



Smart Growth America

Improving lives by improving communities

Recommendations and Next Steps

**Complete Streets, Complete Communities
RAO Community Health and Sustain Charlotte
Charlotte, NC**

**Prepared by Smart Growth America
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memo

Background

Smart Growth America, in partnership with the CDC's Department of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity, is providing technical assistance to SPAN, HOP, and REACH recipients on building Activity-Friendly Routes to Everyday Destinations. These efforts are part of the Active People, Healthy NationSM Initiative that is working to help 27 million Americans become more physically active by 2027 by supporting the strategy of building activity-friendly routes to everyday destinations.



As part of this work, SGA partnered with REACH recipient RAO Community Health and Sustain Charlotte in Charlotte, NC over the course of several months to prepare and provide a virtual multidisciplinary technical assistance workshop held from July 21-30, 2020. Originally envisioned as an onsite workshop, SGA worked with partners to shift to a virtual format in response to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.

SGA used its experience and expertise to provide education on best practices to build a common foundation of understanding on the relationship between Complete Streets and activity-friendly routes to everyday destinations; to facilitate a series of discussions to identify local challenges and opportunities; and ultimately to synthesize the outcomes of the data and discussions into recommendations that represent the priorities of the community and stakeholders.

Complete Streets, Complete Communities

Representing SGA, Emily Schweninger, Cole Zaccaro, Beth Osborne, Chris Zimmerman, Christopher Coes, and Eric Sundquist worked with local partners in Charlotte, NC, leveraging experience in public health; transportation; streetscape planning and design; corridor planning; community and economic development for small towns and rural areas; equitable development strategies; policy development and adoption; and stakeholders, partnerships, and community engagement. Participants in the virtual workshops included representatives such as local government, transportation professionals, advocacy groups, healthcare professionals, community members, education affiliates, non-profit representatives, and economic development leaders. The local government was notably well represented with an active presence of the City of Charlotte, including Mayor Pro Tem Julie Eiselt, City Manager Taiwo Jaiyeoba, and County Commissioner Susan Harden.

This Memorandum constitutes Smart Growth America's final recommendations, summarizing the recent Complete Streets, Complete Communities workshop, and suggesting possible Next Steps the city could take to realize a vision for future development of the focus areas addressed during the workshop.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Completing Charlotte's Streets - Problem Statement

Streets are a vital part of livable, attractive communities. Everyone, regardless of age, ability, income, race, or ethnicity, ought to have safe, comfortable, and convenient access to community destinations and public places – whether walking, driving, bicycling, e-scootering, rolling, using a mobility-assistive device, or taking public transportation. But too many streets, including those in Charlotte, are designed to encourage speeding cars and lack connectivity that would make active transportation a safer option.

Charlotte has taken great strides to create safer streets for active transportation through the development of the Charlotte 2040 Comprehensive Plan, the Transportation Action Plan, which includes a commitment to Vision Zero, and its Complete Streets Policy. Additionally, there is work being done to overhaul the zoning elements, and use a form-based code which will help create places safer for walking, biking, or rolling. Coalitions of community organizations and neighborhood residents have seen success working with the City and state to make specific corridors safer.

However, many of the participants in the workshop identified Charlotte's suburban street network, lack of connectivity to destinations, and historic car-oriented growth as significant barriers. Many of the city's corridors are designed for high speed car travel, while many neighborhood developments are built on cul-de-sacs. Residents do not have reliable or convenient transit options, forcing them to take more car trips, and forcing those who rely on transit to endure lengthy commutes and navigate unmarked, dangerous crossings to reach transit stops. Charlotte's oversized arterials encourage speeding, which make it hard to walk, bike, or roll to cross neighborhoods or reach destinations like work, healthcare, and other essential services. Workshop participants also observed disparities in what neighborhoods receive investment in pedestrian and bicycle facilities. In neighborhoods where active transportation infrastructure is being installed, there are concerns about potential rapid gentrification and the resulting displacement of existing communities.

A Complete Streets approach integrates people and place in the planning, design, construction, operation, and maintenance of our transportation networks. This helps to ensure streets are safe for people of all ages and abilities, balance the needs of different modes, and support local land uses, economies, cultures, and natural environments.

Recommendation 1: Build partnerships to support Complete Streets

Strengthen existing partnerships and coalitions

- Continue to build on the efforts of existing coalitions, such as the West Boulevard Neighborhood Coalition, and engage new stakeholders in the Coalition's work to broaden reach and influence. Replicate practices like walking audits used to gather input.

- Engage the school system to support Complete Streets initiatives. School systems can be powerful partners. They can help start a dialogue in communities that have traditionally not been empowered to engage in the transportation decision-making process, including about where schools should be located. The City of Pittsburgh led a successful demonstration project to improve safety near a school in a primarily lower-income neighborhood by working with the school to bring children and parents into the process.¹
- Focus coalitions' efforts on improving decision rules around funding, design, and land use so that individual active transportation projects do not require individual campaigns.

