



**DRAFT**

## Observations and Recommendations: The Built Environment Albuquerque, New Mexico

---

*Prepared by the Walkable and Livable Communities Institute for the City of Albuquerque  
June 2014*

The following memo summarizes the WALC Institute's observations and recommendations during a May visit to Albuquerque on behalf of the Complete Streets Leadership Team, led by the Healthier Weights Council. 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 Albuquerque 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 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 (two-thirds 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](#). Additional guidance is available from [AARP's Livable Communities program](#).

## Albuquerque

In addition to the broad guidance noted above, Albuquerque 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

Albuquerque is well positioned for walkability, with 310 days of sun and a high-desert climate. The City has already developed some walkability elements, such as through the 16-mile Paseo del Bosque Trail that winds through the city, and a Form-Based Zones policy. And there are other projects being considered or built that will also improve walkability and walking, such as the mayor's 50-mile loop project, bicycle boulevards, additional trail improvements, Safe Routes to School, and road diets such as the Central Ave. segment, San Pedro Road, Girard Blvd. and others.

Albuquerque also has strong local political and agency staff leadership and momentum. But there are still a lot of high-speed roadways in the city that are difficult to walk or bicycle along or to cross safely, and some land use issues such as the State Fairgrounds, which could be moved or remodeled, adding a great deal of mixed-use development potential and walkability to the city core.

The business community seems to be supportive of walkability in general, and wants to remove blight and beautify streets like San Pedro Road and Central Avenue, but many still want four-lane roadways "protected" from the lane-reducing effects of road diets. A communications plan should be developed and launched for each walkability project under consideration, with an early and intensive public process for larger projects that includes robust personal contact with business owners, in order to educate and get buy-in from the public and business sector about best practices and the economic benefits of mixed-use development and walkability.

Here are some ways leaders can build on these elements to enhance walkability in Albuquerque, based on the five principles of walkability: Security, Efficiency, Convenience, Comfort and Welcome:

## Low-Hanging Fruit: *Short-Term Projects*

- **Move Transit Benches Out of Sidewalks** – In several locations we noticed transit benches placed directly in the center of a four- or five-foot-wide sidewalk. This creates a dangerous and inconvenient situation for pedestrians, who may be encouraged to walk into the street, or have to negotiate a narrow space being shared with people waiting for a bus. ROW/easement may have to be secured from adjacent landowners, but the footprint of a bench and waiting area is not very large.
- **Mark Twain Elementary School** – The principal and staff have already put into place a number of good safety measures on school property, in addition to a crossing guard at the Florida St. and Constitution Ave. crossing. An additional safety measure would be to separate the travel modes; parent vehicles should queue up along Summer Ave. only, leaving only staff vehicles, visitors and buses accessing the school from Constitution Ave, using the current flow pattern through the parking lot.
- **Conduct a Public Outreach Campaign** – Build social capital through early stage outreach to stakeholders and residents, and ongoing partnerships with officials and advocates. Conduct business and neighborhood association presentations and have conversations with individual stakeholders about the benefits of walkability and specific projects will help to set the stage for public acceptance and discovery of local champions for walkability and road diets. This process should include the provision of talking points, data, photo visions, and case studies from elsewhere in Albuquerque and other NM cities that are relevant to making the case.
- **Train Department Staff** – Conduct training courses for the public works department on the best practices in walkability and public outreach processes. Ensure that public works staff such as engineers attend the training and understand the benefits of walkability, mixed-use and other relevant topics. Provide them with talking points to use within public discourse on projects planned or underway.
- **Adopt a Street Design Manual** – As part of Albuquerque’s ongoing Complete Streets efforts, adopt or adapt a model manual, such as the Los Angeles County [Model Design Manual for Living Streets](#), or the National Association of City Transportation 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](#).
- **Tell The Stories** – Encourage business owners and other neighborhood representatives who are engaging and have helpful stories to tell to attend meetings with other neighborhood stakeholders to share how improvements in walkability helped their businesses and daily

lives, improved safety, etc. Make sure that they have relevant traffic safety and business data in hand.

- **Enhance Bicycle Parking** – Identify opportunities for additional bicycle parking in retail areas and at schools, neighborhood parks, and other public spaces. Consider on-street bicycle parking racks, which can accommodate up to 10-12 bicycles per parking space, in mixed-use developments, retail areas and dense living and working spaces such as apartment and office buildings. Also consider installing bicycle racks that tie into the historic, artistic or other branding elements of Albuquerque – 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.
- **Reduce Lane Widths on Wide Streets if Full Road Diets are Not Yet Feasible** – Many vehicle lanes are overly wide, encouraging motorists to exceed posted speed limits, such as those on Constitution Ave. and San Pedro Road. An easy, short-term win is to inventory overbuilt streets and repaint them, especially if a full Road Diet is not feasible right away. Use bold striping, which leaves the remaining roadway available for future bicycle lane and/or angled or parallel on-street parking with curb extensions. Then, when feasible:
  - On roads that are 60 feet or wider, consider installing head-out angled parking on both sides.
  - On roads that are 50-60 feet wide, provide enough space for angled parking on one side and parallel parking on the other side.
  - On roads that are 40-50 feet wide, install parallel parking on both sides.

