

# We Have Vision and Leadership Now, How to Make It Happen?

— BY BRUCE SCHALLER AND ALLEN ZERKIN —

**L**ivable and complete streets goals are increasingly embraced by municipal leaders across the United States. This support is critical but not sufficient for overcoming myriad obstacles to building the necessary agency and community support for specific projects. This article discusses proven strategies to tackle seven commonly encountered obstacles.



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Cities across the United States are increasingly reclaiming urban streets for pedestrians, transit riders, and bicyclists, replacing the long-dominant car-centric model of city transportation systems. It's been a big change. Livable streets and complete streets goals are now embraced by mayors and transportation leaders in cities ranging from New York to Los Angeles, Memphis to Minneapolis. Municipal leaders have articulated their commitment to creating street networks that offer a robust set of transportation choices, enabling residents and visitors to get around town without depending on a private automobile. In support of these efforts, they can cite successful pedestrian, transit, and bike projects from around the country as proof of the feasibility and effectiveness of complete streets treatments.

Thus, a broad range of cities now have the vision and leadership for a more robust and sustainable transportation system. Nevertheless, it is still not easy to plan and implement projects that alter the balance of how streets are designed and used. Top-level leadership is critical but not sufficient. There remains the task of “getting it done,” project by project.

Often, the most vexing challenges are outreach and public engagement—gaining support from the community members directly affected by these projects. Other obstacles are opposition from internal staff and the political dynamics in which complete streets projects get caught in political crossfire. Projects can be sharply curtailed, if not totally abandoned, because of community skepticism, internal opposition, and politically motivated attacks.

The importance of this challenge was highlighted at the annual Street Design Conference held by the National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO) in October 2014 in San Francisco, CA, USA. A session led by the authors called “We have vision and leadership, now how to make it happen?” was packed with staff from a wide range of organizations who deal with this challenge on a wide variety of street design projects. The discussion highlighted the wide range of projects that transportation agencies are developing and implementing with community support. But, as the participants at the session made clear, it is not easy, and the obstacles and challenges are myriad.

While toward the end of this article we articulate several broad guidelines, the devil is in the details, so we will focus on specific obstacles described by the participants in the NACTO discussion and suggest how they might be overcome. The solutions we discuss are based on what has worked on difficult and demanding projects in a variety of cities. In each example, we restate what we heard, suggest how the problem might be redefined to lead toward an effective approach, and discuss how the reframing will improve the odds of success. We should mention that many, and particularly small scale, projects do not need the “full treatment” described here. The scale and ambition



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*A thriving new public space in an ethnically diverse area of Queens, NY, USA converted in 2001 from parking and a service road. The plaza, implemented through New York City's application-based Plaza Program, was proposed by community groups which now sponsor seasonal activities and events.*

of each project and existing relationships with key constituencies will help determine which strategies need your time and effort.

### **#1: “The public won’t make the necessary trade-offs between competing options. They want it all.”**

We hear this problem frequently. As engineers and planners know quite well, street space is inherently limited. Design is about making choices, but the public rarely wants to hear about trade-offs.

The solution is to move away from a negative framing of the task—making trade-offs. Structure the effort as a goal-oriented,

collaborative process focused on solving problems on the street: “How do we work together to solve the things we all agree are problems?” Thus, instead of itemizing trade-offs between design options, ask:

*How can we take the best elements of each option in a way that will be effective in achieving overall goals, and reasonably satisfy each interest?*

What this requires is, first, starting the public engagement process before you have a project design. Public engagement should start with problem identification and goal-setting. What are the problems with how the street works today? What do we want from a new design? Reach agreement on problems and goals, and only then talk about solutions.

Start with workshops where project staff sit with 6 to 10 people at a table, a format that facilitates hearing from everyone and prevents loud voices from dominating. Keep the focus on the problems and goals that everyone can agree on or at least accept.

Present options for discussion. Invite the public to come up with creative solutions that you have perhaps not thought of or assumed they would not accept. Structure the discussions to help participants weigh options and decide on what mix best serves community needs. Make it a *positive* problem-solving exercise focused on identifying the street design elements that people want to combine in a project.

People are smart and know they cannot have everything. They will make choices. Telling them they *have to choose* gets the discussion off on the wrong foot.

**#2: “We do not get participation from the full range of stakeholders. Only the ‘usual suspects’ come to our public meetings, mostly people who drive and like the status quo. We don’t hear from those who will benefit from new street designs, public plazas, bike lanes, and improved pedestrian facilities.”**

As with the first example, success lies in meeting people where they are. Most people will not attend a public meeting, and even

HTTPS://WWW.FLICR.COM/PHOTOS/NACTO/14442790549/IN/ALBUM-72157645623589362/



Protected bike lane on Dearborn Street in Chicago's Loop, opened in 2012, part of Chicago's bike network that was planned through a series of neighborhood-based advisory groups tapping local knowledge to develop a safe and attractive bike network.

