lessons learned

Howard County's policy was built on a strong foundation of collaboration, which required both time and extensive community engagement.

### Take your time—great policies are not created overnight.

They require significant time and energy from a diverse group of stakeholders to ensure the policy reflects community needs. It took Howard County six years to develop and adopt this policy and the corresponding Design Manual. Although it may create a longer process, it's critical to take the time to get all the details right and build policies that benefit as many community members as possible.



**Caption:** A crowd of community members, county staff, state transportation staff, Columbia Association staff, and policy consultants gathered around picnic tables, trees, and display boards at a 2019 community input meeting for the Complete Streets policy at Wilde Lake High School, Columbia, MD. Photo courtesy of Howard County.

**Bring together people with a wide range of lived experience and expertise to inform your policy.** In order to create a transformational policy and design manual that reflects community needs, Howard County brought together people with a diverse range of personal and professional backgrounds.

**Activate your community.** A huge component of Howard County's success was that they kept the community informed and actively involved throughout the process. Holding walk audits, open streets events, and other gatherings focused on the County's Complete Streets work helped people connect on shared goals and create a collaborative vision for what they wanted their community to be.

*"In Howard County, we prioritize the safety of pedestrians, cyclists, drivers, and transit riders of all ages and abilities. Complete Streets is at the forefront of our work to build a safer, more sustainable, and more equitable transportation system."*

— Calvin Ball, Howard County Executive



**Caption:** A racially diverse group of Howard County residents use the crosswalk at Little Patuxent Parkway in Columbia, MD. Photo courtesy of Howard County.

Thank you to Howard County staff Bruce Gartner, Administrator at the Office of Transportation, Chris Eatough, Bike & Pedestrian Coordinator at the Office of Transportation, Abdul Akbari, Chief at the Department of Public Works Bureau of Engineering, Transportation and Special Projects Division, Nikki Highsmith Vernick, President & CEO of the Horizon Foundation, and Larry Schoer, Chairman of the Multimodal Transportation Board for the Office of Transportation for their time and expertise in producing this case study.

# 📍 El Paso, TX

## From good intentions to great policy



**Caption:** A quick-build project in El Paso puts Piedras Street on a “road diet,” giving pedestrians a safer, more comfortable place to walk and shop. Photo by Joaquin Rodriguez.

For over a decade, the City of El Paso's vision of having safe travel for all mobility users and promoting active transportation had fallen short. In the face of continuing street safety, health, mobility, and other challenges, a diverse coalition of advocates worked with city planners and decision makers to strengthen and improve the way the City of El Paso designs and builds its streets. Their top-scoring Complete Streets policy was adopted unanimously in 2022.

<b>ORDINANCE NO. 019355   ADOPTED 2022</b>									
Jurisdiction: El Paso, Texas				Population: 865,657			Land Area: 256 square miles		
NCSC Score   96 / 100									
<b>Elements</b>									
Establishes commitment and vision	Prioritizes underinvested and underserved communities	Applies to all projects and phases	Allows only clear exceptions	Mandates coordination	Adopts excellent design guidance	Requires proactive land-use planning	Measures progress	Sets criteria for choosing projects	Creates a plan for implementation
<b>Score</b>									
12/12	9/9	10/10	4/8	8/8	7/7	10/10	13/13	8/8	15/15

## Part I: Background

A large, majority-Hispanic city located along the Texas-Mexico border, El Paso has increased in physical size over the last decade, even as its population has [stagnated](#). This change is due to [development patterns that encourage sprawl](#)—patterns that persist despite [smart land-use and transportation goals](#) that have been on the books for over a decade.

As car-oriented development continued, concerns about the health of El Paso residents grew. El Paso has a [relatively high number of residents with diabetes](#), but its road design makes it hard to get out and get active—[one key measure for preventing diabetes](#)—because the city is filled with wide, dangerous, sprawling arterial roads that are unsafe and hostile for walking and rolling.



**Caption:** Two El Paso residents travel along a wide sidewalk. Screen capture from the [El Paso Complete Streets Coalition street audit training video](#).

The city has also grown consistently more deadly for people walking, outpacing the increase in deaths in other metro areas. In 2019, El Paso was ranked the [38th most dangerous city in the nation](#) for pedestrians, with 173 pedestrians killed between 2008 and 2017. By 2021, El Paso jumped up to the [20th most dangerous city for pedestrians](#), and in 2022, they were ranked the 18th deadliest metro area in the nation for pedestrians in [Smart Growth America's Dangerous by Design report](#). As city leaders established Vision Zero and other safe streets initiatives, local advocates pushed for further change to realize those goals, including complementary policies to work alongside El Paso's commitment to Vision Zero—such as a Complete Streets policy.

