

Howard County Complete Streets Policy

- As Adopted 10/7/19 By Council Resolution 120-2019

1. Vision

“To ensure that Howard County is a place for individuals of all backgrounds to live and travel freely, safely, and comfortably, public and private roadways in Howard County shall be safe and convenient for residents of all ages and abilities who travel by foot, bicycle, public transportation or automobile, ensuring sustainable communities Countywide.” - Council Resolution 35-2016.

2. Scope

The scope of this policy covers every transportation project, whether new or retrofit, capital improvement, or subdivision and land development. Certain operations, repair, and maintenance activities also create an opportunity for safer, more accessible streets for users of all ages and abilities, who walk, bike, take the bus, and drive cars, motorcycles, and trucks. Project phases within the scope of the policy include: planning, programming, design, land acquisition and rights of way, construction engineering, construction and reconstruction.

Provision of temporary accommodations during periods of facility disturbance must also be considered. Capital projects in the early stages of design will be included if possible. If opportunities arise for Complete Streets improvements to be incorporated into projects that have another primary purpose, the scale of Complete Streets improvements should be appropriate to the scale of the project. The Design Manual will provide guidance on the appropriate scale of improvements. County operations and maintenance procedures must take into account the needs of all street users. Emergency repairs and similar situations that require an immediate response are excluded from this policy.

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.

3. Exceptions

Complete Streets improvements may not be appropriate in some cases due to the context. There are different exception processes for capital projects and developer projects.

For capital projects within the scope of this policy, exceptions to this policy shall be reviewed and approved unanimously by the Director of Public Works, the Director of Planning and Zoning, and the Administrator of the Office of Transportation or their designees. When a Complete Streets exception is being considered for a particular project, public notice, including a description of the project and the reason for the exception, shall be given through the Office of Transportation website. The Multimodal Transportation Board shall be given the opportunity to offer an advisory opinion before an exception is granted.

For development projects, exceptions will be considered using the development review process, which provides opportunities for technical review and public input.

Exceptions may be considered for approval when the project (either capital or developer) involves:

- i. An accommodation that is not necessary on corridors where specific user groups are prohibited;
- ii. A justifiable absence of current and future need exists and is not recommended in any existing planning documents;
- iii. A project of equivalent scope and schedule exists or is already programmed for funding within the next five years to provide connectivity for all users; or
- iv. Cost of accommodation or degree of impact is grossly disproportionate to the need or probable use.

4. Conflicting or Competing Needs

When there are conflicting needs among users and/or modes, safety shall be the highest priority; particularly safety for the most vulnerable street users (pedestrians, bicyclists, children, seniors, and people with additional accessibility needs). Selection and quantitative weighting of performance measures shall also support investment in the most underinvested and underserved communities.

Motor vehicle speed, flow, and driver convenience shall not be prioritized over safety for vulnerable street users. Reducing excessive motor vehicle speeds on streets where vulnerable users are likely will be considered a net benefit to the community.

To the extent that current code allows, when space is a limiting factor and where vulnerable users are likely, allocating space to a mode that is not currently accommodated shall be prioritized over providing additional space to a mode that is already accommodated.

5. Creating a network

To connect people to the places they want to go, the entire trip should be safe and comfortable. This requires a seamless, connected street network, regardless of mode, including safe and convenient pedestrian crossings and access to transit. Even a small interruption in the connection or one hazardous section can make a trip challenging.

Every street does not necessarily need to provide separate accommodations for every mode, but a network should be in place so that likely trips can be made by walking, biking, and taking public transit, as well as driving. The street network is also complemented by pathway connections in many locations.

The County shall require developers to implement Complete Streets as per this policy. Furthermore, the County shall work proactively with the State of Maryland, neighboring communities and counties, and businesses and educational institutions to develop plans, facilities, and accommodations that further the County's Complete Streets policy. Such coordination should result in continuing such infrastructure beyond the County's borders to the extent feasible.

6. Coordination and Engagement

Many organizations, agencies, and entities have a role to play in implementing Complete Streets. Coordination and commitment from all agencies involved are required for success. Howard County is committed to being a leader in this effort. Some of the groups involved include:

- Howard County Government
- Howard County Public School System
- Community associations
- State Highway Administration
- Developers
- Property owners
- Engineering companies
- Construction contractors
- Advisory groups such as the Multimodal Transportation Board and Public Works Board
- Advocacy groups
- Groups working with those with limited English proficiency

Community engagement is also essential to the success of Complete Streets, particularly in the planning and design phases. Regular engagement should occur prior to the planning and design of specific capital projects. For each capital project within the scope of this policy, input shall be sought from affected stakeholders prior to setting the scope and budget of the project.

