

Stories from Small Towns: *America paves the way for
connected citizens and good health*



Trout Run Trail improvements, Decorah, Iowa.
Used with permission.

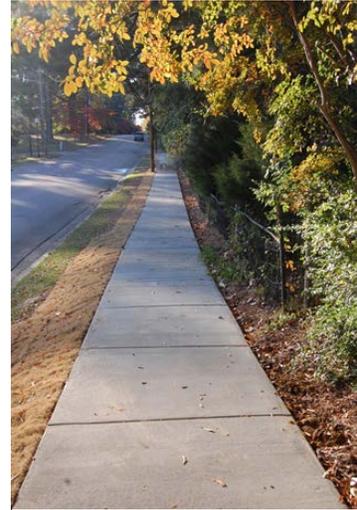
A project of the National Physical Activity Society

Stories from Small Towns

Hernando, Mississippi (Pop.15,000)

Hernando's Complete Streets policy mandates sidewalks in new subdivisions and new roads. A Mississippi law transferred liability for ill-repaired sidewalks to the City, rather than the homeowner, with the result that sidewalks are now kept in repair.

Hernando mayor Chip Johnson created a park system that now has eight new parks and 23 different programs. A charette funded by a Mississippi Main Street grant led to design standards and natural environment protection features. In the past ten years, Hernando has seen community events, bicycle clubs, yoga at the farmers' market, and a first-time soccer league for a thousand kids.



Sidewalk in Hernando, courtesy of the mayor's office.



Rubberized track ribbon cutting. Used by permission of the mayor's office.

The city also

obtained a grant to replace the old track around the football field with one that is rubberized, making it easier on joints--a plus for senior citizens and younger folks, too. A culvert under the road connecting the middle and high schools had been used long ago to move cows from one pasture to another, but had been blocked off for years. Hernando cleaned it up and opened it as a safe route to school.

Most of all, Hernando has created a culture of health. You can walk safely down the street, jog or cycle safely, and get fresh produce. Mayor Chip Johnson sums up his responsibility: "If you wake up and decide you want to be healthy, you should have that opportunity available to you."

Key Lessons

- Get feedback. People wanted bike lanes and sidewalks. They like connecting with their community on foot.
- Even the naysayers may turn around. One man was angry about bicycle lanes in front of his house until he noticed traffic going much slower. Now he is one of the most vocal supporters.

Thanks to Mayor Chip Johnson and Community Development Director Gia Matheny, Hernando, Mississippi.

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Brentwood, Missouri (Pop. 8,032)

Parks have long been promoted in Brentwood, considered good for residents and businesses. Recently, Brentwood formally adopted a master plan, a blueprint for parks. The city turned to Great Rivers Greenway to align plans to establish connected trails in the area. Responding to resident input, Brentwood installed benches and tables as small amenities to make greenways more enjoyable.

As a suburban area, Brentwood's young family population appreciates renovations of playgrounds. Positive reaction to one improvement leads to others as residents want the same improvements in their parts of town. Five-foot wide sidewalks now connect parks that were previously unconnected. The town recently re-built its recreation complex and is connecting its plans for biking and walking with nearby communities.

Brentwood sees quality of life as the biggest benefit. Businesses and families support parks and walkability, and health is a side benefit.

Key Lessons

- Talk with residents early and often for truly engaged citizen involvement.
- When possible, provide requested amenities (e.g., benches); citizens will support projects more.



Kids at play in a Brentwood park. Photo: Brentwood Parks Department. Used with permission.

Thanks to Assistant City Administrator Justin Wyse, Brentwood, Missouri.

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Columbia, Pennsylvania (Pop. 10,382)

Several parks in the borough of Columbia were run down, and a master plan identified the need for improvements. Mayor Leo Lutz started revitalizing, purchasing more land for the park system. One example is the Susquehanna River Park, four acres now refitted with a trail system and a new building with educational center. The borough obtained several grants to fund this project.



Susquehanna River Park. Used by permission.

Another project was carried out amidst concerns from residents, who thought the new basketball courts and play apparatus would be destroyed. Residents came around to the idea and now even support the new park projects. The important aspect seemed to be letting them have their say and be heard by the town leaders.

The borough's changes have taken place over 12 years. Columbia was listed as one of the 20 best small towns to visit in 2014 by Smithsonian Magazine and in the same year among the top 16 small Pennsylvania cities by Cities Journal.

