

Making a Pedestrian Master Plan that Makes a Difference
A National Survey of Pedestrian Master Plans



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Planning for non-motorized transportation is an important part of creating livable communities. As recognition of the importance of creating walkable cities grows, so to has the popularity of conducting a pedestrian or a pedestrian/bicycle master plan.

In the spring of 2008, Feet First conducted an online survey of participants of a pedestrian or pedestrian/bicycle master planning process. The survey targeted three groups of participants: government officials (staff, elected, and consultant), advocacy groups, and community members. Each group took their own version of the survey with supplemental questions appropriate for their experience. The survey asked questions about motivation, implementation, barriers to the process, impact, public participation, diversity, and health.

We received 60 responses (35 government officials, 12 advocates, and 13 community members) from 25 plans. In most cases, advocates and community members commented on the same plans, with diversity of plans coming from government responses. Of the plans, 60 percent were completed at the time of survey.

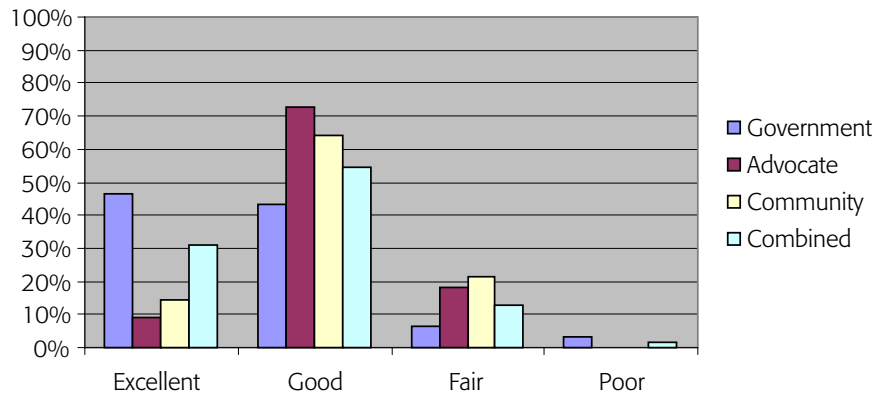
Contents

General Impression	2
Motivation for the Planning Process	3
Funding and Implementation	5
Barriers	6
Impact	7
Participation	8
Diversity	10
Health	11
Conclusions	12
Acknowledgements	13

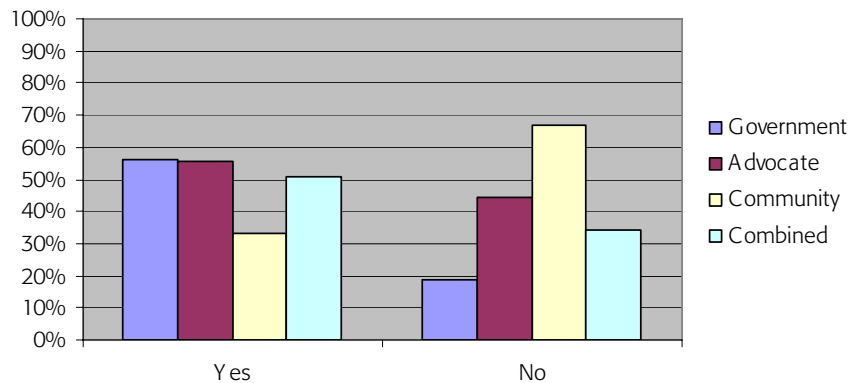
General Impression

Respondents regarded pedestrian master plans as generally positive documents and experiences. More than 80 percent rated the general quality of their plan as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’. Government officials were most positive about the plans, while advocates were most negative. Though many considered the quality to be high, only 50 percent considered the plan to be ‘successful’ (35 percent answered ‘no’). Government officials were most positive and community members were most negative (66 percent saying no). Though this response was positive, comments throughout the survey alluded to varying scales of ‘quality’ and ‘success’.

Overall Quality of Plan



Successful Implementation?