Furthermore, resources should be allocated to proactive efforts to interact with the community to identify and communicate their experience regarding existing transportation facilities and identify areas of need and opportunity. At a minimum, this should be tied to the annual Complete Streets report or preparation of the County's MDOT priority letter. Local meetings or other opportunities for input should provide easy access for all members of the community.

Different types of projects benefit from different types of public engagement. Therefore, specific procedures for initiating public engagement, focusing on traditionally disenfranchised and underserved communities, shall be developed and made available to the public on the County website by agencies responsible for implementation of this policy within 12 months of County Council's vote to approve this policy.

7. Design Guidelines

This policy shall provide the policy context, themes and tone for Howard County Design Manual Volume III, Complete Streets and Bridges. Design of Complete Streets in Howard County shall draw on established state of the art street design guidelines including but not limited to national guidance from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), and the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO). In addition to reliance on established street design guidelines, the design of Complete Streets in Howard County will be flexible and responsive to the evolving nature of transportation needs and innovation in design practice.

8. Context Sensitivity

Context sensitivity allows for flexible evaluation of the community's needs with respect to existing streets and planned land use. The level of improvements should take into consideration the classification of the existing roadway as defined in the Design Manual, adjacent land use, type of community, and plans and guidelines, in particular, The Howard County General Plan. Improvements should consider the scale and character of the community and strive for connectivity between communities based on the expected transportation needs.

Context sensitivity also reflects the desires of communities affected by implementation of transportation improvements. At the planning phase of a capital project, before scope and budget are finalized, the County will obtain public input to identify transportation needs related to all modes of travel. Input will explicitly be sought from traditionally underrepresented populations in the project area. Unintended consequences to those populations, including potential gentrification and/or involuntary displacement, will be considered and mitigated.

9. Performance Measures

Performance measures shall be used to track Complete Streets implementation progress, prioritize projects, and evaluate designs. *Evaluating Complete Streets Projects: A Guide for Practitioners* by AARP, Smart Growth America, and the National Complete Streets Coalition provides guidance for municipalities implementing Complete Streets policies. The performance measures listed below fit into several categories as listed in the guide and prioritized by Howard County stakeholders: access, equity/safety (tied), public health, place, and economy. Specific measures for each goal were evaluated by the Complete Streets Implementation Team in consideration of stakeholder feedback, staff feedback, and measurability.

The Complete Streets Implementation Team, in conjunction with the Office of Transportation, shall maintain a publicly-available list of performance measures on the County website and prepare an annual report documenting the County's progress with respect to these performance measures as described in Section 10 of this policy. The following performance measures shall be used:

- Safety/Public Health: Number and location of fatalities by road type and mode of travel, and by age and gender as data are available
- Safety/Public Health: Number and location of serious injuries by road type and mode of travel, and by age and gender as data are available
- Access: Miles of sidewalk, trail, and bicycle infrastructure installed or repaired
- Access: Number of curb ramps installed or repaired
- Access: Number of crosswalks installed or repaired
- Access: Number of transit stops with sidewalk access installed or repaired
- Access: Percentage of transit stops with marked crosswalks within 150 feet
- Access: Percent of Bike Howard short term network completed
- Access: Percent of Walk Howard network completed
- Access: Percent of the population with direct access to a low-stress bike network
- Access/Place: Connections to important destinations, including schools, libraries, parks, community centers, village centers, social service centers, significant health care facilities, and government centers
- Access/Economy: Connections to employment centers
- Equity: Percentage of new roadway projects or roadway repairs in priority communities

Equity shall be incorporated into every performance measure listed above to the extent data are available. Equity will be measured using the Vulnerable Population Index method, a system developed by the Baltimore Metropolitan Council which is compliant with the requirements of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Executive Order 12898, "Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority and Low-Income Populations."

The Vulnerable Population Index uses U.S. Census Bureau data to measure the percentages of the following population groups in each census tract:

- Poverty
- Non-Hispanic, Non-White
- Hispanic
- Limited English Proficiency (LEP)
- Disabled
- Elderly
- Carless

When the percent of the seven population groups in each census tract is higher than the County mean, this tract is counted as vulnerable. Tracts with even greater disparity receive additional weight. Data from each group is combined to create a composite score to measure the degree to which each tract is vulnerable.

Priority shall be given to projects in census tracts that are within the top 20-25 percent of scores on the Howard County Vulnerable Population Index.