Key Lessons

- Funding can be cobbled together from multiple places. Columbia obtained Urban Enhancement Funding from the county, along with funds from the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission, and the Department of Environmental Protection.
- Involve everyone you can think of, from the very beginning. The more people and the more public, the better your chances of success.

Thank you to Mayor Leo Lutz, Columbia, Pennsylvania.

Stories from Small Towns

Heber City (Pop. 13,000) & Wasatch County, Utah (Pop. 26,437)

Plans that began a decade ago were moving along, slowly, until people became excited about urban trails. The discussion progressed from trails in the hills and forests surrounding communities to the in-town assessment of walkability. By partnering with neighboring counties, Heber City (county seat of Wasatch County) brought in a walkable communities expert to take a walk with city planners and political leaders. Now there is more recognition of the need, and more sidewalks are appearing.



Gold Medal Mile, Wasatch County, Utah. By permission.

The 2002 Summer Games led to “gold medal miles,” miles marked for easy walking in places throughout Utah. Kids in Wasatch County rack up miles by participating.

The area gets a boost from tourism to nearby skiing destinations. Visitors to the community want access to trails and links to state parks.

The towns and county have collaborated with the school boards on addressing policies and ensuring the safety of kids walking to school.



Kids Walk to School, Wasatch County, Utah. Used with permission.

Coalitions have kept all these issues prominent even through funding stream changes. Connectivity goals have remained as leaders continued projects despite lack of funding.

Key Lessons:

- Develop relationships with stakeholders. Start with people who are already interested and include leaders in the community.
- Funding for ongoing projects can be hard to come by. Find ways to do the work anyway.

Thanks to Jonelle Fitzgerald, Wasatch County Health Department, Utah.

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.

Madisonville, Kentucky (Pop. 19,791)

A coalition of leaders chose transportation walkability as one issue to address in a new grant affecting the community. A walkability study highlighted areas like the railroad overpass, which people were using without sufficient walking space, putting themselves in danger. On the south side of Madisonville were no sidewalks. The governor happened to visit for an unrelated issue and asked what Madisonville needed. “Sidewalks!” came the answer. Now the community has more sidewalks, which see lots of use.

The city adopted “live, work, play” as a theme. The coalition takes a long view, focusing on policies and procedures impacting long-term needs. Smaller scale benefits are cropping up. A teacher initiated exercise before 2nd and 3rd grade classes, then found test scores improved. Madisonville has a web site for comment submission and responds to resident comments, so if residents notice a street light that’s out, they know how to address it. The constant throughout the improvements has been the coalition, always willing to tackle the next issue.

Key Lessons:

- It doesn’t matter who gets the credit. Getting it done is what matters.
- If you put people on the defensive, they don’t want to help you.



Photo Credit: J. Stephen Conn, <http://bit.ly/1MQu7EJ>. Used under Creative Commons License.

Thanks to YMCA CEO Ed Wallace, Madisonville, Kentucky.

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Traverse City, Michigan (Pop. 15,018)

Two decades ago the state department of transportation widened a road into town without any provisions for walking or cycling. Local citizens then formed into a group to promote trails and walking in the city and at the state level. Upon securing funding, the group built trails. After the department of transportation objected to a trail to “nowhere,” the private group coordinated with town leaders to tie in a base park, and thus was birthed the Traverse Area Recreation Trail.

Business leaders, including those at a local resort on the edge of town, wanted connectivity. “There’s no reason our guests shouldn’t be able to hop on a trail and bike into Traverse City,” said the owner. In a state heavily influenced by the automobile, these events spurred a way of thinking. Now there are 25 miles of paved trails connected to trail networks, and Traverse City is known for health and recreation opportunities.

Key Lessons

- Economic benefits are huge. One trail network pumps \$2.6 million into the local economy, mostly due to special events.
- People are paying to live in areas where they can walk and bike.
- Start somewhere; it doesn’t have to be big! Gather people and get started.



Photo Credit: Michigan Municipal League. Used under Creative Commons License. <http://bit.ly/1YHKc3p>

Thank you to Julie Clark, Executive Director of TART Trails, Traverse City, Michigan.

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 as possible and worthy.

The National Physical Activity Society is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization promoting public health approaches and collaboration to create active communities. Members include state and local health department personnel, university researchers and professors, fitness professionals interested in broader impact, nonprofits, and other interested individuals. For more information, visit <http://PhysicalActivitySociety.org>.

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“If you wake up and decide you want to be healthy, you should have that opportunity available to you.” Chip Johnson, Mayor, Hernando, Mississippi

