

Moving Toward Safer and Equitable Walking Environments in Tucson

by Maia Ingram, MPH
and Arlie Adkins, Ph.D

Executive Summary

In 2016, the City of Tucson and the Living Streets Alliance entered into a collaborative venture to “develop a Complete Streets policy reflective of and responsive to the values and specific needs of all Tucsonans”. The partners sought to ensure that the Tucsonans who need safe, affordable, and comfortable alternative transportation most – youth, seniors, persons with disabilities, and persons from under-served communities – are both prioritized and engaged through the process. This research brief describes the orientation of city and county staff to concerns of people who walk, and outlines both the perceived problems and potential solutions to creating a more walkable Tucson. We found that despite an aging infrastructure, conflicting priorities, and lack of a coordinated approach to improving walkability, city staff and elected officials are optimistic about shifting attitudes and policy opportunities that will create a vision for Complete Streets in Tucson. Key changes in the philosophical approach to city transportation will be necessary to successfully surmount challenges to a safe and equitable walking environment.

Introduction

Tucson’s welcoming winter weather and beautiful desert scenery entice residents to engage in walking, biking and outside recreation. Tucson’s rating as one of the nation’s most bikeable cities, may seem baffling to the ~6,400 victims of traffic related crashes. With 61 traffic related deaths in 2017, and a growing number of cars on the road, Tucson is facing a transportation crisis.¹ Residents walking in low-income areas do not have equitable access to a safe, convenient, and comfortable walking environment, despite the fact that they are less likely to own a car and more often walk and/or use public transit to arrive at their destination. This study included 13 interviews with local policy makers to provide perspectives on how to improve the walking experience for Tucson’s residents, and particularly those most vulnerable, youth, the elderly, the disabled, and all who live in areas with inadequate walking infrastructure.

Methods

The policy interviews were part of a research partnership between the University of Arizona Colleges of Public Health and Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture and Living Streets of Alliance. We conducted 13 interviews with staff from city transportation (4), planning and development (3), police (1) and city staff (2) as well as personnel from the Pima Association of Governments (1) and Pima County (2). The stated purpose of the interviews were to:

- Understand perspectives on problems and solutions related to walkability in Tucson.
- Explore current policy opportunities in Tucson from the perspective of policy, transportation, planning and development decisions makers in the Tucson region.



Sunnyside Neighborhood, Tucson AZ

“We’ve had so many incidents of pedestrian deaths that could have been avoided if better safety infrastructure were in place... in older parts of the city that often happen to also be Latino communities; there’s not been a lot of investment over time.”

-Public Official

Findings

Problem Identification:

When reflecting on major challenges in improving the walking environment, respondents described the aging infrastructure as an overarching issue, with more specific challenges being a lack of a systemic approach to sidewalks, the need for engineering perspectives that prioritize walkability, and the need for a dedicated funding source for pedestrian infrastructure.

The following are quotes from local policy makers:

"I think on arterials where we don't have sidewalks is just horrifying...seeing people in wheelchairs in the bike lane or navigating dirt."

"Our engineering division they are often the ones that are directly overseeing the investment in capital projects. They (engineers) have the ability to look for specific ways to design things keeping certain fundamental philosophies in mind...we don't have consistency across the board among engineers."

"Sidewalks seems to be more of a challenge for us, what I and others have said is to try to find some destinations for people to walk to, and then provide some real infrastructure to get there."

Respondents acknowledged that a paradigm shift in the city's approach to planning, engineering and traffic is necessary to create a pleasant, safe and equitable walking environment.

"Flip the pyramid upside down and adopt a pedestrian first hierarchy so that it is pedestrians first, and then alternative modes that the pedestrians might want to access to get from place to place, and then it's the vehicles."

National Complete Streets Coalition Definition of Complete Streets

A Complete Streets approach integrates people and place in the planning, design, construction, operation, and maintenance of our transportation networks. This helps to ensure streets are safe for people of all ages and abilities, balance the needs of different modes, and support local land uses, economies, cultures, and natural environments.



Barrio Kroeger Lane Neighborhood, Tucson Arizona

*"Lack of sidewalks and a lack of lighting especially in our older, poorer neighborhoods where most people's main method of transportation is walking or biking or some form of in between."
-Public Official*



Proposed Solutions:

Respondents recommended concrete actions to improve Tucson Walkability:

“Transforming internal processes and coordination between Tucson Department of Transportation (TDOT), engineering, planners and developers.”

“Engineers who are trained to be on board with fundamental philosophies of sustainability that would promote a better walking environment.”

“Pedestrian amenities should be a required part of new development that cannot be cut from the budget.”

“Developers need to be brought on board with “smart growth” in the Complete Streets concept.”

Policy Focused Implications:

While the city had not yet begun developing a Complete Streets policy at the time of this interview, seven of those interviewed (54%) were already thinking about the concept as a means to address inequities in Tucson’s transportation approach.

“If we had a Complete Streets policy we would have everything we need to move forward with designs.”

“A healthier more socially connected community and that will help deter crime, it will increase property values, it’ll prolong life and decrease a lot of the chronic conditions that people have if they don’t have access to these amenities.”

Conclusion

On January 23rd 2018, the Tucson City Council unanimously voted to direct staff to develop a Complete Streets policy. Our findings demonstrate that the Complete Streets concept was on the minds of key stakeholders even before the city leadership initiated the Complete Streets process. While a Complete Streets policy is a key component in breaching the disconnect between transportation planning and community needs, our findings underscore the need for a pedestrian focused approach (micro level) within a broader restructuring of funding mechanisms (macro level).



Picture Courtesy of Living Street Alliance

References:

- “ARIZONA MOTOR VEHICLE CRASH FACTS.” AZDOT CRASH FACTS 2016. AZDOT, www.azdot.gov/docs/default-source/mvd-services/2016-crash-facts.pdf?sfvrsn=4. [1]
- “What Are Complete Streets?” Smart Growth America, smartgrowthamerica.org/program/national-complete-streets-coalition/what-are-complete-streets/. [2]

This work was supported by the Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Research Centers Program, which is funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; cooperative agreement DP005002).