

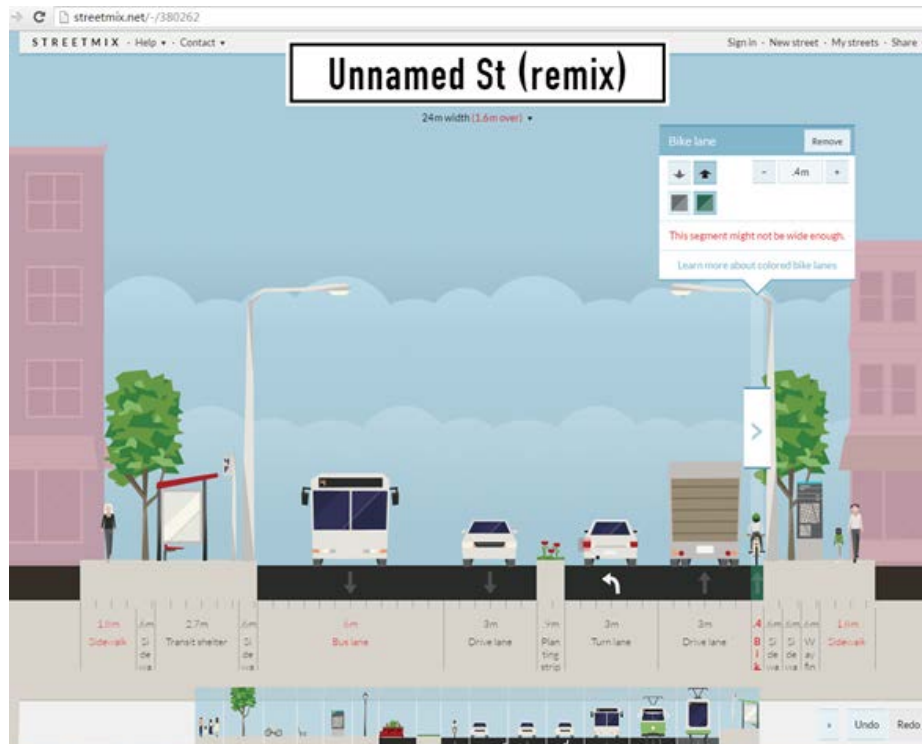
Innovations in Public Involvement  
Structured Interview Report  
Tri-State Transportation Campaign's Use of StreetMix

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**Interview Subjects:** Janna Chernetz (Director of New Jersey Policy), Joseph Cutrufo (Director of Communications and Connecticut Policy)

**What it is:** StreetMix is an interactive website in which users have the ability to design their own complete streets by changing widths of traffic lanes and sidewalks and adding features such as bike and bus lanes, light rail, trees, wayfinding signs, benches, and more. It also provides recommendations relevant to safety and other transportation impacts. Below is a screenshot of the website's interface.



**Interest to NJTPA:** Focus group participants felt being required to create an account to engage virtually is a strong deterrent to participation. StreetMix, however, engages users immediately upon entering the website by allowing the creation and sharing of designs without providing any personal information.

### Major Takeaways:

1. **Free and immediately engaging:** StreetMix is completely free to use. While there is an option to login via Twitter or Facebook, it is not necessary. Anyone with access to the internet can go to the website and begin designing a street without sign-ups or other delays.
2. **User- and laymen-friendly:** StreetMix is highly interactive and extremely easy to use. The components of the virtual street are simple and the drag-and-drop interface minimizes design steps. Further, transportation and safety standards are built in, so you do not need to have expert knowledge to design a street.
3. **Grounded in reality:** The built-in parameters ensure that all street designs are both physically possible and abide by industry standards. As such, it has the potential to be a strong advocacy tool by providing concrete evidence to contradict typical pushbacks to projects (such as “the streets aren’t wide enough to add a bike lane”).
4. **Allows for visualization:** Physical concepts can be difficult to understand when they are expressed in writing. StreetMix provides a visual illustration giving users (and those reviewing users’ work) a better understanding of the specific details of a.
5. **Aggregation of input would be helpful:** StreetMix does not provide a means to aggregate the preferences and designs of users to determine the most desirable outcomes. For instance, if 50 individuals are using the tool to design street preferences, you do not have a quick way to aggregate their preferences (For example, 40 decide a bike lane would not be a good idea). It would be useful to have a way to quickly analyze and document overall preferences..
6. **Might be more of a ‘demonstration’ tool than a ‘participation’ tool:** TSTC representatives noted that their blog posts with StreetMix designs sparked a lot of conversation. By allowing people to see possible street designs, they are more apt to offer their opinions and suggestions. However, TSTC’s invitation to users to submit their own designs did not necessarily result in innovative ideas. StreetMix may be best used to show people possibilities and initiate discussion, rather than providing an open forum for design.
7. **It could use some modifications/additions:** TSTC representatives noted that StreetMix would be better if the terminology for some of the design features had the option to be modified in order to account for regional differences (i.e. – median vs. neutral ground). Also, the ability to geocode or link to real places via Google Maps would be an improvement. However, those changes are more technical and would tend to benefit those within the planning industry. For the general public, it might be helpful to be able to create a ‘project’ in StreetMix (similar to the way MySidewalk can create subpages for projects) in which different users could open that project and make their own unique

changes. Those changes would then be saved and an organization such as NJTPA could go back and see what the common outcomes were.

8. **Better for specific street planning than general regional planning:** The scope of StreetMix is limited to a cross-section of a single street. It would be most useful in allowing participatory planning at a very local level (i.e. – “What would you want ‘X’ street to look like in your neighborhood?”). Broader regional planning concerns are beyond its capabilities.

