IMPLEMENTING STREET CHANGES IN A PANDEMIC
A GUIDE FOR CITIES AND ADVOCATES

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is a historical moment for cities. The pandemic has resulted in a drastic shift in the way people use streets and public spaces. Traffic volumes in Oregon are down 40% from 2019,[1] and transit ridership has plummeted around the state, with Portland's TriMet experiencing a 70% decline in ridership.[2] Meanwhile, active transportation modes like biking and walking are more popular than ever, both as travel options and for recreation.

However, traffic is likely to increase with each phase of Oregon's reopening. Oregonians may continue walking and biking, but only if these options are safe and comfortable as more cars take to the roads. Additionally, the fear of public transportation due to social distancing concerns may make active transportation modes one of the few affordable options left to Oregon's most vulnerable residents.

Many cities have already made temporary changes to their streets to allow for social distancing. These interventions include signal retiming to better accommodate pedestrians, closing select streets to through-traffic, expanding sidewalks and bike lanes by removing car lanes, and accelerating construction of planned bicycle and pedestrian projects.[3]

Some cities both in the U.S. and around the globe are making these changes permanent, which will help their economies recover, protect their most vulnerable populations and essential workers, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Cities need dedicated street space for active transportation both during and after the pandemic. If communities take action now, they can find ways to make street changes that will endure beyond the pandemic.

PURPOSE

This report is an implementation guide for Oregon cities and advocates that want to make changes to their streets during the COVID-19 pandemic. It outlines a six-step change-making process through the lens of street interventions. This guide isn't as interested in *what* cities are doing so much as *how* they are doing it. It will walk through each step of the process with relevant examples from cities that are making street changes to help people walk, bike, and stay healthy.

Painting a temporary bike lane in Berlin, Germany

STEP 1: COMMUNICATE URGENCY

Communicating urgency is a key first step in the process of implementing street changes, as city staff and elected officials are experiencing increasing workloads and political pressure due to the COVID-19 pandemic. By framing street interventions as an immediate need, individuals or organizations can help busy city staff to prioritize active transportation.

Cities and advocates should carefully consider which issues best emphasize the urgent need for street interventions in their communities. These issues include:

- **Public Health:** More people walking and biking on limited infrastructure creates challenges for social distancing. Using data such as bicycle and pedestrian counts can help communicate the need for street interventions to support active transportation.[4]

- **Safety:** Although vehicle travel is down across the country, fatalities per mile driven are up by 14% due to increased speeding.[5] Speed and crash data can help communicate urgency surrounding the need to calm traffic.

- **Equity:** As transit agencies reduce service, essential workers and people who rely on transit need an alternate form of transportation. Furthermore, lower-income communities may have less access to parks and open space, which can be addressed by opening up street space for recreation.

- **Economy:** Businesses are finding creative solutions to allow for social distancing, including expanding seating and shopping activities into streets and sidewalks. To continue or resume operations, businesses need additional street space.

STEP 1: COMMUNICATE URGENCY

" Public leaders are just swamped with emergency decisions right now. And as much as I share the active transportation agenda, if somebody called me and it was clear they were pushing an active transportation agenda, I would not have time for them right now. But if they called me with an idea to help us through this, that happened to have active transportation agendas to it, I'm all ears. "

-Jim Filby Williams, Director of Public Administration of Duluth, MN[6]

Case Study: Bend and Portland, OR

Restaurant owners in Bend and Portland are asking their cities to close streets and parking lots in front of businesses to allow for expanded sidewalk seating.[7] By highlighting the immediate economic benefits of street closures, Oregon business owners will be able to reallocate street space for customers and pedestrians.

Artist renderings of Portland streets closed for restaurant seating

STEP 2: BUILD A COALITION

In order to successfully implement street reallocation initiatives, cities and advocates need to build coalitions in support of these projects. Fortunately, support can come from a wide variety of interests.

A broad base of interests can influence cities to implement temporary street changes. These treatments will be easy to remove if the project is poorly received by the neighborhood. However, cities that have implemented such projects are reporting high levels of support once residents see how these changes improve their communities.

Cities can build coalitions from the following groups, who all have vested interests in making the transportation system better for people walking and biking:

- Community groups, such as bicycle and pedestrian advocacy groups, healthy living organizations, and informal running/biking/walking groups

- Businesses, especially restaurants and bike shops

- Populations that have less access to cars, such as low-income communities, kids, and the elderly

- University faculty, students, and researchers

- Neighborhood associations

STEP 2: BUILD A COALITION

Families walk and ride bikes on Stay Healthy Streets in Austin

Case Study: Austin, TX

WalkAustin, a pedestrian advocacy group, built a coalition of 30 other organizations including faith-based organizations, parks and trails groups, mobility advocacy groups, disability advocacy groups, and neighborhood organizations.

