

Integrating Safe Walking and Bicycling to School into Comprehensive Planning

In many communities, roads, schools, and neighborhoods have developed in ways that make it difficult, unsafe, or impossible for children to get to school by foot or bicycle. However, some communities are taking steps to make streets and neighborhoods better. One key way that communities go about determining how they want to change and develop in the future is through a process known as comprehensive planning. Many communities are revising their comprehensive plans to include Safe Routes to School concepts and address walking and bicycling to school. Safe Routes to School describes the initiatives that focus on encouraging students to walk and bicycle to school and making it safer for them to do so, as well as the movement of advocates and stakeholders who support these efforts. Safe Routes to School projects are eligible for funding under federal transportation programs and may be eligible under some state programs. By including considerations and action steps on walking and bicycling to school in comprehensive plans, decisions about the future of our communities can include safe and active travel to school.

What Is a Comprehensive Plan?

A comprehensive plan acts as a blueprint for a community's future. A comprehensive plan is a written document that starts with residents' vision for how they want the community to look and feel in the future – what kind of place they want it to be. Building off of the current community conditions, the comprehensive plan details the specific goals, objectives, policies, and action steps that, if implemented, will lead to a realization of that vision. Does a midsize town in an agricultural region want to stay aligned with its rural culture while becoming a home to specific new industries? Does a small city want to reinvigorate its downtown and maintain the peaceful feel of its neighborhoods? The comprehensive plan is the place where the large and small steps necessary to achieve these kinds of goals are spelled out.

Comprehensive plans vary in their legal strength and effect from state to state. In some states, zoning codes must conform to comprehensive plans, and development that is contrary to a plan is illegal. In other states, comprehensive plans provide a vision and guidelines, but may not be enforceable. State law or regulations may spell out how frequently a comprehensive plan must be updated, and will likely set out the topic areas that must be addressed by the comprehensive plan. But whatever the legal weight of a comprehensive plan, all comprehensive plans play a role in articulating how a community should develop and in guiding investments and actions by private individuals and local officials.

Terminology: Safe Routes to School or Walking and Bicycling to School

In some communities, the phrase “Safe Routes to School” is widely used and well known. In others, the term may be unfamiliar or too jargony and it makes more sense to just say “walking and bicycling to school.” When thinking about language for the comprehensive plan, the goal is to be clear for present and future readers while capturing the full spirit of what is envisioned, so a community can pick whichever phrase resonates more for them.



Why Address Walking and Bicycling to School in Comprehensive Plans?

Comprehensive plans can help to integrate walking and bicycling to school more deeply into the fabric of a community. Much of the work of the walking and bicycling to school movement often focuses on the school itself. But it is the local government that has authority over many key matters that affect walking and bicycling to school. For example, local governments often design and control the streets in the school vicinity, make decisions about the amount of housing and availability of parks near schools, initiate programs that affect the community's support for bicycling and walking, and conduct traffic enforcement that can encourage or discourage walking and bicycling. Because walking-and-bicycling-to-school initiatives require the support of both school districts and local jurisdictions to be fully successful, finding ways to articulate that support can be crucial. A comprehensive plan lets a local jurisdiction spell out the actions that it will take that are within its control, and the ways in which it will collaborate and cooperate with the local school district or districts to accomplish mutual goals.

Including walking and bicycling to school in comprehensive plans also allows for a more forward looking approach. Instead of simply reacting to how things currently are on the ground and identifying short-term solutions, comprehensive planning allows for longer term thinking about how development should occur in the future. Considering walking and bicycling to school in comprehensive planning enables community development to avoid repeating the poor decisions of the past that may have led to unsafe environments for children, instead ensuring that decisions and investments in years to come steadily move a community in the direction of safer walking and bicycling for children. As a result, comprehensive planning allows communities to set processes in motion that will lead to better outcomes in the future.

What Does It Mean to Include Walking and Bicycling to School in Comprehensive Plans?

Comprehensive plans typically include chapters that address core topics related to walking and bicycling to school, such as public facilities (including schools), transportation (such chapters may also be called circulation or mobility chapters), and land use. In addition, closely related topics are addressed, including housing and recreation. What does it look like to include walking and bicycling to school in a comprehensive plan? This inclusion can take place in several different ways.

