

Transportation Reform

Through our Livable Streets initiative, TOPP is reforming the politics and culture of American transportation.

America's transportation policies have remained essentially unchanged since the 1950s, when gas cost a nickel and Eisenhower launched the interstate highway system. Decades of car-first planning have created a broken system: whole cities are stuck in traffic, gas costs are breaking family budgets, and oil addiction is our greatest national security liability.

Transportation reform can launch a greener economy, address climate change, reduce oil dependence, help people get to work and school, mend social fabric, and save thousands of lives. Right now, far too much of our public space is devoted to private vehicles. Our streets can be vibrant places where neighbors meet, kids play, and everyone can move from place to place more quickly and easily.

TOPP has the expertise and track record to transform transportation. In New York City, Livable Streets has redirected millions in city planning dollars towards smart transportation projects. More than a million people have watched Streetfilms.org videos online, and Streetsblog.org reaches 125,000 readers each month. Livable Streets is turning parking lots into plazas and congested highways into bike paths.

Our impact is increasingly national, and we are poised to catalyze a powerful, grassroots Livable Streets movement. The Livable Streets movement will reorient our policies and lead the way to a world-class transportation system that meets the needs of the 21st century.

Goals

- Wake America up to the benefits of planning for people first, instead of cars.
- Put Livable Streets issues on the agenda in neighborhoods, in cities, and at the federal level.
- Tap the power of average citizens, bringing them into the planning processes that shape their towns and neighborhoods.

The time is ripe to extend our reach. This year, Congress will reauthorize the next five years of federal transportation funding. The TEA-21 bill will allocate between \$450 and \$600 billion. Today, 80% of federal transportation dollars are spent on highways, and only 20% on public transit. Even a small shift in the funding allocation would mean billions of dollars to help Americans climb out of their cars. This bill is the perfect opportunity to create the connections that will grow a wider, long-term movement.

Our Approach

Web-based technology offers powerful ways to transform our transportation systems. Dollar for dollar, nothing beats the Internet for information distribution and civic advocacy.

TOPP is using a cohesive approach: use political mobilizers to reorient policy in key cities; connect neighborhood, local and national initiatives; position this work as a mainstream environmental movement; and create open and effective partnerships between government agencies and the public.

- **Bringing our successful advocacy model to new cities.**

In 2005, New York City transportation policy was stalled in gridlock. While other world cities were squeezing traffic off of their streets with bike infrastructure and pedestrian zones, New York was still trying to maximize its streets' capacity to move private cars. City Hall treated transportation as a third-tier issue and ignored public cries for reform.

In the spring of 2006, we launched *Streetsblog.org* and *Streetfilms.org* with four goals in mind:

1. Create a daily “beat” covering the full gamut of transportation issues relevant to New York City— from neighborhood battles over new bike lanes to the way in which other cities were using transportation policy to respond to the climate crisis.
2. Watchdog the Department of Transportation (DOT) and hold City Hall accountable for New York City’s glaring transportation policy failures.
3. Present transportation policy best practices from cities around the world to city policy makers, press and citizens.
4. Create a useful online forum for reform advocates.

Streetsblog and Streetfilms soon emerged as daily reading among advocates, the media, policy people and City Hall. Tips poured in from DOT insiders tired of the agency’s cars-first mentality. Daily newspapers and TV news picked up our stories. Advocacy organizations like Transportation Alternatives used us to amplify their messages and bolster their calls-to-action.

According to insiders, Streetsblog soon exerted influence at City Hall that far outstripped its size. The blog helped hasten the departure of the city’s regressive DOT commissioner, and it ensured new leadership would understand progressive transportation policy. Today, the DOT is pushing an ambitious agenda to prioritize pedestrians, transit and bicycles on New York City streets.

Recent Developments. We launch Streetsblogs in cities where this model can tip the scales. In 2008, TOPP started Streetsblog Los Angeles, and in early 2009 we launched Streetsblog San Francisco.

San Francisco, for example, offers ideal conditions. The city’s advocacy community is coming together to create a ‘Great Streets’ campaign, inspired by TOPP’s New York City Streets Renaissance. Mayor Newsom needs to be seen as an innovator on these issues, and California is often a leader in transportation and environmental policy. Finally, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi represents the city, and she is major player in the 2009 federal reauthorization bill.

- **Use the Web as a national nexus for Livable Streets advocates.**

Streetsblog and Streetfilms have fueled the national appetite for meaningful reform. The ‘comments’ are teeming with great ideas. Streetfilms videos have been used to sell progressive transportation policies to officials in San Francisco, Baltimore, Portland, Minneapolis and elsewhere. We hear from people in cities across the country who hope to follow New York’s example.

Web-based tools can connect advocates and help them turn great ideas into on-the-ground change in their hometowns.

