Bridging Place Manager – State DOT Divides
By Gary Toth, The Placemakers Guild

Transportation agencies are complex organizations. This is particularly true for state Departments of Transportation, which contain many technical divisions, often working at cross purposes. Generally, design and project delivery divisions have the most influence, and too often, they are guilty of believing that the safety and mobility of the motoring public takes precedence over community building.

Creating a shared vision between Place Managers and transportation professionals can be challenging. The lack of a common language, understanding about each other's missions and training, and perceived barriers in prioritizing community building are all very real hurdles that can impede success.

The purpose of this guide is to help Place Managers and downtown stakeholder engage transportation departments, engineers, and other professionals in fostering walkable, bikeable communities that support better health outcomes for all. *A good supplement to this short guide is the more in-depth A Citizen's Guide to Better Streets: How to Engage Your Transportation Agency (1)*

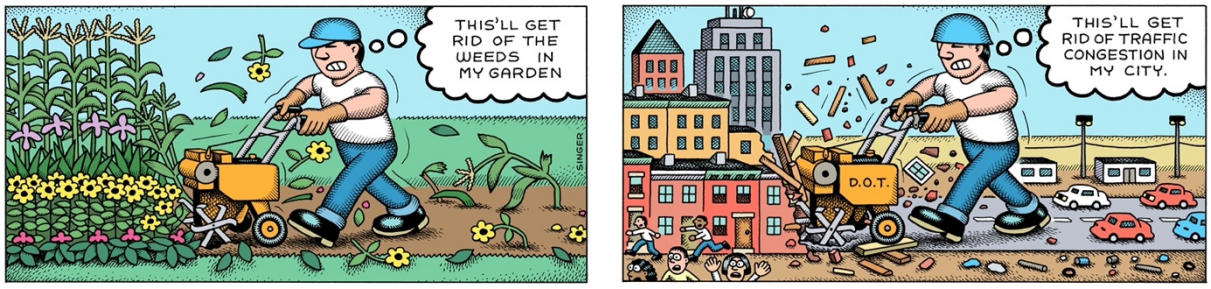
Introduction: Evolution of transportation away from community building

Prior of the invention of the automobile, American's concept of what constituted a good road had a vastly different meaning from today. Serving the community and creating an efficient and livable pattern of development were essential values at the center of street design. Streets served as shopping districts, public places, celebration sites and more. At the Project for Public Spaces, we often referred to this as Streets as Places. Nowhere was this truer than in our downtowns and Main Streets.

Main Streets were not only the most important street in town, they also usually were crucial regional routes connecting to other towns, ports, and other regional destination. Therein lies the dilemma created by the rise of the automobile in America culture. By the 1920's, the growing popularity of automobiles created pressure for new kinds of roads that could maximize the mobility and freedom provided by the automobile. Main Streets were not spared from creation of new standards for separation between the modes and in fact were usually in the way of regional mobility. That made them targets for metrics that favored mobility through a place rather than the place. Like a rototiller plowing through gardens to clear it of weeds, standards such as Levels of Services damaged sociability, place and commerce as collateral damage to ridding Main Streets of congestion.

> Levels of Service (LOS) is a performance metric which flourished during the Interstate and Freeway building era of the 1950s to the 1990s. Using a scale of A to F, LOS (as it is known to insiders) is an attempt to create an objective formula to answer a subjective question: how much congestion are we willing to tolerate? As in grade school, "F" is a failing grade and "A" is perfect. More on Levels of Service can be found in an article I wrote for Planners Web (7)

Application of freeway performance metrics to downtowns



Thankfully, today various organizations and communities are working to restore the historic functions of main streets and reestablish them as the centers of towns and cities. Place Managers of all kinds are often at the center of this. What follows is my advice on how to better succeed.

What Place Managers and downtown stakeholders can do to shift this paradigm

1. **Organize stakeholders and influence elected officials.**
   On specific projects, Place Managers can educate and organize community input and press agencies for an audience. DOTs will clearly listen to coalitions with input more than individuals.

   At the policy level, Place Managers can play a major role by pressing DOTs to create more opportunities for stakeholder participation. They can also press state legislators for more democratic approaches within DOTs

2. **Influence the regulatory framework that will be created to implement the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA)**. While many experts feel that the IIJA did not go far enough in effectuating change, it did include provisions that open the door for more change. As is the case with every Congressional Transportation/Infrastructure Act, Congress these provisions were painted with broad strokes, which allow for specifics to be created first by the federal bureaucracy and ultimately within states. This leaves significant room for the Act to get watered down at each stage.

   The state level is most vulnerable to distortion of the rules with most DOTs trying to find ways to spend money in past paradigms. Elected officials play a key role in influencing state DOTs and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) on how and where to spend money. MPOs are particularly susceptible since most of their voting members are elected officials who feel compelled to press for investment in the sub- region that they represent. Congestion projects usually have larger voter constituencies than community building investment. Politicians will be politicians, and DOTs are currently

transportation focused, so if we perpetuate a system that allows them to use muscle to skew the investment in their favor, then they are almost compelled to do so.