Recommendation 2: Improve network design to promote active-transportation

Connect a disconnected network over time

- Through Charlotte's citywide zoning update, revise roadway standards and development regulations to ensure all new development projects promote connectivity and space for active transportation moving forward.
- Develop and prioritize short-term interventions to improve walkability and connect gaps in the network. Do low-cost retrofits to existing suburban development, such as shared-use paths and trails to improve connectivity within cul-de-sac neighborhoods. Focus on creating more direct routes to transit stops where possible. Incorporate retrofits into routine maintenance.
- Work with residents—particularly Black residents, residents living with disabilities, and residents from historically underserved neighborhoods—to develop longer-term visions for transforming existing car-oriented corridors and improving the connectivity of surrounding neighborhoods (see Recommendation 6).

Improve transit options and connections

- Analyze service options and rider origins and destinations to improve transit service and increase frequencies.
- Improve first- and last-mile access by ensuring connections to transit stops are safe: address the placement of parking in new development projects so that riders do not need to cross large lots to reach their destinations; install safer, marked crosswalks (including mid-block crossings) to reach transit stops and integrate proven safety countermeasures such as protected refuge medians and Rapid Rectangular Flashing Beacons.²
- Bring transit into land use decisions routinely: ensure transit needs are represented in the City's zoning update; consult transit agency representatives consistently when the City reviews new development proposals.

¹ Learn more about Pittsburgh's approach in this case study: <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/resources/safety-demonstration-projects-case-studies-from-durham-nc-huntsville-al-and-pittsburgh-pa/>

² Learn more about proven safety countermeasures endorsed by the Federal Highway Administration: <https://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/provencountermeasures/>

Recommendation 3: Create safer places for active transportation by reducing vehicle speeds.

Reduce speeds

- Build on the important step the City has already taken to implement city-wide speed limits on local streets as part of the Vision Zero program. Work with NCDOT to slow speeds on state roads. A number of states have endorsed the approach in the National Association of City Transportation Officials' new Safe Speeds guide.³
- Adopt design criteria that build safer travel speeds into roadway design by narrowing lanes and turning radii and introducing other traffic calming measures such as chicanes, medians, or bump outs where appropriate. Take advantage of low-cost opportunities to restripe streets for safer speeds during routine maintenance.

Update how roadway design standards are applied to create safer places for pedestrians, cyclists, and people on wheels.

- Make a Complete Streets design approach the default by strengthening requirements around when it should be used. Require justification that Complete Streets design treatments are not needed, rather than needed. Require high-level sign-off and public transparency for any exemptions.
- Establish criteria to routinely add specific active transportation design treatments in resurfacing and maintenance projects (eg, installing a pedestrian crossing within 250 feet of any transit stop).
- Use more flexibility in applying traffic volume thresholds to consider the feasibility of road diets and traffic calming. If community stakeholders are calling for a change but traffic volumes are above the typical threshold, use temporary design changes to test the impacts. This can help build support whether the change is made permanent or not.

Recommendation 4: Address equity in transportation decision-making

Involve the community early and often

- Involve the community early in the planning and design process to guide Complete Streets priorities and decisions, and ensure their priorities and needs drive both the vision and project design. In particular, prioritize the needs and voices of the Black community, people living with disabilities, people who depend on transit to get around, and people living and working in traditionally underserved neighborhoods.
- Ensure community members play a key role in defining the *problem* each project addresses, not just the design of the solution.
- Remove barriers to the engagement process by considering some of the following: who leads the engagement; whether to include childcare; accessible time and location; language and interpretation; compensation for local experts; and how information or

³ <https://nacto.org/safespeeds>

invitations about engagement opportunities are disseminated. For current virtual engagement, consider the needs of people who may lack a computer or reliable wifi.

- Publicly recognize and reward City project managers who are successful in engaging the community, particularly traditionally underrepresented populations. Create accountability by building early and regular engagement into internal city procedures, such as including measures of successful community engagement as part of staff performance evaluations.

Measure the benefits of Complete Streets and evaluate who benefits

- Measure the benefits of Complete Streets investments in terms of health, safety, environment, and the economy; look specifically at who benefits and where investments are occurring most frequently.
- Collect data at the neighborhood level, not just regional level, to build a thorough understanding of disparities and underinvestment. Continue providing education about disparities and the need to invest equitably.
- Deemphasize the role of traditional transportation performance measures that exclusively prioritize vehicle speed and throughput.
- Instead, measure access to jobs and services to identify projects that will build more equitable access to jobs, food, and essential services.⁴

Use transportation project prioritization to build more equitable streets

- Develop a formal project selection process for the region/City's transportation capital and operating budgets.⁵
- Include project prioritization criteria that address existing disparities directly. Put criteria in place that prioritize connecting low-income neighborhoods, predominantly Black neighborhoods, transit-dependent neighborhoods, and historically underserved neighborhoods to job centers and necessities by walking, biking, rolling, and transit.

