

## Moving Together: Getting Around A-Town



## Designing Streets for All of Our Users

by Scott Smith

Complete Streets. Livability. These words reflect a significant shift in the mindset for road design over the past 50 years. What does this shift mean for Arlington?

First, some history. Several decades ago, road design was all about cars. Pedestrians and bicycles were generally ignored. This made some sense in rural areas, where distances are great. Yet, spread-out land uses and roads designed only for cars have led to automobile-dependent lifestyles that require cars for nearly all trips. We have created an inequitable transportation system that excludes a substantial portion of our population (namely, those who can't or don't drive). The automobile-dependent lifestyle tends to be sedentary, contributing to obesity and other health problems. Automobile dependence has also contributed to foreign oil dependence, with its detrimental impacts on national security.

We now realize we have to design streets for all people, not just people in cars. We have to ensure that “transportation planners and engineers consistently design and operate the entire roadway with **all users** in mind - including bicyclists, public transportation vehicles and riders, and pedestrians of all ages and abilities.” (completestreets.org).

Road design that accommodates all users is **not** anti-car. Many of the measures that improve the environment for non-motorized users also improve the environment for motorists. For example:

- Sidewalks (which, legally, are part of the street) increase the comfort level of both pedestrians and drivers by providing designated areas for each.
- Improved visibility of pedestrians at crosswalks make it less likely a driver will have to stop suddenly for a pedestrian, thus reducing that driver's risk of being rear-ended.
- Bike lanes provide buffer space for motorists maneuvering into a parking space or pulling over to allow emergency vehicles to pass, and improve visibility between motorists and side street traffic.

Some European cities have adopted policies that are explicitly anti-car. That would not be appropriate here. Some of our neighborhoods, located far from public transit and perhaps on a steep hill, are highly car-dependent. We need to accommodate trucks making deliveries to our businesses and homes. At the same time, however, Arlington is densely populated with little space for more roads, cars or parking lots.

A more balanced approach is appropriate in Arlington. We accommodate those who find it necessary to drive, while also accommodating and encouraging those seeking alternatives, such

as public transit, bicycling and walking, that are more frugal in their use of road and parking space than automobiles. Benefits of a balanced approach to transportation include the following:

- Consistency with State and Federal policy. State law requires reasonable pedestrian and bicycle accommodation in state highway projects, and the MassDOT design guide reflects this. Federal policy encourages states to go beyond the minimum in non-motorized accommodation (<http://www.dot.gov/affairs/2010/bicycle-ped.html>).
- Building on Arlington's strengths. We are a densely populated community with neighborhood schools and other close-by destinations. We promote walking to school. (Perhaps not coincidentally, Arlington has a lower rate of childhood obesity than other districts in Massachusetts.) Arlington has more bicycle use than other American communities, with many residents using bikes for day-to-day transportation. Finally, we have more public transit use than other communities, transit use that requires walkable streets and paths in order to get to the bus or subway.
- Good risk management. As oil reserves around the world are depleted and demand increases from developing countries, future oil supplies may not be able to keep up with demand. In the face of such risk, a community that provides transportation choices will be more resilient than a community that is totally car-dependent.
- Making Arlington more affordable. Many families may find that they can get by on one (or even zero) cars, whereas in a more car-dependent community they would need to have two cars. They could thereby save thousands of dollars each year.

Designing our streets to accommodate all users is the only thing that will work. Adding more pavement for roads and parking will crowd out other important land uses and may exacerbate flooding in parts of town. Our traffic congestion is frequently caused by situations outside of Arlington (for example, the intersection of Mass Ave and Route 16 in Cambridge) or is a regional issue calling for a regional solution (for example, the congested roads in Cambridge, Arlington and Lexington running between Route 2 and Mass Ave). We cannot unilaterally build our way out of congestion, and we simply don't have enough road and parking space to support everyone driving on all of their trips. Pedestrians, cyclists, motorists: our streets work best when they serve all of our users.

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