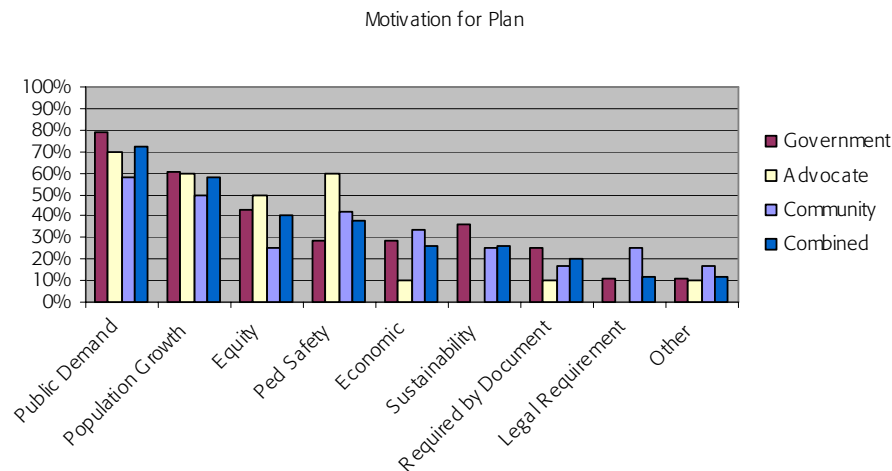


Motivation for the Planning Process

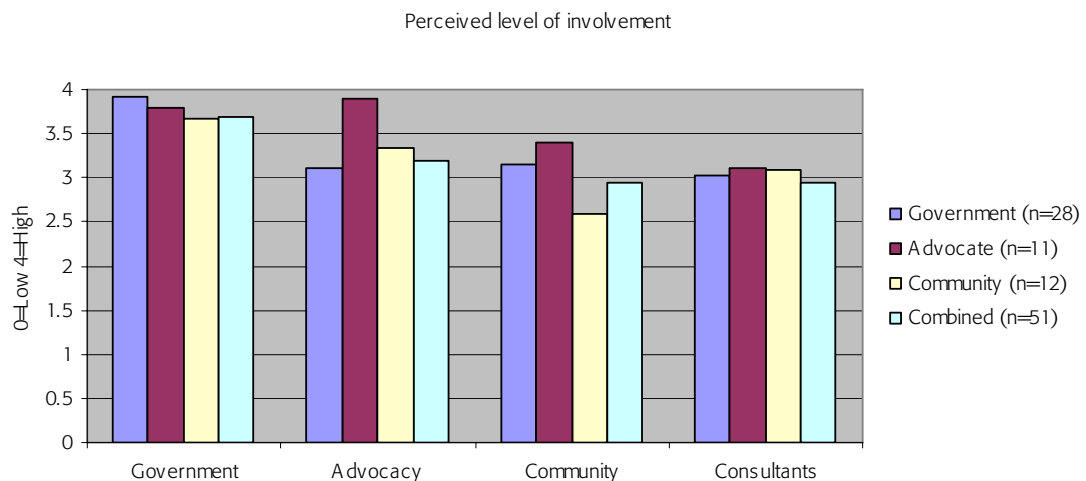
Pedestrian Master Plans were created to respond to different contexts. The leading four motivations for completing a plan were:

1. 'public demand' (71%)
2. 'population growth' (58%)
3. 'equity' (40%)
4. 'pedestrian safety' (37%).

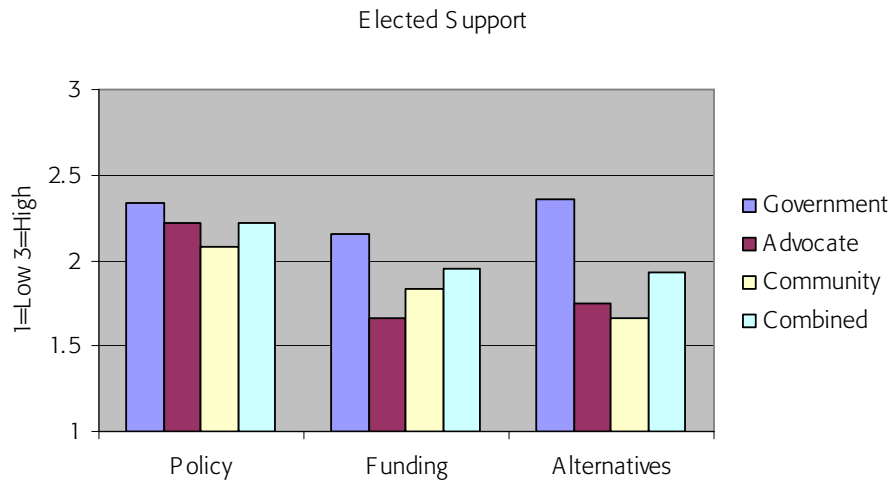
These motivators would suggest diverse public participation and forward thinking to influence future development would be key elements of the plan. However, as will be discussed below, there was criticism for plans lacking in both participation and forward thinking.



