

# 6 Freedom to Choose How We Get Around

**T**hink about the choices you have for getting around town. In many places in this country, you must use a car, because other options are not safe, practical, or even possible. But when snow, sleet, or construction snarl traffic, can you ride a train or bus to work instead? If you're in the middle of baking cookies and you run out of butter, can you safely send your child to a corner market? As you grow older, will you be able to go to the store, a doctor's appointment, or a friend's house on your own if you can no longer drive? Communities need to provide options for those who can't or choose not to own a car, for children and seniors who want more independence, and for people who might want to drive to work one day and bike the next.

The key to efficient transportation is to have multiple routes and types of transportation. In many places, we rely on highways and busy arterial streets to get from one place to another because there are few alternate routes. Then, when there's traffic or an accident, we're stuck. But when our streets are connected in a complete network, we can choose from many different routes to get from point A to point B. Streets should be designed not only to move cars but also to be safe and inviting for pedestrians, cyclists, and transit users. Such design means appropriate speeds, widths, and sidewalks, as well as buildings, trees, and even benches. Often, communities already have the basic infrastructure for people to get around without a car; they just need to make a few improvements so that it's easier and more comfortable.

Arlington County, Virginia, just across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C., gives its residents a wealth of options for getting around. Walking is easy because homes, offices, stores, and civic buildings are grouped near subway stations and in close proximity to each other. Forty percent of the people who live in the county's subway corridors commute by public transit,<sup>1</sup> compared with a national average of about 5 percent.<sup>2</sup> For



A Metro station in Arlington

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Missoula

Davis

Missoula

Location: Western Montana—Population: 57,053



To make people feel more comfortable commuting by bus, van, or carpool, bicycle, or foot, the Missoula in Motion partnership offers commuters a free, guaranteed ride home in the event of an emergency or unexpected overtime.

Davis

Location: Northern California—Population: 60,308



Tim Bustos, Davis' pedestrian and bicycling coordinator, notes, "The city's extensive network of greenbelts is critical, because it makes parents comfortable with their children cycling. They don't have to worry about their kids interacting with traffic."<sup>5</sup>



For people who need cars only occasionally, **car sharing** is a popular concept. Typically, a company or organization owns a fleet of cars that can be reserved by the hour. They are parked at strategic locations around a city. Members pay a fee to join and are charged an hourly rate to use the vehicle without having to pay separately for gas, maintenance, and insurance.

areas not served by the subway, the county has tailored bus routes to key corridors. It also has partnered with car-sharing companies to provide vehicles for residents to rent, making it easier for citizens to choose to own one car instead of two or three or not to own a car at all. Arlington’s comprehensive approach to transportation ensures that its residents, whatever their age, ability, or preference, have many options for getting around.

Subways or other rail systems may not work for smaller communities, but transit still plays an important role. Many communities use bus systems to supplement transportation choices. In Missoula, Montana, bus lines take people almost anywhere in the city. Students at the University of Montana ride for free, and businesses can arrange for employee discounts. While cars are still an important part of most Missoulians’ lives, the bus helps ensure that when people can’t or don’t want to drive, they can still get where they need to go.

Bikes are another option, especially for the roughly 60 percent of all daily trips in the United States that are

under five miles.<sup>3</sup> Using bicycles to get around requires safe streets, bike routes and trails, and adequate bike parking. Davis, California, instituted strong policies to support biking and has one of the highest levels of bicycle commuting in the country—17 percent.<sup>4</sup> Davis has more than 100 miles of bike lanes and trails and thousands of bike parking spaces. The city has a good bus system, too, giving residents other transportation options.

Then, there’s walking. In Providence, Rhode Island, South Providence Neighborhood Ministries has mapped a two-and-a-half mile pedestrian route along the neighborhood’s main thoroughfare, Broad Street. The nonprofit group has linked a host of health-related programs and activities to what it calls the Broad Street “Path to Health,” which is lined with mom-and-pop shops and restaurants. Walkers can track their mileage on the path by checking signs marking every half mile in four languages. And along the route, South Providence Neighborhood Ministries offers various services to low-income residents, including exercise and stress management classes, health screenings, and food distribution programs. Bobbi Houllahan, the nonprofit group’s health coordinator, notes that Broad Street also is the route of a bus line that is heavily used by residents. “We have a lot of refugees and immigrants,” Houllahan says. “People can’t afford cars.”

People want more transportation choices, whether it’s to save money on gas, to get into shape by walking or biking to their destinations, or to have a more relaxing commute. Communities can provide these choices by making it easy for residents and visitors to drive, walk, bike, or take transit. Large or small, every community can use smart growth techniques to give people the freedom to choose how they get around. ■

South Providence	Arlington County	URBAN ►►
<p><b>South Providence</b> Location: Rhode Island—Population: 173,618</p>	<p><b>Arlington County</b> Location: Northern Virginia—Population (entire county): 189,453</p>	

South Providence’s “Path to Health” encourages residents of this low-income neighborhood to bike and walk for exercise, for fun, and to get to where they need to go.

Arlington’s range of transportation choices has made it one of the few places in the country that’s managed to grow without significantly increasing traffic, benefiting not only the people who choose to walk, bike, or take transit, but also those who choose to drive.