



## Walkable and Livable Communities Institute

### Observations and Recommendations: The Built Environment Santa Fe, New Mexico

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*Prepared by the Walkable and Livable Communities Institute for the City of Santa Fe  
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The following memo summarizes the WALC Institute's observations and recommendations during a May visit to Santa Fe on behalf of the Santa Fe MPO. These initial recommendations are based on a short visit to the community and shouldn't be considered exhaustive. They do provide a strong starting point, however, in identifying some "low-hanging fruit" and longer-term initiatives that will improve health and well-being through better built environments.

#### **Overall Opportunities**

In general, downtown areas and neighborhoods that aim to improve the ability of people to walk, bicycle, socialize and "age in place," should adopt the following:

- 1) **Lower Vehicle Speeds.** Posted speeds and "design" speeds should be reduced; instead of speeds being determined based on the comfort of drivers, it should be based on the safety and comfort for all users, setting an appropriate "target" speed. Destinations—places where people wish to gather or live—require low, safe vehicle speeds. Like many other places across the country, vehicle speeds in Santa Fe have crept up over time. This has been the result of focusing public investments and built environment design on vehicle flow and driver efficiency, to the exclusion of people walking, biking, living in place or using other active modes of transportation. With excessive vehicle speeds, walking and biking become uncomfortable and even seem to be dangerous in some places. High speeds dampen quality of life and the actual safety of the public.
- 2) **Narrower Vehicle Lanes.** The wider a roadway, the faster cars tend to travel, decreasing safety for all users. Wide roadway lanes also make for wide crossings, increasing the amount of time a pedestrian is exposed to the threat of being hit by a car, and the amount of time drivers have to wait for the crossing to be completed by each pedestrian. A large

proportion of pedestrian fatalities occur on overly wide suburban five-or-more-lane roadways. Throughout most communities there are opportunities on non-highway streets to reduce the width of vehicle lanes to 10-feet, which should be the default lane width, including on many suburban regional trunk roads. If necessary, such as when there are especially high numbers of large trucks or buses on the road or significant curves, cities can permit construction of wider lanes, but the narrower lane should be the default. In addition to lowering vehicle speeds, it saves on materials, reduces environmental impacts and provides space for wider sidewalks, bike lanes, or wider buffers between sidewalks and passing vehicles. In many cases, narrower lanes also make intersections more compact and efficient. Narrow lanes can be as safe as wider lanes, and they add to motorist vigilance. When it comes to the width of vehicle lanes, less can be more.

- 3) **On-Street Parking.** Removing on-street parking or failing to install it in the first place has had the effect of speeding up cars while removing an important physical buffer between pedestrians on sidewalks and the cars passing them. It also puts an emphasis on parking lots, which eat up valuable urban space (2/3 more than on-street parking), create stormwater runoff, add to heat gain and are generally unsightly. Add on-street parking wherever appropriate and change policies to set a maximum for off-street parking with new development, instead of requiring a minimum. Even better, consider not setting a minimum or maximum at all. Refocusing on on-street parking helps preserve important buildings and facilitates infill investment.
- 4) **Buildings that Front the Street.** Buildings and homes should “front” the street—instead of being set back far from the street—to create a pedestrian-scale landscape and to put “eyes on the street” so that people feel watched over. Establish maximum allowable setbacks for homes and commercial buildings in places of emphasis. Encourage placement of buildings and homes so that they create natural surveillance and maximize opportunities for people to meet or say hello. This practice is especially important near schools and parks, and within civic, retail, and commercial districts.
- 5) **Complete Streets.** Streets that work for everyone are called “complete.” Many communities throughout the country—more than 600 now, and over 23 states—have adopted policies and practices in support of completing the streets. A strong complete streets policy helps ensure that anytime a street is resurfaced, reconstructed or maintained, elements are added or redesigned to improve the ability of people to walk, bike and drive safely and comfortably. Model complete streets policies and a local-policymaking workbook are available at the National Complete Streets Coalition’s [website](#).

## Santa Fe

In addition to the broad guidance noted above, Santa Fe has specific opportunities to greatly improve walkability and biking conditions. The opportunities are summarized here as recommendations. Some can be accomplished at little cost, while others require a more elaborate process, additional funding, and/or a longer timeframe.

### General Observations

The City continues to develop a strong ethos around active transportation and recreation, with a walkable downtown set around a well-preserved historic square – the Santa Fe Plaza National Historic Landmark.

