Main Street...
when a highway runs through it:
A Handbook for Oregon Communities
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Main street is more than just the buildings which line it. The street records human endeavors through time: the progression of architectural styles, types of businesses, social changes, and the evolution of street design. As planner Allan Jacobs notes, streets are made for “symbolic, ceremonial, social and political roles, not just those of movement and access.”

As many people told us during the creation of this handbook, main street is the heart of the community. It has history and character. Main street provides the focus of civic life and is recognized by the community as the town center. It often has historical value as the oldest part of a town and is frequently the central business district. It is an interesting and inviting place to walk. It is economically important to the area. More and more, the main street is what attracts people and businesses to a town.

Main streets are usually several blocks in length and width, with compact, mixed-use development, and buildings spaced close together and close to the street. Main streets have short blocks, are interconnected with local street networks, boast sidewalks wide enough for pedestrians to walk side by side, and usually include on-street parking. Main streets, by tradition and design, are pedestrian friendly.

When a community has what is often called a sense of place, that sense of place is found on main street. Many communities are realizing that they have lost their sense of place. Whatever the causes—economic recession, changes in land use patterns (particularly strip development and large indoor shopping malls), and sometimes, inappropriate highway modifications—these communities are working hard to recapture their sense of place.

Many places, seeing what has happened to their neighbors, are working hard to keep downtown vital. Other towns are actively developing new or expanded main streets. This handbook provides communities with guidance on what makes a good main street, particularly when it is also a highway.

“Main Street is where you have parades.”
–Focus Group Participant, April 1999

Main street caters to pedestrians.
The driver’s focus at different speeds.

A low speed allows drivers to be more aware of their surroundings and to have time to react to other highway users.

The photos show how a driver’s focus changes as their speed increases. The setting is a typical downtown in a small Oregon city. Shops and on-street parking line both sides of this 2-lane couplet. The highway is built to “full standard” because of the ample right-of-way.

At the posted speed of 30 mph, many drivers have a difficult time seeing bicyclists and pedestrians, and stopping distance is nearly twice that of 20 mph.

To safely accommodate all users, this highway needs substantial design changes that tell the driver that this is not the open highway it was a few blocks before.

A good start would be wide planting strips with trees to narrow the roadway. A bike lane could be striped. Intersections could be narrowed even further with curb extensions.

When a person is struck by a motor vehicle, they have the following chances of death according to Killing Speed and Saving Lives, UK Department of Transportation:

- **40 mph**
  - 85% chance of death

- **30 mph**
  - 45% chance of death

- **20 mph**
  - 15% chance of death

- **15 mph**
  - The driver easily sees that this is a place where pedestrians and bicyclists are present.
Crossing

Highways are important transportation links, but they can also be significant barriers, especially to pedestrians. Busy urban highways reduce pedestrian travel and disrupt access, which can have a chilling effect on main street businesses. Antidotes are reducing traffic speed (discussed above), shifting trucks to more suitable routes (discussed below), managing vehicle access (discussed below), and increasing pedestrian crossing opportunities.

The priority in main street intersection design is to make all users feel safe and comfortable. Many urban intersections, including main streets, have complex traffic patterns and designs unsuitable to pedestrians and bicyclists. The blind, in particular, are often faced with long crossings that are hard to follow, have poorly placed ramps, have signals and traffic phases that cannot be heard, and that put obstacles in their path. The combination has proven lethal, with a disproportionate rate of blind, visually impaired, young, and old pedestrians being killed or injured when crossing streets.

Good signalized intersection design include traffic phases that are understandable to the disabled and ample pedestrian crossing time. Pedestrians want to be in the street no longer than necessary, so crossing distances need to be kept short by keeping lanes no wider than necessary, eliminating unnecessary lanes, aligning intersections at 90 degrees, and using tight corners and curb extensions. On multiple-lane streets, medians and refuge islands can also be used to shorten crossings.

We can’t put a signal at every corner, but we can calm traffic, reduce conflicts, and make the pedestrian more visible.

See also:
Speed and Access in this Chapter, and
Traffic Controls, Enforcement, Median, and Curb Extension in Chapter 4.

Typical statement: “We need a stop sign (or signal) at this intersection.”

Possible problems: High speeds, difficulty crossing or turning on highway, and collisions.

Potential ingredients: Traffic controls if warranted, corner radius reduction, curb extensions, median, lane width reduction, travel lane removal, and other speed-reduction measures.

Typical statement: “The agencies won’t mark the crosswalks; they say it’s too dangerous.”

Possible problems: Inadequate sight distance, poor crosswalk visibility, and long crossing distance.

Potential ingredients: Curb extensions, median, refuge islands, and high-visibility crosswalks.
Most intersections in the heart of downtown, with or without signals, need to have marked crosswalks. Combined with curb extensions, medians, illumination, and signage, marked crosswalks can improve the visibility of pedestrian crossings. Crosswalks send the message to motorists that they are encroaching on a pedestrian area.

Over the years, some transportation planners have expressed concern that marked crosswalks could create a false sense of security for the pedestrian. This concern may be valid where travel speeds are high and pedestrian numbers low, such as the highway transition areas into downtown. However, this is not the situation in a downtown, if travel speeds are appropriate and there are enough visual cues to tell the motorist to expect pedestrians. Where pedestrian safety and security are lacking, strong design and enforcement may solve the problem. Well-designed crossings provide real security for pedestrians, especially children who have incomplete traffic awareness and skills.

Some pedestrians will want to cross at mid-block locations. To increase pedestrian crossing opportunities and safety, several approaches can be considered:

- Assist safe crossings between signals with **signal timing** that creates gaps in traffic. This allows the pedestrian to identify when it is safe to cross at any point on the street. It works best where traffic is moderate, speeds are low, the street is not too wide, and people tend to cross randomly.

- At mid-block locations with many pedestrians (apartment complexes, senior citizen centers, schools, parks, shopping areas, libraries, hospitals and other public or institutional uses), use **curb extensions**, **median refuge islands**, and **high-visibility crosswalks**. This creates preferred crossing points that most pedestrians will use if they are convenient and close to destinations. This approach will also improve safety by reducing conflicts and providing more crossing opportunities for the disabled.

> A lack of good crossings creates a sense of insecurity.