## Part II: Road to adoption



**Image description:** A timeline of El Paso's Complete Streets work: The adoption of Plan El Paso in 2012, formation of the Complete Streets Coalition in 2020, adoption of the Complete Streets policy in 2022, and creation of the Elevate El Paso website in 2022.

In response to the rising traffic fatalities and health concerns in the community, the El Paso Complete Streets Coalition formed in the summer of 2020, but it would take two more years for a policy to be adopted. Led by the American Heart Association, with additional community engagement and education support through a Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) grant funded by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the coalition prioritized involvement of diverse users from underserved communities throughout El Paso, especially people from communities most impacted by the region's dangerous roadways. They focused on engaging a wide range of community stakeholders and all relevant city departments to ensure everyone had a voice in the process, build trust and buy-in, and set the Complete Streets policy up for success.

In addition to educating and drawing attention to the need for Complete Streets in El Paso, the coalition researched other Complete Streets policies from across the country for model policies and best practices.

The City of Tucson, demographically and climatically similar to El Paso, adopted a standout Complete Streets policy in 2019, which the El Paso coalition used as a starting point. They modified their draft with input from community stakeholders, including city staff and leadership, and with the help of technical assistance from the National Complete Streets Coalition and the Safe Routes Partnership. The National Complete Streets Coalition's [Complete Streets Policy Framework](#) was another resource that guided the coalition toward a strong draft policy.



**Image description:** Logo of the El Paso Complete Streets Coalition depicts a variety of travelers walking, biking, and rolling. Courtesy of the coalition.

Having an active and diverse membership with representation from local, state, and national organizations helped the coalition build relationships and gain ground with the city. At the same time, the city developed more capacity to dive into El Paso's land-use and transportation needs, thanks in part to the creation of a new transportation division outside of the more operations-focused Streets and Maintenance Division—the Capital Improvement Department. Even after taking steps to build support with necessary stakeholders, the coalition and its allies hit roadblocks on the way to policy adoption.

Some city staff were concerned about the administrative burden of a new policy and standards for street design, in addition to the challenge of securing funding to cover the costs for street design changes. Complete Streets advocates focused on communicating the benefits these changes can provide and how they aligned with other citywide goals, like improving safety. To address the concerns about cost, some city officials found it was useful to focus on the long-term cost implications of not adopting Complete Streets. By explaining why a short-term minor increase in expenses (about three to four percent) would ultimately be worthwhile if the city is going to achieve its long-term goals.

“For new streets, we’re issuing debt for 20-30 years. That means the street won’t change for 20-30 years. A dedicated bike lane now is the cheapest it’s going to be,” said El Paso Transportation Planning Administrator Joaquin Rodriguez.

The pandemic further stalled progress towards the adoption of a policy, as the focus of city leadership understandably shifted. However, the partnerships the coalition formed remained strong and nimble, adapting to a host of [virtual community forums](#) and utilizing opportunities, such as the [local news](#), to continue to make the case and highlight the need for Complete Streets.

The coalition's hard work paid off. With help from Complete Streets champions on the city council like City Rep. Cassandra Hernandez, and support from the mayor, city manager, city plan commission and other key city staff, the city council unanimously adopted the policy in 2022, setting in place a strong foundation for a safer, healthier El Paso.

**The El Paso Complete Streets policy earned a top score thanks to the hardworking members of the El Paso Complete Streets Coalition. Membership included AARP Texas, Action for Healthy Kids, the American Heart Association, the Center for Community Health Impact, Centro San Vicente, CityHealth, El Paso Border Coalition for Fitness, El Paso Diabetes Association, El Paso Independent School District, Frontera Land Alliance, Green Hope Project, LiveActive EP, Medical Center of the Americas, Moms on Board, Paso del Norte Health Foundation, Paso del Norte Trail, Podium Finish, Quantum Engineering Consultants, Race El Paso, Rio Grande Area Agency on Aging, Texas Tech University Health Science Center, University Medical Center of El Paso, Velo Paso, Volar Center for Independent Living, and the YMCA.**

## Part III: What makes El Paso's policy great



**Caption:** A bike boulevard on Robinson Avenue uses white bike symbols to show bicycle travel is prioritized over vehicle travel. Photo by Joaquin Rodriguez.

