

Topsham Planning Department

# Complete Streets Policy in Topsham

The Need to Introduce Complete Streets policy in Topsham, ME.

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## **Purpose**

Topsham is one of the largest towns in Midcoast Maine. Thousands of commuter travel through the town daily as the town connects major thoroughfares such as I-295, U.S. Route 1, US 201, and State routes 196 and 24. Topsham functions as an intersection of travel as commuters travel from southern and western Maine east towards the Midcoast. Pedestrians and cyclist also frequent the town's roads as Topsham has many amenities and features that attract the recreational minded. With the high number of motorist and the increasing amount of pedestrians, cyclists, and other road users; safety and access becomes an issue. As the town grows it becomes important for the town to keep all modes of transportation in mind as it evaluates, constructs, and improves current and future roads. By adopting a Complete Streets policy the town of Topsham can create safer access to town road for all users, whether those users are motorists, pedestrians, cyclists, or people utilizing public transportation.

## **What are Complete Streets?**

Complete Streets are streets or roads that are open to everyone by allowing safe access to all forms of transportation and users. Whether those users are pedestrians, bicyclists, drivers, or people utilizing public transportation; Complete Streets seek to identify all users, current or future, and give them safe access to public right-of-ways. "The concept of Complete Streets encompasses many approaches to planning, designing, and operating roadways and rights of way with all users in mind to make the transportation network safer and more efficient"<sup>1</sup> Policy for Complete Streets are set by States, Municipalities, and the Federal government. It is the job of the town of Topsham to adopt its own Complete Streets policy to best give safe access to streets and roads to all visitors or residents of Topsham regardless, of age, ability, financial standing, or status.<sup>2</sup> Through the implementation of Complete Streets policy road in the town will be set to a certain standard where new roads and all major road construction projects must evaluate possible users prior to commencement of the project. Any Complete Streets policy that the town may adopt will lay out any exceptions to when a road is considered will implement Complete Street guidelines, and what the standards for Complete Streets are. The policy will help the town move to a more user friendly environment by encouraging more eco-friendly forms of transportation which help promote the health and economy of the town.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Transportation Complete Streets Policy

<sup>2</sup> Maine DOT Complete Streets Policy

## Similar Policies throughout Maine

Many major cities and towns in the Midcoast and southern Maine have had Complete Streets policies for several years now. Portland, Maine was one of the first cities in Maine to adopt a Complete Streets Policy. In their policy, they identify the need for safe access to all users and lay out how the policy will be implemented. The following excerpt shows how Portland plans on implementing its Complete Street Policy:

“Early consideration of all modes for all users will be important to the success of this Policy. Those planning and designing projects that affect public streets will give due consideration to all roadway users from the very start of planning and design work. This will apply to all roadway projects, including those involving new construction, reconstruction, repaving/rehabilitation or roadway retrofit. Roadway retrofits may include changes in the allocation of the right-of-way and pavement space on an existing roadway, such as changes to the number and use of lanes, changes in lane widths, and/or reconfiguration of on-street parking. When applying for and reviewing projects for funding purposes regardless of funding source, Complete Street practices and principles will be included, as appropriate, for all projects that affect the public right-of-way.”<sup>3</sup>

All the towns that have adopted Complete Street policies in Maine have used similar formats, first explaining the vision of Complete Streets, then moving on to explain how this vision will be implemented. Most towns have also included an exceptions section where the town or city has laid out certain instances where Complete Street policies may not have to be implemented. An example of possible exceptions to the Complete Streets Policy is as follows:

1. Street projects may exclude those elements of this policy that would require the accommodation of street uses prohibited by law;
1. Ordinary maintenance activities such as mowing, snowplowing, sweeping, spot repair, joint or crack sealing, or pothole filling do not require that elements of this policy be applied beyond the scope of that maintenance activity;
2. Ordinary maintenance paving projects may only exclude the elements of this policy that would require increasing pavement width. However, when such projects do occur, the condition of existing facilities supporting alternate transportation modes should be evaluated as well as the appropriateness of modifying existing pavement markings and signage that supports such alternate modes. This exception does not apply to street reconstruction projects;
3. Street reconstruction projects and maintenance paving projects which involve widening pavement may exclude elements of this policy when the accommodation of a specific use is expected to:
  - a. require more space than is physically available, or
  - b. be located where both current and future demand is proven absent, or
  - c. drastically increase project costs and equivalent alternatives exist within proximity, or
  - d. have adverse impacts on environmental resources such as streams, wetlands, floodplains, or on historic structures or sites above and beyond the impacts of currently existing infrastructure.<sup>4</sup>

Towns in Maine that have adopted Complete Streets policies have had to layout guidelines of what Complete Streets looks like in each town. Each town has developed layout and design guidelines and that follow road standards throughout Maine and the United States.

