

Adapting Streets for Pandemic Response and Recovery in Massachusetts

June 16, 2020

As Massachusetts continues moving through its four-phase reopening plan, municipalities across the state will need to make changes to their streets and other public spaces in order to ensure public health and economic vitality. It will be important to support restaurants and small businesses and give people enough space to comply with physical distancing guidelines as they travel to work and other errands, get exercise, and access healthcare. Although Massachusetts has recently moved into a new phase, it's likely that infection rates will fluctuate and we could experience a second wave in the coming months, requiring adjustments to street space and an adaptive approach.

Many municipalities are experiencing budget constraints due to the impacts of the pandemic, highlighting the importance of creating a careful and clear process for the prioritization of projects. This pertains to the necessary balancing between quick-build, rapid response strategies for recovery and already planned capital improvement projects. Additionally, prioritization should ensure that support is provided first to the people who need it most, taking into account systemic inequities, unequal levels of risk and exposure, and disparate financial and social resources available to people.

Below, we've outlined several short-term recommendations for improving the way our streets can work in this new context, to keep people safe and aid our economic recovery. Throughout, it's important to keep in mind the following overarching approaches:

- **Health and Safety:** Municipal and state staff and the public need to nimbly respond to changes that may be needed to keep people safe -- whether from COVID-19 or traffic crashes.
- **Equity:** Prioritize those who are most burdened by COVID-19, including older adults, essential workers, Black and brown people, and Environmental Justice communities.
- **Partnership:** Resource community groups, Main Streets organizations, and the private sector to support municipal responses.
- **Community engagement:** Consult with community members and groups to determine the right solutions for each neighborhood, and ensure outreach is done in multiple languages and via both online and offline methods.
- **Build on what we know:** Resource plans and processes that already exist to make progress quickly. Many municipalities already know which streets are the most dangerous, where older adults and children may need special consideration, which corridors are important for commuting, and which business districts need support.
- **Rapid response:** Use quickbuild and tactical methods that are inexpensive and fast (including cones, barrels, planters, saw horses, and flex posts).

Recommendations:

Support safe access to transit service. It's important to make transit use as safe as possible as essential workers continue to travel, more non-essential trips are made, and more people return to work. While municipalities can't directly impact frequency, crowding, station flow, or other aspects of transit service, there are several ways that cities/towns can support transit agencies, including:

- Identify the busiest bus stops and rail surface stops and remove adjacent parking spots to lengthen waiting areas and allow for physical distancing for people walking by the stops or stations
- Create quickbuild bus lanes on key bus corridors with cones or other pop-up delineators in order to ensure buses are not stuck in traffic and, therefore, speed up frequency and reduce crowding
- Target key feeder streets to busy bus and rail surface stops to implement traffic calming and other safety measures for riders who are walking and biking to access transit, including sidewalk extensions at busy intersections to reduce crowding among people waiting to cross
- Identify bus stops that serve a high number of older adults, and add or modify seating to allow for compliance with physical distancing guidelines

Make biking easier, safer, and accessible for new riders. Bike sales have significantly increased in Massachusetts, likely signaling that there will be many new riders in the coming months as people take advantage of streets with less traffic and look for ways to commute that allow for physical distancing.

- Rapidly speed up existing programs to build protected bike lanes on key corridors, using orange barrels, jersey barriers, and other quickbuild materials to create physical separation
- Focus on corridors that are key for commuting and provide access to healthcare, food, parks, and other essential needs
- Ensure that corridors are connected to each other in a network
- Expedite the approval process for installing bike parking, particularly bike corrals that accommodate a high volume of bikes, use on-street parking spaces, and do not impinge on sidewalk space

Support small business recovery. Reallocating space from streets, sidewalks, or parking lots in business districts will help restaurants and retail stores expand their footprint and allow enough space for their customers to comply with physical distancing guidelines.

