The November-December issue of Capitol Ideas magazine features my article on how states and communities are working to improve transportation mobility for older Americans. One of the experts featured in the article is Beth Osborne, vice president for technical assistance at Transportation for America in Washington, D.C. Osborne, a veteran of both the U.S. Department of Transportation and Capitol Hill, in recent years has been working with states on the implementation of complete streets policies. Complete streets are streets designed for safe access by all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders. In this extended excerpt of our conversation, Osborne talks about how complete streets can benefit seniors, how complete streets implementation processes have evolved, how the process differs from state to state, the promise of rideshare companies and autonomous vehicles for improving senior mobility and what kinds of policies state officials should consider during the 2017 legislative sessions. Osborne will be among the presenters next month at Transportation for America’s Capital Ideas II conference in Sacramento, for which CSG is a promotional partner.

On the benefits of complete streets and livable communities where seniors are able to age in place and continue to lead mobile and productive lives...
Beth Osborne: “We’re actually in the process of updating some of our research into which communities are the safest and the least safe for bicyclists and pedestrians and transit riders—people who are outside of their car—and it is amazing how hard it is to fix these problems once you’ve made them. And we have states that are working very, very hard but once you’ve built the environment poorly, the retrofit takes a while. And the biggest barriers to being able to age in place (are) … people outlive their driving age. Even when they can drive, they start not wanting to drive as much and maybe don’t drive at night. … Part of aging in place is being able to take care of your daily needs and if you can’t drive, in most communities that means you can’t take care of your daily needs or … you put yourself in mortal danger to do it. And many people are hit by cars and harmed just trying to cross the street to reach a destination. So the number one issue is making it safe for people to get where they need to go even if they’re not in the car. There are other benefits too—the ability to be active. There (are) reams and reams of science out there that show that when you can be active for longer, you are healthier. … You don’t have the same number of joint problems. You don’t have the same number of heart problems when you’re healthy and active. And if you’ve got a neighborhood where you have to drive to a special place in order to walk, being active is going to be a much bigger problem than if you live in a community where you walk as part of your daily life. And I think the third thing that is important is when you build complete streets, you’re building communities of activity. It reduces a sense of isolation. … And it’s just good for the local economy to have a lot of people who want to come to your area instead of designing it for people who pass through to get some place much faster.”

On how and why the implementation of complete streets policies has evolved...

Osborne: “Back in 2013, a lot of the folks we’d worked on complete streets implementation and complete streets policies (with) had had a couple years under their belt with the complete streets policy and a few folks approached us and said ‘we are confused and frustrated by the fact that we do not see a big change in the actual outcome of the projects. We’re still building the same things even though we have this complete streets policy.’ And so we started in Michigan, where we worked with
them to figure out why that was and what we did was (we) started by actually discussing how you consider the needs of all users of streets because the engineers had been given the task of moving cars quickly and safely for decades and then someone came in and said ‘okay, now consider everybody’ but what that means probably takes some time to figure out.”

“So we went through all the users and talked about the impact of land use decision making on transportation and the impact of transportation decision making on land use, which a lot of transportation agencies don’t realize. They think they’re not in the land use business and they’re actually dictating land use a lot of times by the design of their roadways.”

“We talked about what the pedestrian actually needs and what makes a friendly environment for pedestrians, what makes a friendly environment for a bicyclist, what makes people decide to try a different mode (of transportation), what different transportation demand management programs can you attempt to tell people ‘just try it’ the first time because when they try it, a lot of times they like it and they decide to keep doing it. What does it mean to design a road for transit? What does it mean to design a road for freight? A lot of times when people say ‘we need to accommodate trucks,’ they mean semis. But semis are one narrow type of truck and especially in downtown settings, you don’t tend to have as many of those as you have delivery trucks. And the best that you can do to accommodate delivery trucks is give it a place to park to deliver and that’s not often what people are considering. So there’s a whole ream of issues to discuss and then we get to the end of that and we say ‘alright, lots of good ideas so why can’t you do those things?’ And we spend a day with a state identifying every barrier to approaching a project with those considerations, both perceived and real. It didn’t really matter if it was real or perceived because sometimes the perceived barriers are even more formidable than the real, written down regulatory barriers. We then work in co-authorship with the state to develop an implementation plan on what those barriers are and how they might be removed.”

Osborne said her team has worked with Florida, Michigan and Vermont so far. They’re now working with the California Department of Transportation (CalTrans) and about to start work in Hawaii. They’re in discussions with several other state departments of transportation do similar implementation process reviews.

