

# La Crosse Transportation Vision Charrette

Toole Design Group (TDG)

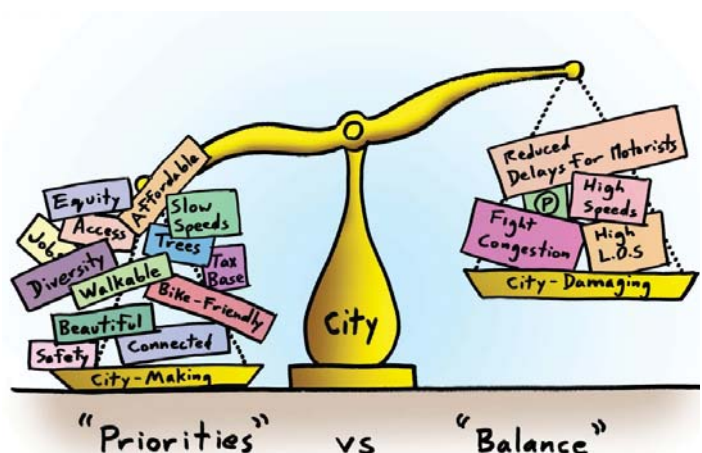
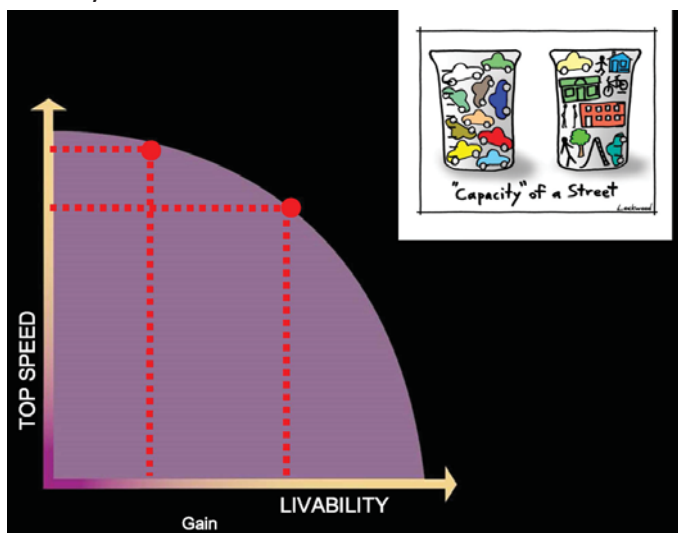
Ian Lockwood, PE and Ken Ray, RLA

## Introduction and Getting Planning Horizon Right

The City of La Crosse is over 150 years old. The city has evolved incrementally over that time through thousands of planning, transportation, and development decisions. Being the central city in the area, the city's future economic and social health is uncertain due to the challenges related to: i) value and investment being exported to suburban areas outside of the city via high car-carrying capacity and high-speed roads; ii) the incremental erosion of walkability within the city; and iii) the incremental erosion of the city's environmental resources. These city-damaging trends are supported by conventional patterns of automobile-based transportation planning and design.

Developing a city-wide, public, vision for 100-years was important so that planners, investors, and transportation agencies have clear guidance regarding how the city ought to be. This was purposeful in order to counter the shorter-term (i.e., 20 to 25 year), incremental, approach employed by most transportation agencies. Periods of 20 to 25 years are insufficient in the life of the city to set a vision; a longer view is necessary so that the next 150 years of the city's development can be positive. As can be seen over the last 50 years, the shorter-term approaches allowed for the incremental erosion of the city's environmental and social resources while favoring pro-automobile outcomes. If shorter-term transportation planning continues this negative pattern, when scaled up to 100 years, the design horizon for the vision, the prognosis for the city, the major employers, and the region is dire. By taking a longer view, sustainable decisions can be made in the near-term on every project such that they support the long-term vision.

Note: It is recognized that the modern automobile-focused traffic models are increasingly unreliable as the planning horizons move out. However, those technical shortcomings are an insufficient justification to plan incrementally. Furthermore, what the model may think is a positive outcome may be in direct conflict with the city's Vision anyway. On the other hand, what is reliable are the place-oriented aspirations of communities. These have been consistent for hundreds of years and involve ideas of walkability, beauty, comfort, and quality-of-life, all of which add up incrementally to a great place. The City of La Crosse existed long before automobiles were even invented and the place will be around long after subsequent iterations of technologies occur. This 100-year vision is intended to be a litmus test that shall be used to test every change in the city, particularly changes to the streets. The intent is to cause the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT), the city, the county, business people, neighborhoods, and everyone else who is involved with streets to be more creative, more collaborative, and more disciplined in their pursuit of sustainable ways of evolving the city towards the desirable future as is articulated in the Vision.



