

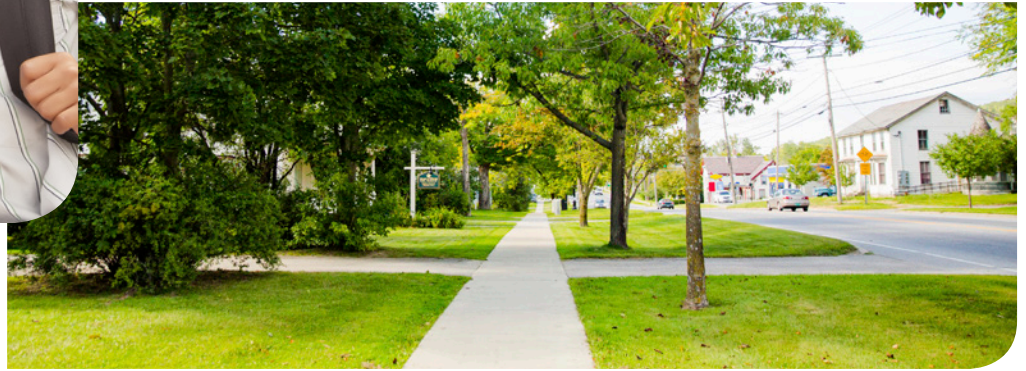


Safe Routes
to School
**National
Partnership**

Rural Communities: A Two Pronged Approach for Improving Walking and Bicycling



When it comes to walking and bicycling, rural communities can be the best of environments and the worst of environments. Historically, small rural towns were very walkable. With small main streets and compact development, it was easy to walk from place to place while running errands. Many small rural towns today remain highly walkable, and rural areas often include beautiful natural or agricultural landscapes that can encourage walking and bicycling.



What Do Rural Americans Want?

Rural Americans want to be able to walk and bicycle. 81% of rural residents think that spending on sidewalks and bikeways should increase or stay the same.⁷ 75% of those who live in small towns or rural environments would stay there if they could choose any place to live, a higher percentage of satisfaction than in suburban or city environments.⁸ But at the same time, almost nine out of 10 rural Americans see pedestrian friendly communities as important, and want to see their communities support walking more.⁹

At the same time, in rural areas people tend to live further from each other and their destinations. Long distances often pose an obstacle to walking and bicycling, and cheap land and low regulation have led to sprawling rural development practices. Limited resources and extensive road systems mean that initial investment in street infrastructure is often minimal, and maintenance and upgrades are very limited. Without sidewalks and bicycle lanes, in many rural areas, walking and bicycling may occur in dangerous proximity to cars.

These pros and cons are reflected in what happens on the ground in rural communities. Rural residents show the nation's highest rates of obesity for children and adults.¹ For those who live in ultra-rural areas, these rates are even higher.² Racial disparities worsen the health burden on some rural residents, with the highest rates of obesity and overweight affecting rural black children. With decreases

in the number of rural residents who are employed in physically demanding occupations like farming, forestry, or fishing, people in rural areas are getting less physical activity overall.³ In addition, rural youth have more sedentary screen time than others.⁴ Moreover, vehicle injury and fatality rates for people walking, bicycling, or in a car are disproportionately high in rural areas, and effects of collisions are often more serious due to emergency response and treatment challenges created by distance barriers.⁵

Despite these challenges and the need for more physical activity for people in rural areas, people already are walking and bicycling in rural areas. In fact, studies show that people walk and bike for transportation purposes in small towns and rural areas at rates that are comparable to big cities.⁶ As a result, we need to capitalize on the advantages of rural areas, while tailoring changes to local needs and conditions.

What Works to Increase Walking and Bicycling in Rural Areas?

What can be done to increase the number of people in rural areas who use bicycles or walking to get around? In rural areas, as in the rest of America, it is crucial to develop a combination of policies and programs that support safety, comfort, and convenience for people on foot or bicycle, while also changing perceptions of walking and bicycling so that people see these as normal, desirable activities that people like themselves could engage in. But the unique demographic and geographic features of rural areas mean that rural areas need something more specific. What works to address rural needs?

