America Walks is a nonprofit national organization empowering communities to create safe, accessible, and enjoyable walking conditions for all.

WITH A NICKNAME LIKE THE DIAMOND CITY, IT’S NO SURPRISE THAT COUNTY SEAT WILKES-BARRE IN LUZERNE COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA HOLDS SOME DESIRABLE QUALITIES. LOCATED IN SCENIC NORTHEASTERN PENNSYLVANIA, LUZERNE COUNTY IS A GEM OF AN OUTDOOR DESTINATION, ROBUST WITH FORESTS, PARKS, AND BUSTLING WALKABLE DOWNTOWNS. AS AN OLDER CITY, WILKES-BARRE HAS THE WALKABLE FOUNDATION OF IT’S SOLID, OLD BONES TO STAND ON WITH A STRONG RESIDENTIAL PRESENCE DOWNTOWN AND CONNECTIONS TO SURROUNDING NEIGHBORHOODS. THIS FOUNDATION HAS GROWN TO INCLUDE ENOUGH OFFICE, SHOPPING, DINING AND SERVICE ACTIVITIES THAT 40% OF CITYWIDE JOBS ARE LOCATED DOWNTOWN, WHICH ENJOYS THE ADDED BENEFIT OF HAVING TWO COLLEGES SERVE AS BOOKENDS.

AS A WHOLE, LUZERNE COUNTY FACES CHALLENGES THAT MANY COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE US WOULD RECOGNIZE. THE LEGACIES OF A MINING-CENTRIC, RUST-BELT TOWN EXIST—GIANT SUBURBAN INDUSTRIAL PARKS WHERE AN INCREASING NUMBER OF LOW-INCOME RESIDENTS ARE EMPLOYED, LACK OF ADEQUATE TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS FOR THOSE WHO COMMUTE FROM OUTSIDE THE CITY OR TO AND FROM INDUSTRIAL PARKS, AND A LACK OF RESOURCES AT THE GOVERNMENT LEVEL TO SUPPORT MAJOR CHANGE.

THAT’S WHERE LIVE WELL LUZERNE (LIVEWELL) AND DIAMOND CITY PARTNERSHIP (DCP) COME IN, TWO KEY GROUPS WORKING WITH THE LUZERNE COUNTY TRANSIT AUTHORITY (LCTA) TO FILL TRANSIT AND ACCESSIBILITY GAPS IN THE LAST FEW YEARS. THE PRIMARY CONCERN FOR ALL PARTIES IS HOW TO IMPROVE LCTA’S SYSTEMS AND NETWORKS, AND THE TIME BETWEEN SERVICES, TO MAKE USING THE BUS A MORE Viable OPTION FOR MORE PEOPLE. AT THE BEGINNING OF THESE EFFORTS, THE BUS IN LUZERNE COUNTY WAS SEEN AS THE LAST RESORT AND PRIMARILY USED BY LOW-INCOME POPULATIONS. A SECOND GOAL WAS HOW PEOPLE COULD SAFELY AND EASILY GO FROM ONE WALKABLE AREA TO ANOTHER WITHOUT HAVING TO GET IN A CAR.

**ABOUT DIAMOND CITY PARTNERSHIP**
- Downtown Business Improvement District in Wilkes-Barre
- Started working with LCTA more intensely in 2016
- De facto downtown planner
- Functions as a full-service place management organization

**ABOUT LIVEWELL LUZERNE**
- Health promotion non-profit
- Main partner with LCTA for walkability initiatives
- Housed within county-wide YMCA organization
- Received Community Change Grant to promote walking to transit

**LUZERNE COUNTY TRANSIT AUTHORITY STATS**
- 18 routes total
- 93% of LCTA riders walk
- 15-20 minute headways in Wilkes-Barre
- Scranton to Wilkes-Barre, hourly service
- Moving towards regional system
- Moving from coverage to productivity system

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When the effort to replace mining started in the 1950's and 1960's, the response was to create giant industrial parks which were built outside Wilkes-Barre around the regional highway network. Now, about 70% of Wilkes-Barre's working residents reverse commute to work outside the city every day. The challenge is to connect these employers and employees with a bus route that boasts strong usability through frequency and options, and to address the issue of the first and last mile.

