



Complete Streets Policy Analysis

COMPLETE STREETS FOR NIAGARA

The Toronto Centre for Active Transportation (TCAT) uses a revised version of the National Complete Streets Coalition's Policy Measurement Tool to assess the prevalence and strength of Complete Streets language in Canada's Official Plans and Documents. In this policy analysis, we look at the Niagara Region's recently adopted "Complete Streets for Niagara" (CSN), a Complete Streets Model Policy Handbook.

On September 11th, 2013, the Niagara Regional Council endorsed the new CSN handbook for use by the Region in planning policy and development programs and invited the local municipalities to use it as well. The handbook provides Complete Streets policy language adaptable to fit official plans, secondary plans or transportation master plans for local municipalities within the Region. The CSN handbook demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the necessary components for a successful Complete Streets approach, however due to the nature of the framework handbook, key components have not been addressed. This analysis of the CSN handbook will assess its strengths and weaknesses based on the 10 elements outlined by TCAT on the Complete Streets for Canada website.

The CSN handbook uses consistent Complete Streets language to emphasize the importance of designing streets for pedestrians, cyclists, and transit users of all ages and abilities. Complete Streets Design frameworks are referenced within the document to ensure that new infrastructure and facilities, as well as any street repairs or retrofits, are designed to be universally accessible. The Complete Streets terminology within the document is strong, however a disclaimer at the beginning of the document states that: "qualifying terms (shall, may [...] etc) included within the model policies are suggested. Each term carries a different level of commitment (mandatory, preferred) from the municipality". The CSN handbook illustrates a number of street types that could most benefit from a Complete Street design, including: streets scheduled for rehabilitation or maintenance, served by public transit, containing mixed land uses, used by a large amount of people, etc.

"A complete street is a public right-of-way where the transportation facilitates and adjacent land uses are planned, designed and constructed to accommodate users of all ages and abilities including pedestrians, bicyclists, transit vehicles, automobiles and freight traffic."

Niagara's handbook does an excellent job of examining 18 common concerns in implementing Complete Streets that were identified through consultation with key stakeholders. Examples of some of the concerns explored in the document are: 1) inadequate funding for active transportation at the municipal level, 2) the difficulties for residents in understanding the Environmental Assessment process, and 3) the safety concerns for cyclists posed by on-street parking. Information, policy recommendations, and resources to address these concerns are all provided within the CSN framework. This is an effective means of alleviating potential confusion and for providing municipalities with strategies for addressing these concerns; however specific exceptions to when a Complete Streets policy will not be followed and approvals processes for granting these exceptions have not been addressed within the document.

The CSN handbook places considerable emphasis on connectivity, with a clear goal of allowing people to move seamlessly between different transportation modes and networks. To achieve this, the CSN handbook recommends investment in the public realm, through policies and programs, to increase residents' use of



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alternative transportation modes. The CSN handbook also discusses the importance of community context in terms of the goals that are set by municipalities during the planning and construction of Complete Streets. For example, the quote below references specific design considerations necessary for a street surrounding medical facilities:

“In some community areas, such as those surrounding medical facilities and social services there may be a need to go above and beyond the minimum standards to ensure that the persons which rely on these services can safely access them all year round.” – pg. 56

A shortcoming of the CSN framework is the lack of a defined set of responsibilities and concrete implementation plans for each area of jurisdiction. Because the CSN handbook is a guideline that municipalities are invited (not required) to follow, specific roles and concrete action plans have not been clearly outlined for each individual municipality. Additionally, the degree to which the municipalities within the Region support the implementation of Complete Streets has not been discussed within the document. However, considerable emphasis is placed on the potential benefits of cooperation between the Niagara region, municipalities, and private developers when Complete Streets funding falls beyond the scope of the annual municipal roads budgets. The CSN handbook discusses methods for local municipalities to obtain funding resources from the Niagara region, and through partnerships with local business groups and developers, to improve infrastructure in the public domain.

One of the CSN handbook’s greatest strength is the importance placed upon performance measurement. The document states that municipalities undergoing a Complete Streets approach must establish performance measures to reflect goals and to build public and municipal support. Several examples of measurements are listed including: kilometres of new bike lanes and sidewalks, pedestrian and cyclist counts, modal shifts, ratio of sidewalk to road lengths, change in number of pedestrian/cyclist collisions with motor vehicles, etc.

A strong Complete Streets approach requires clear and concise policy implementation steps and Niagara’s handbook does include a comprehensive list of policy implementation techniques for local municipalities to follow. Firstly, a clear outline is provided displaying the five phases of a Class Municipal Environmental Assessment, which would be executed before construction of a Complete Street. Additionally, model municipal plans are cited as exemplary policy approaches to illustrate the use of design guidelines for new construction and public realm elements. Lastly, specific instructions are provided for municipalities or residents who wish to initiate a local improvement process for a capital works project through Ontario Regulation 586/06. However, because the CSN handbook is primarily a framework for official, secondary and master transportation plans, no concrete steps to amend these plans have been provided for individual municipalities. The success of the CSN framework will depend on the degree to which local municipalities adjust current planning documents to fit Complete Streets approaches. Before-and-after visualizations of a selection of streets in the region are provided at the end of the handbook that could be quite useful for municipalities to re-imagine their streets from a Complete Streets perspective.

Overall, the CSN handbook is a strong Complete Streets guiding document that includes: strong policy language, consideration for all road projects and users, context sensitivity, concern with connectivity, references to design guidelines, and performance measurements. However, as it is a primarily intended as a guiding, not regulatory, framework for the Niagara Region’s local municipalities, concrete roles and responsibilities for each jurisdiction are absent.