The coalition wrote a letter to City Council and distributed a petition that received over 1,000 signatures in under a week.

Just two weeks later, City Council had passed a Stay Healthy Streets resolution resulting in five street closures with more to come.[8]

STEP 3: DEVELOP AN ALTERNATE VISION

Developing a vision is a time-intensive and robust phase of the planning process. It involves public forums, community workshops, and engaging with existing groups. During this pandemic, planners are struggling to find ways to engage with communities without meeting face-to-face.

However, many communities already have visioning documents regarding active transportation in the form of comprehensive plans, Transportation Systems Plans, neighborhood plans, and climate action plans. In Oregon, many of these plans already include goals and policies surrounding walkability, bikeability, and community place-making. Most of these visions have yet to be implemented.

If planners already have the vision, goals, and policies, engaging the community becomes much more straight-forward. Cities can use tactical urbanism and temporary infrastructure to pilot street changes while collecting feedback from residents. By implementing street changes quickly, cities can help communities realize the vision they have already created. Tactical urbanism-type projects can help residents see their vision in action and can lead towards even broader support of active transportation street reallocation.

STEP 3: DEVELOP AN ALTERNATE VISION

Stay Healthy Streets in Seattle

Case Study: Seattle, WA

Seattle DOT (SDOT) used tactical-urbanism style pilot projects to help residents visualize how street reallocation can improve their neighborhoods. On April 16 2020, SDOT used traffic cones and moveable signs to close 2.5 miles of residential streets to through-traffic in their Stay Healthy initiative.[9] After successfully piloting these changes, SDOT began adding more streets to the initiative, and has closed 20 miles of streets to through-traffic. In early May, Seattle's mayor announced that Stay Health Streets will be permanent. By using temporary materials to pilot changes quickly, Seattle was able to turn the community's vision into long-term, wide-spread change.[10]

STEP 4: LEVERAGE CATALYTIC PROJECTS

Catalytic projects can help communities visualize the future and lead towards more permanent change. When implementing street changes, it is important to remember that the first iteration of a project doesn't have to be perfect. If cities monitor the project, collect feedback, and communicate with residents, a catalytic project can be updated, modified, and improved to lead towards change that is long-term and widely supported.

Decreasing traffic volumes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have opened up space for cities to try tactical urbanism-type projects that are cheap and easy to implement while staying nimble to community feedback. These type of projects are ideal catalytic projects that can lead towards more permanent treatments once political will and budgets allow.

Case Study: Austin, TX

The City of Austin is asking the public to help them expand their network of "stay healthy streets" through robust virtual engagement. The City launched an online, interactive mapping tool where residents can comment on street changes and suggest locations for new projects. The information is publicly available to anyone and the City can incorporate feedback into its projects quickly by continually monitoring comments.[11] Austin is leveraging the momentum that they created with their initial "stay healthy streets" to build a better bike and pedestrian network.

The City of Austin collects feedback about street closures through an online public engagement map

STEP 5: CHANGE SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES

Before the pandemic, implementing active transportation projects proved difficult for many cities due to existing transportation policies and structures that favor automobile modes. Some of these structures include:

- Level of service standards that measure vehicle through-put rather than person through-put, and don't measure non-motorized travelers.

- The lack of funding for active transportation projects

- Policies that prioritize curb space for parking rather than bike lanes or sidewalks

- Minimum parking requirements that result in large parking lots, which increases the distance between destinations and makes driving cheap and more convenient than walking or biking.

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an urgent need for more space for walking and biking, but this need was present in cities before the pandemic and will be present after the pandemic. Cities need active transportation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, improve air quality, and increase transportation equity. In order to create durable and widespread change, cities will need to address the underlying structures of the transportation system. Cities and organizations should work to modify existing policies so that they can easily implement active transportation improvements after the pandemic.

STEP 5: CHANGE SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES

Protected bicycle lane

Case Study: Cambridge, MA

Before the pandemic, the City of Cambridge passed an ordinance that mandates protected bicycle lanes on all reconstructed streets. This change allows the city to build bicycle infrastructure automatically rather than on a case-by-case basis.[12] Although not related to COVID-19, this action showed how changing policies and structures can have long-lasting effects on transportation priorities.

STEP 6: RINSE AND REPEAT

Although presented as six steps, in reality the change-making process is not linear. Cities and organizations will need to revisit earlier steps multiple times before advancing to the next step.

Communities are more dynamic than ever as the economy shifts and governmental priorities change to respond to a global crisis. Even cities that have successfully implemented street changes should not be complacent. Now more than ever, cities and advocates need to listen to the community, stay adaptable to change, and continue building on past experiences by iterating through these steps.

ENDNOTES

This six-step framework was based on the following Urbanism Next Virtual Forum presentation:

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