Osborne: “The Florida one is the one I’m most proud of. I think that we did a much better job there of addressing more of the cultural barriers. If you look at the Michigan one you’ll see it’s very much focused on all of the documents for project development that engineers have to use, whether it’s a scoping procedure, design elements … and in the Florida implementation plan, we got much more into working with stakeholders, performance management, training, those sorts of issues as well. So I just think it’s a really complete document. And then the state has the responsibility to actually decide how they’re going to implement it. Florida has been off to the races. They are re-writing their entire state design guide. It’s going to be a completely different document than any other state in the union has. They’re been doing a lot of training around the state not just for their own folks but for local folks.”

“Local communities have been trained to work in the old way so they have to change and a lot of the local communities now are ensconced in a land use regime that makes it very difficult to build a complete street. You can do all the right transportation elements and still not have a complete street if the land use is all auto-centric suburban. We’re working with them to start to shift the land use to be supportive of non-drivers.”

“But even after they implement that, then the projects have to start rolling out and actually be developed and built to make the changes. So it’s a big undertaking. It takes a while to change those past mistakes. But it’s really exciting to watch it happen and to really go through the state procedures
and most of them feel like ... they have a very flexible system but it turns out when you dig into it, no they really don’t. They have a system designed to move cars quickly and whether it’s the intention or not, they have buried in their system a lot of really, really tough barriers to doing anything any differently and it takes an extremely conscious effort to remove those barriers.”

“One thing we’re doing now going forward is adding an element of least-cost planning and practical design because one of the barriers we keep running into is we now have a very auto-centric attitude and the way a project development process works is a lot of times people come in, as (Tennessee Transportation Commissioner John Schroer) says, with their solution not their problem. So they come in and say things like ‘I need a bypass’ or ‘I need to expand the roadway’ and we’re not very good at saying ‘why do you think we need that?’ Instead we say ‘okay, they need a bypass’ and we start building a bypass with 20-year projections for use and big design standards and when you then start to consider all users because you have a much bigger, more expensive project than you need, you don’t have any money to consider the other users and you’ve designed something that is inherently hostile towards those other users. And most times when you sit down and say ‘why do you need that?’ if you define the problem very accurately, you’ll find you don’t need such an expensive, very engineered solution. A lot of times operational changes are possible. A lot of times much smaller capital improvements are needed and when you go smaller you have more budget to do more things but you also have more opportunity to accommodate slower-moving people and travelers.”

“So we’re starting now not just with the lens of land use in transportation but with practical design. Let us consider very carefully what we’re trying to solve before we go for the biggest, most over-engineered solution possible.”

On how the principles of complete streets translate from one place to another...

Osborne: “Every state is its own beast. Just between Michigan and Florida, the weather is so different and can have a different impact on how you approach things. In Michigan, a lot of the reasons they build big is to make room for snow in the winter. You don’t have to worry about that in Florida. So we do see a lot of individual issues but we see a lot of very similar issues too. And I would say another big thing is how much money they have. The less money the state has, the more they’re likely to be focused on state of (good) repair and that creates opportunity and problems that you don’t have in states that have enough money to be building a lot of new things. ... So we see a lot of similarities and we see a lot of very particular individual things. The size of the state—Vermont can be very different from a Florida. ... We’re now going into CalTrans and one of CalTrans’ division offices is (as big as) a lot of state (DOTs) so that’s going to be a very interesting process.”

On the promise of transportation network companies (TNCs) and autonomous vehicles to increase mobility solutions and the policy and planning challenges they present...

Osborne: “It creates both amazing opportunity and issues as always. The TNCs are a great opportunity to track where there is interest in transit and things like that. Watch and see who gets out of their car. Watch and see who jumps on to that alternative transportation option. It can also create an opportunity to lead people into transit systems.”

“But here’s a big problem: how do you project transportation demand in this world? With the TNCs, does that mean more people are jumping into cars? Are they coming out of transit and using Uber? Are they getting out of their car and using Uber? What does that mean? And one of the things we do in transportation—one of the most fundamental parts of building any transportation project is looking at projections for traffic 20 years out. Now, I’ll be honest. I don’t believe one of them. I don’t believe there is one transportation agency in the world that can accurately predict what traffic will be like 20 years out. So the very fact that we’re doing that is a very dubious process. If any transportation
agency got it right, it was purely by accident. We can’t predict the coming of Ubers. We can’t predict 20 years out what the economy is going to be doing. We can’t predict things like telecommuting or a technology boom and these all impact traffic. We didn’t predict when vehicle miles traveled leveled off for nearly a decade. It’s rising a little bit (now) but much more slowly than it was before it leveled off and went down. We didn’t predict the leveling off while it was going on. We had states projecting that VMT was going up while it was not going up. So these 20-year projections... they’re leading everybody to build things that may or may not be what is needed because they’re never accurate and they don’t allow us to think through what’s happening around us.”

