

September 24th, 2009

The Changing Face of Transportation in America

Posted by **Gary Toth** in [Building Community Through Transportation](#), [Transportation & Streets](#)



The United States Department of Transportation is planning to start leveraging transportation spending to build livable and sustainable communities.

Communities and advocates have been pressing the US transportation industry to be more proactive about achieving livability goals for decades. Yet, the transportation industry continued to pursue the notion that the safety and mobility of the motoring public was paramount. Prior to the Obama Administration, these calls fell on deaf ears; now, it seems, we have an opportunity to begin to turn the battleship around.

“The pedestrian is the indicator species for a healthy, vibrant community.”

- Beth Osbourne, Deputy Assistant Director for Transportation Policy USDOT

On Thursday, September 24, [ContextSensitiveSolutions.org](#), an FHWA website managed by Project for Public Spaces, hosted an online [Forum on Livability](#) for the US Department of Transportation (USDOT). In this forum, USDOT detailed several new programs related to a new Partnership for Sustainable Communities among USDOT, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that promise to reshape development patterns around creating stronger community centers, more compact, mixed-use and walkable environments, and enhanced transportation options. At the same time, these programs would focus development in existing developed areas and protect farmland and open space.



Transportation policy has drastically shaped the face of America.

We hope that we will look back on this initiative as a watershed moment in the history of transportation in America—a return to the idea that transportation investment should be about livability and community outcomes, not simply moving vehicles.

The idea that the transportation system should support community and societal outcomes is nothing new. Prior to the passage of the first federal aid highway act in 1916, road building was the responsibility of communities. They built roads to serve people and the needs of the community. Even when Americans authorized their government to begin taxing them to add highway infrastructure and create dedicated transportation agencies, we did so because we wanted the government to help improve our quality of life. For reasons which I outlined in a 2007 article entitled [“Back to Basics in Transportation Planning”](#) the American transportation establishment has lost its way. It is exciting to believe that the Obama Administration will be trying to help us find our way back to our roots.



Transportation policy is increasingly including efforts to improve accessibility, rather than just mobility.

Today’s webinar built upon the anticipation and excitement created by the June announcement of the Partnership for Sustainable Communities. Key officials from the USDOT’s Office of the Secretary (Beth Osborne), the Federal Highway Administration (Gloria Shepherd), and the Federal Transit Administration (Robert J. Tuccillo) covered the guiding principles of the new [Partnership](#):

1. Promote more transportation choices
2. Promote equitable affordable housing
3. Enhance economic competitiveness
4. Support existing communities
5. Coordinate policies and leverage investment
6. Value communities and neighborhoods

These goals signal that our transportation leaders will finally tackle broader societal issues, which for decades they have insisted were not their purview. Issues covered by the presenters included land use, housing, climate, energy security and public health.

Later, the webinar addressed the inevitable question: “What Does the Future Hold?” Answers were encouraging. We can look forward to performance -based planning,

especially using benchmarks that go beyond the narrow transportation focus that has conventionally dominated DOT and MPO planning and investments. Finally, an era may be approaching in which community vitality, equitable access to transportation, and a match between housing, jobs and transportation choices are equally as important as pavement quality and congestion levels.

Major changes to long-range planning practices, which advocates such as PPS have demanded for quite some time, are also on the horizon. I have personally advocated for multi-modal corridor planning that integrates transportation and land use, with Placemaking as a key foundation. PPS will again explore some of these ideas in a blog post next week.

Most critically, the speakers indicated that there will be changes in the transportation funding structure. Currently, there is a huge disconnect between strategic and policy-level transportation planning and how public funds are actually spent. It is encouraging to hear that these expenditures will be based on performance measures that go beyond pure transportation objectives. It sounds like we may actually be getting back to the basics!



The road ahead for transportation in America will only get more interesting -- and hopefully more livable.

PPS has been contributing to the idea of livable transportation for almost two decades. We were involved in publications like the *The Role of Transit in Creating Livable Metropolitan Communities*, as well as a 2008 publication written for AARP entitled *Great Corridors, Great Communities: The Quiet Revolution in Transportation Planning*. Additionally, our recent *Citizen's Guide to Better Streets: How to Engage your Transportation Agency* was published to help advocates work constructively with public agencies in order to create more livable and sustainable streets and neighborhoods. In these efforts, we are proud to have been able to build on and supplement the work of other great organizations such as the Center for Neighborhood Technology, Reconnecting America, the Surface Transportation Policy project, among others.

We believe that non-profit organizations and advocates across the country—at the local, state and national levels—have both leadership and implementation roles to play in helping Washington achieve these goals. PPS will continue to be actively engaged to keep the public informed to make change happen in communities across the country.