Overall, the City of Santa Fe has laid a solid foundation for active living, especially at its core. It could readily increase the number of people walking or cycling for transportation by tweaking existing programs and developing plans to address any shortcomings in street design, signage and the built environment. Some roads are wider than necessary, for example, and the City should repaint faded crosswalks, discover what is causing markings to become stained, and work to identify other active transportation needs.

The City is fortunate to have a growing trails system with planned underpasses that will make it unnecessary to cross streets, but Santa Fe would still benefit from better signage and street design that accommodates more bicycling. Some new development also lack sidewalks and connectivity and many city roads could be narrowed to calm traffic and to create more walkability. Bike racks, benches and other amenities for cyclists and pedestrians should continue to be made available throughout the city.

Santa Fe's downtown features a variety of historic buildings, popular retail and restaurant destinations, and a large public gathering space in the Plaza, all of which create a robust community hub. While the new trail system enhances the appeal and feasibility of active transportation throughout town, it's important to note the City's attention to the role of attractive destinations in any effort to improve walkability.

Here are some ways the City can build on the foundation that was begun years ago to enhance walkability in Santa Fe, based on the five principles of walkability: Security, Efficiency, Convenience, Comfort and Welcome:

## Low-Hanging Fruit: *The 100-Day Challenge*

- **Enhance Bicycle Parking** – Identify opportunities for additional bicycle parking downtown and at schools, neighborhood parks, and other public spaces. Consider on-street bicycle parking racks in retail areas, which can accommodate up to 10-12 bicycles per parking space. Also consider installing bicycle racks that tie into the historic, artistic or other branding elements of Santa Fe – racks can take the shape of almost anything imagined. Install bicycle racks that feature two points of contact, such as the “staple”, or “inverted U” rack, or decorative versions of these – racks with only one point of contact, such as “wave” or “wheel bender” or “hanging triangle” racks, are substandard.
- **Remove “Sharrows” on Low-Volume Streets** – Unless there is a need to help reduce the territorialism of other roadway users, consider removing sharrows on slow, low volume streets to reduce over-saturation of this safety tool. Several streets in the downtown area, for example, may not be appropriate for these markings, since they will reduce the effectiveness of other existing, or needed, sharrows on busier streets elsewhere in town.
- **Move Existing Sharrow Markings** – There are bicycle ‘sharrow’ markings on roads in the downtown area, and likely in other areas, that are placed too close to the right side of the travel lane, encouraging bicyclists to ride close to parked cars. This placement also encourages drivers to attempt to then pass bicyclists in what may then be too narrow a space for safe travel for bicyclists, putting them in between parked and moving cars. Citywide policy should be to place sharrows in the middle of the travel lane.
- **Improve Crosswalks to Make Them more Visible** – Santa Fe makes good use of signs to draw motorists' attention to crosswalks, but many of its crosswalks are poorly marked or fading and difficult for motorists to see. Consider “double signing” those locations where only one sign appears (using the back sides of signs). Prioritize crosswalks for restriping. Start with two wide, bold edge lines and use high-emphasis markings in all downtown and high-traffic locations. Survey major intersections, particularly in places where there are opportunities for higher pedestrian counts and vulnerable populations such as schools, and paint or repaint crosswalks that are missing or faded. Consider colorizing crosswalks to increase visibility.
- **Paint Mid-Block Crossing Advance Limit Markings** - Paint these ‘stop bars’ back from the crossings--30 to 60 feet depending on vehicle speeds--to reduce the risk of a multiple-threat collision. At the midblock crossing on Cordova Road that has recently been moved, for instance, set the stop bar at least 35 feet from the marked crosswalk. This will help reduce the risk of a multi-threat crash. Also, double-sign the crossing – install signs on both sides of each sign pole, on both sides of the street. This will improve visibility overall, and motorists

will be able to see a crossing sign even if there is a larger vehicle in front or next to their vehicle, partially obstructing their view.

#### OTHER 100 DAY ITEMS TO CONSIDER

- Provide a Walkability/Smart Growth/Complete Streets Training Course to City Council.

