

Stories from Small Towns

Decorah, Iowa (Pop. 8,089)

Interest in addressing physical activity grew slowly over a period of years during a grant-funded effort on healthy eating. The Safe Routes to School coordinator initiated walking school buses and events such as walk to school day and ride your tractor to school day.

Then residents began focusing on the loop, 11 miles of trails around the city. Funding helped ensure the loop was completed, and residents began to get curious. Some sedentary individuals rode bicycles for the first time in 20 years. The trail has scenic beauty and varied terrain, with about a third rather hilly. About 10 times a year, the trail is used for fun runs and other events, pumping money into the economy. The loop has become a destination for people both inside and outside the area. Trails pass by historic town areas along with attractive natural resources.

In town, there had been a history of opposition to sidewalks. A group of local business leaders decided it wanted to connect sidewalks together, and their approach to the city was “We’re doing this, and we hope you will be with us.” With prominent champions, Decorah got sidewalks.

The walking school bus concept reached maturity in Decorah. Kids knew how to walk safely, and they kept that knowledge throughout their school years and passed it on to younger kids. Intersections near the schools have been redesigned to encourage walking.

Key Lessons:

- Nothing communicates more than seeing people use the sidewalks you have. Contrast that image with the sidewalks you need.
- It’s essential to have a champion and fruitless to wait for funding to show up without one.



Trout Run Trail Segment 8. Used with permission.

Thanks to Engineer Lindsay Erdman and City Administrator Chad Bird, Decorah, Iowa.