## Process

Monday February 23, 2015 – The Toole Design Group (TDG) Charrette Team of Ian Lockwood, PE and Ken Ray, RLA, arrived in the city and held introductory meetings with city Staff and completed a driving tour of the city and potential project corridors. That evening TDG facilitated a Community Vision Public Meeting, which was attended by over 115 members of the general public. Ian Lockwood gave an educational and informative presentation about current issues and trends in transportation planning, relevant case studies to La Crosse, and the schedule for the week. Following the presentation, TDG conducted table exercises to gain information, values, and direction from the public. Participants were asked to work in groups of 8-10 people to list the top 5 things they like most about La Crosse (want to see preserved), 5 things they dislike most about La Crosse (like to see changed), and then to write a statement about what they thought La Crosse should look like in 100 years. The responses were written on large sheets of paper that were pinned up around the room and reported back to the entire group. The responses were then tabulated and converted into word cloud graphics, in which words that were repeated in each list were automatically given a larger font. This helped illustrate what the main themes were for the public’s vision of the city. The results were very consistent with written and oral comments, indicating a strong public consensus.



What people love about La Crosse



What people dislike about La Crosse

Tuesday February 24, 2015 – The second day of the charrette was used for additional research and discovery by facilitating a series of eight stakeholder interviews. The groups that were interviewed included attendees from economic development, transportation and infrastructure, local businesses, local schools and universities, land use, the bike/ped community, environmental and conservation, and neighborhood groups. The interviews lasted about an hour each. These interviews explored the attendee’s individual plans and gleaned input regarding the direction for the city which helped evolve the vision. The input reinforced the consensus from Monday.



Wednesday February 25, 2015 – By Wednesday the charrette began to transition from discovery and learning to preliminary design ideas and first draft versions of the city’s vision statement. First thing that morning, the TDG Team conducted a city Staff meeting to review what happened during the stakeholder interviews and what some initial ideas were for going forward. As the TDG Team worked through the initial concepts, they had open office hours and a public pin-up session which allowed people to come by the charrette studio and check in on the progress. They were also able to critique the vision statement and add comments or write their own statements for the Team to consider. Throughout the day, there were over 40 people from the public that stopped by to provide comments. The vision statement was edited to reflect the comments from the pin-up and was expanded to include themes that should be used by the city to evaluate proposed projects.

Thursday February 26, 2015 – Thursday was the final day for conceptual design, editing the vision statement, and documenting the week’s work into a public presentation for that evening. The conceptual designs were focused on areas that were identified as having issues, were already streets that were planned for construction, or were critical in adding network and redevelopment potential. The idea was not to prepare an entire city-wide plan but to illustrate how the vision should be used/applied in actual situations and with unique contexts.

The public presentation was given to over 90 members of the general public and staff. A question and answer session ended the presentation and comments were highly in favor of the vision and were mostly directed toward next steps and how to implement the vision.

### **Outcomes and Recommendations**

The consensus by the public, stakeholders, and city staff is the Vision is to plan, prioritize, and design changes that help city the to become a beautiful, livable, vibrant, historic, city between the rivers, bluffs and marsh that is the economic, educational, medical, social, and cultural and transportation hub for the region.

Based on the vision, the city will prioritize changes that result in outcomes like safety, walkability, bike friendliness, access, slower driving speeds, few vehicle-miles-traveled, complete streets, and beauty; and not prioritize conventional ideas such as reduced delays for motorists, high speed roads, high levels of service for motorists, abundant and low-cost automobile parking, and fighting congestion through road widening.