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if they do, they may be intimidated by the naysayers in the room. Start by identifying:

*Who are the potential beneficiaries? What type of involvement will they find attractive and meaningful? How can I facilitate their involvement?*

Go about this by first identifying the specific groups and individuals who would experience direct benefits from a new street design. Do not rely on inviting people to meetings or public hearings. Visit community or elected leaders, or even “cold call” local nonprofits, resident associations, religious institutions, schools, and other community-based groups. Set up a meeting or attend their meetings if they will put you on their agenda. Take advantage of small group meetings to walk them through your project and the process you are undertaking and hear what is on their minds. These meetings can be labor intensive, but it beats having the same people show up as opponents later in the process after being activated by the project opponents.

As you develop the project, you can also set up mini-open houses on the street or in public places. These could be transit centers to reach bus or rail riders, or in parks or playgrounds to reach parents of young children. Talk to people on their own turf and get around the problem of their not coming to you. As the process moves forward, you can invite them to public workshops and meetings where it is important for their voice to be heard. But if they do not come to you at the beginning, go to them instead for the first conversations to talk about the problems, identify their interests, and chart a path for them to get involved.

**#3: “We get resistance because the public does not believe the project benefits (e.g., better transit service) will actually occur, or is not willing to give up what they have (e.g., parking).”**

One of the great barriers to change is that the prospective costs seem large and very tangible, while the benefits seem small and uncertain. These realities reinforce people’s natural tendency to be risk-averse. You cannot “prove” that their concerns are without merit. What you can do is help them think their way through the risks. Step back from the argument and ask:

*What is the most compelling reason or evidence to think the project will succeed?*

Often, the most persuasive evidence is success on similar projects. We installed a bus lane and rerouted left turns as part of a bus rapid transit project, and improved the overall traffic flow through this congested intersection. Show them studies, statistics, or testimonials. If stakeholders have direct experience with other projects, that can

help. If not, take them for a visit! Seeing is believing. People tend to reason by analogy, so documented experience is often more persuasive than modeling or other analysis.

A complementary approach is to show commitment to making the project work. Commitment can be shown in many ways: through highly visible statements from your mayor, governor, or agency head; approval of project funding; or making the project part of a larger effort such as bringing a major event to the city, or strategic plans or sustainability plans. It is also critical to show commitment to follow-through, which includes monitoring the project’s impacts, releasing an evaluation of the project and reporting back to stakeholders, and considering what additional actions may be needed based on implementation experience.

The public knows that you cannot provide an iron-clad guarantee of project success. Commitment to taking the steps necessary for success shows that you understand the uncertainties and will be there to respond when problems arise. Being accountable for the results goes a long way toward reassuring people who have legitimate concerns.

**#4: “The public just does not trust us. They view us as coming from ‘downtown’ and not understanding what they want or what is good for them.”**

There are many ingredients to a trusting relationship including mutual understanding, shared goals, and a commitment to an ongoing relationship. A public engagement process that consists of problem identification, goal setting, and assessment of options often builds trust that proves just as critical to project success as the planning and engineering work itself. The trust that develops on one project can also help future projects get off to a good start. That is one reason to start with smaller projects, perhaps less impactful but also less intimidating, and build toward larger, more ambitious ones.

Sometimes, however, the relationship between government and community is too tenuous to establish a foothold for effective public engagement and project development. This may be obvious at the beginning, or it may only become apparent down the road when a project is sandbagged by stakeholders who never bought into the process. In these cases, you need to find another way to proceed. The most promising avenue is often to let someone from the community step out in front. Your job becomes answering the following question:

*How can people from the community take the lead on originating the project, articulating prospective benefits, and getting stakeholders involved in the public engagement process—credibly and effectively?*

In other words, you are looking for a local champion of the project. Sometimes a champion has already stepped forward,

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and you can ask them to take the lead in inviting stakeholders to participate in a process in good faith. The prospective champion needs to have the credibility, capability, and commitment to bring in skeptical and sometimes warring factions. Forward-looking elected officials and community groups can be effective champions.

But what if there are no local champions? Another approach is to create a process that both opens the door for champions to step through and requires that they generate local support. Cities have created application-based programs for small plazas, for example, with an annual window for community groups to submit proposals. A successful process may require government to provide clear guidelines, offer technical support to local groups, and include funding for projects. Once applications are submitted, project development becomes a collaborative enterprise between the applicant, government agency, and other stakeholders. But an application-based process in which “you come to us” gives the project local ownership and credibility.