When asked what the perceived level of involvement was between groups, there was a general consensus all groups were moderately to highly involved throughout the planning process. Government was highly involved, while advocates and community members were moderately involved. Interestingly, advocates perceived that they had a high level of involvement, while community members perceived they had a low level of involvement.



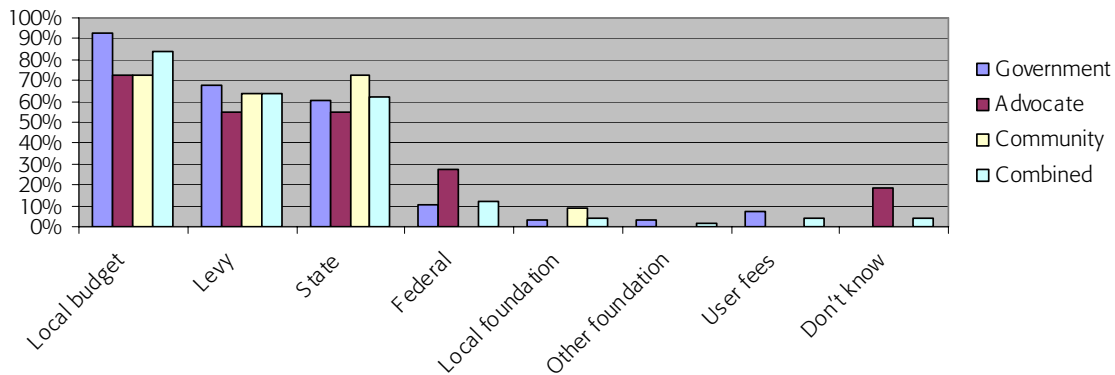
Though respondents said government was highly involved in the plan, elected officials appeared to be only moderately supportive. Additionally, their support was mostly in policy issues, while funding and being open to alternatives – aspects that need elected officials support to come to fruition were lacking.



Funding and Implementation

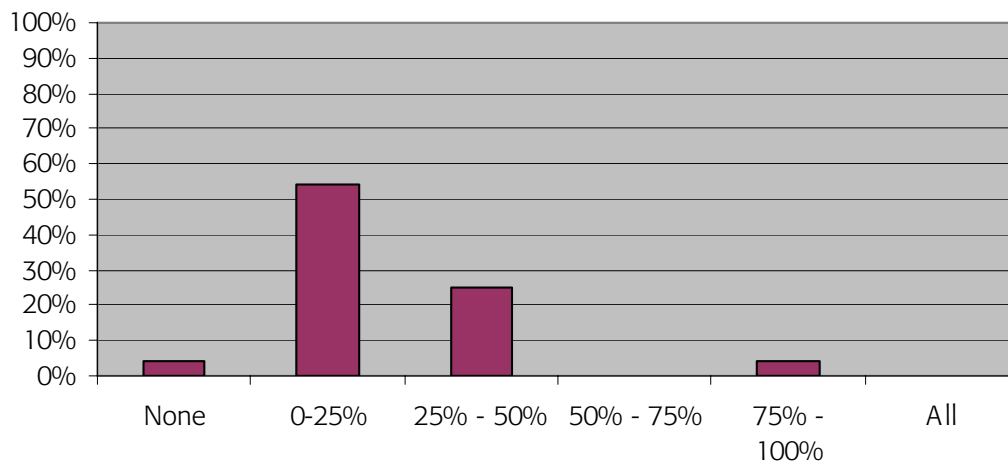
Funding was mentioned as one of the main barriers to creating and implementing pedestrian master plans. Respondents indicated they primarily used conventional methods for funding mechanisms. Local budgets (83%), levies (62%), and state funding (62%) were the major sources. Historically, these sources have proven limited in their capacity or ability to support pedestrian infrastructure and programs. Nonetheless, few plans used other funding sources or created their own mechanism.

Funding Sources



Additionally, many of the plans reported little progress on completing the work laid out by their plan. Fifty percent of respondents said their plan had completed 0-25 percent of the projects, while only 3 percent of plans had completed 75-99 percent. Implementation of a plan is slow; however this also suggests that components are not given the priority or funding support to be readily implemented.

Completion of Projects



A positive side of the implementation though comes in staff time. Forty percent of respondents reported having an increase in pedestrian related staff positions within the government. This institutional change can lead to greater integration of pedestrian issues in other government projects as well as create sustained pressure for greater pedestrian funding.