Rural areas can support walking and bicycling despite the challenges of distance and limited resources by taking a two pronged approach. First, rural areas can create activity hubs that are highly walkable and bikeable, following the historic approach of rural town design. Second, rural areas can create spokes that connect far flung residents to these hubs without tying them to vehicles, that a combination of walking and bicycling paths, public transit that is supportive of walking and bicycling, and other creative programs for getting people to where they need to go by healthy means.



1

Creating Walkable & Bikeable Hubs



Walkable and bikeable hubs allow people in rural areas to easily walk and bicycle when they are in the hub.

It is the rare person who will walk or bicycle 10 miles, but many people are willing to walk a short distance to run errands or get to work or school. As noted above, many small and medium sized rural towns are already designed in ways that easily support walking and bicycling. That's why just as many people walk to work, and twice as many people bicycle to work, in small rural towns (2,500 to 10,000 residents) as in urban centers.¹⁰ By using policy, infrastructure investments, and programs, rural communities can create walkable and bikeable activity hubs from town centers, main streets, school campuses, and even commercial strips.

Encourage Growth in Town Centers

First, use governmental decisions, policies, and incentives to encourage new growth to

occur in town centers and commercial nodes, rather than in far flung locations. Local governments can support school locations that are in town or near existing resources like libraries, commercial areas, or neighborhoods near town centers. School locations are important because they affect children's and parents' commute routines. The same principle should go for libraries, town parks, community centers, or other government buildings or agencies – town and county governments should adopt policies and make decisions to locate these resources near existing destinations so that people can easily travel from place to place on foot.

Policies can also encourage more housing located near existing destinations and town centers, so that people can easily access services or jobs on foot from their homes.

Another important part of creating walkable hubs is supporting new and existing local businesses on main streets and downtowns. To support people walking and bicycling in town centers, you need to have destinations that people want to go to. To create a thriving main street or walkable downtown area, you need many different business options with different people out and about visiting them. Moreover, the job creation that accompanies new growth can be crucial for rural families, with particular benefits for health when new jobs don't require long hours of commute time.

Prioritize and Support Safe Walking and Bicycling in these Activity Hubs

Not only is it necessary to have a concentration of destinations in an activity hub – the area also needs to support safe walking and bicycling, which requires *sidewalks*, a network of *low traffic streets* and *bicycle lanes*, *low speeds*, and *safe ways to cross streets*. To accomplish this, rural towns can adopt complete streets policies, ensuring that anytime a new road is built or an existing one is renovated or repaved, the road is designed and built to address the needs of people walking, bicycling, driving, and using public transit.

They can also engage in multimodal planning, developing comprehensive plans, bicycle plans, and pedestrian plans that spell out how future development can fix current hazards while realizing a better vision, and they can update zoning and subdivision codes to support those goals. Local governments need to prioritize investments in walkable and bicycle street improvements, bicycle racks, and the like. Fortunately, these investments are good for local employment, since bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure projects create 46 percent more jobs than road projects built strictly for cars.¹¹ At the same time that rural communities support changes in the streets and ground to support walking and bicycling, they can also change people's behavior and their view of walking and bicycling. Activities and programs can get people on

bicycles, teach them skills and safety for walking and bicycling, and showcase walking and bicycling as fun activities and easy ways to get around. Programs and events like Safe Routes to School, shared use at schools and other community buildings, open streets events, bicycling clubs, walking groups, and bike to work day events are all ways of increasing physical activity and making walking and bicycling part of how people get around.

Nearly 40% of rural trips currently are shorter than three miles; nearly 20% are less than a mile.¹² That means that there are a lot of trips that could be turned into healthy transportation if it were easier to walk and bicycle – and a lot more short trips that could be generated by encouraging more growth in town centers.