The El Paso Complete Streets policy establishes a [clear vision and intent](#), building upon the goals the city established over a decade ago. With a focus on boosting equitable access, enhancing roadway safety, improving public health, and reducing emissions, the policy “directly supports the transportation goals outlined in Plan El Paso and the [the 2012] Livable City Sustainability Plan ‘to become the least car-dependent city in the Southwest through meaningful travel options and land-use patterns that support walkability, livability, and sustainability.’”

In its [implementation plan](#), the policy outlines how it plans to [prioritize underinvested communities](#). El Paso's engagement process requires inclusion of historically marginalized voices and projects that serve vulnerable users will be prioritized first. The engagement process heavily emphasizes “going to the people,” through block parties, pop-up demonstrations of proposed street redesigns, and other activities that meet people where they are already likely to convene.

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***“Each of these groups are either at higher risk of injury or death while walking or biking and/or more likely to walk, bike or use public transit than the population as a whole and, therefore, need to be considered specifically when improving the transportation environment.”***

— El Paso Complete Streets Policy

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Vulnerable users identified in the policy included low-income residents, people of color, senior residents, children, youth, people with disabilities, and people without access to a car.

El Paso's policy also emphasizes the importance of community context and [proactive land-use planning](#). Addressing the city's current development patterns and how these impact travel options, the policy calls upon the city to “review and, in coordination with our development community, revise land-use policies, plans, zoning ordinances, and/or other relevant documents ... to incorporate the vision of the Complete Streets policy.”

## Part IV: Putting the policy into practice

Passing the policy alone wasn't enough to bring change. The first step on El Paso's road to implementation was to facilitate [coordination](#) between city departments, agencies, and members of the community.



**Caption:** A two-lane shared-use path reserves space for pedestrians and cyclists along Robinson Avenue. Photo by Joaquin Rodriguez.

El Paso's Technical Review Committee is made up of chairs from multiple city departments, plus Sun Metro, the Health Department, the Public Health Department, and the Active Living Initiative. This committee oversees internal implementation of the policy, including the successful coordination of all departments. They work alongside the Mobility Advisory Committee, made up of a diverse set of roadway users, to review policy exceptions, prioritize and select projects, allocate funding, and organize engagement around Complete Streets projects. These two groups bring in valuable insight, with practical experience on planning and transportation decisions from the Technical Review Committee and knowledge of the needs and values of the community from the Mobility Advisory Committee.

The city has started work on multiple pilot projects—often a good way to start quickly and get people comfortable with new ideas—measuring the impacts before and after each project was implemented. This is a small snapshot of how [progress will be measured](#) in the years ahead. Among the data the city evaluates are average travel speeds, impact on level of service and number of vehicle trips, and pedestrian choice models. Qualitative data, such as surveys and interviews, will further inform city decision-making by highlighting the experiences of individual users.

Information on how implementation is going will be publicly available online thanks to a new website, [Elevate El Paso](#). As the hub for the Capital Improvement Department's community engagement activities, this website allows members of the El Paso community to remain informed about Complete Streets progress and other roadway safety measures.

*"We are proud of El Paso for adopting one of the best Complete Streets policies in the country but now the real work begins. We are committed to continuing our partnership with the city to equitably implement the policy and are excited that together we will build a safer and more healthy community for El Pasoans of all ages, abilities and walks of life for years to come."*

—Louie Salazar, Public Health Program Manager | American Heart Association

## Part V: Lessons learned

El Paso's new, top-ranking Complete Streets policy shows what's possible with a strong coalition and a shared goal for safer, healthier, and more convenient transportation options.



**Caption:** Members of the Complete Streets Coalition after the passage of the Complete Streets policy. Photo courtesy of the American Heart Association.

**Build a strong coalition and find your allies.** The El Paso Complete Streets Coalition included members of the community who had firsthand experience of the difficulties of traveling in El Paso. They were joined by local, state, and national organizations with expertise in a variety of fields (health, environment, active transportation, disability, education, and more). This wealth of knowledge and expertise helped the coalition earn the respect, trust, and support of local leaders.

**Take advantage of every opportunity to share your message.** It took the coalition two years to get their policy drafted and passed. In that time, they [created local news opportunities](#), [collected stories from community members](#), conducted street audits, had [renderings](#) done to illustrate the concepts, held [community engagement activities](#), and met one-on-one with city leaders to get their message out. These efforts were critical in gaining the support needed to get their policy passed.