Barriers

Respondents were asked what barriers kept their plan from being better. Barriers, starting with the most common, include:

1. Having the government and community recognize pedestrian planning as an important activity and worthy of the jurisdiction's time.
2. Limited support for the planning process and implementation. This included securing a budget for planning, staff time and resources for planning, and leveraging funds for implementation.
3. Limited cooperation and knowledge about the subject for departments and community members.

Though the respondents felt these barriers at work, they offered little advice on what could have been done differently to avoid them.

Impact

Particular aspects of a plan will often be remembered for having an important impact or being radical shifts for the community. Respondents were asked what they felt was had the greatest impact.

Each group felt a different subject had the greatest impact:

- Community members primarily praised individual design or policy changes. These often related to the functional use or experience of an isolated case (e.g. adjusting signal timing along the main street).
- Advocates looked back at leveraging funding and large design elements. These focused on system-wide changes.
- Government officials thought that the data gathering and analysis conducted had the greatest impact. Where this does not have any immediate functional use, it has considerable implications in achieving high-quality planning.

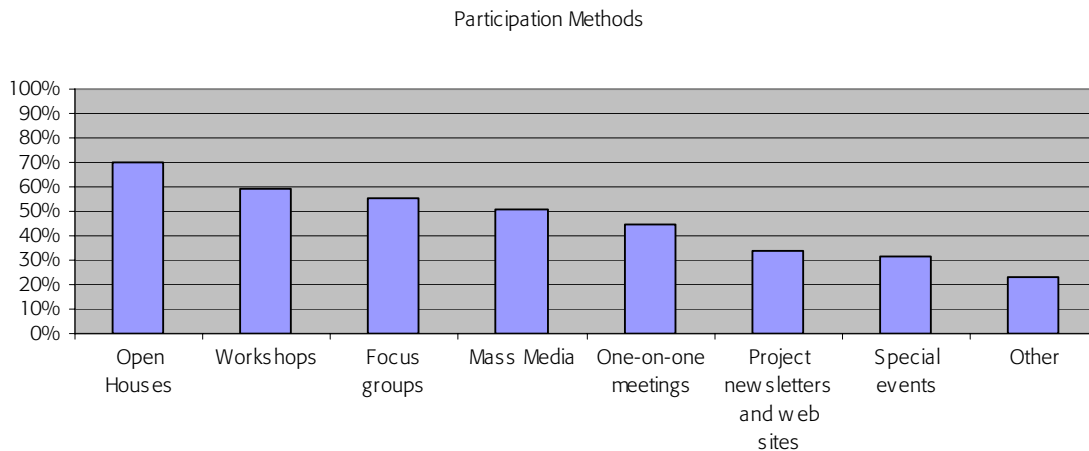
It is interesting that reasons for praising plans vary so widely, and how each group focuses so greatly on how they relate to the pedestrian environment (community members as users, advocates as lobbyists, government officials as planners). In constructing a plan, it would be important to provide elements for each of these views to be proud of, and work to develop recognition of the other aspects of a plan.

Design guidelines were the one theme a collection of respondents mentioned – though mentioned in very different ways. This is both a conventional method to make change, and a powerful set of policies that can have large impacts. Some elements that were mentioned were unique and more innovative. These included:

- Conducting annual pedestrian safety audits
- Creating a publicly legible handbook on the pedestrian master plan
- Renaming “primary arterials” to “residential throughways”
- Creating a new road hierarchy based on the pedestrian environment
- Creating wayfinding systems targeting pedestrians

Participation

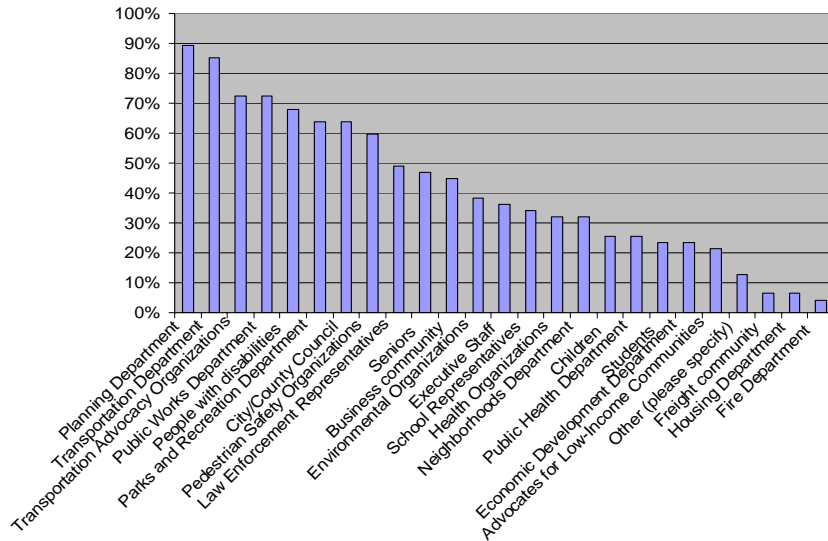
Most pedestrian master plans included mechanisms for the public to participate. Participation is important for developing a deep understanding of the local pedestrian environment, and developing public buy-in for the plan. Though it was common for plans to have public participation, there were several different methods.