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<sup>3</sup> City of Portland, Maine Complete Streets Policy

<sup>4</sup> City of Bath Maine Complete Streets Policy

It is important that the town adopts a concise policy on Complete Streets so that the roads in the town will be safe and accessible for all users and any improves made on roads to be made in a comprehensive, cohesive way.

Every town that has adopted Complete Street policy has done so to help promote the creation of a multi-modal right-of-ways and roads throughout the town that are safe and open to everyone. These policies will help foster a healthier community that allows residents and visitors greater access to roads and right-of-ways. The adoption of a Complete Streets policy in Topsham will benefit everyone in the community and will be a benefit to the town's future layout and design.

Bath, a municipality with many similarities that is relatively nearby, recently adopted its own Complete Streets policy focusing on the needs of all who use their roads. The City recognized that all roads are not the same and that while all projects on town roads should consider all modes of transportation, the end result will be different; as a Complete Street in a rural area will look different than a Complete Street in an urban area. Likewise, Topsham should adopt similar approaches to their Complete Street policy.

### **Topsham Comprehensive Plan and Complete Streets**

A Complete Streets policy would not only be beneficial for the town but would also coincide with the town's Comprehensive Plan. In the transportation section of the Comprehensive plan the town dictates that, "Future planning and investment in the transportation network should be approached with a sense of equity and balance for all users of the system, so residents of all ages can be connected to the entire Town."<sup>5</sup> This view of transportation that the town holds in the Comprehensive Plan coincides closely to what a Complete Streets policy would uphold. Throughout the Comprehensive Plan the need for a Complete Streets policy is noted, it would be best for the town, especially for the future of the town, to adopt a cohesive Complete Streets policy that keeps all users of Topsham's right-of-ways in mind.

### **Route 196 Transportation Study and the TFMR Master Plan**

Over the past several years, the town has performed several Transportation studies along with the state to help identify concerns and development ideas in some of the major areas throughout town. The State Route 196 Transportation Planning Study mentions the importance of maintaining the road to be safe for both pedestrians and cyclists. The study comes to the conclusion that in future the Route 196, "Corridor plan should both accommodate the movement of all users, and encourage the use of public transportation."<sup>6</sup> Hoping to

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<sup>5</sup> Draft of Topsham Comprehensive Plan: Transportation

<sup>6</sup> State Route 196 Transportation Planning Study, 40

encourage multi-modal forms of transportation the study highlights the need for better access in the future along 196 to both pedestrians and cyclists. The state identified the possible use of a multi-purpose trail along the length of the 196 corridor but acknowledged that the bike path was not very feasible as the corridor traveled through several urban areas, traversed difficult river/stream crossings, and would run through challenging topography along the corridor. These factors serve as roadblocks to a possible bike path in several sections of the 196 corridor.

The town has also performed studies in the past on the Topsham Fair Mall Road and how this area can be best utilized for all users. The Master Plan mentions the following in regards to pedestrian safety and multi-modal forms of transportation:

“Topsham’s multimodal transportation system – including its pedestrian facilities, streets and highways, and bicycle facilities – provides a structural network that is essential to the community’s daily life and commerce. However, while good mobility is an important outcome, the Town needs to balance the deeper goals for health, safety, quality of life, economic vitality, and land use and community character when making transportation decisions.”<sup>7</sup>

Complete Streets policy closely follows these goals set by the TFMR Master Plan. As Topsham grows and the town looks to expand and improve transportation networks it is vital that the town keeps in mind all possible users. By adopting a Complete Streets policy the town can ensure that future projects will look at all users in ever project performed in the town’s right-of-ways

### **Cycling Routes and Bike paths**

The transportation planning study on Route 196 highlights that sections of Route 196 in Topsham are also sections of the East Coast Greenway<sup>8</sup>, one of several bike routes running through Topsham today (Figure 1). The Greenway runs on one section of 196 stretching from River Road in Pejepscot all the way to the town boarder with Lisbon. U.S. Bike Route 1 also runs through Topsham following the same rout as the ECG. The Merrymeeting Trail (MMT) is another bike route in town that serves as an alternate route to a planned off-road bike path. This Trail runs from 196 along Middlesex, to the south end of Foreside road. The route runs along Foreside road to its end, then up Route 24 through to Bowdoin. These three bike routes run along some of the most important corridors in Topsham for cycling and are in most cases safe because most motorists are accommodating to other users. There are some areas along these bike routes that can be dangerous and are not accessible to all modes of travel including cycling. The Route 196 corridor is one area where cyclists are in more danger than any other road in town because of the high volumes of traffic and the high speeds at which motorists drive. By adopting a Complete Streets policy the town can work towards achieving a safer community for various forms of transportation.