### Mid-Range Projects: *The Second Wave*

- **Reduce the Speed- and Use of- Channelized Turn Lanes** – Channelized right-turn lanes throughout Santa Fe are very high-speed, which is dangerous to both drivers and people on foot, and unnecessary. Eliminate double right turn lanes; this is a practice that is especially unsafe, as it creates the “multiple threat” scenario, when one vehicle is stopped and a pedestrian then crosses into the path of another (potentially) moving vehicle. In some cases, the channelized turn lane is unnecessary – conduct traffic studies to determine whether these lanes should even remain open to turning traffic.
- **Install and Enhance Mid-Block Crossings** – Blocks in many places are very long and need mid-block crossings with crossing islands or medians. Airport Road, just east of the Country Club Gardens development, has at least one crossing that is inadequate, missing crosswalk markings, signage, lighting, etc. And consider getting neighbor support for opening up the wall behind the small strip mall near the crossing, to give access from the neighborhood behind the mall property (we understand that neighbors wanted the wall, likely to reduce noise). The mall retail businesses could then open towards the neighborhood, creating outdoor seating and other welcoming elements. This would likely increase business there as well.
- **Ensure Lighting is Placed at all Intersection and Mid-Block Crossings** – Many intersections and mid-block crossings currently have inadequate lighting. Lighting will increase walking and safety for all users.
- **Put Cordova Road on a Road Diet** – This will also simplify the crossing. In the interim, reduce the travel lanes from 13 and 14 feet wide to 10 feet wide (or 11, if warranted) and use the remaining space to add dedicated bike lanes.
  - At the intersection of Cordova Road and St. Francis Drive
    - Widen the curb cut in the median to accommodate at least two people with mobility aids (such as wheelchairs) to pass through the median at the same time. This will reduce the risk of a wheelchair-bound pedestrian or person with a stroller getting stuck in the intersection if they and someone coming at them are trying to cross at the same time.

- Move pedestrian signal heads to locations they can be viewed by pedestrians when tall vehicles are queued properly. Ex: bus was legally stopped at stop bar and blocked the signal head.
  - Reduce the turning radius from 45 feet to a more appropriate radius, using the correct truck turning template.
- On Cordova Road near the rail crossing, put the pedestrian crossing where it will be most benign and eliminate the most conflicts. Also, work with the car wash owner to close the driveway closest to the rail.
- **Put Airport Road on a Road Diet** – Lanes are unnecessarily wide, traffic is moving too fast, some turning radii are too wide, and crossings are not adequate for the conditions. A comprehensive engineering analysis is recommended.
- **Add Wayfinding to Existing Trails and to Popular Destinations** – Santa Fe’s trail system serves as a great recreation option for residents and visitors. However, completing a comprehensive wayfinding system will increase usage – people using the trails system would now know how to get to other destinations using the trail. Wayfinding will help users begin to connect destinations, especially to downtown and the Railyard complex, creating a new transportation option in Santa Fe, and increasing the value of the trails to the community as utilitarian resources, in addition to their great value as recreational assets.
- **Finalize or Adopt a Street Design Manual** – As part of Santa Fe’s ongoing Complete Streets efforts, make revisions to the City’s street design manual with an eye for walkability. Another option is to adopt a model manual, such as the Los Angeles County’s [\*Model Design Manual for Living Streets\*](#), the National Association of City Officials [\*Urban Street Design Guide\*](#). In addition, incorporate elements from the [\*Designing Walkable Urban Thoroughfares: A Context Sensitive Approach\*](#) manual created by the Institute for Transportation Engineers and the Congress for New Urbanism, and NACTO’s [\*Urban Bicycle Design Guide\*](#).
- **Stop Giving Variances** – This common practice in Santa Fe is weakening good practices around land use and transportation. The City should adopt a policy that variances are not to be given except in the most extreme circumstances, and only when it will stabilize or increase the value of adjacent properties; and only when normal practices are not possible.

#### OTHER MID-RANGE ITEMS TO CONSIDER

- **Identify Opportunities for Roundabouts** – Modern roundabouts are four to ten times safer than four-way signalized intersections, substantially reducing crashes and helping to calm traffic – they can even contribute to reduced traffic speeds through a corridor,

and move 30% more traffic without signal and stop control delays. Roundabouts can improve pedestrian connectivity, but they also provide opportunities to create a gateway and improve the retail and social life of streets. When installing roundabouts, be strategic, but be bold, and maximize the opportunity to help people become more comfortable with roundabouts and the benefits they offer. It is important to design for low speed in and low speed out on each leg of a roundabout.