“Another big problem with 20-year projections is alright, so what if we find out that traffic is going to be at a certain level in 20 years, do you build the road to be basically empty for 19 of them in order to accommodate the twentieth year? Is that considered good planning and budgeting? Is that how we build our homes—to be empty for 19 years and pay for the extra space only to have it accommodate what we need for that twentieth year? That doesn’t sound like the way we approach a lot of things in other areas. So it’s a real conundrum all this change and what it means for a lot of the sacrosanct project development processes. Maybe it does a good thing and it makes us back off a little bit and say ‘okay, let’s look at what’s going on now and what’s likely to happen in the next five years. Let’s make investments based on that and if we find out we need it bigger, we can do major capital improvements once we know that for real.’”

“On the autonomous vehicles there’s a lot of conversations about whether or not autonomous vehicles end up being the vehicle that everybody owns and because everybody owns a vehicle, everybody goes back to owning three to four vehicles per four-person family ... or it is utilized in a fleet situation and a way to move more people to more places as more of a transit or TNC-type setting. And no one really knows. I think it’s going to be very different based on the generation because if you look at millennials, they’re coming out of college with unprecedented debt. ... And a lot of kids are moving into areas where they don’t need to drive because it’s just not an alternative available for them. And in that situation the idea that all these young, debt-ridden millennials are going to run out and buy very fancy, expensive automated vehicles doesn’t really ring true to me.”

**On the kinds of state policies in this area she would recommend policymakers consider during the 2017 legislative sessions...**

Osborne: “They could certainly look into working with organizations like ours to dig through their own processes and identify where their big barriers even are. Probably a good start is just having an accounting of what is preventing you from doing it in the first place not just at the state level but at the local level and acknowledging that if you want to build a walkable, safe community for seniors who might need to be on foot or even seniors who are in a car frankly, you are going to have to handle both the land use and the transportation sides. It simply will never be done by simply just handling one side of it. You can build all the land use right and if the transportation is designed for cars to go barreling through, that’s not going to create a safe street and if you build all of the complete streets elements but to get from the street to any facility you have to wind through a quarter-mile of parking ... where all your destinations are very far from one another, you’re not going to build a complete street either. So I think just starting by doing an accounting of where your barriers are. You can do that by working with groups like us. You can do it yourself. But start figuring that out and then once you’ve done that, you can start developing strategies to address each one.”

“Some very specific things you see happening in states like Florida. They’re rewriting their entire transportation green book and they’re writing it to get rid of a lot of the rules that are very typical of states that make it impossible to build a complete street, rules that push engineers to design wide, fast lanes and require them to go through a timely and difficult exceptions process to do anything different.”
“They’ll identify that they’re measuring the wrong things. They’re not measuring the outcomes they really mean to be measuring and you do what you measure. If you’re measuring something called level of service, which is basically the speed and density of cars on the roadway, then that’s what you’re going to design to and if you measure something different, you’ll design to that.”

“So there’s a lot of things that (state legislators) can do there in telling their state DOTs ‘we want you to be accountable to these areas.’ We have a bunch of states that are looking at either getting rid of level of service or adding other measures to it or adjusting it. And that’s a great thing to do. But I think it starts with just figuring out what is preventing you from doing this in the first place. And there will be a lot of things that are similar to other states. But in every state there will be things that are unique to its circumstances that need to be identified and once identified a bunch of them might be fixed through removing a barrier legislatively. Some of them might be done by giving direction or guidance to the state DOT. Maybe it’s a design guide or regulation and so you tell them to update this regulation. Maybe it’s telling them to measure the things that matter to the state. It could be any number of things.”

**Transportation for America’s Capital Ideas II**

I be among the policy experts on hand next month as Transportation for America hosts Capital Ideas II [3] in Sacramento, California. CSG is pleased to be a promotional partner for the two-day event (November 16-17), which will offer attendees a highly interactive curriculum of model state legislation, campaign tactics, innovative policies and peer-to-peer collaboration designed to help them advance successful state transportation policy and funding proposals. Just in time to get a jump on the 2017 state legislative sessions, Capital Ideas II [3] (no affiliation with CSG’s magazine Capital Ideas) will also examine how state departments of transportation are instituting reforms and how California and other states are leading the way in policy innovation. Among the other topics on tap: enabling local transit funding, incentivizing complete streets, project selection process reform, mileage-based road usage charge pilot studies and capturing the value of transportation investments. The latest tentative agenda [4] for the conference is available on the T4America website. Registration is available [5]. For an idea of what the first Capital Ideas was like in 2014, you can read my coverage of the event [here][6], [here][7] and [here][8].

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