

20 years strong AMERICA WALKS

On June 21, 2018, America Walks hosted the webinar, “Walkable Transformations: Healthy, Active, and Engaged Communities”, where we highlighted three communities that have undergone transformations to create spaces that put people first. It featured Dabney Sanders, Project Manager for the Downtown Greenway, a collaborative project of Action Greensboro and the City of Greensboro, Stacie West, Director of Parks Projects at the NoMa Parks Foundation, an affiliate of the NoMa Business Improvement District (BID), and Al Wilson, Founder and Executive Director of Beyond Walls, a creative placemaking agency based in Lynn, Massachusetts whose mission is to activate public space to strengthen communities. Our inspiring panelists shared intimate details of the innovative processes, resources, tools and creativity that helped them overcome obstacles to walkability.

America Walks received many questions and comments from attendees. Dabney Sanders and Stacie West took time to offer their expert answers, to continue the conversation and provide further insight on best practices they used for creating safe, accessible, and enjoyable walking conditions in their communities, so you can too.

What happens to the areas where the revitalization takes place? We've seen how great change can be, but also how many people tend to be displaced because their area was no longer affordable. How do we keep the people who have always been in these areas able to stay there? Do these improvements change the cost of living as well?

Dabney: In the Morehead Park area that I discussed, there had been a homeless camp located in the area where we were building the trail. We worked closely with the City of Greensboro and local homeless advocates to find a solution for the displacement. The City secured federal funding that it earmarked for this area and we were able to offer permanent housing to all 18 of the homeless residents on the site. Many homeowners in surrounding neighborhoods want and appreciate rising property values that typically happen with these projects - and this includes both lower and higher income neighborhoods. It is trickier with neighborhoods that have a higher percentage of rentals through investment property - we haven't quite figured that one out.

Stacie: NoMa had a lot of warehouses and some office space in it prior to the development of the parks. In that sense, we are not really experiencing displacement, as almost all of the residential in the area is new. In the last 1-2 years, we have seen a rise in the number of homeless people living in the area. We did not have homeless encampments when the parks projects, including the underpasses, began. We work with local government and non-profit services, and have staff that do outreach to the homeless in the neighborhood to try to connect them with services.

Curious about two things: 1) Use of pervious pavement on a lot of paths for groundwater runoff. 2) Use of building materials with inherent visual interest (pattern, variety) perhaps less expensive than art installations?

Stacie: In the underpass art parks, we are not changing the ground plane. For all of our parks where we are disturbing a minimum threshold of dirt, we are required to have approved stormwater plans that meet the District of Columbia's requirements.

How did Greensboro's project get started - public outcry, staff recommendations, grant opportunity? If through staff recommendations, what's the secret to getting the buy-in from elected/general public?

Dabney: The Downtown Greenway in Greensboro started when 6 local foundations got together to consider what we needed to do to address the changing economy of the community. A grassroots approach was taken to identify community interests and needs. A Master Plan for Center City was created that identified the Downtown Greenway as a priority project. Initially driven by the private sector, the City became a full partner after the adoption of a Bi-Ped Plan in 2006 that identified the Downtown Greenway as the central hub of the entire system, the naming of the Downtown Greenway as the City's signature project to celebrate its Bicentennial in 2008 by a City Council appointed commission, and by the passage of a Street Improvement Bond in 2008 that dedicated local bond funding for the project. Many community meetings were held to garner public support for the project and information was researched on other greenway projects from across the country to build support from both elected and staff leadership at the city as well as funders and the general public.

How has this increased light pollution in the area?

Dabney: We are in an urban environment - so we are not increasing light pollution significantly. We use low-pollution lighting fixtures in areas where we are adding light (done for safety primarily) and in many cases we are using existing lighting.

What are some things you think would recommend as starter projects for towns who are just starting down this route?

Stacie: Temporary activations! Trying things out can build buzz and support for getting funding from local government or grants. The murals were also a fairly affordable set of projects for us, as some local property owners were willing to donate costs toward the murals.

Dabney: Murals, parklets, "better block" strategies, neighborhood and community engagement public meetings and focus groups.

Did you have to file a public space permits? What were some of the restrictions you had to follow?

Stacie: Yes, we had to file for public space permits. The restrictions we had to follow mostly came from Amtrak, but also the city. They are outlined in the presentation, and mostly had to do with keeping clear and open walkways for cyclists and pedestrians and not attaching the art parks to the walls or ceiling of the underpasses.

What was the budget for the Rain Public art?

Stacie: The overall budget for 4 art parks is over \$2 million.

Are individuals with disabilities taken into consideration when designing these beautiful spaces? If so are there any assessments on how many people with disabilities are able to use these spaces?

Dabney: We are building the downtown greenway to ADA standards so we are accessible from that standpoint. Our woven works park cornerstone was designed specifically for inclusive play. We are investigating working with a local Lions Club civic group to install some braille signage.

Stacie: We are not changing the size of the space available for people walking through the underpasses (there are roadway and train operation considerations out of our scope). It was important to us that the designs chosen did not impede any further than existing streetlights would. We did consider the deaf community, as Gallaudet University is in our neighborhood, and required a minimum light level to make communication in sign easier.

Are the pedestrian corridors multi modal? how do you control pedestrian/cyclist conflicts?

Stacie: They are multi-modal. Some cyclists choose to use the sidewalk, some use the roadway. Both the L and M Street Underpass have sidewalks that are 27 feet in width, and conflicts are not common. We are a parks nonprofit in the neighborhood, so ultimate regulation of the spaces from a pedestrian/cyclist safety standpoint would be done by the District Department of Transportation.

How were all of these projects funded?

Dabney: With the Downtown Greenway - private funding from local foundations provided the initial seed money to get the project off the ground. That money was used to leverage public support which has come from 2 local bond referendums that then leveraged state and federal public support. We also did additional private fundraising from foundations, businesses, and individuals, and we actively apply for grants on the local, state, and federal level.

Stacie: Capital funds from the District of Columbia government.