

# COMPLETING OUR STREETS

• *The Transition to  
Safe and Inclusive  
Transportation  
Networks*



BARBARA McCANN



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The Transition to Safe and Inclusive  
Transportation Networks

Barbara McCann



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*To the memory of Susie Stephens, who planted a seed*



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Buford Highway, Atlanta, Georgia. Note the trail leading to the bus stop in the background. (Photo by Steve Davis.)

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## Preface

ONE DAY IN THE EARLY 1990S, I was riding my bicycle in Atlanta along wide, fast-moving Ponce de Leon Avenue. I was passing by Ponce de Leon Plaza, Atlanta's very first strip shopping center, sharing one of the six lanes with cars speeding by, inches away. I began to imagine a city with bike lanes everywhere. It turned out to be more than a fleeting thought.

I had been helping organize an annual Bike to Work Day effort that brought out a few stalwarts, but most people reacted to the suggestion that they bike to work with skepticism or disbelief. If you could afford it, driving was the default for almost all trips in Atlanta, even to reach transit. MARTA (Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority) rail stations were surrounded with parking lots and ringed with fences to keep people from walking straight into adjoining neighborhoods—if you were using transit, you must be up to no good. Bicycling was assumed to require a separate path, because the roads were clearly no place for anyone outside of a car. I knew that encouragement alone was not going to get Atlantans to try bicycling. They needed the road network to give them some space.

This was at the time when Atlanta was just starting to understand the downside of its explosive outward growth. Just a few years earlier, the Georgia Department of Transportation had confidently launched a massive highway expansion project to “Free the Freeways”—and the interstates were again jammed. The region was threatened with losing control of its federal transportation dollars due to its failure to come up with a plan to reduce automobile emissions. I became fascinated by the struggle to change the course of development and transportation investments. Shortly thereafter, the Atlanta region did become the first and only metro area in the nation to lose control of its federal gas tax money because of Clean Air Act violations. The term *sprawl* was just coming into vogue,

and I realized these issues were not isolated to Atlanta. I was working as a writer and producer at CNN, so I did what any journalist would do—I started researching and reporting.

Not long after completing an hour-long special for CNN on transportation and development issues, I took a job at a Washington, DC, nonprofit, the Surface Transportation Policy Project (STPP), which worked to defend and expand innovations in federal transportation funding to allow more spending on motorized modes and public transportation. I wrote widely publicized research reports about how transportation planning decisions affect Americans' quality of life, from endangering pedestrians to forcing moms to become chauffeurs. And as I talked to reporters, planners, and local leaders, I realized how hard it was for people to envision places where driving was not an everyday necessity, or roadways where bicycles, public transportation, pedestrians, and cars could coexist.

New urbanism and smart growth were starting to present an alternative. The idea of traffic calming to slow cars was gaining ground, and a few places were building bike lanes and light rail. But each project was still a struggle, against attitudes, assumptions, and systems designed to deliver auto-mobility.

People from the public health community visited STPP in 2000, having come to the conclusion I had reached in Atlanta: asking people to get out and walk or bicycle was hopeless until we could start building places that were safe and inviting to walk and bike. They suspected the growing obesity epidemic had something to do with Americans' ability to move around without actually moving their bodies. With funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, I worked with transportation researcher Reid Ewing on a study finding that people who live in more sprawling places are more likely to be overweight or obese.<sup>1</sup> The study was the first to use national health and land use data to make a connection between sprawl and health. The companion report received extensive media coverage in 2003, setting up a conversation that has continued since.<sup>2</sup>

### What This Book Does Not Do

The previous summary is the background that led to my creation of the Complete Streets movement, and I tell it in part to explain what this book doesn't do. It doesn't dwell on the problems of our automobile-oriented

system. I explored those issues earlier in my career, and many others have written articulate, well-researched books and articles on the topic. I encourage you to explore them, and I provide some resources in the bibliography. This book will make only a limited case for why and how compact communities with transportation choices create healthier, more vibrant, and more sustainable communities. The National Complete Streets Coalition has developed (and keeps updated) an extensive list of fact sheets and reports that are chock-full of statistics and information (see appendix B for a guide to these resources). Island Press and many others have also developed extensive resources that do this job.

This book also does not paint a vision of an ideal future or provide a template for the “perfect complete street.” This book is not the cutting-edge design manifesto that some people may expect. Plenty of others have created beautiful, innovative templates for multimodal streets and compact, walkable towns and neighborhoods. But I’ve found that those finely crafted visions are not of much immediate use in the communities I see as my baseline: Atlanta and the small towns across Georgia and the suburban United States. These places, and so many more across the United States, have been shaped by sprawling development. It will be quite a while before they reach any sort of smart growth ideal—if ever. But the people who live there still need to be able to reach their neighborhood schools safely and walk to and from the bus stop.

If I’m not focusing on the problem, or on the best solution, what on earth will I be talking about? It turns out that many communities are somewhere in the middle—grappling with current conditions as they make their way to creating better, safer streets. This book tells their stories and explores how they have made change happen. It examines what happens after a community has embraced a new vision but when the reality it faces is still a sprawling, automobile-dominated street network with a planning system geared to deliver more of the same. This book is about what such communities do next.



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*Portions of this text appeared in different forms in reports issued by the National Complete Streets Coalition and its partners, and in the Urban Design Journal.*





A well-maintained four-lane road in the Midwest alongside a school for children with disabilities. (Photo by Barbara McCann.)