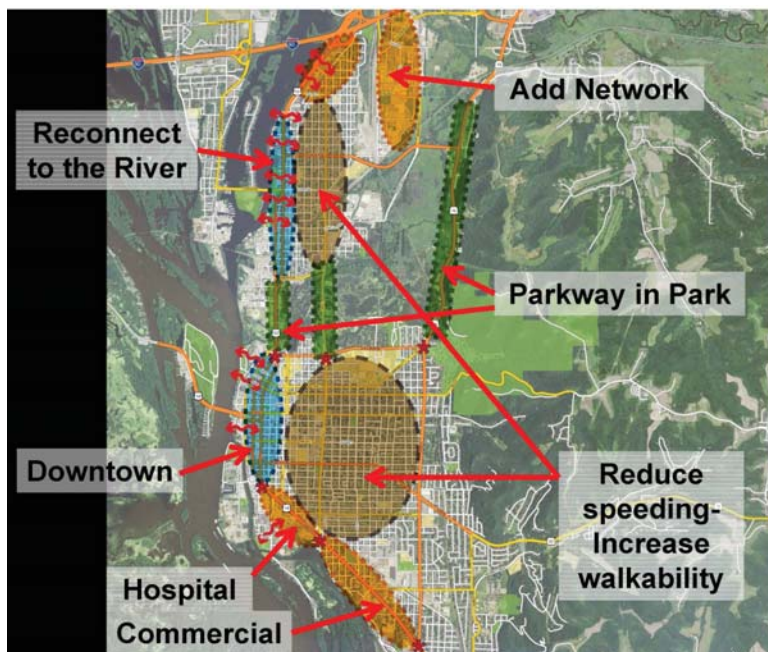
Some questions that were asked when considering changing from conventional transportation planning to one that is vision-based with a longer-term outlook were:

1. How much more degradation of the city's value is it worth to have motorists drive through the city faster?
2. Is enabling faster, long distance, commuting worth widening streets, acquiring private property, increasing speeds, creating barriers between neighborhoods and their destinations, reducing comfort and safety, reducing access and closing streets, etc. in the city?
3. Will the long-distance commuters or through traffic actually save a few seconds or a few minutes or will more people escape the declining city, move to more remote low-density suburban developments, become car-dependent, and perpetuate the present conventional and unsustainable patterns?



Main design objectives of the vision are to reconnect to the river, restore the street network, enhance the downtown areas of both north and south La Crosse, reduce speeding and increase walkability in neighborhoods, transform the streets that currently pass through the marsh to be more like “parkways in the park” instead of highways, reduce trip lengths and vehicle-miles traveled, and make the city’s arterials complete and hospitable for social and economic exchange.

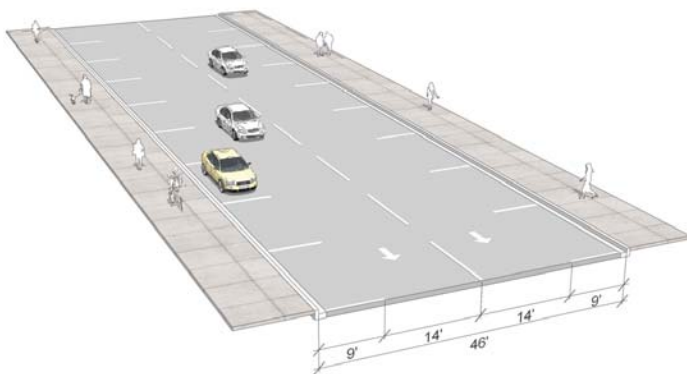
There should be a transit oriented development approach along the downtown and South Avenue transit corridor. This would work to promote mixed-use development along this corridor and the highest densities of residential development in the city. It would also be helpful to introduce parking maximums along this corridor



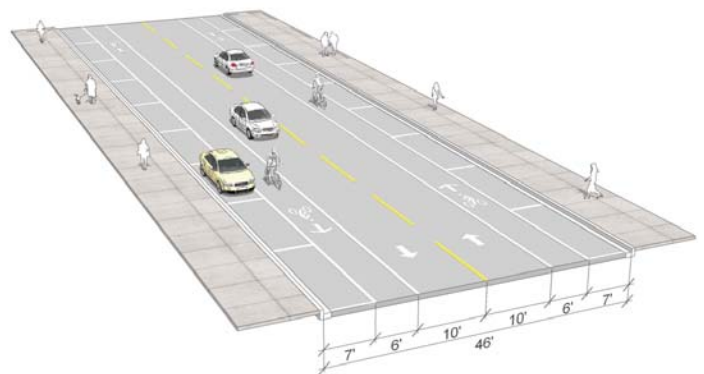
to help developers not be burdened with building excess parking, but rather to use a comprehensive parking strategy for new residential, retail, and other downtown uses. In adjacent neighborhoods, the city should consider residential parking passes to reduce the amount of parking outside of metered or managed parking areas.