10. Implementation

Responsibility: It shall be the responsibility of the Office of Transportation to convene a Complete Streets Implementation Team, consisting of an equal number of internal and external stakeholders, to guide and track implementation of this policy. Initial composition of the Team shall be determined within 60 days of County Council's vote to approve this policy.

Update of Regulations, Standards, and Plans: The County shall incorporate this policy into all county-developed land use and transportation plans and policies.

The County shall review this policy every five years to ensure the policy is in line with current best practices.

The County shall establish a routine process for project delivery that reflects the Complete Streets policy. The Department of Public Works, Department of Planning and Zoning, Office of Transportation, and all other relevant County departments and agencies will review, seek and incorporate public input and amend current design standards, including the Design Manual and the portions of the Subdivision and Land Development Regulations that apply to roadway and bridge construction or reconstruction, to ensure that they reflect the best available standards and effectively implement this policy. Updates to the Design Manual shall be finalized by the County Executive and submitted to Council within 24 months of County Council's vote to approve this policy. The County will issue interim updates to design guidance while the Design Manual is being updated.

The County shall review Subdivision and Land Development Regulations concurrently with the Design Manual updates. The County shall make recommended updates to the Regulations, including public engagement procedures, as soon as possible but not more than 9 months after the Design Manual is updated.

Establishing Priority Projects: Projects shall be prioritized quantitatively on an annual basis using the project performance measures listed in this policy. The County shall establish a detailed project prioritization process within 12 months of the County Council's vote to approve this policy.

Education and Training: The County shall provide training to all staff in all County departments who are responsible for site and road improvements on the content of this policy and the County's new standards for using the policy for project development and review. Training shall also be provided for staff who are responsible for street maintenance and operations to offer an understanding of how maintenance and operations activities affect the experience of all street users. The County shall also encourage staff professional development and training on non-motorized transportation issues through attending conferences, classes, seminars and workshops, as appropriate.

The County shall provide training to citizens serving on relevant boards and commissions on the content of this policy and best practices for implementing the policy. Education for the public on Complete Streets concepts, the policy, and the implementation process shall also be provided. Demonstration projects can be used as educational opportunities to build familiarity with new street designs.

The County shall provide educational opportunities to developers, civil engineering firms, land use attorneys, and similar parties to understand the policy and subsequent changes to regulations, standards, and plans.

Tracking and Reporting: Tracking progress with Complete Streets project implementation will facilitate coordination and transparency. The Office of Transportation – with the support of the Complete Streets Implementation Team, the Department of Public Works, and the Department of Planning and Zoning – shall track and document progress made in implementing this policy in the form of a semiannual report. The annual report shall include:

- Progress made on each performance measure during the previous year;
- Public engagement undertaken;
- A description of the Complete Streets related education or training undertaken by the County;
- Exceptions granted to incorporating Complete Streets into transportation projects, citing specific reasons; and
- The measures listed below:
 - Journey to work by mode
 - Percentage of urban/suburban roadway mileage with sidewalks on one or both sides
 - Transit ridership
 - Number (or percentage) of students within the recognized Howard County Public School walk zones (safe walk or bike route to school within the minimum distance set by HCPSS)

Communication: Project plans and objectives shall be clearly communicated to stakeholders and the public at large. As more fully described in Section 6 of this policy, the public shall be given ample opportunity to provide input to the annual tracking and reporting process for the policy as a whole, as well as to capital projects before scopes and budgets are set. The Department of Public Works, the Department of Planning and Zoning, and the Office of Transportation shall develop department-specific outreach procedures and present them at a monthly meeting of County Council within 12 months of County Council’s vote to approve this policy.

Maintenance: Transportation facilities shall be maintained until they are decommissioned or replaced. All forms of transportation shall be equitably maintained, including during times of repair, upkeep or construction. “Maintenance of traffic” shall be applied to all modes. To the extent possible, maintenance of facilities for one mode should not disadvantage another.

The County shall update or establish maintenance procedures as follows:

- Roads and streets shall be kept clear of debris through regular sweeping.
- Spot repair shall keep surfaces smooth and manholes or access covers flush with the pavement.
- Snow plowing should, to the extent that conditions allow, keep sidewalks, bicycle facilities, and bus stops clear of snow.
- Property owner responsibilities to keep sidewalks passable should be enforced.

Funding sources: Funding for construction, operations, and maintenance is expected to come from a variety of areas including County budgets, developer projects, state, federal and other grants.

11. Conclusion

A Complete Streets approach will make the street network safer and more convenient for those who drive, bicycle, walk, or take the bus – improving quality of life and making Howard County a better and more equitable place to live, work, and play.