**Changing attitudes bring new opportunities.** The City of El Paso set a goal in 2012 to make their community a safer, healthier place to travel, but it would take nearly a decade for a coalition of advocates to start up the call for Complete Streets. The important role Complete Streets could play in allowing the city to reach their broader goals wasn't immediately clear to the community and city leadership, but once those connections were communicated, the policy was much easier to pass.

*Thank you to Joaquin Rodriguez and Kyle Ibarra at the City of El Paso, Texas, as well as Louie Salazar, Lindsay Hovind, and Jerry Saavedra at the American Heart Association for their time and expertise in producing this case study.*

# Joplin, MO

## The key to getting a Complete Streets policy passed? People.



**Caption:** Parents, children, and dogs gather at a community engagement event on Joplin’s Main Street. Photo courtesy of the City of Joplin.

The mid-sized city of Joplin is one of nine cities in Missouri to pass a top ranking Complete Streets policy in this report. To get there, a committee of city staff relied on support from every level—from a diverse set of local advocates, to statewide Complete Streets champions, to national technical assistance programs.

<b>JOPLIN COMPLETE STREETS ORDINANCE   ADOPTED 2022</b>									
Jurisdiction: Joplin, MO				Population: 51,846			Land Area: 36 square miles		
NCSC Score   95 / 100									
Elements									
Establishes commitment and vision	Prioritizes underinvested and underserved communities	Applies to all projects and phases	Allows only clear exceptions	Mandates coordination	Adopts excellent design guidance	Requires proactive land-use planning	Measures progress	Sets criteria for choosing projects	Creates a plan for implementation
Score									
12/12	9/9	10/10	8/8	8/8	7/7	10/10	13/13	8/8	10/15

## Part I: Background

Joplin is a mid-sized, steadily growing, and predominantly white (84 percent) Missouri city that is nestled between three neighboring states: Kansas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. Like nearby cities, the City of Joplin has recently made investments to help attract and retain residents and bring in more tourism. These efforts include revitalizing their [Main Street, downtown](#), and [city parks](#). However, active transportation has been on city planners' minds for over a decade, as [advocates have called for more opportunities to bike and walk](#). Efforts to provide safe, equitable travel options included extending walking and biking trails and repairing or replacing ADA ramps, but more action was needed.

In 2018, Joplin's [Bicycle and Pedestrian Transportation Plan](#) cited a need for travel options outside of a car to better serve low-income residents ([17.6 percent](#) of Joplin's population is low-income), people with disabilities ([nearly 14 percent](#) of Joplin residents under the age of 65 have a disability), and older adults ([18 percent](#) of Joplin's residents are 65 years or older). These residents were less likely to own a car or be able to drive one. In public engagement activities, the community called for safer options to bike and walk that would better connect all residents to essential destinations.

A year later, in 2019, Joplin city staff and officials joined the National Complete Streets Coalition's [Complete Streets Consortium](#), which they participated in through 2020 and 2021. Designed to help communities identify and overcome barriers to implementing activity-friendly routes to everyday destinations, the consortium gave Joplin city staff and city council members the opportunity to learn from the efforts of nearby communities along with two other Missouri consortium participants, Eastern Jackson County (in the Kansas City area) and Kirkwood (near St. Louis).