Participation most commonly happened as large meetings – ‘open houses’ (70%), ‘workshops’ (60%), and ‘focus groups’ (55%) were the three most common types. Other groups would use non-personal methods such as newsletters and media, online sites, or surveys. A few plans included special events (such as a mobile workshop) or one-on-one meetings with key stakeholders.

When asked what type of people participated, the responses expressed the ‘usual suspects’. The top ten included government departments managing planning and roads, organizations for walking, transportation and pedestrians, and the seniors and disabled. Those at the bottom of the list included health departments, children, low-income advocates, housing departments, and freight.

Stakeholders Participating (n=47)



Ninety percent of respondents used an advisory group as part of their participation. This group was asked about their advisory group process. Each of the three groups expressed differences about what they thought was good about the advisory group process. Government officials felt the process was good when the advisory group had a visionary role (guiding the direction, providing comments), and did not infringe on creating the plan’s content. In comparison, community members felt the process was good if they actively addressed issues and content (writing the plan, advocating for elements, challenging staff about status quo). Advocacy organizations were split between the two. It appears that government officials felt effective when the advisory group functioned, could be referenced, but did not infringe on the work of staff. Community wanted to be empowered. Balancing these differing desires is not impossible, but requires quality facilitation and communication between the groups.

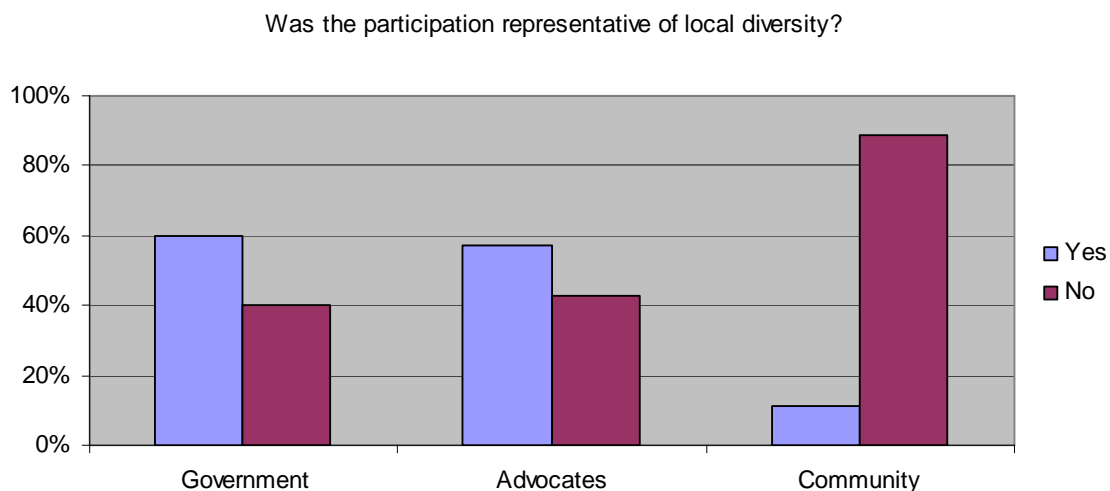
Half of all community respondents felt the participation was inadequate. More innovative methods (such as attending other organization’s meetings, mobile workshops, or meetings with city elders) could change this perspective and gather more useful public comment. Additionally, these methods could draw greater diversity and participants new to governmental processes.

Diversity

Though public participation is important in a pedestrian planning process, diversity provides validity to public comment and builds community buy-in. Only 40 percent of respondents claimed to encourage diversity. The majority of those that encouraged diversity did not seek diverse and broad input, but representatives for diverse groups to be on an advisory committee. This method is the easiest as it only requires a single representative of different groups, yet this it is often the weakest without the use of broader public input and failing to develop diverse public buy-in.