Downtown and Main Street Managers can play a role by engaging with state DOTs and Metropolitan Planning Organizations to ensure that their states and regions fully embrace the spirit of building communities through transportation. In theory, the long-range plans and metrics mandated by federal regulation requires that they must be used to drive transportation investments. Case closed right? Yet, the American public would be disillusioned to find out how much mismatch there is between long range plans and how state DOTs actually invest the transportation dollars entrusted to them. Federal requirements that the capital programs be "consistent" with metro or long-range transportation plans and metrics. "Consistent" has become a term of art and is subject to strong-arming by the DOTs, which come equipped with bridge, pavement, and congestion performance metrics which they often claim are more pressing than community building.

State DOTs don't have boards, but on many issues are subject to influence by state legislators, Mayors and of course Governors.

I elaborated on how Downtown advocates can influence how the makeup of capital programs in the Citizens Guide to Better Streets (1).

3. **Understand the language for influencing transportation officials.**
One of the main obstacles for engaging transportation agencies has been the language gap: terminology, language, standards, funding mechanism and carefully articulated metrics on how to build roads. When it comes to communications regarding streets, street engineers are from Mars and stakeholders are from Venus.

Guidance on how downtown stakeholders and transportation officials can communicate are critical. Fortunately, there is a growing number of resources that can help; a few examples are listed here.

For instance, the Colorado Departments of Transportation, Local Affairs (which houses their Main Street Program) and the Colorado Department of Health collaborated on the creation of the Colorado Downtown Streets manual, "a tool to help local governments, community members, planners, and engineers communicate and develop thoughtful partnerships to improve Colorado's downtown streets".

The Smart Transportation Guidebook for Pennsylvania and New Jersey and the Florida DOT Complete Streets are examples of guides created by state DOTs to facilitate agency/public interactions.

Finally, two publications published by the Project for Public Spaces: the Citizens Guide for Better Streets (1) and Navigating Main Street as Places (5), provide important resources; the latter was created in collaboration with the National Main Street Center thanks to funding provided by the Anna T. and Robert M. Bass Foundation.

Downtown managers can press DOTs and state legislators for similar guidance in their states. Until that guidance arrives, managers can educate themselves using the above and similar guides and understand the game plan before walking into the process.

4. **Avoid the temptation to be overly specific: define the problem, not the solution.** Engineers, the predominant force in the transportation industry, were taught in school to be problem solvers. Since the 1950's, they have been almost exclusively groomed to focus on the safety and high-speed mobility of the driving public. Therefore, if we want different solutions, we have to ask them to solve different problems.

   For instance, downtown stakeholders might ask for a road diet or adding a stop light on a Main Street. Too often the response will be a litany of reasons why this can't be done, for instance, we need to achieve a specific level of service at this location. Instead, frame the problem: "I think that it is unsafe to cross intersection X – the cars are going too fast, the road seems too wide to cross; can you help me find a solution?" Instead of citing all the reasons why a signal is not warranted, a DOT can help you think about other solutions that might easily fix the problem.

5. **Finally, approach engineers and transportation planners like people:** Engineers are people too. When I worked within NJDOT, when a stakeholder approached me angrily, I went into my shell and offered my name, rank, and serial number. Getting hit in the head with a rock is a bad way to start a conversation.

   There is always time to escalate later and when you do, it will serve you better if your initial conversations were professional. Be polite, and never accept no from someone who can say yes.

6. **Shift the conversation to Placemaking as often as possible.** As noted above, avoid the temptation to focus in on a solution at a specific location. This will reinforce the training that transportation folks have received to evaluate solutions at a specific location, e.g., Levels of Service. Get the conversation outside of the transportation silo as soon as possible.

   A focus around place makes conversation simple enough to allow everyone to contribute, as opposed to discipline driven processes that can be too complex and intimidate. It can break down the silos and bring the private sector into the conversation, as well as other government departments such as health. This will solve

multiple problems with greater results at lower costs, incentivizing DOTs to select solutions that also work for downtown stakeholders.

Closing

In closing, a fundamental change is needed, to go back to the historic role of transportation as being a critical tool in supporting the vibrant communities and the quality of life of its citizens. Increasingly, as electronic communication has made it possible to live anywhere and still connect with others, the freedom to work and play apart has increased the sense of isolation and the craving for new ways of interacting socially and meeting informally. Main Street is far better positioned to fulfill that burgeoning need than malls. Being geographically positioned within walking distance of neighborhoods, Main Streets are suited perfectly to evolve, via Placemaking, into the great destinations of the 21st century. If vehicular performance measures continue to dominate transportation investment in downtown, these opportunities will be hampered.

Footnotes

(1) https://assets-global.website-files.com/581110f944272e4a11871c01/61dc9a2023782f6235e52bc3_How_to_Engage_Your_Transportation_Agency_AARP.pdf

(2) https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B-vz6H4k4SESQk9vSGRlQll5dnM/view?resourcekey=0-fDhrh7gLO5DDJHb7XQvv_Q

(3)https://www.state.nj.us/transportation/community/mobility/pdf/smarttransportationguidebook2008.pdf

(4) https://hpe-inc.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/fdot-csi-handbookextdraft.pdf

(5) https://www.mainstreet.org/howwecanhelp/navigatingmainstreets

(6) https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1xMsmOkFhX8y245lMqRXrAWmmAjZWvqXj

(7) https://plannersweb.com/2010/06/breaking-our-addiction-to-highway-level-of-service-standards/