Vision: First, the community vision can include walking and bicycling to school. The notion of a community where children are safe from traffic and from violence in their daily journey to school on foot or bicycle is one that many community members picture in an ideal community. The vision can note Safe Routes to School by name, or may simply state something like: "We envision a community where children and adults safely and conveniently walk, bicycle, and use public transportation as part of daily routines to get to schools, parks, shopping, health care facilities, work, and other destinations."

Public Facilities Chapter: In most States, towns and counties might have little or no authority over public schools, yet schools are clearly a crucial player in the future development and well-being of a community. The public facilities chapter is the area in a comprehensive plan where schools are usually addressed, along with other civic spaces and government buildings. The comprehensive plan generally cannot dictate what steps should be taken by the school district, but can be used to develop a dialog.



It is a place to (1) lay out those actions within a local government's control that it will take to support a positive direction for the community's schools, and (2) identify how the local government will work to collaborate with the school district or districts.

In practice, communities can spell out any number of actions. Examples include promoting walk and bike to school days on a community-wide basis; supporting districts in establishing walking school buses and encouraging families to walk and bicycle to school with children; and identifying a role for law enforcement officers, such as providing a crossing guard program and slowing traffic near schools. Comprehensive plans can commit the local jurisdiction to expanding a crossing guard program or seeking funding to support walking and bicycling to school. For example, the county comprehensive plan for Marin County, California, says: "Consider using general fund monies, state gas tax subventions, sales tax funds, and development exactions/impact fees to provide bicycle and pedestrian facilities, as well as Safe Routes to School programs."

Transportation Chapter: Another key area for including walking and bicycling to school in a comprehensive plan is in the chapter on transportation. Transportation chapters usually address how the community wants to see mobility improve in the community. From the 1950s through the 1980s, such chapters were almost exclusively dedicated to the movement of cars and freight; transportation chapters would lay out general goals and areas for improved movement of vehicles and goods. But increasingly since the 1990s, many comprehensive plans describe goals related to a more multimodal vision. The transportation chapter may include the community's commitment to Complete Streets, ensuring that with every new street or street renovation, streets become safer and more convenient for everyone who uses them, whether young or old, on foot, bicycle, wheelchair, or car. Some plans may lay out specific goals, objectives, and policies with regard to safety and convenience of different modes of travel. For example, they may discuss where gaps in a bicycling network can best be filled, may describe a vision for making transit easier to access, and may spell out different strategies for increasing walkability in town centers and neighborhoods.

A focus on increasing walkability and bikeability in a community contributes to creating the kind of community where children can get around safely on bicycle and on foot. But by spelling out specific goals and implementation steps around walking and bicycling to school, a transportation chapter can go much further in making trips to school safer for children. Prioritizing infrastructure near schools and parks is one obvious way to do this. The comprehensive plan for the town of Nampa, Idaho, works to incorporate this goal into the design of new schools in its policy to "[e]ncourage all new schools

Useful Resources in Adding Walking and Bicycling to School into Comprehensive Plans

Model Safe Routes to School Language for Comprehensive Plans – ChangeLab Solutions. This resource includes suggested comprehensive plan language for basic and advanced walking and bicycling to school goals, objectives, and policies. It is designed to be tailored to the needs of a local community. http://changelabsolutions.org/publications/SRTS_general-plans.

Multimodal Transportation Best Practices and Model Element – National Center for Transit Research. This resource reviews literature and best practices in addressing multimodal transportation in comprehensive plans. The suggested language and compiled examples should prove very helpful to communities looking to revise their transportation chapters to move beyond a vehicular focus. http://www.nctr.usf.edu/2014/06/multimodal-transportation-best-practices-and-model-element-2/?utm_source=transptdm&utm_medium=listserv&utm_campaign=reportrelease



to do an analysis of pedestrian and bicycle accessibility to the school prior to approval of the construction plans.” A comprehensive plan can also identify steps to reduce speed near schools, both through lowering speed limits and through design changes. In addition, plans can commit to providing law enforcement officers to ensure safe driving in school vicinities during school travel hours.

Incorporating Walking and Bicycling to School Concepts in Additional Areas

Walking and bicycling to school concepts should be incorporated wherever relevant throughout a comprehensive plan.

