

## CHAPTER 3: EXISTING CONDITIONS

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This section of the Plan provides a brief overview of the existing conditions for bicycling and walking in the Baltimore region. A full report on existing conditions (Task 2, Existing Conditions Report) can be obtained from the Baltimore Metropolitan Council's Regional Information Center.

Bicycling and walking are popular activities among both residents and visitors to the Baltimore region, for both recreation and transportation purposes. In addition, children often ride bicycles to school, friends' houses and other destinations. Thousands of people walk to work in the Baltimore region, and many more walk for exercise. There are many places in the region where walking is comfortable and convenient because of connected sidewalk networks, multi-use trails, street trees and destinations that are close to home.

In many places, however, travel by foot and bicycle is dangerous. Many communities are isolated by major highways and multi-lane thoroughfares, giving people little other choice but to drive to every destination.

Policies and practices at the state and local level have a tremendous affect on bicycling and walking conditions. For example, if a local developer is not required to provide pedestrian access between the storefront and the roadway, or to the neighborhood behind the store, it is unlikely that these critical connections will be made. During the development of this Plan, an analysis was undertaken of existing land development policies in the region. It was found that policies and practices within each jurisdiction are improving in terms of quality and level of detail. Local governments are paying more attention to these issues than in the past, reflecting the increasing recognition that bicycling and walking have a direct relationship to:

- Smart growth initiatives,
- Quality of life measures,
- Traffic congestion, and
- Air quality.

At the state level, the Maryland Department of Transportation (MDOT) is undergoing some key changes - a growing focus on bicycle and pedestrian modes, more emphasis on transit, and a recognition that our modern transportation problems require new and innovative approaches. In conjunction with the state's Smart Growth initiatives, and in response to the Bicycle and Pedestrian Access 2001 legislation and requests from bicycling advocates, MDOT

has introduced new programs to fund bicycle and pedestrian improvements. In addition, MDOT has been training its staff to better accommodate bicyclists and pedestrians in the design of highway and transit projects. However, additional progress will be needed to fully institutionalize these considerations into all projects.

## PEDESTRIAN CONDITIONS

The Baltimore region has a number of outstanding examples of good places to walk. People enjoy walking at the Inner Harbor area and in many areas of Baltimore City, historic downtowns such as Ellicott City, Annapolis, Westminster and others, and in residential communities that have sidewalks and tree-lined streets. Elements that create good pedestrian environments in these communities include continuous and accessible sidewalks, intersection crossing provisions, landscaping, directional signs, and separation from travel lanes. Planned communities such as Columbia in Howard County and Piney Orchard in Anne Arundel County provide sidewalks, pathways, street trees, lighting and traffic calming features that create a more comfortable pedestrian environment.

Unfortunately, areas that are difficult and dangerous for pedestrians are common in the Baltimore region. Examples include congested roadways in commercial strip areas, freeway interchanges that lack pedestrian crossings and carry free flowing high-speed traffic, and wide intersections that do not provide adequate crossing measures for pedestrians. Public meeting attendees specifically cited the following concerns with regard to pedestrian conditions in the Baltimore region:

- Lack of continuous sidewalks leading to destinations, specifically leading to and around schools, commercial areas, parks, employment centers, transit stations, bus stops and other destinations.
- Lack of pedestrian crossing measures at intersections and mid-block crossings, such as pedestrian refuge islands, curb extensions, pedestrian signal heads that function properly, audible pedestrian signals for the visually impaired, high-visibility crosswalks, accessible curb ramps, and adequate crossing times.
- Sidewalks are too narrow for two people to pass each other (most local standards allow 4' sidewalks, national guidelines recommend 5' as a minimum width).
- Lack of buffering between pedestrian and motor vehicle traffic – many sidewalks are built at the back of the curb, leaving very little separation

between the pedestrian and motor vehicle traffic. Planting strips with street trees give pedestrians a higher level of comfort in the roadway environment.

- Lack of compliance on the part of motorists to laws that require them to yield the right of way to pedestrians in crosswalks, problems with speeding and unsafe driving behavior in neighborhoods and commercial areas.

Aside from infrastructure barriers that perpetuate difficult walking environments, single-use zoning in the Baltimore region has resulted in long trip distances that do not support walking, particularly in suburban areas. Many existing land uses were designed primarily to accommodate auto trips (see policies analysis below). Without significant changes in land development practices, distance will continue to be a primary barrier to walking in the region.

## **BICYCLING CONDITIONS**

While the Baltimore region has been a leader in developing off-road trails for bicycling and walking, the region has lagged behind other major metropolitan areas that have provided on-street bicycle accommodations such as bike lanes and paved shoulders. The good news first: more and more jurisdictions are implementing shared use pathways such as the Gwynns Falls Trail, the Baltimore and Annapolis Trail, the Northern Central Rail Trail and the Ma and Pa Trail, and many more additional trails are in the planning and land acquisition phases. In addition, the Maryland Department of Transportation is developing new programs and policies that better support walking and on-road bicycling. Transportation planners and citizens have begun to advocate for a more efficient and sustainable transportation network that provides a variety of travel choices – by transit, on foot, on bicycles, and by car.

