

# PETITION AND LETTER WRITING BEST PRACTICES

Petitions and campaign letters can be a great way to bring important bicycle and pedestrian policies and projects to the attention of elected officials. They can also be useful in building your base or getting media attention on your campaign.

Petitions involve collecting signatures of people who support your initiative while campaign letters involve asking others to send a letter directly to their local government. We recommend using these best practices to help you get started writing a clear, meaningful petition or letter.

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## Before you get started, do your research:

- **Are your elected officials already on board?** Perhaps your local government is already working on drafting a Complete Streets Policy or already has plans to install a protected bike lane on Main Street. Make sure to focus your petition on efforts that need your support.
- **How does the petition/letter fit into your campaign?** Understand what you are trying to accomplish with your petition or letter. Is your primary goal to engage elected officials, build your base, or garner media attention?
- **Set a goal:** Based on your goal, how many signatures would you like to collect? How many letters would you like local officials to receive? Setting a realistic, yet impactful, goal will help you stay motivated.

## Writing your petition/letter:

### How to structure your petition or letter:

#### 1. Title/First Paragraph

- Petitions: The title of your petition should include your call to action (e.g. Petition to Support Bike Lanes on Main Street).
- Letters: Start your letter with a clear and concise request. You need to provide your audience with a specific and informative statement that you want people to support. This is the most important part of your letter and should be placed at the beginning.

**2. Problem:** What is the problem you are trying to address? Give your audience some background about the situation. Explain why the problem is important and who is impacted by it.

**3. Solution:** What solution are you proposing? Why is it a reasonable solution and how will it solve the problem? What impact will it have? Including supporting facts and examples can be helpful.

**4. Action:** What action do you want your audience and elected officials to take? Your call to action should be clear and concise and can include a request for a reply to your letter or petition.

## General tips:

- **Keep it brief:** Don't clutter your petition or letter with too much information and details that are not essential to your main message.
- **Be polite:** Using positive, polite communication will be more effective in garnering a positive response from your elected officials. Also, be sure to use the appropriate title or salutation when addressing your letter recipient.
- **Read it over:** Review your petition/letter and make sure it clearly explains the situation, what is needed, and why. Someone who has no background knowledge of your campaign should be able to understand what you are trying to accomplish.
- **Select your platform:**
  - Active Trans has an online advocacy system we can use to support certain local advocacy efforts. Reach out to Active Trans staff to see if our tools are the right fit for your petition or letter writing campaign. However, there are also a number of free options online for you to choose from.
  - Petitions: Your petition can be circulated in person or online. While paper petitions can be effective tools for local campaigns, creating an online petition can help you reach a broader audience. If you use an online petition, you will need to send out a short email alert to encourage people to take action. Examples of online petition sites include:
    - change.org
    - petitions.com
    - Petitions24.com
    - GoPetition.com
    - thepetitionsite.com
    - Facebook Causes
  - Letters: If you choose to write a letter to an elected official, you can help others by creating a letter template that they can edit and send. You could share your template over email or using an online platform such as Citizen Speak ([www.citizenspeak.org](http://www.citizenspeak.org)) which is a free tool that allows supporters to edit and send a message to a target email address.

## Petition and letter samples:

Petition Samples: Below are two petition examples. The first is an email alert and petition on change.org regarding improving biking and walking conditions along the Des Plaines S-Curve. The second is a petition from Oak Park residents urging the village to move forward with plans to improve Madison Street:

## Des Plaines Email Alert:

**Subject:** Support biking and walking in Des Plaines

**Audience:** Des Plaines members and supporters

Des Plaines residents are tired of feeling cut off from certain areas of the city due to inadequate access for people who bike and walk.

**Sign the petition to show your support for improved biking and walking in Des Plaines.**

Improving the treacherous Northwest Highway S-Curve, where two intersecting railroads make conditions unsafe for pedestrians and cyclists, is currently being considered by the city. A feasibility study recommended a multi-use path along the side of the highway.

Join Active Trans and the Des Plaines Bike and Pedestrian Advisory Committee in advocating for this new path. This low-risk investment will increase economic activity in downtown Des Plaines, provide a safer option for pedestrians and cyclists, and improve community health and sustainability.

**Tell the Des Plaines City Council that you care about biking and walking by signing the petition today.**

## Des Plaines Petition:

**Show your support for biking and walking in Des Plaines**

Des Plaines has developed a plan to improve the S-Curve rail underpass on Northwest Highway, making this hazardous stretch safe for bike and pedestrian use. A feasibility study recommended a path under the rail bridge. The next step is engineering work for which the city has budgeted \$250K. Grant funding would be sought to pay for most of the total bill for the work in future phases, a cost equivalent to resurfacing a few blocks.