## Long-Range or Policy Initiatives: *The Big Wins*

- **Improve Connectivity through Santa Fe** – There is a need for Santa Fe to stitch together important neighborhood connections that were either removed at one time, or which were never completed. This can and should be performed with a specific strategic plan of action.
- **Partner with local schools to promote Safe Routes to School** – Partner with the local school district to coordinate initiatives aimed at making it safe for students to walk and bicycle to school. **Convene a community-wide high-level task force**, or have an existing safety or health committee absorb Safe Routes to School as a primary initiative. Convene school teams at each school under consideration, and develop a comprehensive 5-E’s program at each of the designated schools. Consider starting with a pilot school, or multiple schools, that already have parental momentum, a supportive principal, and/or ‘champion’ volunteers. Consult school officials to identify ongoing challenges for students who wish to walk or bicycle to school. Identify existing city facilities and/or upcoming projects that address problem areas, such as completing sidewalks around schools, and work with schools to conduct outreach to parents and promote walking and bicycling to school. Apply for TAP or HSIP funds to pay for program activities and infrastructure improvements. The City should sponsor a Safe Routes to School forum to promote the concept and catalyze citywide efforts.
- **Work with NMDOT and County Officials to Improve Walkability** – We recommend that the City set up a meeting with NMDOT district staff to discuss several very specific ideas, such as redesigning the channelized islands to be both safer for people on foot and more efficient for turning movements, placing a mid-block crossing in a priority location, etc.
- **Adopt Form-Based Code** – Santa Fe’s General Plan is getting more up-to-date with sustainable land uses, and more form-based, but more needs to be done. By adopting this as policy, walkability will be improved, in addition to more sustainable and profitable land uses.

- **Require and Develop Neighborhood Master Plans** – Master plans are not a requirement now in Santa Fe. The City should adopt a policy requiring neighborhood master plans. This will help to build ‘social capital’, and will likely increase voter turnout at important elections.
  - **Prioritize the Southside Community** – Continue to meet with and – most importantly – listen to Southside residents and stakeholders, in order to identify, prioritize and complete walkability projects and programs that will improve this under-resourced part of the Santa Fe community. The Southside community would be a great place to begin, partnering with Councilor Dominguez and stakeholders such as LaFamilia, NM Health Equity Partnership, Health Access NM, Chainbreaker, and others. The City should also connect neighborhood plans with general connectivity efforts.

#### OTHER LONG-TERM ITEMS TO CONSIDER

- **Create a Sidewalk Improvement District (SID)** – City Council could adopt a resolution declaring the necessity for an improvement district in certain areas of the City. Consider getting interns to measure a linear stretch, or a square mile, and determine the cost of maintenance/additions; create a pilot project to test the approach. Councilor Maestas could be a champion for this effort; he would need example SID’s with sample data for comparison. A good model for a SID can be found by contacting Missoula, Montana city officials.

#### ADDITIONAL ITEMS TO CONSIDER

- Build social capital through early stage outreach to stakeholders and residents, and ongoing partnerships with officials and advocates.
- Develop or review bicycle, pedestrian and open space plans.
- Ensure that schools are “[community-centered](#),” and are planned with municipal participation and through an effective and authentic public process.
- Consider creating small neighborhood parks and community gardens in unused and underused lots, such as underused parking lots, and temporary on-street “[Parklets](#)” in (former) parking spaces.
- Ensure that there are healthy food retail outlets within walking distance to residents, especially lower-income residents. Until these are underway, look into allowing and promoting fresh and healthy food vending trucks, which can be grouped into ‘pods’ where feasible.



- Plan future walkability improvements around destinations, and use [Walkscore](#) as one of the tools to evaluate need and outcomes.
- Develop a [bicycle library](#) or public “[Bike Share](#)” system.
- Adopt a “[Health in All Policies](#)” policy, and conduct [Health Impact Assessments](#).
- Increase transparency (windows) requirements on all downtown buildings over time, with high emphasis on key blocks, eventually reaching over 70 percent transparency.
- Establish true ‘cost’ parking, which will help to incentivize added street life, safety, and downtown investment. This is a major step that will better incentivize those modes of transportation, settlement patterns and lifestyles that can produce the greatest wealth and health for the community.
- Program stoplights to give pedestrians a “pedestrian lead interval”, especially on busy roads, in order to get them partly across the street before motor vehicles begin moving. Also, dedicated left-turn signals can precede (lead interval) or follow (lag interval) the pedestrian phase to further increase safety, and there are safety benefits for all (including the motorist) to use the lag (end of cycle), but it is not always possible in some settings. These two treatments are not always possible, but when it is possible, there is a safety gain to both pedestrians and motorists.