Along the same lines, an agency can reach out to potential champions individually to ascertain, privately, what their view of a project is. If there is some level of interest, even if not commitment, expressed by a number of these individuals, the agency can invite all of those potential supporters to come together to discuss how the project could be moved forward and what role they would, together and individually, be willing to play. They may prove to be far more willing to commit to being a champion once they know that they will not be out on a limb all by themselves. An initial such meeting should not be large. If appropriate, a second meeting can be organized by the initial leadership group to enlarge the circle of supporters before going public.

**#5: “We get hung up on issues that really aren’t about the project. For example, people opposed a bike lane design because of cyclist behavior (running red lights and going the wrong way), not things about the project.”**

At the heart of this situation are differences in problem definition and goals. In this example, it would be difficult and probably inadvisable to try to separate the concerns about cyclist behavior from the merits of the bike lane project, since the two obviously concern the use of bikes in this location. A better approach is to:

*Recognize the concern as legitimate and potentially relevant to the project, rather than as “not my problem,” and look for ways to address the concern as part of the project.*

In taking this approach, it is important to recognize that your project (the bike lane) is unlikely to *solve* the concern (cyclist behavior). But if it can be *part* of the solution, then it is logical to support the project as one step among many to address the concern.

As we have discussed earlier, identify and articulate concerns about cyclist behavior during initial outreach activities. As part of the collaborative problem-solving process, ask, “How can that concern be addressed as part of this project?” In addition, let participants know about steps that are being taken separately from the project to address the issue; perhaps those expressing the concern would like to know more about these other efforts and join with community members in working on them.

This approach provides the benefits of responding respectfully and constructively to the issue being raised and expressing openness to solutions that both fit within your project and would be separate from your project. It invites collaboration in working on solutions. Once again, it works within a framework of a collaborative problem-solving process—a much better context than arguing over whether a concern is important or relevant.

**#6: “Our problem is that our in-house engineers are stuck in a car-oriented engineering mentality that resists pedestrian-, bike-, and transit-friendly changes to streets.”**

We hear this comment about key specialists who are critical to moving projects forward, including engineers, attorneys, and often procurement specialists. Whatever the field, it is important that you learn to speak the same language. Spend face-to-face time with them and get to know at least the basics of the other person’s field. What are the legal provisions that apply to this project, and how have they been interpreted on other projects? What guidance is in the standard engineering references and the new *NACTO Urban Street Design Guide*? Where could the bike lane go? What is necessary for traffic flow? Then ask:

*How can this project be done?*

Simply put, engage these professionals in the problem-solving task. It may be helpful if you have possible approaches to suggest—or it may not be helpful, depending on the issue and the person. When there is high-level buy-in for the project or project goals, make that clear, and then seek to enlist their efforts to work out how to solve the legitimate problems that they see as obstacles. Also, make it clear that you have worked through many other issues and will work through their issues with them. As with the public, focusing on how to reach desirable goals tends to elicit a constructive response.

**#7: “Our projects are used as pawns in gamesmanship between local political factions, where the merits of the project don’t matter.”**

While certainly frustrating, such games can be circumvented. Political leaders, more often than not, are playing such games to



SFMTA

San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) public outreach activities for a bike lane installation on Polk Street.

curry favor with specific constituencies or to get media coverage. So the answer lies in finding ways to create constituencies that favor the project and are prepared to make themselves heard, either by the political leader directly or in the media. The question to ask is therefore:

*Who does any given political leader listen to or care about who can lobby in favor of the project?*

An effective constituency can take many forms—a neighborhood, a user group, a broad-based coalition, or one important local business or campaign contributor. The devil, once again, is in the details. The task is to identify the particular people who can alter the political equation. If it is too dangerous for an agency to orchestrate this itself, a political champion or group of champions can be asked to carry the ball, or the agency can ask the editorial board of a local newspaper to consider writing about the project. Be creative.

## Conclusion

Vision and high-level commitment are necessary to reclaiming urban streets for pedestrians, transit riders, and cyclists, but the ground game of getting projects planned and implemented is equally important. Certain themes run through most of the practical solutions to obstacles that are often encountered in project development and implementation.

First, for complex and difficult projects, start public engagement early, before project plans are set. Make sure all relevant stakeholders are included. You rarely get support—and will often get opposition—from people you aren't talking to.

Second, successful projects are about successful problem solving. Identify the problems up front and agree on the goals. If agencies and communities are working on different problems, you won't solve their problem and they won't solve yours.

Finally, be ambitious in your aspirations, but pragmatic in plotting the way forward. The immediate goal is to solve a problem, get something done, show results, and build from there. Your current activities should be focused on executing steps toward an achievable, tangible outcome that represents real progress toward your aspirations. Rome was not built in a day, but as cities across the country are showing, livable and sustainable streets can be built and, step by step, can transform urban streets. **itej**



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