

Commentary: A glimmer of hope for Maine cyclists and pedestrians

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Maine is a wonderful place to live and explore, but all too often biking or walking is reserved for places like parks or conservation lands instead of the streets near our houses. This is understandable because dangerous driving is on the rise and far too many roads are designed to move cars quickly instead of ensuring safety for everyone.

As volunteer leaders of bicycle and pedestrian groups in our towns, we often hear from residents that they would like to bike or walk more but aren't able to, either because of concerns like fear of speeding drivers or lack of safe spaces like sidewalks or separated paths.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Colin Durrant serves as chair of the Yarmouth Bicycle and Pedestrian Committee, a volunteer advisory committee to the town. **Kirsten Brewer** is a leader of CAPITAL, a group of Augusta residents dedicated to safety for bicyclists and pedestrians.

Thankfully there is a glimmer of hope on the horizon. For the first time ever, the Maine Department of Transportation has created an active transportation plan. It released a draft just before New Year's Eve and will be accepting comments through Jan. 30.

The plan lays out a promising framework for building safer streets and paths that encourage more people to walk and roll. With some adjustments and improvements to the draft, we could have a vision for the future that will make it safer and easier to walk or bike around town or connect to surrounding communities.

The first improvement that could be made is to elevate a recognition that whether you are 8 or 80, you should feel comfortable and safe biking or walking in Maine and not have to be dependent on a car to get everywhere. We encourage the Maine DOT to incorporate a clear commitment to designing for all ages and abilities in the plan's vision statement, and then reflect it more clearly in the plan's goals.

The draft plan's focus on widening roads to provide shoulders on rural roads needs to be balanced with a much stronger commitment to build wider sidewalks and multi-use paths across the state that are safe for all users, not just those comfortable enough walking or biking next to speeding cars.

Second, the success of this plan will depend on how it is implemented and on that measure there is little detail. There should be more clarity about how the DOT will implement this plan and on what timelines.

Specific performance criteria – like miles of multi-use paths built – should be developed and clear milestones should be added, especially for completion of an updated Complete Streets Policy and new policy for setting speed limits on local roads. Both these policies are out of date and they are slowing progress. Because road deaths are on the rise, the department should aim to release these updated policies in 2023.

Third, the draft plan includes a vague recognition that we will need to increase funding for active transportation which has been sorely underfunded for decades. The state can use existing resources to “flex” more federal funding to support sidewalks, separated trails and other active transportation infrastructure instead of choosing to spend it on expanding highways or building wider roads which encourage speeding. It can also take advantage of several new federal grant programs.

We'd also like to see the Maine DOT increase the state's share of funding for safety projects like wider sidewalks or multi-use paths. The current approach requires local towns and cities to foot a large part of the bill even if the improvement is part of a state project, which forces hard decisions about how to use taxpayer money, often pitting local road projects against each other.

Maine's roads should be safe and accessible to everyone, especially those who either can't own a car or choose not to drive. The active transportation plan is an exciting step forward, and the state's [new active transportation planner](#), Dakota Hewlett, is bringing fresh energy as well. We're grateful to the Maine DOT, the Bicycle Coalition of Maine and others who got us to this point. Let's view it as a starting point to building a safer, more equitable Maine that gives everyone the opportunity to walk or bike to school, to run an errand or connect with friends and family.

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