**Shared Streets**

**Impacts for Pedestrians with Visual Impairments**

Janet Barlow and JoAnne Chalom

May 2019

Shared Streets are streets where the entire area between buildings is level, signs and markings are minimal, and drivers, pedestrians, and bicyclists are supposed to ‘share’ the space. They are intended to be safer for all users and provide more space for pedestrians and bicyclists, expand accessible workspace, provide more space for amenities, encourage economic development, and provide a flexible public space.

Curbless streets are a variation on shared streets and are designed to provide flexible and accessible space for festivals, farmers markets, and other activities, during which time the street is closed to vehicular traffic. Curbless streets are not intended to enable pedestrians to comfortably mix with moving vehicles in the same space.

What are the challenges of shared spaces for people with visual impairments?

The main challenge is the assumption is that users crossing or traveling in the shared street will “negotiate” with other users through eye contact. Without treatments the pedestrian who is blind or who has low vision may enter a vehicular zone or shared street and not be able to determine traffic patterns because the traffic patterns are random. Various surfaces, some not detectable under foot or with a cane, have been used to delineate the pedestrian zone from multi-use zones where pedestrians, bicyclists and vehicular traffic travel in unison. Although there are requirements for shared spaces to be usable by all, there are no specific guidelines or requirements in ADA that address some of the issues in the shared street environment.

As a result of questions and concerns about shared streets and their impact on pedestrians who are blind or who have low vision, Federal Highway Administration funded a project to develop recommendations for cities when installing shared streets. A comprehensive report, Accessible Shared Streets: Notable Practices and Considerations for Accommodating Pedestrians with Vision Disabilities,( <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/bicycle_pedestrian/publications/accessible_shared_streets/>) was authored by Elliott, J; Lohse, K; Toole, J; Lockwood, I; Barlow, J; Bentzen, B; Porter, C. and is available free.

During the development of Accessible Shared Streets: Notable Practices and Considerations for Accommodating Pedestrians with Vision Disabilities, input was received from stakeholders with mobility, hearing and vision impairments and from engineers, planners and O&M specialists in a series of four workshops.

Some of the key takeaways include:

* Shared streets need to be recognizable
* Need different types of what are called Tactile Walking Surface Indicators
	+ Detectable Warning Surfaces (truncated domes) need to be installed at corners and crossings
	+ Directional Indicators may be helpful along a pathway and need to be detectable (report includes information on what profile is needed for detectability)
* Detectable changes in surface texture and color should be provided
* Pedestrian paths along buildings (called comfort zones) need to be clear from obstructions
* Transitions from pedestrian only areas to shared zones and from shared streets to conventional vehicular intersections need some kind of treatment
* There should be obvious (to drivers) traffic calming measures and gateway Treatment

The guide includes a toolbox and design ideas when planning shared streets.

When speaking with planners, designers, and engineers, consideration should be given to layers of information, consistency and predictability and universal design for all.

O&M specialists should be aware of these issues and educate their clients about potential issues of shared streets. They and their clients should advocate for treatments when such shared streets are being planned.

The Environmental Access Committee (EAC) is ready to help you and answer your questions. You can access EAC resources

<https://aerbvi.org/about/divisions/orientation-mobility-division/resources/>

Scroll down to view general resources

Topics such as Accessible Pedestrian Signals, Detectable Warning Surfaces, Guidance through Construction Areas, Need for Accessible PedestrianSignals when Leading Pedestrian Intervals (LPIs) and Exclusive Pedestrian Phases are installed are at your disposal. Updated and new resources such as Roundabouts and Pedestrians who are Blind or who have Low Vision, and Shared Streets: Impacts for Pedestrians with Visual Impairments are coming soon.

We urge you to get involved in your local communities. There are a lot of new street designs being developed and proposed to give better access or safety for motorists or bicyclists. Some of those may negatively impact the travel of individuals who are blind or who have low vision without careful consideration during the design phase. Most street projects have a public meeting requirement and bringing up accessibility concerns early in the project can make a big difference in the final outcome.

Email us at OandMEAC@gmail.com. Please let us know what you would like us to do and how we can be more helpful to those of you in the field.

References

Elliott, J., Lohse, K., Toole, J., Lockwood, I., Barlow, J., Bentzen, B., & Porter, C. (2017) *Accessible Shared Streets: Notable Practices and Considerations for Accommodating Pedestrians with Vision Disabilities*, Washington, D.C.: Federal Highway Administration. FHWA-HEP-17-096