- In dense business districts, consider closing entire blocks to cars to ensure safe use of streetspace by pedestrians, shoppers, and diners. Otherwise, clearly delineate the space for pedestrians from vehicle traffic with planters, stanchions, or other vertical separation.
- Ensure ADA access is maintained, and that there is enough space on sidewalks for people passing by to comply with physical distancing guidelines. Establish a consistent walking zone that does not weave in and around tables or other furnishings, providing a clear lane for those visually or mobility impaired
- Streamline the process for restaurants and shops to apply for temporary outdoor dining and retail space

- Adjust licensing to remove non-essential restrictions around the sale and service of alcohol in outdoor spaces
- Ensure that delivery drivers and other people picking up take-out still have easy access to restaurants
- Coordinate across municipal lines to be as consistent as possible in policies and street space usage

Adjust curbside management, delivery, and freight strategies. Narrow sidewalks make physical distancing difficult or impossible, particularly near locations that are busy or require queuing, such as grocery stores and restaurants offering take-out. Additionally, there has been a boom in grocery and other home deliveries, necessitating changes to loading zones and pick up/drop off areas without impeding accessibility by freight delivery.

- Provide more space for people to comply with physical distancing guidelines while walking or queuing by reallocating curbside parking or vehicle travel lanes
- Convert curbside parking to clearly signed pick up/drop off zones, particularly in front of restaurants serving take-out or businesses that need more frequent deliveries, including grocery stores, pharmacies, and convenience stores
- Provide frequent pick up/drop off zones in dense residential neighborhoods in order to facilitate home deliveries

Create safe places for people to walk or play outside near their homes. Getting exercise and spending time outdoors are important for physical and mental health. Many more people are walking and biking for recreation as well as transportation. This is causing crowding in some parks and adjacent parking lots, which can be relieved by the creation of more pedestrian-focused spaces.

- Promote the creation of “shared streets” in residential areas, in order to slow down and reduce car traffic. Depending on the staff resources available, municipalities can explore allowing neighborhood associations or community organizations to directly manage this process, including putting up signage
- Focus on neighborhoods that have fewer parks, green spaces, or private yards
- Provide places for children to play safely and without crowding. “Play streets” can be integrated into shared streets, creating a specific area that is separated from vehicle travel lanes where children can play, draw with sidewalk chalk, ride scooters or bikes, and socialize with each other at a distance
- Identify areas with high concentrations of older adults and communicate a clear and frequent cleaning schedule for benches nearby

Provide street safety in a way that does not require police enforcement. Define safe streets and safe public places as providing adequate physical space to comply with public health guidelines, protection from motor vehicle crashes, and protection from other types of violence.

- Rather than relying on police cars and police officers for enforcement to close or delineate street space for people walking and biking, use physical barriers like cones

- Ensure that behavior in light of physical distancing guidelines and the use of new street configurations is not criminalized, including compliance with wearing face coverings in public places
- Involve communities of color and low income communities, where safety and the threat of violence have long been a concern, in planning and implementation for adapting streets for COVID response and recovery
- Work with Google, Waze, and other navigation platforms to remove shared streets from the network to guide vehicle through-traffic around shared streets instead of on them

Looking further into the future, other adjustments and approaches must be taken into account. Municipalities should start thinking about how winter weather will impact these new configurations, exploring ways to ensure snow is completely cleared from bike lanes and sidewalks so that width is not lost to snow piles. If COVID-19 trends allow, many restaurants and other retail establishments will want to allow dining and shopping outside to continue even as the temperature drops, requiring a more streamlined approval process for installation of tents and outdoor heaters. “Winter Cities” -- an urban design concept for cold climates that includes well-lined seating, wind protection, and outdoor fire pits -- may provide needed inspiration later this year.

There is technical and funding assistance available for municipalities from MassDOT and the Lawrence and Lillian Solomon Foundation in partnership with the Barr Foundation:

- MassDOT “Shared Streets & Spaces”:
<https://www.mass.gov/shared-streets-and-spaces-grant-program>
- Solomon Foundation “Streets for Recovery”:
<https://www.solomonfoundation.org/streetsforrecovery/>

We support our municipal leaders in addressing safety issues and ensuring that our cities and towns are lively places for the people of Massachusetts during this challenging time.

Sincerely,

Allston Brighton Health Collaborative
 Boston Cyclists Union
 Cambridge Bike Safety
 Environment Massachusetts
 Gateway Cities Innovation Institute at MassINC
 Green Streets Initiative
 Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP)
 LivableStreets Alliance
 Mattapan Food and Fitness Coalition
 Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative
 Massachusetts Sierra Club
 MassBike
 MassPIRG
 Safe Roads Alliance

Stepping Strong Injury Prevention Program, Brigham and Women's Hospital
TransitMatters
Transportation for Massachusetts
WalkBoston
WalkUP Roslindale