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

- **Put San Pedro Road on a Diet** – Reduce lanes to one in each direction with a center median/lane, reduce lane widths to 11 feet each, install one- or two- lane roundabouts in eligible intersections. Consider adding bicycle lanes, and/or head-out angled parking where feasible, and/or parallel on-street parking; these are the best uses of remaining roadway space. Utilize the Form-Based Zone policy to develop liner and frontage buildings, and add trees and landscaping throughout the corridor.
- **Improve the Intersection of San Pedro and Constitution** – Put in a roundabout at the San Pedro/Constitution intersection, and put liner buildings in where possible. Move the “Turning Vehicles Yield to Pedestrians” signs from the far sides of each crossing to the near sides, so that drivers see the sign BEFORE they make a right turn, not on the far side of the intersection where drivers cannot see the sign before they begin a right turn.

- **Engage the Public and Conduct a Charrette for San Pedro Road** – It is critical that the public continue to be engaged in meaningful ways as the San Pedro road diet progresses forward. Feedback from the business community, neighborhood associations and others are critically important for the success, and positive media and continued political support, of this project. Also, a Charrette is recommended for this corridor: A Charrette is an intensive planning session where citizens, designers and others collaborate on a vision for the road diet. It can be led by planning agency staff, or by a consultant. It provides a forum for ideas and offers the unique advantage of giving immediate feedback to the designers. More importantly, it allows everyone who participates to be a mutual author of the plan. Through brainstorming and design activity, many goals are accomplished during the Charrette. First, everyone who has a stake in the project develops a vested interest in the ultimate vision. Second, the design team works together to produce a set of finished documents that address all aspects of design. Third, since the input of all the players is gathered at one event, it is possible to avoid the prolonged discussions that typically delay conventional planning projects. Finally, the finished result is produced more efficiently and cost-effectively because the process is collaborative.
- **Put Constitution Avenue on a Road Diet** – Constitution Avenue is 39 feet across, which is more than is needed. Reduce the current 14-foot-wide travel lane widths to 10 feet by marking a 20-foot-wide travel-way for two vehicle lanes—one in each direction—using bold, thick edge lines. Convert the remaining space to buffered bike lanes – starting 6 feet from the inside (pavement) edge of the gutter pan, paint a bicycle lane stripe, then paint a buffer zone up to the edge of the 10-foot motor vehicle lane stripe. The buffer zone created between the bicycle lane and motor vehicle lane(s) can also include portable planters or bollards, and can be colorized for additional visibility and perception of separation, in addition to providing aesthetic appeal. This can become Albuquerque’s pilot “Cycle Track”. Consider adding in pedestrian refuge islands inside the buffer area at critical intersections, such as at Florida Street NE. Consider converting the intersections along the school zone area to mini-circles, or install one or more speed tables, especially at Florida Street NE. At the intersection with San Pedro Road NE install a modern roundabout. This road diet will help calm traffic and improve access for people, especially students walking and biking.
- **Put Summer Blvd. on a Road Diet** – Summer Blvd is 32 feet across, which is more than is needed. Reduce the travel lane widths to 9 feet by marking an 18-foot-wide travel-way for two vehicle lanes—one in each direction—using bold, thick edge lines. Convert the remaining space to buffered bike lanes. Convert the intersections along the school zone area to mini-circles, and at the intersection with San Pedro Road NE install a modern roundabout. This road diet will help calm traffic and improve access for people, especially students walking and biking. Consider establishing a crossing guard or student safety patrol at the intersection with Florida Street NE and/or Georgia Street NE.

- **Start a Weekly Growers Market** – A public market can be launched and open for one or two days per week in an unused or underused and convenient place such as a parking lot. This will contribute to walkability by providing a destination and local business that can replace longer (driving) travel to another location for food. Consider launching markets in several places in town, even one in each greater neighborhood area.
- **Bicycle Boulevards** – The plan to install bicycle boulevards in Albuquerque is excellent. Ensure that they are designed as true bicycle boulevards, with traffic calming measures that will reduce traffic speeds and volumes on those streets, and make active transportation easy and safe. Also ensure that the plan includes a completely connected – and well signed, with posted distances and destinations – system of boulevards that encompass all of Albuquerque’s major residential and commercial areas.
- **Mark Twain Elementary School** - The driver and pedestrian sight lines at the front (Constitution; westside), and back (Summer; eastside) entrances of the property are blocked by walls, and a fence (Constitution; eastside), which should be mitigated. With such poor sight lines, a driver may not see a child about to enter the driveway; likewise, a person walking may not know a car is approaching. These factors combine to significantly increase the risk of a collision. School zone signs should be moved closer to (but not at) major cross streets, to encompass the immediate neighborhood and street crossings on Constitution Ave and Summer Blvd. Consider flashing beacons on Constitution Ave. (City will need to pay for it, as school district wouldn’t cover costs, according to the principal), and on Summer Blvd if all parent drivers are routed to that side.
- **Ensure Lighting is Placed at all Intersections and Mid-Block Crossings** – Many intersections and mid-block crossings currently have inadequate lighting. Lighting will increase walking and safety for all users.
- **Identify Opportunities for Roundabouts** – Modern roundabouts reduce injuries and fatalities by up to 90 percent compared to four-way signalized intersections, substantially reducing collisions 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. Put in public art installations and landscaping within roundabouts.

