

# ***Stories from Small Towns:***

America Paves the Way for Connected  
Citizens, Health, and Town Pride

2nd Edition

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Davidson, North Carolina

A Project of the National Physical Activity Society



<http://PhysicalActivitySociety.org/>

## Molalla, Oregon

Population 8,304

Data for Clackamas County showed low levels of physical activity among children. The Oregon State University Extension Service began working with communities to create solutions. Molalla decided to create a StoryWalk®. A StoryWalk® features books on stakes in a public location for people to read as they walk through the story. Posts are cemented into the ground and pages laminated.



The school superintendent suggested focusing on early literacy, getting preschoolers ready for school. The coalition commissioned six original stories from local authors and had them illustrated by high school students. At each location, a kiosk describes the featured book. The Extension Service staff put together formats, and a local sign company printed them on a vandal-proof, weather-proof material. The Chamber of Commerce maintains the storyboards.

Installation of the stories finished in 2015 and are on a rotating schedule at schools and parks, so visitors returning to the same location will, after a time see, a different story. While the loop for any one story is typically only about a half mile, the attraction of coming out to see it leads to outdoor play at nearby playgrounds.



The Extension Service is now conducting evaluation with the Summer StoryWalk Challenge. Visitors take a survey on their phones that asks how they enjoyed the book, whether they have kids with them, and how many times have they have walked it.



### Advice:

- Work on relationship building.
- Get people involved!

*The StoryWalk® Project was created by Anne Ferguson of Montpelier, VT and developed in collaboration with the Kellogg Hubbard Library. Storywalk® is a registered service mark owned by Ms. Ferguson.*

*Thank you to and photos courtesy of Beret Halverson*

## Sulphur Springs, Texas

Population 15,868

Central Square of this county seat was a parking lot before planning started in 2007. “When you tell people you’re going to take away parking, you have to be able to look them in the eye,” says city manager Marc Maxwell. Sulphur Springs planned to slow down traffic and make sidewalks wider and streets narrower.



The day the sod went in on the central square, people started coming. They brought picnic baskets and watched while the square was transformed. Since 2012, downtown has become a destination. Turkey trots, 5K races, a marathon planned and executed in three days--all originating from the square. People have even gotten married on the streets downtown.

Friday is movie night, attracting 200-300 people. Kids play in the fountain and pizza delivery cars are a common sight. Saturdays feature a market with music, vendors, and food trucks. The square has become the center of social life.

Sulphur Springs is home to an unusual tourist attraction: Glass-enclosed public toilets. The one-way mirror reflects outward to the square, allowing parents to take one child in while watching another play.



Glass-enclosed Public Restroom

When the project started, most buildings downtown were vacant. Now the vibrant downtown boasts local shops and sidewalk cafes. People stop Maxwell on the street to tell him they are proud of their town now.



➤ If you don’t make that mental jump to having the streets available to all, you’ll make some errors. Moving cars is just one of many responsibilities.

➤ Find out about new urbanism and the Project for Public Spaces.

*Thank you to and photos courtesy of Marc Maxwell and the City of Sulphur Springs*

# Sergeant Bluff, Iowa

Population 4,326

Safe Routes to School served as an opening for discussion in Sergeant Bluff. A walkability audit then demonstrated problems with common routes to school. One side of the street had no sidewalk, yet it was the logical walking side. The city created crosswalks and moved stop signs behind them to encourage cars to stop before they get to the crosswalk.



As recently as 2007, the city acquiesced to developers who didn't want to pay for sidewalks. By 2013, people living in those new developments were complaining about lack of safe walking paths. The city then spent \$220,000 to add sidewalks -- and promptly made sidewalks a requirement for any new developments.

A coalition included police, school districts, planning organizations, health department, parks and recreation, a city council member, a school principal, transportation. The widespread interest led to strong collaboration.

With people from different walks of life championing the effort, volunteers soon showed up from unexpected places. A church got involved in repairing an existing sidewalk, for instance, at no cost to the city or homeowners. A local business coordinated the project

and donated labor, supplies, tools, and equipment for the job. A local concrete company provided concrete at cost. The church paid for the concrete.

- Start with quick wins.
- The schools are what sparked the jump to community changes.
- Assemble a group of people who have passion for the community.



*Thank you to and photos courtesy of Aaron Lincoln and Angela Drent*

## Eufaula, Alabama

Population 12,914

Eufaula is a lake community on the border of Alabama and Georgia. Rails to Trails added a trail along the lake several years ago. Recently the Yoholo Micco Creek Indian trail was extended.



The trail goes past the middle and high schools, along with the private school, so kids use it to walk to and from school. The trail meanders in and out of neighborhoods and along city streets almost like a sidewalk, then back out to the park. At the beginning of the trail visitors find information on the Creek tribe.



The city is applying for another grant to extend the trail to the city limits. When successful, the trail will end on a road with a bike lane and people can loop back to the city. The trail hosts events such as marathons and 5K races. This year it had its first color run.

Skirting the water provides an opportunity for physical activity in beautiful surroundings. The Extension Service added exercise stations, and many people enjoy seeing hawks and box turtles. A waterfall, birdwatching, and folk art give plenty to view. Eufaula has a safe place to walk that has nice atmosphere and sights.