2

Creating Spokes that Support Active Living

Spokes can take the form of walking and bicycling routes, bus transportation, park and walk locations, and other creative approaches to getting people to hubs.

Walkable and bikeable hubs are a key part of making it possible for people to walk and bicycle in rural areas. But many people in rural areas live far from an activity hub, and some destinations are located in isolated areas. How can rural communities support walking and bicycling more broadly? Spokes overcome the challenge of distance, getting people from isolated areas into activity hubs where walking and bicycling comes easily. Spokes can take the form of walking and bicycling routes, bus transportation, park and walk locations, and other creative approaches to getting people to hubs – but a key aspect of using spokes to support active transportation is that the approaches need to be designed with that goal in mind.

Paths and Trails

At the most basic level, spokes can take the form of bicycle and walking paths or trails that lead into activity hubs. Trails and paths that shadow highways or roads and pass by residential areas and commercial destinations give people the option of safely walking or bicycling to get to hubs. Of course, all trails don't accomplish these goals. Many trails are designed just to be recreational, and actively avoid proximity to development. To function as a spoke, a bicycle or walking path needs to be designed to connect people from one or more destinations with an activity hub. When trails connect to activity hubs, they can also be used for recreation or fitness purposes by people in the hub, who can access the trail without driving.

One caution for rural areas is that when all-terrain vehicles or other motorized vehicles are permitted to use bicycle paths or walking trails, it can create a dangerous environment for people walking and bicycling.

Mass Transportation

Intercity buses and public transportation can be a key part of creating spokes that give people access to walkable and bikeable hubs. This is because mass transit, including school buses, gets people into hubs. In contrast to people who arrive in hubs by car, when people get off a bus, their default mode of travel is likely to be on foot. In order for public transportation to best function as a spoke, it needs to have a high level of investment and functionality, which is always a challenge for public transportation and

particularly for rural public transportation. That means adequate coverage, sufficient routes, frequent pickups (known as “short headway”), and long enough hours of operation to address people’s needs. Beyond those general needs, for public transportation to function as a spoke, there need to be walking or bicycling paths connecting to the pick up spots and drop off spots. It is increasingly common for public transportation to include provisions for bicycles to be taken on the bus, so that people can use them when they get to the hub. Another alternative that also allows people to get to activity hubs by a combination of bicycling and mass transit is secure bicycle lockers near bus stop origination areas. For people who commute by public transit, one-third get all their daily requirements for physical activity by walking to or from transit.¹³

Walk On In Programs

Another kind of spoke are programs or approaches that allow people to get most of the way to a destination by vehicle (whether car or bus), and then walk the rest of the way in. In the context of rural school children, this increasingly popular approach is known as the remote drop off, in which a parent or school bus takes children most of the way to school, and then drops them a moderate distance away, perhaps a quarter mile, to walk the rest of the way. Adults can also get the physical activity benefits offered by this approach by parking their cars or getting off the bus a short distance from their destination and walking the rest of the way. Rural towns can run *Park Once* campaigns to encourage people to move between errands on foot and can provide *Walk On In* parking lots outside their downtowns to decrease the number of cars on main streets, improving their walkability, reducing congestion, and creating a more friendly atmosphere.

Interjurisdictional Cooperation

One important component of creating spokes that support rural active living is the need for interjurisdictional cooperation among towns, school districts, counties, and regional planning and transportation bodies. In trying to ensure that different agencies and jurisdictions are lining spokes up and connecting them to hubs, it can be important for everyone to understand the goals and cooperate to achieve them. Whether it is a town engaging in joint planning of a trail that with a county government, a school district collaborating with local towns on siting a new school, or two counties coordinating their public transit schedules and routes, interjurisdictional cooperation is crucial.



Conclusion

Rural communities can increase the health of their residents by supporting walking and bicycling. But to do so, rural areas need to prioritize their transportation investments very, very strategically.

