

20 years strong AMERICA WALKS

On July 11th, 2018, America Walks hosted the webinar, “Opportunities for Walkability in Rural Communities”, where we highlighted programs, policies, and projects being worked on across the US to promote physical activity and improve walkability in small towns and rural communities. It featured Dr. Renée Umstattd Meyer, an Associate Professor and Graduate Program Director in the Department of Public Health at Baylor University in Waco, TX, Corianne Payton Scally, a senior research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute, Joseph Stemberger, Mayor of Elmer Borough, Salem County, New Jersey, and Rebecca Williams, Information Specialist for the Southeast ADA Center, a project of the Burton Blatt Institute of Syracuse University.

America Walks received many questions and comments from attendees. Our panelists 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 small and rural communities, so you can too.

What was the source of funding for these mini-grants?

Renée: These were funded through the Physical Activity Research Center funded through RWJF; however, they are minimal and this year one of our communities is working without any budget, just with equipment and things she already has. The City of Chicago has built the costs into their city budget.

Joe: There is no funding for repairing sidewalks; it is the owner's responsibility.

What is the typical annual household income for your community? Is your community growing, remaining static, or declining?

Renée: These are low-income families.

Joe: 46,000 and remaining static.

What's the population in the city or town this work was done?

Renée: Ranged from 800 people to 5000 people in the towns. Although one was done this summer in a town of < 150.

Joe: 1,300.

Corianne: The population of Rifle, CO (housing location example) was just under 10,000 in 2010 Census. The population of Easton, MD (social service location example) was 11,700 when they made the siting decision.

What about viewpoints of rural residents that they do not see value in such infrastructure?

Corianne: The fiscal/tax savings argument can be quite compelling if savings are projected for one type of infrastructure development over another. [Here's a toolkit resource on this.](#)

Rebecca: In many rural communities residents with mobility impairments do value the construction of accessible sidewalks/shared use paths as this is the only means of safe transportation for them.

Joe: They do not see value in infrastructure if they have to pay for it.

How do you recommend converting "main street" highways with deep setbacks into vibrant walkable safe main streets?

Corianne: Alta Planning & Design has an interactive planner [here](#). And [here's the full FHWA guide](#) they helped develop.

Joe: I would recommend sidewalks. Roads are too narrow in places to add walking and biking paths.

Can you give an example of what you mean by how rural communities define "active transportation"?

Joe: Foot, bike, motorcycle, automobile.

Renée: Some people in rural communities talk about active transportation as how they get to a place where they can be active (e.g., a park or a program). For example, can my neighbor or family member drive me to sports practice or the pool? This does not necessarily mean being active in the mode of transportation for some in rural communities.

Corianne, are there ways that can connect CBO's/Muni's to funding to help implement some of the bike/ped infrastructure improvements you went over?

Corianne: See [the FHWA administration guide here](#). Funding sources are discussed beginning on p.35.

Renee, is there any evidence that a short-term "play street" event can lead to permanent infrastructure improvements? Can it lead to the types of multi-modal network improvements that Corianne described? I don't think, for example, we would consider building a playground to be such an outcome.

Renée: This has not been looked at, but could be interesting. One of the benefits to temporary play streets places though is that they can be located in different areas in a community, allowing for different people to have better access given on location. Play Streets also have an element of supervision with them, where permanent play spaces do not always have this.

How often did the play street events happen?

Renée: They varied by community. In some communities they occurred every week or every other week. In some communities they were aligned with other community events to capitalize on the transportation already occurring to get to a location.

How is the cost of using police to close the street handled?

Renée: There was no cost for police in our rural communities. Law enforcement were invited to participate and support, but were not hired. In Chicago where actual streets are used, permits have to be obtained from the city to close the street down. In the rural communities we worked with, other open and publicly accessible areas were used, not requiring permits (e.g., parking lots, fields, etc...).

I like the urban examples to give perspective. However, I can imagine skeptics criticizing the temporary nature of Play Streets teaching children to play in places that are not safe spaces for them to play the majority of the time. Can you help answer that?

Renée: Play Streets are not promoting playing in the street from a normal perspective, but rather transform streets into a play space. I have not heard anything about this being a concern, and Chicago has been doing this since 2012. Play Streets are on specific days and times and have equipment and adults involved.

Have you heard concerns regarding Play Streets being used as such when the streets were no longer closed?

Renée: No, we have not heard this. When a Play Street is over, all of the equipment is gone, the supervisors are gone, and it appears over.

If the majority of implementations (if not all) were not on actual streets, should the name be different in rural areas?

Renée: We have talked a lot about this, but the concept is the same as in urban areas, and we have not changed it. We do have more communities looking at streets this year, so it will be interesting.

What have the participants done for financing to fund these sidewalk improvements?

Rebecca: As far as ADA requirements for sidewalks (for example curb ramps) these should be written into a municipalities transition plan and municipal funding should be appropriated for these alterations.

Joe: Elmer was able to add over a mile of new sidewalks through a New Jersey state funded program called Safe Sidewalks to School.

Is there an ordinance that requires the landowner to be responsible for the public sidewalk at their property? Is this common?

Rebecca: Any such ordinance would be written in municipal code. This will vary from community to community.

Joe: Yes there is an ordinance and yes it is common for the landowner to be responsible for the public sidewalk on their property. [Here's our ordinance.](#)

Are spot fixes being done, or have you looked at implementing sections of sidewalk repair to obtain economy of scale from an engineering/construction perspective?

Joe: Because it is responsibility of property owners, spot fixes are being done to existing sidewalks. New sidewalks have been installed through NJ State money so those our done on an economy of scale depending on the project and grant funds available.

Did you come up with a creative solution to help the single mother in foreclosure? I can't imagine that it would be good for the community to take away housing from kids; that would negatively impact the children in your community. Do you evaluate contributions on a case-by-case situation? Have you considered a go-fund-me option for that situation?

Joe: Our sidewalks ordinance reads that if a resident does not comply fixing their sidewalks within 90 days the Borough can fix them and bill the resident. If the bill is not paid by the 31st of December each year the lien will go to tax sale on that property. That is not our goal, rather we would like to have a quarterly assessment within the homeowners budget and continue to pay until the lien is paid in full.

For Mayor Joe, why pave a circular trail in the park, rather than pave an equivalent distance on the rail-trail to make it a "transportation" corridor to destinations or adjoining communities? Since it connects the park, could it still support "leisure" or recreational walking, but also be a part of transportation network?

Joe: Our experience is that residents want a secure controlled walking area, especially for children and seniors. Also, the rails-trails is actually not located in the Borough so it is not under our jurisdiction.

Have you thought about parents that are pushing around strollers, trying to get out and walk and provisions for their mobility?

Joe: Yes it is a priority. That is why we have been becoming more proactive on enforcement of sidewalk violations.

What are your requirements regarding winter maintenance? For example, in rural America, there are often more elderly individuals. Are they required to shovel snow at every storm when many may be fairly immobile?

Joe: The State of NJ requires snow removed; municipalities enforce their own laws.