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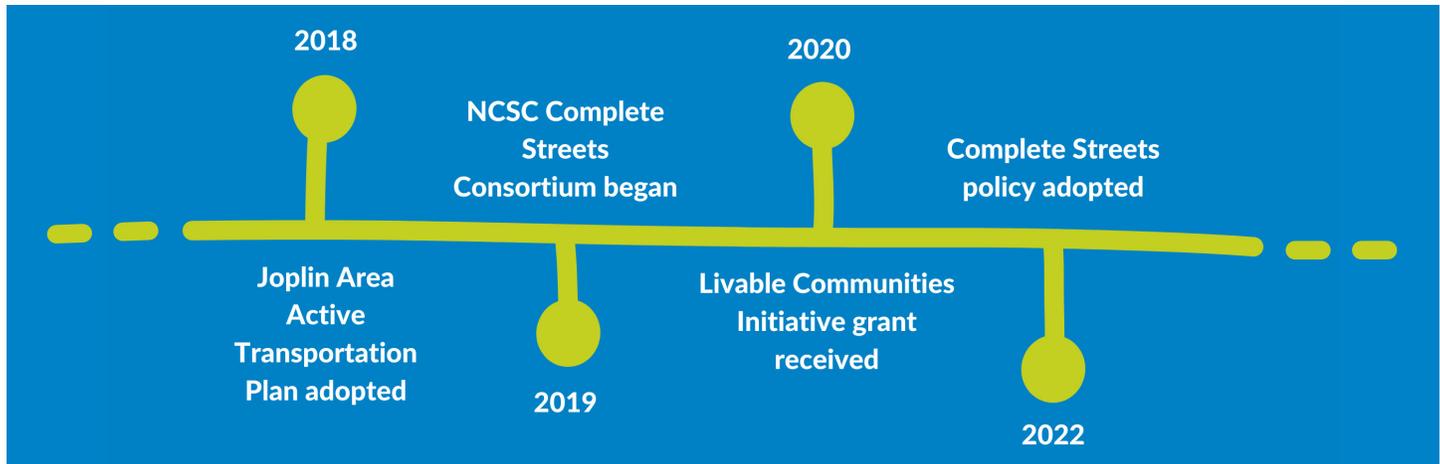
***“The cross-sector collaboration from leaders across the state of Missouri was integral to the success of this program and the work in the communities. We literally saw issues that seemed like insurmountable barriers being resolved in real time during these sessions by talking across sectors and connecting folks with the information and know-how they need to get things done.”***

—Emily Schweninger, former Director of Thriving Communities at Smart Growth America

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In 2020, armed with new knowledge and resources, plus strengthened relationships, the City of Joplin began making progress on its goal to better connect the community, attract new residents, and boost the local economy by providing more opportunities to safely bike, walk, and roll.

## Part II: Road to adoption



**Image description:** A timeline of the key points in Joplin's Complete Streets work: the adoption of Joplin Area Active Transportation Plan in 2018, start of the Complete Streets Consortium in 2019, delivery of the Livable Communities Initiative grant in 2020, and the adoption of the Complete Streets policy in 2022.

Funding to pursue more active transportation options came in 2020, when Joplin received a Livable Community Initiative grant from the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services to enhance the livability of their community through transportation. Joplin formed a committee to explore the best way to use these funds to advance the community's priorities. The committee, spearheaded by Taylor Cunningham (a former transportation planner at the City of Joplin), decided the best use of the funding was to create a Complete Streets policy. After a long, 18-month process of drafting, revising, and garnering support, the policy would finally pass in 2022.

Two aspects of a strong Complete Streets policy were on the Joplin team's mind from the very beginning. They wanted to [establish a strong commitment and vision](#) that would guide future transportation projects towards safety, equity, and livability. They also wanted to create a policy that would [apply to all transportation projects and phases](#). To write a strong policy that checked these boxes (and others from the [Complete Streets Policy Framework](#)), Cunningham collaborated with Complete Streets advocates Ron Bentsch, project director of Missourians for Responsible Transportation, and Michael Kelley, policy director at BikeWalkKC.

An internal team of planners and engineers met to make edits and raise concerns about the draft, and the committee collaborated with planners and engineers throughout the state to further strengthen their policy. They wrote four drafts before putting the policy up for adoption.

In their efforts to raise support for the policy, the committee found that everyone supports making streets safer and more accessible in theory, but city staff voiced fears about cost and concerns about making changes that wouldn't align with community context.

When issues arose, the committee found it was most helpful to explain that Complete Streets are, by definition, context-specific, and highlight [how they would make financial sense in the long run](#). They also benefited from the vocal support of local advocates who wanted more opportunities to safely bike and walk in the city.

Some city council members were persuaded to adopt the policy by learning about the demand for Complete Streets, and how implementing them could be a part of attracting new residents and tourists. At the same time, the committee was able to point to significant existing demand from current Joplin residents, and they highlighted the need for more travel options for low-income residents.

COVID impacted the momentum of the policy, as city priorities shifted to the pandemic. However, the city's commitment to Complete Streets remained strong, thanks to the previous efforts of the committee and local advocates. Since multiple city council members had participated in the Complete Streets Consortium, the benefits for Complete Streets were fresh in their minds, helping the committee make its case for a strong policy.

### Part III: What makes Joplin's policy great

The Joplin Complete Streets policy set a goal in its vision and intent to [prioritize underinvested and underserved communities](#): "While this ordinance applies throughout the community, Joplin shall develop plans and set goals to prioritize and ensure the successful implementation of Complete Streets in neighborhoods which have experienced historic underinvestment."