The TDG Team proposed several projects that the city should consider as city-friendly alternatives to the conventional projects to what is being proposed by the WisDOT. This would help the city revitalize its downtown and restore outcomes that are consistent with the city's core traditional values. The TDG Team recommends restoring 2-way operation on 3rd and 4th Streets. To facilitate the changes roundabouts are recommended at the intersection of La Crosse Street and to the south where 3rd and 4th converge into South Avenue. The roundabouts will also provide great gateway feature into the downtown, calm traffic, increase safety, and allow direct access. Having two 2-way streets provides redundancy which is important for maintenance, special event planning, and emergency services. Similarly, the other 1-way couplet that currently splits into Rose Street and Copeland Ave should be restored to 2-way function. This project could utilize roundabouts at the north and southern ends for the same reasons.

Another key downtown project involves Pearl Street. Pearl Street should also be restored to 2-way operations and be considered for a shared street streetscape design. This would entail changing the streets profile to be flush (i.e., no vertical curbs) and introducing texture, landscape and hardscape elements to delineate a legible space for motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians. The street would be more like a linear plaza space that one can drive through and have little reliance on conventional traffic control devices, such as pavement markings, signs, and signals. Shared spaces have been extremely successful in European cities in a variety of contexts, providing safety benefits, increased retailing success, and great place-making. Shared spaces have started to become a preferred alternative to the pedestrian malls in the United States but without the problems that pedestrian malls face. The intersections of 3rd and 4th should also be raised to be flush to: i) continue Pearl Street's plaza's look and feel farther; ii) help calm 3rd and 4th; and iii) increase pedestrian-friendliness.



3rd Street today



Proposed 2-way with bike lanes on 3rd and 4th

A time-sensitive project is the Exit 3 interchange project at I-90, Rose Street, and the waterfront. The WisDOT is currently proposing a new interchange at Exit 3, but the new ramps and intersection designs are conventional: i) requiring private property to be impacted; ii) creating a greater disconnect between the river and the neighborhoods; iii) excessively widening of Rose Street which is already over built for its role and context. The TDG concept is to introduce a roundabout at the exit which will provide several benefits, including: i) providing a gateway feature into the northern part of the city; ii) it can be landscaped beautifully; and iii) be an effective transition between the highway design vocabulary and the city street vocabulary. The transition will help change driver expectations as they arrive into the city on Rose Street (i.e., expect people around, crossings, slower speeds, etc.)



Pearl Street today



Shared street in Boston

By utilizing a five-approach roundabout, George Street can be an additional southern approach and provide a second access option to access Hwy 90. The advantages include increased direct routing to the city, redundancy (in case of maintenance needs, emergencies, etc.), and help spreading the traffic loads. The latter will help Rose Street, its intersections, and the waterfront in general. Rose Street should be reimagined and reconstructed to be an urban, three or four-lane cross-section and positioned towards the east side of the right-of-way to make available more land on the waterfront for open space and trails. This should all be feasible without having to purchase private property. The result will, instead be surplus land that can be used for worthwhile public purposes.