Land Use Chapter: Land use chapters can emphasize the importance of in-fill development near schools (tucking new development into existing communities, rather than building out fields on the outskirts of town), and can call for zoning updates that support connectivity and good walking and bicycling infrastructure in these areas.

Recreation Chapter: Recreation chapters can encourage the development of safe walking and bicycling routes for the school journey that run through parks and along trails. They can also encourage locating schools and parks next to each other to maximize efficiency and available resources. Safe Routes to School concepts include safe routes between school and recreation areas; recreation chapters can address these routes as well as the general need for safe access by foot, bicycle, and public transit to parks and recreation areas.

Housing Chapter: Housing chapters can call for building new housing near existing schools, especially multifamily and mixed income housing, to increase the percentage of children who live near enough to school to easily walk and bicycle.

Health Chapter: Another new trend in comprehensive planning is to include a health chapter. A health chapter should include a mention of walking, bicycling, and Safe Routes to School as a way to promote healthy children and support healthy adults as well.

How Do You Get Walking and Bicycling to School Incorporated into your Comprehensive Plan?

How does a comprehensive plan get put into place, and who decides on the vision and actions laid out within? Comprehensive planning processes differ from place to place, but they generally include some similar steps:

1. **Process Begins:** A comprehensive planning process may get underway because it is required by state law, or it may be initiated because local leaders see an updated vision and plan as necessary to attract new investments or change the community’s direction. Generally, as an early step, planners will conduct an analysis of existing conditions in the community to assess strengths, areas of concern, and opportunities.
2. **Community Meetings and Visioning:** The local planning department or a consultant will usually hold a number of community meetings to solicit input from different sectors of the community and draft a community vision for future development.
3. **Drafting the Plan:** The planners will take the input and draft a plan that sets out, within the parameters described by state planning law, how the community should develop in the future in a variety of areas.



4. **Public Comment:** Following the drafting, there will be a period during which the plan is made available for public review and comment. The plan will be revised to account for feedback from the public, from interest groups, and from others within the local government.
5. **Adoption:** As a general matter, the legislative body for the local government will vote on whether to adopt the comprehensive plan. Sometimes this process occurs in stages, with part of a comprehensive plan adopted while another portion is still under development.
6. **Updates:** Depending on state law, a comprehensive plan may be updated every five years, or perhaps at longer intervals. These updates may provide an opportunity for slight revisions or may involve a complete rewrite of the comprehensive plan, to account for changed circumstances or new visions for the community's future.

If a comprehensive planning process is anticipated or underway in your community, there are a number of opportunities to incorporate language on walking or bicycling to school into the comprehensive plan. Participating in the community meetings that define the vision and initial direction of the plan is important. Community members can suggest desired language up front, or can make comments and propose edits and additions when public comment occurs following the release of the initial draft. When the plan is presented to decision makers, community members can also appeal to those individuals to require the inclusion of desired provisions or themes. Generally, the earlier that you engage with the planning process, the more stakeholders you include, and the more sustained your engagement is, the greater the impact will be upon the final product.

Working with governmental and community partners can be key to achieving policy goals. Partnerships can take the form of a formal coalition or simply consist of discussions and actions directed toward common goals. In working toward the inclusion of walking and bicycling to school in a comprehensive plan, there are a number of partners who can support your efforts:

- **The planning department:** Having your planning department on board is a big advantage. Meet with your planners early in the process to discuss how walking and bicycling to school can best be included in the comprehensive plan in light of your community's characteristics.
- **The health department:** In most communities, health is a newer voice in planning processes. The support of your health department can provide a sense of urgency and credibility to the need for walking and bicycling to school. Health departments are also frequently a source for excellent local data that can demonstrate the need for safe and convenient active transportation opportunities.
- **Elected officials:** It is generally very beneficial to have elected officials champion a given goal, especially if they will ultimately decide whether to vote for or against a draft plan or the implementation efforts that follow.
- **Other government personnel:** Other government officials may also help to influence the content of a plan. For example, having your chief law enforcement officer speak to the importance of removing obstacles to children's travel to school can be significant in influencing decision-making.
- **Community members:** Community coalitions are at their best when they include a wide swath of community interests – families with children, older adults, faith leaders, education professionals, equity leaders, active transportation groups, and environmental interests, for example. Final outcomes are stronger when many different perspectives are incorporated, and attendance of many unified residents at community meetings and city council votes can have a strong impact on decision makers.



