



Roundabouts are one kind of “context sensitive solution.” They can increase roadway capacity (sometimes avoiding the need for road widenings), while fitting nicely within developed areas. Above left, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. Highways can also be designed to fit better with their surroundings. Above right, the recently completed Paris Pike, near Lexington Kentucky.

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“More land than the State of Georgia,” says transportation planner David Burwell, “that’s how much public space the nation’s roads and highways take up.” Given that fact alone, Burwell feels it is essential for planners and planning commissioners to pay close attention to our transportation system.

But Burwell, who works on transportation policy issues for the Project for Public Spaces’ “context sensitive solutions” project, also stresses that land use and transportation are inextricably linked, “two sides of the same coin,” as he puts it.

Context sensitive solutions (CSS) represents one of those (too rare) concepts that draws support from groups typically viewed as being in opposition. In this case, those who support highway and road building, as well as those seeking to reduce auto usage.

As Burwell recounts, CSS first emerged at a major national transportation conference held at the University of Maryland in 1998. The conference, titled “Thinking Beyond the Pavement,” included chief engineers, senior designers, and planners from 29 state departments of transportation, plus representatives from a broad range of other organizations.

State transportation departments were growing increasingly frustrated by the delays encountered in getting road projects

built – often because of intense community opposition. Both the Federal Highway Administration and AASHTO (the American Association of State Highway & Transportation Officials) were also coming to realize that past ways of doing business were not working.

The characteristics of a “context sensitive” transportation project that emerged from the Maryland conference – and that still define the process today – include:

- the project satisfies the purpose and needs as agreed to by a full range of stakeholders.
- the project is a safe facility for both the user and the community.
- the project is in harmony with the community, and preserves environmental, scenic, aesthetic, historic, and natural resource values of the area.
- the project exceeds the expectations of both designers and stakeholders and achieves a level of excellence in people’s minds.
- the project involves efficient and effective use of the resources of all involved parties.
- the project is designed and built with minimal disruption to the community.
- the project is seen as having added lasting value to the community.

Considering the land use and environmental context does not mean “no roadways,” says Burwell. Rather, it means “right sizing the project from the beginning.” The goal, he explains, is “to first identify common community aspirations; then the type of transportation solutions

that will work best can emerge collaboratively.”

CSS can also save money. Burwell likens it to a wellness program. Smaller scale transportation solutions are often found, allowing more costly improvements to be put off, or sometimes even eliminated.

Jennifer Gavin, AASHTO’s deputy director of communications, offers several pointers for communities interested in following a “context sensitive” approach: develop a shared vision for the project; let the community know something’s in the works early on; be flexible and remember that every project has its own special conditions; keep evaluating the project as it is being constructed and make refinements if needed; and keep in mind livability and environmental concerns.

Gavin also notes that her organization has partnered with others to support the Project for Public Spaces’ development (for the Federal Highway Administration) of a comprehensive web site on CSS: <www.contextsensitivesolutions.org>. The site provides information on CSS principles, and on projects from just about every state. Significantly, the Federal Highway Administration has adopted the goal of integrating context sensitive solutions into project planning, development, and implementation in all 50 states by September 2007. ♦

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