Looking closely at areas that lack safe connections where people are or would be walking is a good start, as is focusing on schools, main streets, existing clusters of destinations, and locations of widely accessed services. At the regional level, jurisdictions can consider how to create regional connecting spokes for bicycling and transit, and can avoid building major infrastructure to new sprawling developments when existing roads are not being maintained or made safe for walking and bicycling.

Fortunately, most rural communities have existing features that support walking and bicycling. By using a hub and spokes approach to reduce obstacles to walking and bicycling, rural communities can overcome the hurdles that exist and become healthier and more vibrant places.



Footnotes

- ¹ Tai-Seale, T., and Chandler, C. (2003). Rural Healthy People 2010, "Nutrition and Overweight Concerns in Rural Areas," <http://sph.tamhsc.edu/srhc/docs/rhp-2010-volume1.pdf>; Blankenau, J., Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity in Rural America, No. 1 (2009) <http://files.cfra.org/pdf/Nutrition-Physical-Activity-and-Obesity-in-Rural-America.pdf>. (Note that prior to 1980, rural residents had lower rates of obesity than urban and suburban dwellers).
- ² Bailey-Davis L, Horst M, Hillemeier MM, Lauter A. Pediatrics. 2012 Dec;130(6):1102-9. doi: 10.1542/peds.2012-0192. Epub 2012 Nov 12. Obesity disparities among elementary-aged children: data from school-based BMI surveillance.
- ³ <http://files.cfra.org/pdf/Nutrition-Physical-Activity-and-Obesity-in-Rural-America.pdf>.
- ⁴ Tai-Seale, T., and Chandler, C. (2003). Rural Healthy People 2010, "Nutrition and Overweight Concerns in Rural Areas: A Literature Review," <http://sph.tamhsc.edu/srhc/docs/rhp-2010-volume2.pdf>.
- ⁵ FHWA, Highway Safety Information System, Factors Contributing to Pedestrian and Bicycle Crashes on Rural Highways, <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/research/safety/10052/10052.pdf> (25% of nationwide pedestrian and bicycle fatal and injury collisions occur on rural highways; see also Rural Health, "Healthcare disparities & barriers to healthcare," (2010), <http://ruralhealth.stanford.edu/health-pros/factsheets/disparities-barriers.html#sthash.BLZ6k JrZ.dpuf> (rural roads see one-third of motor vehicles collisions, but two-thirds of motor vehicles deaths).
- ⁶ Rails to Trails, 2012 Poll, <http://www.railstotrails.org/trailblog/2012/may/10/resounding-new-evidence-america-wants-biking-and-walking-in-transportation-future/>.
- ⁷ National Poll: Americans Support Funding for Sidewalks and Bikeways, http://bikeleague.org/sites/default/files/America_Bikes_White_paper_final.pdf.
- ⁸ National Association of Realtors, 2013 Community Preference Survey: Analysis and Slides, <http://www.realtor.org:8119/reports/nar-2013-community-preference-survey>.
- ⁹ Rails to Trails, Active Transportation Beyond Urban Centers, <http://www.railstotrails.org/resourcehandler.ashx?id=4141>.
- ¹⁰ Rails to Trails, Active Transportation Beyond Urban Centers, <http://www.railstotrails.org/resourcehandler.ashx?id=4141>.
- ¹¹ Heidi Garrett-Peltier, Pedestrian and Bicycle Infrastructure: A National Study of Employment Impacts (2011), <http://www.peri.umass.edu/236/hash/64a34bab6a183a2fc06fdc212875a3ad/publication/467/>.
- ¹² Rails to Trails, Active Transportation Beyond Urban Centers, <http://www.railstotrails.org/resourcehandler.ashx?id=4141>.
- ¹³ L. Besser and A. Dannenberg, Walking to Public Transit: Steps to Help Meet Physical Activity Recommendations, Vol. 32, Issue 4, American Journal of Preventative Medicine, at 273-280 (November 2005).