

## Advancing Complete Streets in Rural Areas

By Jessica Ridgeway, Planner

The concept of equitable access to transportation for all users and modes is the pillar of Complete Streets. It can be applied to even the furthest reaches of our rural County thanks to the recent passing of a County-wide Complete Streets Policy in 2017. Building Complete Streets infrastructure not only provides safer and more connected network of opportunities for County residents and visitors to be physically active, it improves air quality, reduces traffic congestion and promotes equal opportunity.

Orange County is not alone in the pursuit of a safe and accessible transportation network, according to a National Complete Streets Coalition report, as of the end of 2016, more than 1,000 jurisdictions in the United States have passed a Complete Streets policy. New York State passed the Complete Streets Act in August 2011, requiring state, county and local agencies to consider the Complete Streets practices when developing transportation projects that receive state and federal funding.

However, the great majority of case studies surrounding pedestrian safety, calming traffic congestion, bicycle access, and other Complete Streets concepts are typically conducted in large cities or otherwise booming metropolises. What about the nearly 49 million Americans and approximately 83 thousand Orange County residents who live in small towns with rural geographies? How can we implement the tried-and-true practices here in Orange County?

Metro-centers may have the analysis to support traffic calming, safety, and accessibility projects, but rural areas around the country have demonstrated just as high of a need and want for complete streets. Injury or death while using the transportation system is higher for Residents of small towns than those in urban areas. According to data collected by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) in 2006, less than one-quarter

of US residents lived in rural areas, yet 56 percent of all traffic fatalities occurred in these areas. With wider, open roads common, higher driving speeds are likely: 68 percent of fatal crashes on rural roads occurred when the posted speed limit was 55 mph or higher. On top of these rather glum statistics, studies have shown our rural communities are home to some of the most vulnerable populations: low income families and elderly adults – two groups that are less likely to drive or own a vehicle.

You might be thinking, “It would never make sense to install a sidewalk or bike lane along every County or local road!” This is a perfectly acceptable statement, especially given the vast diversity of land use in Orange County. This is where the flexibility of a Complete Street program can be realized in rural contexts – there is no “cookie cutter” complete street, but rather a recipe, specifically crafted based on a number of different ingredients. Take, for example, a road lined with active farms in a small town, all this road may require to be “complete” is wide shoulders to accommodate large equipment/trucks, public transportation users, pedestrians and bicyclists. While a road with a 30 mph speed limit, parallel parking, crosswalks, and accessible sidewalks may best meet the needs of a residential street.

Both national and state funding resources have, in recent years, shown increasing commitment to advancing transportation projects in rural areas. According to a recent press release from the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), rural projects were the recipients of over 64% of this round of The Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) funding, a DOT grant program that invests in road, rail, transit and port projects that promise to achieve national objectives. To learn more about the TIGER grant funding program, visit <https://www.transportation.gov/tiger/about>.

Have an idea for “completing” a county or local road in your area?

Contact the Orange County Complete Streets Working Group at 845-615-3840.