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<sup>7</sup> TFMR Master Plan, 2

<sup>8</sup> State Route 196 Transportation Planning Study

The town of Topsham currently has plans to expand its current off-road bike path network. According to the town's Shared-Use Trail Master Plan, the town hopes to connect important locations throughout town with shared use trail like the trail that stretches from the Municipal Offices to the intersection of the Highlands and Route 196.<sup>9</sup> The Shared-Use Trail Master plan was developed in 2004, the plan's goals were similar to what Topsham's current Comprehensive plan lays out, but is outdated. The plans for new multi-use trails in along the 196 corridor would be very beneficial to the town, but funding is an issue with these projects. While the plan was created in 2004, none of the projects were funded and constructed until recently when the new bike path was constructed in 2016. In the future it would be best for the town to adopt a cohesive Complete Streets policy so that a bike path network in town could be better expanded for all users.

### **Pedestrian Access and Safety**

Pedestrian access in town is also lacking in some regards. According to the Comprehensive plan Topsham has, "nearly 8 miles of sidewalks, primarily located along urban arterials where the potential conflict between vehicles and pedestrians is greatest"<sup>10</sup> Most of these sidewalks are in the urban sections of town and for the most part are pretty cohesive except for the Topsham Crossing neighborhood where the sidewalks do not connect to the larger network of sidewalk in town (Figure 3). The one other location where pedestrian access is limited is at the Highlands, where sidewalks do not connect to the nearby network of sidewalks. The biggest issue at the highland is where the sidewalks end at route 196, there is currently no pedestrian access across route 196, at the intersection between Village Drive and the Bypass. There are sidewalks across the intersection and a trailhead to the towns new bike path but no pedestrian access across 196. It should be noted that currently there are future plans to erect a pedestrian bridge over Route 196 near this intersection, but the project has yet to be planned.<sup>11</sup> Downtown pedestrian access is adequate in most areas but can be made safer. A cohesive Complete Streets policy is needed in Topsham so that pedestrian access is made safer and existing pedestrian networks can be expanded efficiently.

### **The Need in Conclusion**

To summarize, the town of Topsham needs to adopt a cohesive Complete Streets policy that keeps all users in mind. The town is constantly expanding and changing, as new streets are added to the town and improvements are being performed on current roads the town needs to

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<sup>9</sup> Transportation Feasibility Study: Redevelopment of BNAS, 25

<sup>10</sup> Topsham Comprehensive Plan: Transportation, 1

<sup>11</sup> Transportation Feasibility Study; Redevelopment of BNAS, 33

be able to improve its current network of pedestrian, bicycling, and public transportation facilities so they can meet the needs of all current and future users.

The current facilities in town can be improved to better serve all users in the community. By creating a Complete Streets policy that efficiently and cohesively identifies how the town can make improvement to better serve all modes of transportation will be beneficial for all those who use the town's roads. Not only is a policy like this beneficial to the health and well-being of the community, but the policy closely coincides with numerous transportation studies performed throughout the town and the towns Comprehensive plan.

Similar towns throughout Southern Maine and the Midcoast have adopted Complete Streets policies in order to better their communities. The town of Topsham needs to adopt a similar policy so that our town can be benefited from a more efficient network of multi-modal transportation and connectivity that other towns have benefited from. Bath, Portland, and Yarmouth, all nearby cities and towns have already adopted Complete Streets policies and have benefited from those policies. Topsham is already a town frequented by people of all different modes of transportation. A Complete Streets policy not only enhances the town's multi-modal facilities and road, but makes the safer and more accessible to residents and visitors of the town.