Skirting the water provides an opportunity for physical activity in

### Advice:

- Be aggressive, go after the grants, but recognize there's usually match money required of about 10%.
- The benefits to the town and the population of the town outweigh the money you'll spend.
- Do it!



*Thank you to and photos courtesy of Mayor Jack Tibbs*

# Soap Lake, Washington

Population 1,574

“We’re a rural community that’s been in decline for decades,” says Mayor Raymond Gravelle. “This was do or die.”



The revitalization started a handful of years ago with a Complete Streets policy and bike lanes on the state highway that runs through town. The community is working on connecting those bike lanes to the regional bikeway and the next community, seven miles away. Extra-wide sidewalks and pedestrian-scale lighting brought in far more pedestrians, particularly in the summer tourist season.



The town, whose master plan was collecting dust, got assistance from the Rural Communities Design Initiative at Washington State University. Citizens learned about good design, collected community input, and put in the hours of work to go about saving their town.

The mayor goes on to say this was one of the “most rewarding projects I’ve worked on in my life—to see the community come together.” Benefits have included an overall improvement in the community’s appearance, as well as new interest from developers and businesses. The community saw such success from working together that they are updating their park plan.

### Steps:

1. Identify funding sources
2. Put together a team of citizens who understand the criteria to meet funding requirements
3. Have team carry the ball far enough to know you’ll qualify, then get lots of citizen input

*Thank you to and photo courtesy of Mayor Raymond Gravelle*

## Canton, Connecticut

Population 10,292



The historic village of Collinsville, located within Canton, is the heart of the town. In the 1990s a railbed converted to a trail brought cyclists closer -- but not quite into -- town. Barriers along the trail kept people confined to either on the trail or off. Then a few years ago, Canton extended the bike trail to make a 28-mile loop.

Enter 2012: A master plan emerged to develop the village and remove the barriers separating trail users from the businesses. The carefully delineated design components began bringing people into town in 2014. Business owners noticed immediate results: From August of one year to the next, those closest to the trail saw 100% sales increases. Even after the novelty wore off, business continued to increase, as it did for those merchants a bit farther from the trail. The data showed the need for continued improvements, though, as the town businesses farthest from the trail saw little change.



Canton sees data as an asset: Laser counters installed on the trail help gather information for planning. In one two-hour time period they recorded 500 non-motorized movements, and more than 100,000 in the season.



- People spend money locally when non-motorized transportation brings them to town.
- Learn about “bike-onomics,” the evidence that cyclists make smaller, more frequent purchases

*Thank you to and photos courtesy of Neil Pade*

## Davidson, North Carolina

Population 11,750

Through a sustainable growth planning vision that began in the early 1990s, Davidson has been able to maintain small town charm despite doubling in population over the past two decades. The key? Davidson has created a community that caters to pedestrians rather than automobiles.



Town planners have preserved open space by disallowing drive-through windows and requiring all new commercial buildings to be at least two stories high. Instead of widening a highway that runs through Davidson's downtown, the town instead created parallel, connecting streets, making roads safer for pedestrians.

Davidson's commitment to walkability continues. The town requires new neighborhoods to connect to adjacent ones and undeveloped property via new streets and greenways. Flashing beacons at crosswalks enhance pedestrian safety. The town has also recently adjusted the timing of crosswalks on Main Street so that pedestrians can establish their presence in the crosswalk before cars proceed.



### Key Lessons:

- Get feedback from residents. People living and working in the area can give firsthand knowledge on what changes to enhance walkability and safety would be most effective.
- Create a diverse mixture of destinations that can be easily reached by foot or bike. This will ensure that there are places for people of varied interests.

*Story and photos courtesy of the Town of Davidson*

## Hebron, Nebraska

Population 1,561

Hebron schools started their efforts with some health programming initiatives. “No child left on their behind,” quips Principal Kurk Wiedel. They walked in the mornings in the gym or around the school.

Then they took it up the street. Buses bring kids in from as far as 30 miles away. On Walking Wednesdays, 180 elementary kids are dropped off at the courthouse to walk a mile up to the school. Drivers around the courthouse square took notice.

Then the city council got involved. A competitive grant allowed the town to feature a walking summit, which led to a plan for more accessibility for walking and biking. The focus has become eight-foot-wide trails, where it’s easy to travel peacefully by foot or pedals.

A big funding break came in when the city council member was visiting another town’s fair. He noticed they had a new trail, and it turned out they had a bit of money left over that they would happily share with their neighbors. Talking about their plans led directly to more funding!



### Key ideas:

- Get the right people involved--passionate people. One person is great but having several involved is important.
- Find creative solutions. Hebron divvied up the pouring of concrete, with four entities paying for separate sections. Volunteers helped make it happen.
- Plan big but ask people to help you. People want to help.

*Thank you to and photos courtesy of Kurk Wiedel*

# Stories from Small Towns



*Stories from Small Towns* is a project of the National Physical Activity Society. The objective of the project is to demonstrate that structural changes to make walking easier can be carried out in America's thousands of small towns and not just its big cities. The project focuses on advice from towns that have made some changes, with the aim of inspiring town leaders across the country to see such infrastructure investments as possible and worthy.

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The mission of the National Physical Activity Society is to create safe and accessible communities, where people of all ages and abilities are physically active, by taking deliberate and informed actions across all sectors of society.

For more information, visit the National Physical Activity Society's web site at <http://physicalactivitysociety.org/>

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