What Are Some Examples of Communities that Have Walking and Bicycling to School in their Comprehensive Plans?

Just as many different types of communities have embraced walking and bicycling to school, there is also a wide diversity in the types of communities that have integrated walking and bicycling to school into their comprehensive plans. Some examples follow.

Moscow, Idaho

Moscow is the county seat of Latah County, in western Idaho. The principal city in this largely agricultural region, Moscow has a population of around 24,000, making up about 60 percent of the county's population as a whole. Around 22 percent of households include children under 18. The Moscow comprehensive plan has a specific section addressing student transportation to school. This section calls upon the city to “[p]romote student use of biking and walking to school through the development and improvement of pedestrian and bicycle facilities throughout the community.” The plan notes key sidewalk projects, including some that are underway and others that are planned for the future. Specific actions that are called out include finding funding to fix hazards that require busing children who live within walking distance of school. The plan also looks at an area that is often disconnected from walking and bicycling to school considerations, the development approval process, committing Moscow to reviewing “proposed subdivisions and other development proposals for potential pedestrian easements or other means of providing more direct pedestrian routes between residential developments and school facilities.” With population growth occurring in this region, the focus on development is particularly apt.

Arlington, Virginia

Located within the Washington DC metropolitan area, Arlington is an affluent area that is home to many federal agencies and government contractors. The county is the densest in Virginia, and has over 200,000 residents, with just under 20 percent of households including school age children. The comprehensive plan has a clear statement supporting walking and bicycling to school, stating that the county will “[u]tilize the principles of Safe Routes to School in designing and operating streets in the vicinity of Arlington schools.” In addition, the plan establishes the policy of “[c]onstruct[ing] missing sidewalks and upgrad[ing] street crossings within school walking zones to provide school children and those who walk with them safe and enjoyable walking routes to school.” Arlington also specifically calls out bicycling and the need to provide curricular material on bicycling: “Conduct an ongoing safe bicycle route to schools program including semi-annual bicycle safety educational programs for children and adults.”

Corte Madera, California

Corte Madera is a small suburban town in California, located along the San Francisco Bay. The town is four square miles, and has a population just under 10,000. One third of households have children. Corte Madera's comprehensive plan addresses walking and bicycling to school, as well as bicycling and pedestrian needs generally, throughout the circulation element of its comprehensive plan. One circulation goal is the creation of a “Town-wide system of safe, efficient and attractive bicycle and pedestrian routes for commuter, school and recreational use.” The plan calls for the city to work with “local School Districts to identify those bicycle and pedestrian routes most critical for Safe Routes to School improvements.” In addition, the comprehensive plan integrates walking and bicycling to school considerations into other areas of emphasis.



For example, in considering a goal of reducing vehicle miles traveled, the plan calls for travel demand management at local public and private schools and commits the city to “[a]ctively support efforts to improve upon and expand transportation options for students and reduce school-related traffic congestion. Examples include supporting increased funding of school buses and crossing guards, construction of safe routes to schools, and staggering school hours.”

Bluffton, South Carolina

Near the coast of South Carolina, and situated along a river, the town of Bluffton has a population of around 13,000 and a land area of around 51 square miles. Over 50 percent of households have school age children. The town has seen rapid population growth and development since 2000. The town’s comprehensive plan addresses walking and bicycling to school in depth, including relevant considerations in its chapters on community facilities, land use, and transportation. One area of focus is the need for coordination between the town, school district, and other governmental bodies when it comes to school siting and the co-location of government services. The plan notes the importance of this goal in light of the “fast decreasing amount of buildable space.” A key implementation step involves the promotion of “the clustering of schools, libraries, parks and residential areas” and need to ensure “walkability between facilities and neighborhoods.” Other topics addressed include prioritizing sidewalks and bicycling facilities near schools and seeking funding to support walking and bicycling to school.