One strategy to accomplish this goal was including equity in the [project selection criteria](#), ensuring the prioritization of projects that will provide more transportation options to historically disconnected neighborhoods to help boost residents' access to everyday destinations.

To [measure their progress](#) on implementation, Joplin will collect data on the number of other city policies that have been updated to comply with the Complete Streets policy, the number of exemptions granted, personnel trainings, community engagement activities, the locations and quantity of crashes and serious injuries on roadways, the number of users (new and existing), and a breakdown of users by mode (cycling, walking, driving, etc.). The results will be distributed online through social media to encourage transparency and accountability to the community advocates who fought so hard for the policy's adoption.

### Part IV: Putting the policy into practice

The final element of a strong policy is a [concrete plan for implementation](#). How will you make the paradigm shift required to institutionalize this new approach? Like many cities, limited capacity in Joplin's city government has impacted the speed of implementation, but some aspects are already underway.

While creating the 2018 Active Transportation Plan, city personnel prioritized engagement with underserved and low-income communities. To solicit feedback, they met people where they already were, holding meetings in a local theater in the historically Black neighborhood of East Town, as well as sending out surveys through free school lunches. The information in this plan will ultimately help identify specific corridors to prioritize for Complete Streets projects.



**Caption:** A group of children take a bike bus to school. Photos courtesy of the City of Joplin.

To allow for coordination among all the different departments and stakeholders that will influence Complete Streets projects, a Complete Streets Committee will be formed to guide the implementation process. This committee includes representatives from the Department of Public Works; the Department of Planning, Development and Neighborhood Services; the Department of Parks and Recreation; the Joplin Police Department; the Department of Health; the Convention and Visitors Bureau; the Joplin Trails Coalition; and the Trails and Connectivity Working Group. Four representatives from the general public will also serve on the committee, including two from neighborhoods that have experienced underinvestment, poor health outcomes, or are otherwise categorized as low-income neighborhoods.

The policy **requires proactive land-use planning**, including revising existing land-use policies, plans, and zoning ordinances. As a result, Joplin's new zoning and development code will set minimum standards to enhance roadway safety, like 10 feet widths for multi-use paths.

As Joplin's Complete Streets Committee makes progress on implementation, more policies and standards like these will be updated. The Complete Streets policy will be at the heart of the city's plans and investments for the future. For example, Joplin's capital improvement plan is going up for vote soon, and the new Complete Streets policy should steer the plan towards more active transportation and safe streets projects.

## Part V: Lessons learned

The story of Joplin’s Complete Streets policy always comes back to the people. This top-ranking Complete Streets policy would have never been possible without the hard work and dedication of Complete Streets advocates, city staff and leadership, and the numerous connections they built along the way.

**There are resources out there to help you meet the moment.** Creating the case for a strong Complete Streets policy required funding and knowledge. The Joplin team benefited from funding from the state’s Department of Health and Senior Services and technical assistance programs like Smart Growth America’s Complete Streets Consortium, where they tapped into broader advocacy networks and strengthened relationships with policymakers. These resources helped the committee draft a top-ranking policy and develop strategies to get it passed.

**The conversation doesn’t end after adoption.** At every stage of the process, the Joplin team relied on input from partners and stakeholders in and outside of their community. Complete Streets Champions like Michael Kelley helped create a strong policy draft, while Joplin residents and city council members helped advocate for change. As Joplin moves into their committee-led implementation process, coordination between the City and advocates will continue to be key to the project’s success.

**Complete Streets are for transportation. But they also provide space for recreation.** The Complete Streets policy will help attract new residents, tourists, and economic development—selling points that helped the Joplin team make the case for adoption. However, the policy focuses on prioritizing projects that will better connect current residents to safe, active transportation options. Their focus on equity will help ensure that Complete Streets truly benefit all of Joplin.

*Thank you to Troy Bolander, Director of Planning, Development and Neighborhood Services at the City of Joplin, Taylor Cunningham, Transportation Planner at the Mid-America Regional Council, and Michael Kelley, Policy Director at BikeWalkKC for their time and expertise in producing this case study.*

**Michael Kelley has helped nine communities across Missouri adopt Complete Streets policies.**



**Caption:** Sidewalks give space for pedestrians to walk. Photo courtesy of the City of Joplin.



**Smart Growth America**  
Improving lives by improving communities



**National Complete  
Streets Coalition**