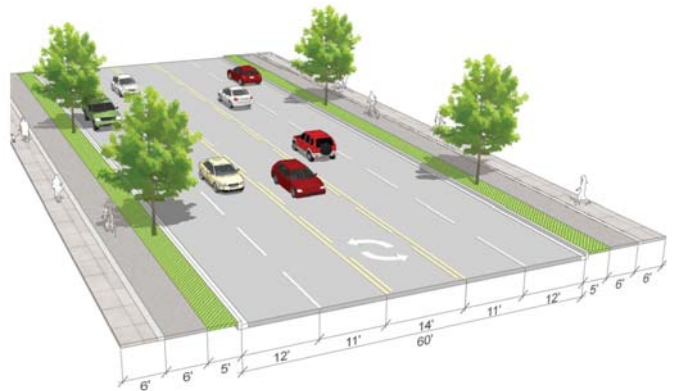


Other projects that would be relatively easy to design and construct in the short-term, would include separated bicycle lanes along La Crosse Street and Losey Boulevard. La Crosse Street currently has standard bike lanes and is scheduled to be repaved and restriped. Because of Myrick Park and the cemetery on the north side of La Crosse Street, it is a perfect east-west corridor to utilize 2-way separated bike lanes on the north side. That low-cost facility would provide comfortable bicycle travel along the north side of the city and connect nicely with the trails in the Marsh, and provide better access to the college. Losey Blvd is also at an opportune time for introducing separated bike lanes. Currently there is a project to cut and remove the existing ash street trees because of disease. This will leave the 12-foot tree lawn between the back of curb and existing sidewalk available for new trees. TDG's suggestion is to replant the new street trees five feet from the curb and construct a new separated bike lane, immediately next to the sidewalk. These would provide excellent north-south bicycle accommodation along the east side of the city.

The TDG Team recommends building roundabouts at the intersections of Losey and La Crosse and Losey and Mormon Coulee Road. They would: i) help the these two bicycle projects succeed; ii) help transition the cyclists onto the dedicated bicycle facilities; iii) create gateways at the transition of the natural areas and suburban contexts to the urban edges of the city; and iv) increase safety by calming motor vehicle traffic as it enters the urban context.

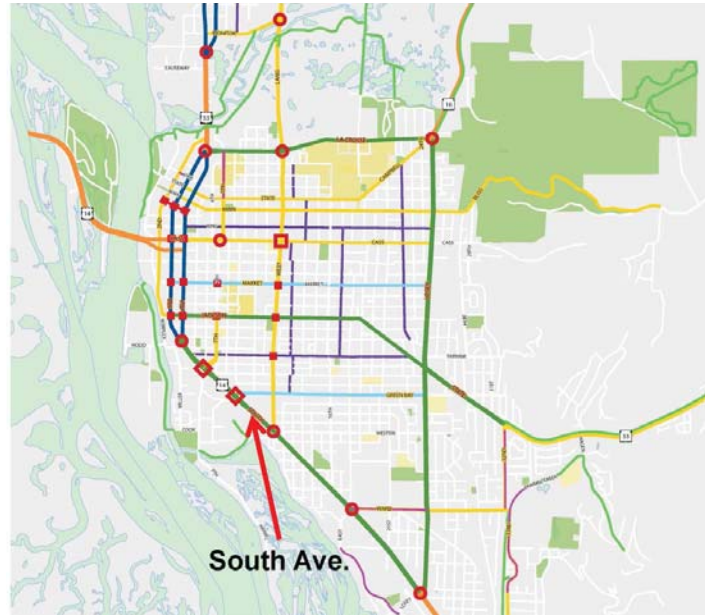


Losey Blvd today



Proposed separated bike lanes on Losey

South Avenue is another corridor that is being considered for change by the WisDOT. South Avenue is a key commercial and institutional corridor on the south side of the city. WisDOT’s goal of widening South Avenue to speed up motorists requires acquiring private property and closing neighborhood streets. From eroding the neighborhood to creating a bigger barrier, that proposal is completely contrary to the direction provided by the vision. The TDG plan has a different imagination for South Avenue that is consistent with the vision. The TDG concept employs a series of roundabouts along South Avenue which allows the street to become three lanes; one lane in each direction and a turn lane to provide convenient and direct access to business, institutions, and neighborhood streets. Unlike traffic signals, the roundabouts don’t need the extra through lanes to hold stopped traffic, while idling at red lights. Also, roundabouts do not need turn lanes. The use of roundabouts will result in surplus right-of-way that can be used for public benefits, including friendly bicycle, pedestrian facilities, and street trees. Also, the street will be calmed, speeds will be lower, safety will increase, and pedestrians will be able to cross the street more easily. Some of the roundabouts might need a little more right-of-way at the intersections. However, these are corner-clips, not lengthy swaths of private property.



There are a variety of other routine actions that the city should undertake automatically during utility, repaving, and redevelopment projects. Some examples include: enhancing intersections to have high visibility crosswalks, narrowing lanes, adding bulbouts, planting street trees, etc. Also, adding bicycle boulevards along a few of the city’s calmer residential streets would help introduce additional bicycle network.