Recommendation 5: Establish an equitable development approach

Measure and manage the community's equitable development

- Identify and evaluate place-level social equity performance metrics to (1) determine who is the most vulnerable to economic, environmental, cultural displacement and (2) adopt racial and economic justice guiding principles.
- Identify broad, inclusive community strategy leaders to help develop a neighborhood-level strategic and community benefits plan. The plan should outline community benefit needs (economic and social equity), tradeoffs necessary to uphold the community's unique character, and an action plan.

⁴ This guide provides an introduction to using destination access metrics in decision-making for transportation and land use practitioners:

<https://www.ssti.us/2018/01/accessibility-in-practice-a-new-guide-from-ssti/>.

⁵ The following guide includes a case study on Chattanooga's model project prioritization approach presented by Cole Zaccaro during the workshop series. See page 83:

<http://t4america.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Healthy-MPO-guidebook.pdf>

- Establish a place management organization (e.g., BID, community quarterback) to (1) manage and coordinate the implementation of the neighborhood-level strategy and action plan; and (2) evaluate key economic and social performance measures and indicators for assessing the success of those plans (ex. combined housing and transportation costs, health equity, accessibility to essential services, etc.)
- Engage community partners from Black, low-income, transit-dependent, and other underserved communities as well as the disability community. Look for neighborhood or community champions and community validators to participate in the process and compensate them fairly for their time. Over-communicate, be transparent, and improve how communities and developers interact with one another. Be explicit in reporting how feedback from the community has been incorporated.

Build trust and create a shared table for neighborhood-level decisions

- Facilitate relationship-building between community leaders and developers to ensure that community needs are being integrated early in the planning process.
- Build capacity of community leaders, advocates, champions, and validators to inform development decisions based on the equitable development framework. Provide education about how development decisions get made, what standards apply, when those standards get waived, and how to engage in the process.
- Recognize and accept that a truly equitable approach may slow down the process at the beginning, but will help fast track equitable development if done correctly.

Use scorecards to shape and assess development projects

- Create a scorecard to evaluate potential development projects using an equity-based framework, working with the community. Scorecards can provide a clear picture of what success looks like for new development. They also serve as a market signal and push developers to integrate those types of standards into their plans and policies from the beginning phases. These scorecards can be used by community groups as well as the various city agencies as part of their project evaluation process.

Recommendation 6: Reenvision existing car-oriented corridors to support a transition to more walkable, people-oriented corridors over time.

Update local land regulations and development review to provide the foundation for change.

- Use the City's zoning update as an opportunity to do a detailed audit and identify barriers to active transportation in the existing code.
- Establish regulations and development strategies that orient buildings to the curb, reduce parking requirements, and make other changes to promote walkability.

Use seven key actions for remaking specific suburban corridors:

1. Identify centers and restructure land use: Start with specific nodes, such as areas near major transit stops and potential new community centers. Focus investment in those areas.

Start with zoning overlays to prioritize clustered development for those areas and work toward a walkable, well-connected street grid in redevelopment.

2. Re-engineer the street: reduce travel speeds and prioritize safety and walkability.
3. Deal with parking: with any new development and redevelopment of existing parcels, ensure that parking is oriented behind and to the side of buildings.
4. Inject new housing options: Provide diverse, affordable medium-density housing, such as duplexes, townhouses, and mixed-use apartments.
5. Locate governmental facilities strategically: government facilities are significant investments, providing jobs and services that many in the community access. Be strategic about locating them to tie networks together. While land may be cheaper toward the outskirts of the community, locating facilities on the fringes can lead to significantly higher transportation costs and poorer access for people trying to reach them.
6. Create a catalytic project: Focus initial investment and community engagement around one project to demonstrate success and encourage future reinvestment.
7. Establish place management: Start a place management organization like a BID to ensure future development occurs equitably and in line with the community's vision.

Recommendation 7: Use short-term achievable outcomes to facilitate future projects and grow community interest.

Conduct demonstration projects to improve engagement and build support for Complete Streets

- Conduct demonstration projects or quick builds to show the community the variety of tools at their disposal through temporary and low-cost installations.
- Use festivals and other events to move demonstration projects forward.
- Develop strong engagement plans for each project. When planned thoughtfully, demonstration projects can also be used to test (and later replicate) new ways of engaging communities who have traditionally been underrepresented in decision-making.⁶

Focus on the process of Complete Streets, not just the products

- Conduct an audit of transportation project development processes and practices that pose barriers to Complete Streets and codify needed changes to avoid losing ground on progress the City and community stakeholders have made as champions leave.
- Establish a long-term goal to complete Charlotte's streets and identify markers or milestones to achieve that goal.
- Celebrate small victories to keep the community engaged and energized around the work.

⁶ For examples of demonstration projects from other communities, including community engagement approaches and key lessons learned, see the following case studies:
<https://smartgrowthamerica.org/resources/safety-demonstration-projects-case-studies-from-durham-nc-huntsville-al-and-pittsburgh-pa/>
<https://smartgrowthamerica.org/resources/safety-demonstration-projects-case-studies-from-orlando-fl-lexington-ky-and-south-bend-in/>