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

- **Pass a Strong Complete Streets Ordinance** – Complete Streets ensure that roadways are designed for the comfort and safety of **all** users and of **all** abilities. The Metropolitan

Transportation Board passed a Complete Streets resolution in 2011 that directs creation of a policy and roadway design guidelines. The City is revising the [Future Albuquerque Area Bikeways and Streets \(FAABS\)](#) document to include Complete Streets design guidance. Start developing any ordinances and/or specific Complete Streets policies and practices for eventual adoption. Adopt the most up to date best practices for complete streets policies and enhance the current policy framework to ensure that a complete streets policy actually achieves the desired outcome. A complete streets policy that includes too many ways to justify less than optimal street improvements will not accomplish Albuquerque's potential to become a more walkable and bikeable and economically viable community.

- **Create an Albuquerque Destination Brand** – Albuquerque's potential as a destination for tourists and even residents can be enhanced through a destination branding campaign, and should be incorporated into the other promotional and business plans. The many attractive and compelling aspects of Albuquerque can become a magnet for increased business, visitation and livability.
- **Complete the 50-Mile Loop** – This great mayoral initiative should be capitalized on while the political support is available, and it should become part of the City's new brand. The loop should connect to the upcoming bike boulevard network and it should be equitable, reaching every neighborhood in the city.
- **Plant Street and Median Trees and Other Landscaping** – Given the challenges of Albuquerque's dry high desert climate, plant drought-tolerant trees and landscaping that will enhance livability throughout the city. Trees and other landscaping can be planted in curb extensions, sidewalk buffer zones, medians and refuge islands, and in planters in on-street bicycle buffer zones and other places. Landscaping such as trees return a community financial and safety benefit as well, that more than makes up for the relatively small installation and maintenance costs.
- **Complete, Improve and Maintain Sidewalks** – Albuquerque has a good network of sidewalks downtown and in many residential areas, but many of the sidewalks are very substandard, and on others the sidewalks are poorly maintained. Take inventory and create a program to replace broken slabs and make safety upgrades, and establish a City-sponsored fund to assist with sidewalk installation and maintenance, rather than requiring the property owner to pay for this public access facility. Transit benches and other obstacles such as telephone and sign poles should be kept out of sidewalks. Citywide sidewalk construction should firmly follow a 6 ft. width minimum, with no variances unless the ROW access is not physically feasible.
- **Comply with ADA** – Redesign sidewalk ramps as needed to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Many sidewalk ramps in Albuquerque are very substandard, creating a major safety hazard for vulnerable users, such as children, wheelchair users and older people. Curb ramps should also directly face the opposing side of the street crossing; there



are many places in Albuquerque where the ramp geometry angles pedestrians out towards the middle of an intersection. Create an ADA-compliance map or survey and develop an action plan that prioritizes improvements near medical facilities, schools, senior centers and civic buildings.

- **Partner with Local Schools to Promote Safe Routes to School** – The 2035 Metropolitan Transportation Plan reinforces that Safe Routes to School are a priority for the region. Partner with the local school district(s) 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.
- **Analyze the Viability of BRT on Central Ave** – Engage in a study and public process and discuss the relative benefits and cautions of implementing a Bus Rapid Transit system on Central Avenue. BRT is a powerful transit approach that is cheaper than rail, and can be more efficient than regular bus service, but it may or may not be the right approach for walkability along Central Avenue. Perhaps it would work on another corridor?
- **Work with NMDOT and County Officials to Improve Walkability** – We recommend that the City set up meetings with NMDOT district staff to discuss specific treatments, such as road diets on state-owned streets, preferably before public outreach begins.

#### ADDITIONAL ITEMS TO CONSIDER

- 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. Over 600 short-term bike-sharing systems have taken off around the world and in dozens of metropolitan areas around the country. Albuquerque can develop a robust, multi-station, 24-hour a day short term-based public "Bike Share" system, and/or a Bike Library long-term (up to six months) loan program. Many resources exist for guidance and the new Institute for Transportation Development and Policy's Bike Share Planning Guide is a good starting point.
- 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.