### Maps and Figures

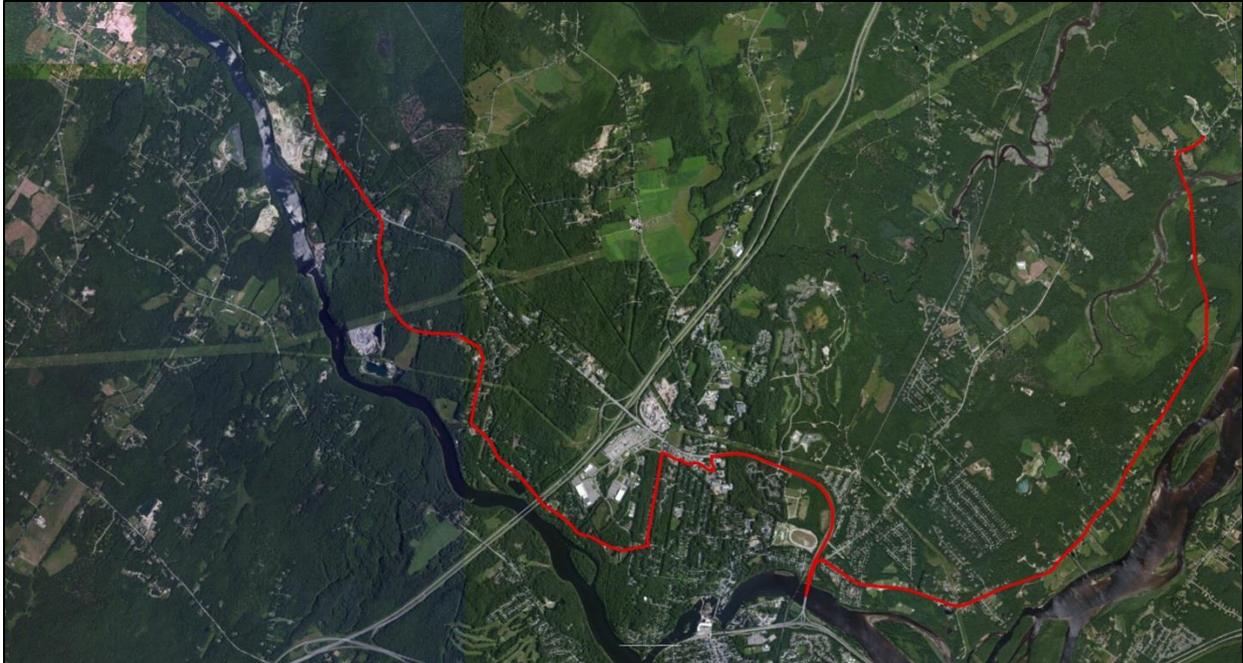


Figure 1: Map of bike routes in Topsham: ECG, USBR 1, and, MMT.

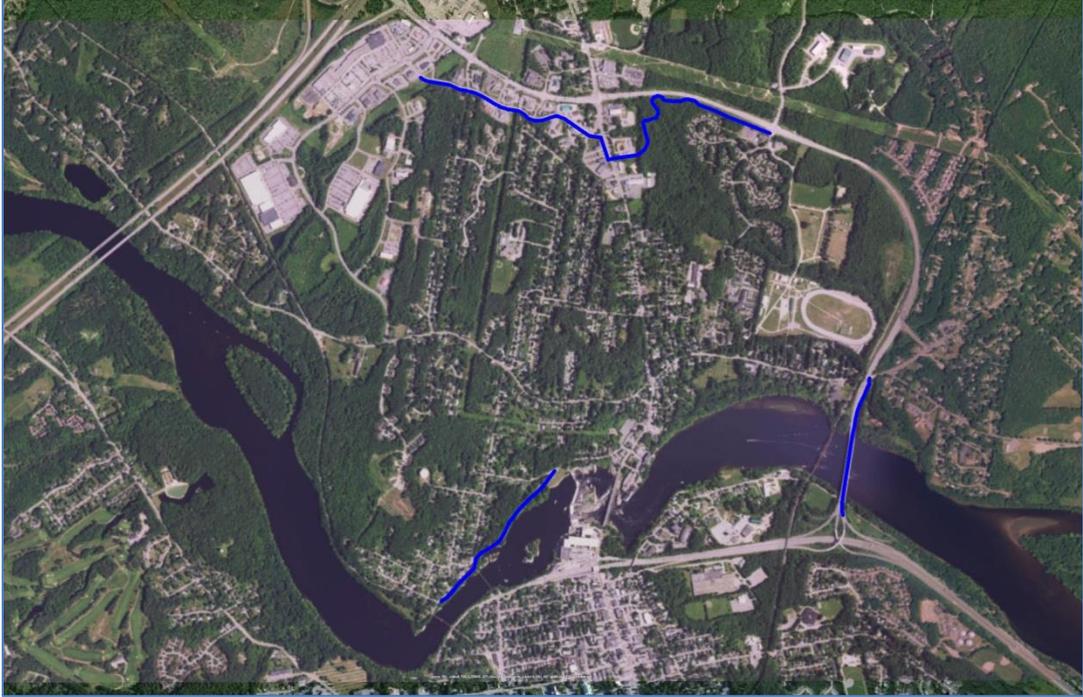


Figure 2: Bike paths in Topsham, ME.