The remainder tried to encourage diversity in two different ways. Some focused on reaching out to make input opportunities available to more groups. This included presenting to a diverse set of community members, holding walks for youth, direct mailings to diverse groups, etc. Others worked to make it easier for diverse groups to attend events. This was in ways such as having drop-in workshops, workshops last for 4 hours every day for a week (to fit almost any schedule), providing child care, food, or translation. Working to attract more diverse participants and making participation easier for diverse participants require adjusting the outreach process to accommodate those that normally cannot or do not provide input.

When asked if the participation was representative of local diversity, 60 percent of both government officials and advocates answered ‘yes’. Eighty percent of community members, on the other hand, strongly answered no.



Three population groups were most commonly mentioned as being left out. First were minority groups. Second were practitioners (e.g. health practitioners, freight drivers, taxi drivers, school employees, etc.). Third were particular behaviors or lifestyles (e.g. disabled, youth, carless residents, etc.). For those that had advisory groups, they were also asked about the diversity of their advisory group. Practitioners and minority groups were most common (with the majority of the same populations mentioned), while lifestyles were only mentioned by community members. Potentially, these lifestyle groups are not seen by government or advocacy groups – contributing to community members viewing participation as not being representative.

Health

There is a clear relationship between walking and individual health. The physical activity one receives through walking in daily travel becomes increasingly important as more and more of people's activities become sedentary. Additionally, walkability is connected with social health of a community. Planning for walkable communities can have strong impacts on the health of residents and communities, not just on transportation flow or behavior.

When asked how health was incorporated into their pedestrian master plans, 57 percent of respondents said their plan did not mention health, or that it only mentioned health briefly in passing. A quarter of respondents said health representatives were stakeholders in developing the plan. In plans where health was represented, it was seen as important for three reasons:

1. To provide direction or motivation for the plan – vision.
2. To argue the need for active transportation and increasing the area's walkability.
3. To develop partnerships between community groups and government departments.

Of plans that respondents deemed 'excellent', over 60 percent of them incorporated health into their plan. This could be interpreted to mean that excellent plans are comprehensive and visionary enough to include health, or that including health can help transform the plan into an excellent document.

Conclusions

This survey of 60 responses provides planners, government officials, advocates, and researchers a preliminary sense of how pedestrian master plans are being carried out, how they are effective, and where they need to focus attention. Though this is not a comprehensive survey, it guides future inquiries about the planning process.

In many ways, a pedestrian master plan is no different from almost any other government planning process. It is a complex process with many factors and there is no silver bullet. There appears to be large barriers to implementation and funding, and the process too often disregards many diverse populations. However, through the planning process, there is strong potential to develop partnerships and coalitions, and to motivate a popular mandate for pedestrian-oriented planning.

These results also reinforce the importance of a public participation process. It appears that community members are the best judge of equality in the process, while advocates are more focused on their particular constituency. The public participation process should not be an afterthought to the planning process, but an integral data-gathering element in the plan. Through holding a thorough public participation process, a pedestrian master plan can foster community support for the planning process and the plan, provide more comprehensive coverage throughout the area, provide more diverse and innovative ideas, strengthen partnerships, and build trust and validity in the government process.

In the planning process, it appears that government officials, advocates, and community members need to be more considerate of each other. In particular, community members need to be more considerate of government issues and respectful to the process. Also, government officials need to be active listeners and attentive to the neighborhood-specific details shared by community members.

Pedestrian master plans affect many departments and lifestyles. It appears that too often they are isolated into a single department or addressed to a single constituency. Because pedestrian activity is integral to many different aspects of the city and people's lives, the plan needs to embrace a multi-departmental approach. Diversity in perspectives helps the community accept the plan, educates colleagues about their issues in relation to pedestrian activities, and protects the plan from unforeseen issues.

Lastly, health is an important factor in pedestrian activity and should be integrated into a pedestrian master plan. Including health strengthens arguments for pedestrian issues and provides a greater perspective on how integrated pedestrian activity is to an individual's life. Also, health helps to progressively guide the plan and provide a sustainable vision.

There are still many questions remaining about the process and outcomes of pedestrian master plans. Though this survey was a preliminary investigation, pedestrian master plans are becoming a popular subject and will undoubtedly draw additional research. Currently, the Physical Activity Promotion Research Network, a national health research network, is beginning a series of investigations on pedestrian master plans. Through added analysis, the planning, neighborhood, and health communities will be able to develop more accessible and effective pedestrian master plans.

More:

For questions, comments, or for copies of the survey itself, contact Feet First at info@feetfirst.info or 206.652.2310.

Acknowledgements:

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