### Discussion:

#### *How did you discover StreetMix and decide to use it?*

We aren't sure how we first heard of it, but the 2013 Route 35 redevelopment project was the first time we created our own complete street design and posted it on our blog for the public to see. It was a big project, and we wanted to find a way to help people visualize what could be done, rather than just writing about it and saying 'you could put bike lanes in or reduce lane widths.' With StreetMix you can show how those types of things actually could fit. We played around with different designs and it was really effective. We got a lot of readership from that post. It's a really helpful tool for advocacy, but it could be used in the public realm, too. It is has a really adjustable format and is simple enough that you don't need to have planning expertise to understand and use it.

#### *Does StreetMix have an established reputation?*

We aren't sure exactly what its reputation is, but we've seen it used in other reputable venues such as Streets Blog and NYCDOT to show what a road looks like before and after a roadway project. Usually they shave off some of the images because the labelling is not perfect. They essentially use StreetMix as a visualization tool rather than an interactive tool.

#### *Is it totally free? There are no fees associated with using captured images, etc.?*

It is totally free. You can log in through Twitter or Facebook, but it's not required. You can just go to the website and start designing right away.

#### *Was there a strong response from your followers when you invited them to create their own designs?*

I'm not sure. We may have posted some of the designs on social media. The important takeaway is that our designs for Route 35 were basically adopted, so it was effective in that sense. The biggest pushback we get in our complete streets advocacy is that 'the roads aren't big enough,' but when we can use StreetMix to show that it works, it is hard to argue against. We've used it a

lot as an advocacy tool, going on three years now. It's been effective at sparking conversation (for example creating bike lanes along Brooklyn Ave. started with the comments section of a blog post that included a StreetMix visualization). The public might not understand exactly what things are, which is why it is so important to show something rather than just talk about it. StreetMix is really helpful in that context.

***So in terms of StreetMix's usefulness in engaging the public, this is primarily a way for those in the public with no expertise to visualize what a project can be?***

I would put it this way: We didn't expect the type of feedback and eventual change that came out of the Route 35 project. The best success that you can see from this type of tool is that it starts a conversation that allows decision-makers to rethink a project design.

***Is there a way to aggregate the input and suggestions that you get?***

StreetMix doesn't have that ability. But in our case, opening it up to the public was a secondary concern. Our main goal was to do a redesign ourselves to influence the project. Many of our readers work in the field, too, so we opened it up to them to see what kinds of things they came up with.

***If the public were given access to StreetMix at public meetings or other events to create their own designs for their neighborhoods, would it be useful?***

Yes, but it would have to be very road specific. It would be interesting to see if people come up with the same design or different designs. It would be more helpful than having participants just say "I want it more walkable." It really gets down to more of the detail. A great thing about StreetMix is that it tells you when a bike lane isn't wide enough or a travel lane is too wide, etc., so you don't need to know the standards already. It can be useful as an educational tool, so that someone who is playing around with it might discover what those standards are.

***Are you able to put your own parameters in?***

StreetMix has its own built-in parameters for urban environments. But the one thing you do have control over is the total width of the roadway, which you can set to any size you want (and do it in metric, as well).

One thing I don't have the answer for is if there are any legal limitations. We have used screenshots and haven't heard about whether we can use it freely as an advocacy group. There is probably some fine print somewhere that would be good to look for. But we get the sense that it is an open-source. We have tweeted at them and linked to their website when we post our designs on our blog and we haven't heard anything from them.

*Apart from your success with Route 35, have there been any other standouts projects you have used StreetMix for?*

Recently there was a proposal in Hoboken for protected bike lanes on Washington Street. We used StreetMix to mimic the proposal and found out that it was very tight. They were presenting something that would be great if there was enough room, but there wasn't enough room. So we were able to reach out to people we knew in Hoboken and showed them that with StreetMix and they agreed.

*In terms of engaging the public, would you have suggestions for how to use StreetMix other than asking people to submit their own designs? Are there things about the tool that could be improved?*

It would be helpful if they could somehow link it to Google Maps, or use geocoding. But the things we would want to improve about it may not make it more useful for the general public. I would like to be able to use it in a bird's eye view, not just a cross-section. For the public, it would interesting if it StreetMix had something to a Google Doc where you could create a 'project' and people could go into it and their designs would be saved and you could see all of the different designs. Then you could send out the link so that the public could work on that particular project.

*How can participants get feedback and understand how their input was used? Did you reach back out to people?*

We did a final blog post showing the redesign to let people know what changed and then did a bike tour to create a photo essay showing the end result.

*Do you think using StreetMix broadened your audience for this type of campaign? Did you get the sense that it created a bigger influence than your usual methods?*

It wasn't especially impactful in terms of increasing readership or getting done what we wanted to get done (revise the complete streets plan). But it was important in improving the quality of the conversation. Using StreetMix was 100% the turning point in our advocacy for Route 35. Having that early success is why we have continued to use StreetMix and will continue to use it in the future.

*Are there any other strategies you use to increase public engagement?*

Nothing comes to mind. Maybe we need to have a meeting about that ourselves. Public input is not necessarily our goal in doing advocacy work.

*Would you recommend this to NJTPA? How could they best use it?*

Yes, we would recommend it. It could be a beneficial tool. For instance at a bike/ped safety meeting, it could be used to visually demonstrate options or allow participants to create their own designs. It would be best for specific projects rather than regional planning (i.e. – “picture your ideal street in your neighborhood”).

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