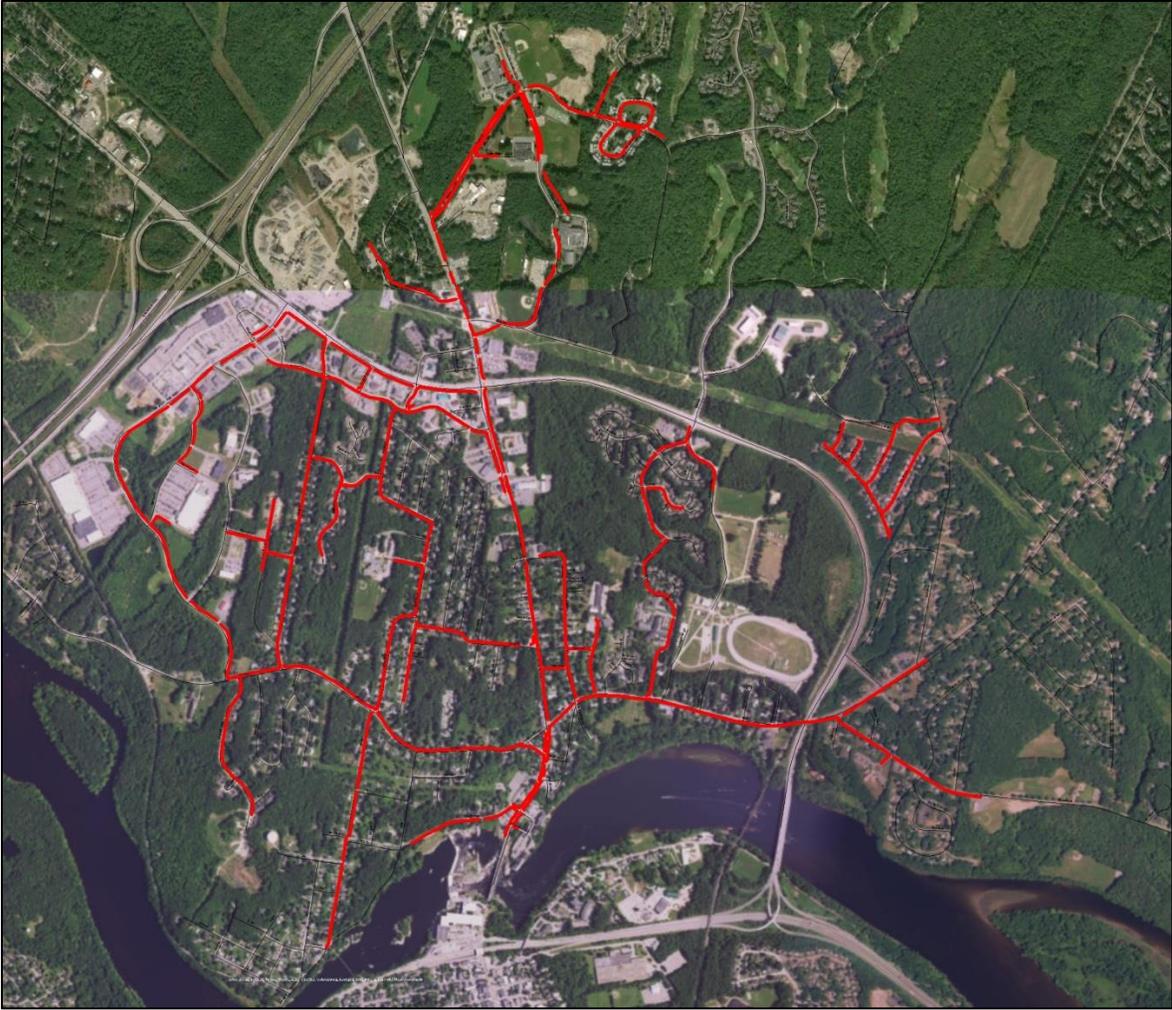


Figure 3: Sidewalks in Topsham-not shown are the sidewalks in the Highlands.