Portland, Oregon

As the most populous city in Oregon, Portland is well known for being at the forefront of the walking and bicycling movement. Bicycle use in Portland has tripled since 2001, thanks to a significant investment in infrastructure and a related cultural change, and Portland has the highest percentage of bicycling commuters of any major American city. With one quarter of households having children, Portland’s commitment to bicycling and walking includes a robust Safe Routes to School program. The comprehensive plan is ahead of many in specifically addressing Safe Routes to School in several places, as well as referring to the walking needs of children in its discussion of providing for pedestrians. For example, in setting out priorities for project selection through the capital improvement selection process, a key objective is to “[p]rovide and improve access to and within activity centers and develop safe routes to schools.” The plan also notes, as one of three objectives related to schools in the public facilities section, the need to provide “traffic improvements, such as sidewalks and bikeways, to promote safe routes to schools where attendance area reorganization requires longer travel distances for students.”

Conclusion

As communities increasingly experience the benefits of walking and bicycling to school for health, traffic congestion, and social connectedness, planning for safe and active school travel is being incorporated into comprehensive plans as well as other local policies. Including walking and bicycling to school in comprehensive plans is a great step toward making sure that in the long term, communities are safer places for children to get healthy physical activity on the way to school.



Additional Resources

Healthy Transportation Planning

- National Center for Transit Research, “Multimodal Transportation Best Practices and Model Element,” http://www.nctr.usf.edu/2014/06/multimodal-transportation-best-practices-and-model-element-2/?utm_source=transptdm&utm_medium=listserv&utm_campaign=reportrelease
- National Complete Streets Coalition, “Taking Action on Complete Streets: Implementing Processes for Safe, Multimodal Streets,” <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/documents/cs/impl/taking-action-on-cs.pdf>
- ChangeLab Solutions, “Model Comprehensive Plan Language on Complete Streets,” <http://changelabsolutions.org/publications/comp-plan-language-cs>

Health and Comprehensive Planning

- Design for Health, “Planning Information Sheet: Integrating Health into Comprehensive Planning,” http://designforhealth.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/BCBS_ISHealthCompPlanning_082307.pdf
- American Planning Association: Comprehensive Planning for Public Health: Results of the Planning and Community Health Research Center Survey, <https://www.planning.org/research/publichealth/pdf/surveyreport.pdf>
- ChangeLab Solutions, “How to Create and Implement Healthy General Plans,” <http://changelabsolutions.org/publications/toolkit-healthy-general-plans>

Citation

- ¹ ChangeLab Solutions, Model General Plan Language for Safe Routes to School, http://changelabsolutions.org/publications/SRTS_general-plans.
- ² Marin Countywide Plan, Built Environment Element, Transportation, TR-2m, www.co.marin.ca.us/depts/cd/main/fm/cwpdocs/CWP_CD2.pdf.
- ³ Nampa 2035, Comprehensive Plan, Chapter 10, Objective 4, Strategy 2 (Fall 2011), <http://www.cityofnampa.us/DocumentCenter/View/415>.
- ⁴ City of Moscow Comprehensive Plan, <https://www.ci.moscow.id.us/planning/Pages/comp-plan.aspx>.
- ⁵ Arlington County, Master Transportation Plan: An Element of Arlington County’s Comprehensive Plan,” (November 2007), <http://arlingtonva.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2014/02/DES-MTP-Goals-and-Policies-Summary.pdf>.
- ⁶ City of Corte Madera, General Plan, Transportation Element, <http://www.ci.corte-madera.ca.us/planning/General%20Plan/GeneralPlanApril2009/Chapter%204,%20Circulation.pdf>.
- ⁷ Town of Bluffton, South Carolina, Comprehensive Plan, 2007, <http://www.townofbluffton.sc.gov/government/Documents/codes.ordinances.manuals/Complete%20Comprehensive%20Plan.pdf>.
- ⁸ City of Portland, Bureau of Sustainability and Planning, Comprehensive Plan Goals and Policies (adopted Oct 1980, with updates through 2011), https://www.portlandonline.com/bps/Comp_Plan_Nov2011.pdf.



This resource was developed by the Safe Routes to School National Partnership for the National Center for Safe Routes to School. For more resources and information on Safe Routes to School, please visit the National Center for Safe Routes to School web site at www.saferoutesinfo.org and the Safe Routes to School National Partnership web site at www.saferoutespartnership.org.