- **Create a national blog network.** The US has a few hundred quality transportation blogs with a total monthly readership of more than 400,000. These local sources are already centers of conversation in their communities, but local transit bloggers felt disconnected from a wider movement. We created the Streetsblog Network (*Streetsblog.net*) to amplify their impact, forming a movement that is both visible and internally supportive. This digital phone tree has access to virtually everyone in the US who is interested in transportation policy, transit, smart growth, bicycling, and livable streets issues.

Nearly 300 blogs have already joined Streetsblog.net, which offers syndication tools and helpful widgets for affiliated bloggers. Local blogs receive national exposure and more traffic, and the national campaign gains access to scores of local markets. The blog network can reach, coach, and deploy a legion of Livable Streets advocates.

- **Develop the social platform that connects and empowers Livable Streets advocates.** In early 2008, TOPP launched *LivableStreets.com*, a platform to “connect the people in Seattle pushing for bike lanes with the people in Peoria who just got them.”

Livable Streets connects Streetsblog and Streetfilms with collaborative tools:

- Streetswiki is a community-build encyclopedia of transportation, urban environmental, and public space issues. Streetswiki is a cache of ideas on how to make our cities more livable.
- Livable Streets Community – This network helps advocates connect, stay organized, and accomplish more. Today, Livable Streets Community is a live beta that is catching on in and around NYC. Groups like *Inwood Livable Streets* and *Bike Hoboken* use it to stay in contact and to keep track of ideas, files, and progress.

Drawing on relationships with our users and advocacy network, we are continuing to improve the Livable Streets platform. As it matures, Livable Streets will get tens of thousands of people talking and working together, creating change in thousands of towns and cities.

- **Use school-age programming to position Livable Streets as a mainstream environmental movement.**

Children and families are a critical constituency for civic initiatives. MacGruff The Crime Dog helped a generation of children ‘Take a Bite Out of Crime.’ School programs have spread good health habits like dental care and prompted millions to ‘Reduce, Reuse, Recycle.’ These lessons pass from one child to the whole family.

In 2008, we launched Livable Streets Education to change how families think about transportation and great public spaces, engage children in their neighborhoods, and use classroom projects as models for improving nearby streets.

We offer classroom residencies that package material into 8-10 sessions, and we partner with leading cultural institutions to provide specialized programming.

The Livable Streets curriculum packages our message in a format that reaches kids and their families. Today, we are working to:

- **Develop a strong cache of curricular materials.**

We are creating and testing a range of age-appropriate lesson plans that meet classroom goals while teaching children about the importance of safe, vibrant public spaces. This year, we reached hundreds of students in 15 schools, testing curricula for a range of grades and classrooms. We will expand this base by developing locally relevant material for a number of metropolitan areas.

- **Brand these ideas using a child-friendly mascot for Livable Streets.** The Zozo, a large purple mascot, has emerged in video and in events across New York. We plan to expand the Zozo effort as a vehicle for bringing Livable Streets concepts to children and families. This mascot works in concert with wide-reaching educational media, such as a collection of songs about bikes, buses, and trains.

- **Create open curriculum sources.** All of our curricular materials, lesson plans, case studies, and related media will be available online. We are keen to develop the community around this work, one in which other educators can easily contribute their materials and share their challenges and successes.

Sample Lesson

Sixth-graders in one NYC public school used ‘speed guns’ to collect information about the safety of the streets around their schools. Groups found the average car speed and investigated pedestrian patterns. Then they wrote letters to the Department of Transportation asking for safety improvements.

- **Via open source software, equip transportation agencies to better respond to public needs.**

To create 21st century transportation systems, government agencies will need 21st century information systems.

Departments of Transportation, zoning boards, and transit authorities all use complex data management systems for daily operations. Public agencies can leverage open source software to better serve their constituents. Open technologies are less expensive and more flexible. Agencies that embrace open source can make better use of their data, synchronize their work with other government bodies, and treat the public as a true partner in data and city management.

TriMet, the transit authority for Portland, Oregon, leverages open source to help Portland residents get around. Their best-in-class route planner uses TOPP's GeoServer software to share TriMet transit data on the Web. Datasets are available in easy-to-consume formats, so the public can assess transit options and quality, and outside software developers have built dozens of additional useful tools on top of the data. The public can provide valuable feedback, and TriMet is better equipped to respond effectively.

TOPP helps public agencies assess and adopt open technologies:

- We build open source applications and provide ongoing maintenance. We have worked with public agencies in Florida, Oregon, Massachusetts, Australia, Finland, and The Netherlands.
- We conduct feasibility studies, helping agencies choose platforms and create transition plans.
- Open source software development is inherently collaborative. To help agencies with similar mandates share and draw on best practices, TOPP plans to bring together transit agencies, land-use planning bodies, and others in function-grouped Open Source Steering Committees.

For more information about initiatives, partnerships, and services, please contact:

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