

# “Be the Advocate for Complete Streets”

## *Interview with Transportation Engineer Mike Sewell*

**G**resham, Smith and Partners transportation engineer Mike Sewell’s enthusiasm for complete streets is clear as he discusses not only the health benefits of complete streets plans, but the many positive effects they can have on communities, including increased economic growth, social vitality, safety, and sustainability. Mike spoke with *ITE Journal* about his experiences and provided some insight on how to get started with any level of a complete streets project.

**ITEJ: Mike, would you provide an example of how you’ve seen a complete streets project promote community health and livability?**

**Mike:** A prime example comes from my experience working with an impoverished community in Louisville, KY, USA. The land use plan in place focused on motorists even though only 20 percent of the

residents own vehicles there. With limited resources and choices, the residents were expressing unhappiness with their transportation options. The community also reflected Kentucky’s significant obesity problem. It was clear that something needed to encourage residents to choose walking and bicycling.

By conducting interviews, we learned that residents were afraid to get on a bike or use the sidewalk to travel even short distances. People with disabilities were unable to get around curbs, and those that did ride bicycles were using the sidewalks. We started doing outreach with safety programs, and Louisville Metro provided funding to restripe lanes for bicycles. Motorists were driving too fast through the area, so by taking away two of the four lanes for vehicles and reallocating them for bicycles and pedestrians, we were able to slow down vehicle speeds, provide residents with more transportation options, and increase overall safety. Now people are out walking or biking rather than traveling a few blocks by bus.

**ITEJ: How can ITE members better incorporate aspects of complete streets on limited budgets when designing a roadway or intersection? What are some simple, cost-effective strategies for getting started?**

**Mike:** It’s okay to start small and incorporate simple elements that provide benefit to users and that can be later expanded—not everything needs to be done at once. You can present different options within your budget. Cost can be prohibitive when you’re looking at buying new right-of-way space. Sometimes there are issues that can be solved very easily, such as blockages in the way of your walking paths that can be cleared or underused areas where you can reclaim space for a sidewalk.

Also, look for projects with low maintenance costs. It helps if the elements you propose are not go-

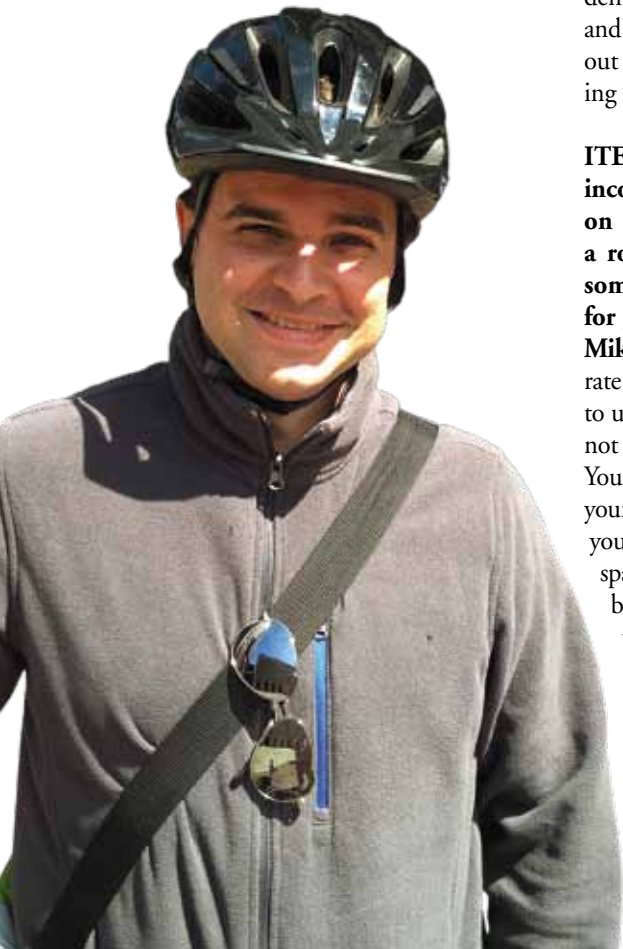
ing to be difficult for municipalities to maintain. This can often be achieved by working with capable landscape architects who will work with you to establish nice borders and protected areas that will be easy to care for over time.

**ITEJ: How do you work with advocates to implement complete streets projects?**

**Mike:** The best way to work with advocates is to be the advocate. Walk and bike the areas yourself and listen to the community firsthand. You can’t design without knowing first-hand what users are dealing with. If you experience the problem, you can better balance a proposed design that can still adhere to local design standards. If you’ve talked with the community ahead of time and know their needs, there will be better opportunity for buy-in for the complete streets elements you propose. More often than not, your implementation plan will address public fears about transportation on a project, but you have to achieve this buy-in and ownership from the public. That can only be done by first experiencing the issues as a user, and then by listening to the people who will be affected by your design the most—the public.

**ITEJ: How can transportation engineers find opportunities to establish partnerships with groups such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in building complete streets?**

**Mike:** You can make a strong case to organizations like the CDC to receive grant money for treatments that will help improve walkability and encourage active transportation. The CDC makes obvious ties between obesity and transportation, so you can create a partnership by telling a community’s story. MAP-21 funding is also opening opportunities for complete streets projects, as the legislation has shifted the classification of road users to include pedestrians and bicyclists, making highway



dollars available to all road users. There are also funding opportunities for complete streets projects that show congestion mitigation and improved air quality.

Telling the story is key in applying for funding and establishing any partnership, so involving the right public relations person helps. You can show how sometimes minimal changes have significant positive impacts on a community. When you go out and talk to the community, it is very compelling if you take photos and get videos of people describing their day-to-day transportation issues. It paints a better picture of what needs to be done and what you want to accomplish, and it also forges a way for the reviewing parties to establish an emotional tie to the project.

**ITEJ: What do you find are the biggest challenges of complete streets projects? How have you addressed those challenges?**

**Mike:** The number one challenge is trying to justify the reallocation of lane width to a motorist. To be successful, we've needed to focus our efforts on travel time analysis

and effectively communicating the results to stakeholders. Travel time delay is always seen negatively, so it needs to be presented in the context of slowing things down to protect pedestrians and bicyclists. It's important to help stakeholders understand the need to balance what a road is to them versus what it is to all users.

**Mike Sewell, P.E.,** is a transportation engineer with the multidisciplinary design and consulting firm Gresham, Smith and Partners (GS&P). Mike has more than 17 years of experience in transportation engineering and design, and has served GS&P in four different states. Mike has played a leading role in incorporating complete streets theory into many GS&P projects and is a strong advocate of smart, sustainable transportation projects that promote positive social, environmental, and economic impacts. Mike, who serves as the office manager of GS&P's Louisville office, bikes to work roughly three times per week throughout the year, and it has helped to open his eyes to how transformative alternative transportation can be to an environment. ■

## Resources for Complete Streets

Read more about Mike's views on complete streets in his blog post, "Complete Streets for More Complete Communities," available online at [www.greshamsmith.com/Dialogue/GSP-Dialogue/December-2012/Complete-Streets-for-More-Complete-Communities](http://www.greshamsmith.com/Dialogue/GSP-Dialogue/December-2012/Complete-Streets-for-More-Complete-Communities).

Mike also recommends the following resources:

### National Complete Streets Coalition

[www.smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/complete-streets)

### National Association of City Transportation Officials

<http://nacto.org>

### Association of Pedestrian and Bicycle Professionals

[www.apbp.org/?page=Library](http://www.apbp.org/?page=Library)

### Transportation Alternatives

<http://transalt.org>

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