



University of Vermont
Center for Community News

Assignment Template: Covering transportation alternatives in infrastructure projects

The Center for Community News' mission is to grow and support partnerships between college reporting programs and local news outlets. CCN has created a series of sample templates for faculty to give to students to contribute local news to their community. Faculty are welcome to use any and all of these and amend them as they see fit for their classes. For questions about this template, contact Elizabeth Hewitt at lizmhewitt@gmail.com.

Notes for Faculty

WHAT: This is an assignment for students to cover transportation infrastructure projects in their area in a more in-depth way. This framework will help student journalists go beyond the Day One news of a roadworks project in the community to look at how multi-modal transportation is – or is not – playing a role in the planning and implementation. This assignment can work as a follow-up to a city council or planning commission meeting where planned or ongoing roadworks are discussed.

WHY: This story teaches students how to look beyond the initial news of a proposed or newly started transportation project to cover how the project impacts different parts of the community. Encourage students to focus on bike, pedestrian and public transportation infrastructure, rather than focusing on disruption for car drivers. This both will help students learn to think about public policy in more multi-faceted ways, and will give students parameters for possible sources, like local bike-walk groups and pedestrians and cyclists. This is also an opportunity to practice man-on-the-street interviews.

HOW TO USE THIS TEMPLATE: This assignment can be used at any point in a city transportation planning project, from proposal and public comment, through to construction. This assignment works well for intermediate students who are learning how to dig deeper beyond an initial hard news story. Students can complete the assignment individually, or they can work in pairs.

EXAMPLE STORIES:

- [Proposed Durham-Roxboro trail draws cheers – and questions](#), by Ava Epstein, The 9th Street Journal, Sept. 26, 2025
- [Phoenix evaluates downtown bike lanes on Fillmore Street](#), by Vanessa Pimental, Cronkite News Service, March 29, 2024
- [For Erwin Road cyclists, the question is where to draw the line](#), by Maddie Wray, The 9th Street Journal, July 11, 2022
- [Main Street residents reckon with side effects of Winooski construction](#), by Noah Diedrich, Community News Service, Sept. 25, 2024
- [Updated: Neighbors say the city bungled sidewalk repair project](#), by Kately Cai, The 9th Street Journal, March 3, 2025

About CCN

The [Center for Community News](#) at UVM is a nonpartisan nonprofit that is working to grow and strengthen university-led reporting programs around the country, to create a more sustainable future for local news outlets and the communities they serve.

Assignment: Cover a transportation infrastructure project

Road construction projects happen all the time, and journalists play an important role in keeping the public informed about road closures, project costs, and changes that will be incorporated in the project. In this assignment, you'll look at the impact of a transportation project in the works in the community, with a particular focus on transportation alternatives to cars. The project can be at any stage: maybe it's a new proposal the city council is considering, or maybe it's already under construction. Through this assignment, you'll go beyond the news that the project is in the works to report on how it will impact the community, particularly considering people who bike, walk or use public transportation.

Instructions

Step 1: Do some background research about the project. When was this proposed? How far along is the process, and what is the expected timeline? What are the key elements of this project? Are there any city meetings, public hearings or other events coming up related to the project?

Step 2: Write up a reporting plan, including a list of sources and any events or places you plan to go to as part of your reporting process. Think creatively as you come up with a list of possible sources. Who is most likely to be impacted by this project in the short term? And who will be impacted in the long term? Think about different types of commuters – not just people who use cars. Be sure to write a draft headline at the top of your reporting plan to help you find the story focus.

Step 3: Begin reporting. Reach out to any advocacy groups or local officials you plan to include in the story. As you do reporting in person, be prepared to speak with people on the fly. If you attend a public event, be ready with some questions to approach some attendees to ask if they'd share their thoughts on the plan.

This is also a great story for man-on-the-street interviews. Spend some time in the place where this project is happening to ask pedestrians, cyclists, and public transport users about how this project will impact them. Remember to ask a mix of fact-seeking and open-ended questions.

Step 4: Write up your story. Draw on a mix of sources, and make sure to use the viewpoints and stories local road users told you to focus on the impact to the community.

People you can interview:

- Local transportation advocacy organizations, like bike/walk groups or neighborhood groups that have advocated on transportation issues before

- Local bike shops
- Local residents. Approach people who are walking, biking or waiting for public transportation, and ask for their impressions of the project.
- Businesses in the vicinity of the road project
- City officials

Questions you can ask:

For pedestrians, cyclists, or public transportation users:

- How do you usually get around this area? *Encourage them to be really specific here. What kind of bike do they use? Which exact bus do they catch?*
- How well does the current road configuration work for you? Is there anything you'd like to see changed?
- What do you think of the plans for the roads in this area?
- Is there anything you'd really like to see included in the plans? Or is there anything you think is missing?

For local officials, planners, or transportation advocacy groups:

- How will this project change the current road configuration?
- What is driving some of the changes this project will make?
- How will this project impact pedestrian infrastructure in this area? *Ask similar versions of this question for biking and public transportation.*
- How has public input shaped this project?

Visual journalism approaches:

- Go to the road where the project is proposed or under construction. Take photos of what the site looks like now. If there's a lot of traffic or movement, you could take some videos.
- Ask the city for any models or renderings of the plans for the final project.
- If you attend a public hearing, take photographs and videos of officials and members of the community as they speak. Look for any striking visual points, like signs, slogans on shirts, or props. Follow up with members of the public after the meeting and ask if you can interview them on video. That will give you both follow up comments for your story, and material for social media.

Definitions:

- Bike/walk groups: in many regions, groups have organized to advocate for improved biking and pedestrian infrastructure. These groups may be officially convened by a municipality, organized as a local nonprofit organization, or ad hoc grassroots groups.

Use internet searches and social media to find and reach out to these groups in your area.

- Planner: municipalities typically employ people with speciality skills in designing public projects. Depending on the size of the municipality, there are likely specific staff members working on transportation projects

Word Count: _____

Deadline: _____