The benefits to Des Plaines and surrounding communities would be great and long lasting. This long-awaited improvement sends a clear message that Des Plaines welcomes pedestrians and bicyclists. Studies show that walkable access to amenities is a key quality of life attraction for home buyers. This low-risk investment helps create a vibrant community, raises property values and will increase economic activity in the downtown area. Providing a safe passage avoids the dangers of pedestrians and cyclists sharing this dangerous stretch of road, reducing risk and congestion. The project also supports Des Plaines sustainability initiatives by encouraging healthy, active forms of transportation and lowering carbon emissions.

We need your help. The City Council will soon be making funding decisions to move ahead. They need to hear that this important improvement is something the community wants. Can we count on you to speak up by contacting your Alderman, and by adding your name to our list of supporters?

## Oak Park Petition:

### **Oak Park's Madison Street: Get it Right and Get it Done**

**The undersigned Oak Park residents urge the village** to move forward with long-overdue improvements to Madison Street in order to create a safer, more attractive corridor, while taking steps to protect neighbors of new developments and limit potential traffic diversions or tie ups.

With Madison TIF funds available to pay for improvements, the village has a unique opportunity to finally act. Forest Park implemented its successful makeover of Madison more than fifteen years ago, while Oak Park has spun its wheels for more than a decade. Madison St. in Oak Park continues to underachieve economically while it doles out around 250 vehicle-related crashes per year that cause financial distress, injury and even death.

**We urge the village** to ensure that the narrowing of Madison is done right. This change should eliminate around 750 to 1,000 crashes every ten years with only modest changes to traffic diversions and backups, based on results from similar projects. Madison's current configuration is dangerous for the children going to the four schools within one block of Madison and for everyone who use this crash-prone street.

**We urge the village** to take steps to prevent potential traffic diversions to neighborhood streets, and the village should update traffic signals to improve traffic flow on Madison.

**We also urge the village** to ensure that the concerns of residents who live near any proposed developments are heard and addressed. Some of us live near the proposed "bend" development and others do not, but we all respect and appreciate the concerns raised.

**Letter Sample:** The following letter template can be modified to encourage your community's decision makers to adopt a Complete Streets Policy. You can also modify this letter for other policy goals such as developing an Active Transportation Plan to prioritize bicycle and pedestrian projects or establishing a dedicated revenue stream to fund bike/ped projects:

## Complete Streets Letter Template:

Dear Commissioner,

We want the streets of [Your Town] to be safe for all people, whether they are walking, bicycling, taking transit or driving. We are writing to request that the Commissioners of [Your Town] develop and adopt a Complete Streets Policy to make our streets livable, safe and comfortable for everyone.

### **The Problem:**

Due to car-centric development and sprawling land-use patterns, our community's streets disproportionately favor the automobile. Lack of sidewalks, bike lanes and accessible transit stops create major safety, health and quality of life concerns for residents. Furthermore, for those who can't drive or don't own a car, getting to work, school or another neighborhood in the region can be a nearly impossible task.

### **The Solution:**

In order to promote safe, equitable, and comfortable streets for all users, we urge you to join over 1,100 other municipalities and agencies nationwide to support the development and adoption of a Complete Streets Policy in our community. Complete Streets are designed to support all road users including bicyclists, pedestrians, transit riders and motorists regardless of age, race, income and ability. They will make it easier for seniors to get to doctor's appointments and kids to get to school. They will make it easier to cross the street, walk to shops and bicycle to work. By creating more transportation options and designing streets with everyone in mind, our community will benefit environmentally, economically and socially.

### **The Action:**

Passing a Complete Streets Policy can help ensure that everyone is considered in future transportation plans and projects. Please support creating livable, healthy streets in [Your Town] for everyone and commit to developing and adopting a Complete Streets Policy.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

## Additional examples of petitions and letters:

- Various transportation petitions in New York City:  
<https://campaigns.transalt.org/>
- Protected bike lane petition in Jersey City:  
<https://tinyurl.com/jerseycitybikelanepetition>
- Complete Streets Policy petition in Plattsburgh, NY:  
<https://www.gopetition.com/petition/39970.html>
- Letter to support bike lanes in Philadelphia:  
<https://tinyurl.com/phillybikelanepetition>