

## UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY NEEDS

Community needs vary widely but typical expressions of local concerns include the following:

- . Pavement requires major repair
- . Drainage is not functioning
- . Traffic volumes are high and cause congestion
- . Traffic speeds are too high for the setting
- . Accidents are a concern
- . Street lacks character and needs improvement in the form of landscaping, street furniture, reduction of overhead utilities, etc.
- . Parking is inadequate
- . Too few or too many poles and signs
- . Visibility or width causes difficulty crossing the street
- . Incomplete or inadequate sidewalk network
- . Difficult to bicycle on the street
- . Lack of lighting raises nighttime safety concerns
- . Transit stops are inadequate
- . Truck traffic is excessive

Some of these conditions are created by “conventional” street design, others have deeper roots. Currently, some roadway design says “It’s OK to go fast” and a design for higher speeds allows drivers to feel comfortable with their “ownership” of the road but causes other users to feel far less comfortable. The highest expression of this approach is the interstate highway. It uses access controls, clear zones, large curve radii, acceleration and deceleration lanes, large message signs, and other design features to isolate the road, ease driver decision-making, and make it safe and forgiving for the highest speeds. Interstates are “safety and mobility” projects and are well-designed for these two goals.

Local streets, on the other hand, require a completely different set of design considerations: access is paramount, there is no room for clear zones, curve radii are small, acceleration and deceleration lanes are less needed, and signage is scaled down. But, above all, the local street cannot be isolated for the safety of the high speed driver; it must be shared with pedestrians, bicycles, parked cars, delivery trucks, advertising signs, drainage structures, and every other use made of our Main Streets. This basic condition shapes the visual and physical character of every local road and nearly all concerns stem from it.

Some deeply rooted community concerns stem from roads and traffic but are more often expressions of traditional conflicts in American society. A very basic one is the issue of life safety and mobility vs livability. For example, the director of a nursing home wants to place furniture in a hallway so that the residents can sit and talk, but the fire safety director doesn’t want any furniture in the hall because it’s a fire hazard. This dilemma springs from differing goals. In Main Street projects, it often takes the form of one group

desiring narrow streets and large sidewalks while the fire department insists upon wide streets for mobility and easy access to all structures.

Another is the issue of self-expression vs community values. The business community's desire for parking at the front door, easy access by private automobile, and control of its "turf" or business environment often clashes with the larger community's desire for alternate modes of transportation, less asphalt, and more opportunities for personal communication and beauty. One form the discussion takes on Main Street is delivery trucks. Should deliveries be allowed at any time for the convenience of the shipper and the store owner but to the detriment of traffic flow? Or should delivery hours or locations be restricted to the inconvenience of businesses but the benefit of traffic?

Whose values should prevail?

Still another basic issue is the notion of current desires vs long-term needs. Should the crosswalk be a painted white stripe or stamped concrete? Should the no parking area be designated by a sign or some other technique? Are street trees worth the possible later costs of repairing root damage to sidewalks and sewer lines? This question is the age-old one of balancing the function of the improvement with the form of the improvement.

The last common conflict is tradition vs change. This is the familiar debate about the virtues of the countryside vs the values of the city. It takes many forms along Main Street and is reflected in arguments over the "city" solution of a traffic signal when the "old" four-way stop has been working well for fifty years. The same may be said for the "new" ideas of pedestrian nodes or bumpouts, median planters, or narrowed lanes. There are no technical answers to any of these conflicts. The only avenue to their resolution is building awareness and better perceptions among those trying to address them. The most important questions that arise are not matters of expertise. The challenge is to establish values and priorities and to decide which approaches are legitimate and which are not; in other words, to define the framework and terms of reference within which experts should work. This is a problem for the community, not for the experts themselves.

To solve the problem, community members must achieve a better knowledge of those things which form the community environment and how those things are interconnected. This is achieved by going out into the community and talking about what is possible. The key approach is "Our community would function so much better if . . ."

This is an area where the communities can and should instruct SHA about how to gain an in-depth understanding of how a community works and what it values. In the MD 235 project in St. Mary's County, project funding, priorities, and philosophy changed several times. The early improvements selected were because of safety and budget. The first proposals were "bare bones" and did not meet the rapidly growing capacity demands of the Patuxent River Naval Air Station expansion or the community's desire for a suitable "Main Street." Time and effort were lost until a focus group was established and a dialogue began to create an understanding of the community and its overall vision.