## **Further clarification and Interpretation of the Vision**

The Streets and Highway Transportation Vision for the City of La Crosse is to plan, prioritize, and design changes that help the city to become to be a beautiful, livable, vibrant, historic, city between the rivers, bluffs and marsh that is the economic, educational, medical, social, cultural and transportation hub for the region. Furthermore, in order to protect and enhance the regional economy and the city's quality of life, natural environment, aesthetics, and human connections, with an emphasis on improving safety for everyone; the city envisions changing policies, practices, and physical design to its streets and highways, as well as the allied parking infrastructure within the city limits, and within the region to the extent that it affects the city. A key component of the city's vision is to reduce the overwhelming and unsustainable dependency on the single occupant vehicle as the primary mode of transportation and prioritize cycling, walking, public and private transit, telecommuting, land use changes, parking changes, and other supportive measures.

For additional clarification, the Vision is to:

### **General:**

- increase quality-of-life for the city's residents, visitors, and workers;
- increase economic and social exchange along the streets, within the city's campuses and districts, and for the employers;
- add vitality to the downtown, centers, and commercial corridors;
- use the vision as a litmus test for every proposed land use and transportation change (i.e., if the change is supportive of the vision then it gets support; otherwise it does not);
- use the vision to inform land use and transportation planning;
- to help change the transportation culture develop a transportation language policy that applies to city staff, projects within the city, and consultants who work with the city (i.e., target biased jargon such as improvement, capacity, deficiencies, upgrade, Level of Service (LOS) for (insert mode here), enhancement, access management... and replace with objective and accurate language);
- use "path-as-place" thinking for every street (i.e. streets are both a "path" and a "place"(or part of a place such as the downtown, open space, neighborhood, commercial corridor...));

### **Modal Reprioritizing:**

- comfortably and safely accommodate the walkers, cyclists, and transit users within the city;
- remove "barrier effects" where they exist for pedestrians and cyclists;

### **Safety:**

- slow design speeds to alter driver expectations and reduce the number of crashes, deaths, injuries, and property damage;
- design streets to self-enforce the desired speeds;
- design streets for the breath of population groups including those who do not or cannot drive motor vehicles, people with various disabilities, young people, many elderly people, low income people;
- encourage barrier-free street designs;
- avoid, whenever feasible, having two general purpose lanes going in the same direction on the same street to reduce aggressive drivers from weaving, speeding, and overtaking within the city;
- adopt National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO) design guidelines;
- State Crash Rate Average – The Vision is to strive to reduce crashes on all streets and highways by changing the designs with traffic calming, road diets, conversion of one-way streets to two-way streets to reduce speeds, as well as improve education/expectations so drivers behave in an orderly and safe manner.



**Land Use:**

- increase land use densities and mix where it can be served by existing transit services;
- require buildings to front and address the streets;
- create entry features and transitions at the edges of the city to announce to travelers that they have entered the City of La Crosse and to manage their expectation of speed (i.e., transition from suburban or rural to urban);
- use roundabouts for transitions between different contexts when longer transition distances are unavailable;
- create great destinations along the corridors, within the downtown and districts, and within the city's neighborhoods;

**Network Restoration:**

- retain and restore the street network to create an attractive and urban context (i.e., human scale, fine-grain block structure);
- reconnect the city's street network at rail ways;

**Natural and Open Space Preservation:**

- protect the natural areas within the city limits;
- increase trail access;
- preserve views of natural areas and features;
- add street trees;
- employ low impact development (LID) practices;
- treat the marsh as a valued, natural, amenity within the city;
- evolve the arterials streets in the open spaces to look more like parkways within an open space as opposed to a road with open space on each side;
- develop an open space plan with connected trails that link to regional trail systems;

**Measures of Effectiveness:**

- increase streets' aesthetics;
- use vehicle miles traveled (VMT) reduction for transportation planning and land use planning decisions;
- accept congestion during peak hours;
- use motor vehicle LOS measures for operations, such as intersection timing, signal coordination, and other operational needs
- increase access by restoring two-way operations on streets and reopening closed streets;
- support and encourage shorter trips lengths by slowing streets, increased mix and densities of land uses, and increased connectivity;
- use street designs that self-enforce slower and safer speeds on all the streets within the city, including the arterial streets, collector streets, and local street;
- for every project, match the desired speed, target speed, posted speed, and design speed;
- develop a truck route map for the city and encourage delivery schedules that are off-peak;

**Parking and TDM:**

- encourage/require major employers and institutions to conduct transportation demand management (TDM) programs;
- reduce parking requirements for developments;
- start a residential street permit system;
- create transit oriented development (TOD) district; and
- have parking maximums in the TOD district.