Prior to this Plan, an analysis of bicycling conditions was undertaken using the Bicycle Level of Service (LOS) methodology. This planning tool measures bicyclists' comfort level in a roadway environment by evaluating such factors as lane width, traffic volumes, vehicle speeds, and pavement condition. Scores are calculated on a scale from A through F with LOS "A" being the best quality of service, and LOS "F" being the worst. It is important to note that the methodology assesses only the characteristics of the environment along roadway segments, and does not account for the lane configurations and traffic movements at intersections. Nevertheless, it is a valuable tool for helping to design roadway cross-sections.

This analysis confirmed the comments made by citizens during public meetings: poor bicycle conditions prevail in urban and suburbanizing areas throughout the

region. In Baltimore City, for example, over 90% of the roadways in the study network had a Bicycle LOS score of “D” or worse.

Public meeting attendees cited the following specific concerns with regard to bicycling in the Baltimore region:

- Roadways lack adequate space for bicycling. In populated areas with higher volumes of traffic, lanes are narrow, and there are no dedicated bicycle lanes.
- There remain many locations in the Baltimore region, particularly in Baltimore City, where drain grates are unsafe (with parallel opening that can catch a bicycle tire and cause a crash).
- In locations where there are paved shoulders, trash and debris has collected, creating very difficult bicycling conditions.
- Some bicycle paths in the region are narrow- particularly those that are older -and do not meet current design standards.
- There is heavy, high-speed traffic on many roadways in developing rural areas, with no space for bicycling or walking.
- There is a lack of bicycle parking facilities throughout the region.
- There are critical gaps in the network between existing trails and nearby destinations – such as the gap between the southern end of the NCR Trail and the Hunt Valley light rail station.
- Connections to transit are difficult – in general, there is a lack of bicycle racks at transit stops, and difficult riding conditions near transit stations; with the exception of Annapolis Transit there are no bicycle racks on buses.

## GREENWAYS

There has been a great deal of trail and greenway development in the Baltimore region during the past 10-15 years. That work is evident in the growing network of trails and many plans for new trail connections. Every jurisdiction included in this study has either already implemented greenways or is in the process of planning future greenways. It is important to understand that this plan does not include all proposed greenways in the Baltimore region. A number of the proposed greenways are not proposed to permit public access (i.e. trails), and others are not planned to include trails that would be suitable for bicycle transportation. For this reason, the map primarily includes those greenways that serve (or will serve) both a transportation and recreation function.

There are a number of proposed greenways that cross county lines, and that will create significant regional links. The Patapsco Greenway, for

example, has the potential to connect Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Carroll, and Howard Counties, as well as Baltimore City.

The Maryland Greenways Commission has been doing excellent planning work on a statewide basis for many years. The status of the greenway system in Maryland is proof of the State's commitment to protect greenways; over 1500 miles of protected greenway corridors exist in Maryland today. In addition, two major national trails are proposed to intersect in the Baltimore region. The East Coast Greenway – a major north/south trail along the eastern seaboard, and the American Discovery Trail – a major east/west trail that goes from Delaware to California – will intersect in Anne Arundel County.

## **LOCAL AND STATE POLICIES AND PRACTICES**

In a very general sense, one reason why bicycle and pedestrian accommodations in the Baltimore region are lacking is because local and state policies and practices have historically neglected these two modes of transportation. As is the case in the rest of the United States, post World War II transportation policies were mainly directed at making automobile and truck travel safer and more convenient. As a result, much work is needed to modernize long-standing policies that do not currently balance the needs of bicyclists and pedestrians in transportation planning, roadway design, transit planning and design, and community design in general.

This is a difficult task, because many parts of the region are simultaneously struggling with constraints on roadway space due to rising traffic volumes and high costs of right-of-way acquisition. Regardless, accommodating bicycling and walking are critically important to the quality of life, and hence the economic success of the region.

Examples of specific policies in the Baltimore region that should be re-evaluated include:

- Road design manuals that do not balance the needs of bicyclists and pedestrians with those of other roadway users. For example design manuals don't require sidewalks and bike lanes on new and reconstructed roadways in urban and suburban areas, or require intersections to be designed for the largest possible truck turning radii.

- Maintenance policies that do not provide adequate sweeping of paved shoulders so that bicyclists are able to ride in that area.
- Land development codes that do yet fully support (and require) smart growth, and that do not provide critical guidance on community design measures that support bicycling and walking.

More detail on policies and practices with respect to bicycling and walking Baltimore region is provided in *Task 2 Report: Existing Conditions* – available through the BMC’s Regional Information Center.