“These distribution centers sit on parcels containing buildings that are often up to a million square feet in size. So the bus is going to drop you off somewhere . . . in an environment that is the opposite of walkable,” says Larry Newman, Executive Director of Diamond City Partnership. Newman’s professional background is one of a downtown planner and previously would not have considered this part of his work but he says enhancing the health of the county means addressing transit-walkability issues like this one.

The business parks are not the only areas demanding attention. Downtown Wilkes-Barre is the primary office location in the region and the largest single employment center in Northeastern Pennsylvania, with more than 11,000 people working downtown. Surveys show that most of these people are coming from outside of the city. The challenge here is how to get more downtown workers, those who live outside the city in particular, to use the bus as an alternative to driving.
When Luzerne County Transit Authority took over ownership of the bus shelters in 2017 they quickly realized that they needed to be updated in terms of safety, connectivity, and meeting ADA compliance. Kathy Bednarek, Planner and Grants Coordinator for LCTA, says it was the perfect opportunity to partner and dig into what really needed to be done around improving transit amenities. In partnership with LiveWell Luzerne, LCTA participated in bus stop walkability audits made possible in part by a 2016 America Walks Community Change Grant award.

“We took some measurements, looked at crosswalks, gathered public opinion, and examined the built environment around it, taking a look at the surroundings,” says Bednarek.

The surveys showed that some of the shelters, particularly a couple in front of major amenities, have scarce sidewalks, are too close to traffic, or are hard to get in and out of. Further assessments will continue next year and LCTA hopes to leverage all the data gathered to gain funding to replace and improve transit surroundings.

There are a number of activities being done to create an even more walkable downtown Wilkes-Barre. The community is rethinking mixed use properties, addressing street speeds, and performing traffic calming projects. The city knows this will help improve walkability in the same way it did when design workshops and community surveys led to a lot of walkability work in previous years.

**THE SOLUTIONS:**

- Central parking
- Traffic calming projects
- Crash-prone intersection research
- One way to two way conversions
- Traffic tables for safer pedestrian crossings
- Complete streets
- Sidewalk construction
- Improved wayfinding
INSPIRING WALKING

Beyond the bits of beautification and usability to attract more residents to the idea of walking, bussing, and making the choice to simply drive less, DCP, LiveWell and LCTA focus on interactive education and inclusiveness. Together, they’re getting folks to experience the built environment from the perspective of a pedestrian, by actualizing walkability as an idea and word that melts into the communities collective consciousness and vocabulary. They’re also creating priceless connections for Luzerne County residents to access trails and state parks.

Hosted by Wilkes-Barre Family YMCA, Y Walk Wednesdays is a series of free, guided, evening summer walks that feature downtown neighborhoods, history, walking and health, architecture, wildlife, nature and new development in Wilkes-Barre. Michele Schasberger, Healthier Communities Coordinator at LiveWell Luzerne/Wilkes-Barre Family YMCA, says the events truly get people walking. Community members are inspired by seeing historical architecture and hearing stories about what downtown is now, what it will be, and how things are changing. Leaders say it’s about changing people’s minds and creating a constituency of transit-walkability advocates.

LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE COLLABORATION

“I rode the bus my whole life, and one of the ways I always viewed transit is that it’s community development.... I really sought out partners in both the health and economic development world, and it’s been great for the growth of both LCTA and for them,” says Bednarek.

That community development is starting to show in Luzerne County. The LCTA, LiveWell Lucerne and Diamond City Partnership all agree that a healthy and functioning transit system is part of the recipe for a healthy and functioning walkable community. Achieving this goal as a transit-walkability team makes them all the more equipt for getting there faster.

“Besides recognizing inclusion and connectivity, we recognize the systematic role of transit. Offering all sorts of ways for many people to get around,” says Schasberger.

Newman agrees. Specifically, he says perfecting these partnerships is important in ensuring that the transit system becomes a larger part of the solution in connecting low-income people with opportunity in the form of jobs that increasingly happen to be found outside the city and outside of walking distance.

“I recently heard transit described, at its best, as being a pedestrian accelerator. When it works that way, transit allows you to get to a new place where you can walk to a whole new range of activities without having to get in a car.”

TRANSIT-WALKABILITY TAKEAWAYS:

- Transit-walkability can be visionary when the transit agency works to partner with community organizations that prioritize pedestrians
- People-first infrastructure projects can both activate park and walk behavior and open new doors for different populations to positively experience transit