



Community Engagement for Active Transportation: Building It and Keeping It

By Caitlin Zibers

“The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: No one is against it in principle, because it is good for you.” In the same way, very few people are against active transportation in principle, understanding that it has a variety of benefits. But it can sometimes be a struggle to build consensus around funding facilities for bicycling and walking, especially in resource-restricted communities. The following will provide general tips for building interest and buy-in for active transportation, advice and examples from other Kansas communities, and ideas for how to maintain and continue to grow momentum once community interest in active transportation has been established.

Why Community Engagement is No Longer Optional

Communities have found that engaging citizens and addressing potential conflicts at the beginning of a project’s planning process can greatly influence the efficiency and outcome. In fact, research has found that there are short and long term effects of quality community engagement. Short-term effects include an increased positive perception of the entities seeking and creating engagement, while long-term effects have shown that citizens are more likely to tolerate disagreements. This could prove



Investing in community engagement will make your project more successful.



to be crucial for a project where disagreements are anticipated. For example, for a trail that requires using easements or land near private residences, those nearby residents may be concerned about safety, loitering and maintenance near their homes. If their concerns are not acknowledged and included in the process at the outset, these citizens may work against the project.

How to Build Interest and Buy-in

The first step in building interest within communities is to recognize that there is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process. Too

often, municipalities and agencies go through the motions of public engagement to check the box, without ever truly engaging the community. This can happen for a variety of reasons, including limited funding and time, and personnel constraints. Regardless, lackluster attempts at engaging the public can work against building interest.

A passive type of public engagement is a public hearing, a time-honored form of participation, but one that has proven to be a very poor tool for actually engaging the community, because there is no dialogue and very little time investment by citizens. Public hearings can create more barriers between citizens and agencies than solutions. Demonstrating a genuine desire to engage with the public, and pairing that with appropriate engagement techniques, can reap reciprocal effects.

Appropriate engagement techniques are essential in determining the type and amount of interest you will be able to generate for your project or plan. Begin by identifying the purpose of your engagement efforts. Are you trying to educate the public? Resolve conflict? Build support? Or maybe you have a combination of several purposes? There are dozens of engagement techniques; Judy Rosener has identified common ones and determined their correlating function, or intended purpose. For

Rosener's Technique/Function Matrix for Community Engagement¹⁰

Technique	Function								
	Identify Opinions	Facilitate Participation	Clarify Planning Process	Answer Citizen Questions	Distribute Information	Generate New Ideas	Program/Policy Review or Update	Resolve Conflict	Develop Support/ Minimize Opposition
Charrette ¹	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Citizen Advisory Committee	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Surveys	X								
Focused Group Interview	X	X		X	X				
Neighborhood Meetings	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Public Hearing		X				X	X		
Task Force							X		X
Workshop	X		X	X	X		X	X	X

¹ A Charette is an intense, group collaboration which brings together a variety of stakeholders to brainstorm and plan. The format varies, but generally a charrette organizes participants into subgroups that work together on a given problem, later sharing their results with the larger group as a whole. This allows multiple issues to be discussed in timely and efficient manner.

example, if your agency's intention is to resolve conflict while also developing support, a charrette, citizen advisory committee or workshop could work as feasible public engagement techniques. See the table above for a condensed version of Rosener's Technique/Function Matrix, pulled from her article "Matching Method to Purpose: The Challenges of Planning Citizen-Participation Activities."

Framing is another technique used in building interest and creating buy-in. Most issues can be viewed through a variety of lenses, which allows the public conversation to be framed several ways. For example, bicycle trails could be viewed as a tool for economic development, a way to increase public health indicators, or a method for bringing communities together.

Using appropriate public engagement techniques, an agency can determine the community values that will help inform the framing of

a topic. For example, your agency is attempting to build community support for the implementation of new bike trails. However, through engagement, you have discovered that the community is worried about the current unemployment rate and feels that money could be used for a project more focused on economic development. One way the agency could frame the project is in economic terms, highlighting the fact-based economic benefits of trails. The Urban Land Institute (ULI) has stated that:

- Active transportation infrastructure can catalyze real estate development. Trails, bike lanes and bike sharing systems can improve pedestrian and cyclist access to centers of employment, recreational destinations and public transit, as a result boosting the appeal of development near the infrastructure.
- Investments in trails, bike lanes and bicycle-sharing systems have high levels of return on investment.

Regions and cities have found that relatively small investments in active transportation can yield high economic returns, due to improved health and environmental outcomes.

- There is evidence of a correlation between access to active transportation facilities and increased property values. In urban and suburban markets, studies have shown that direct access to trails, bike-sharing systems and bike lanes can have a positive impact on property values.

- There is a reciprocal relationship between the private and public sectors in terms of maximizing investments in active transportation. Developers are benefiting from access to sought-after locations that are close to publicly financed active transportation routes; but they are also making direct investments in active transportation by helping to finance improvements to the systems.

Likewise, if communities value

improving health or children's safety, using data to support and frame the conversation around active transportation can provide multiple ways to view the project, ultimately creating greater buy-in.

Additionally, creating interest and initiating buy-in can be achieved by encouraging a sense of ownership and responsibility for citizens in a project. Since final decisions are almost always made by elected officials, delegating power for making recommendations and partnerships can be powerful tools in building interest and creating buy-in from a community.

Two Kansas Examples of Community Engagement

Thrive Allen County. Thrive Allen County, Inc. is a health-oriented 501(c)3 whose "mission is to support and encourage programs, policies and resources that promote access to healthcare, healthy lifestyles, and positive community conversation that improves the well-being of residents of Allen County, Kansas." Thrive Allen County uses a multi-disciplinary approach for tackling a variety of obstacles within the county affecting health and active transportation. Damaris Kunkler, the

Program Director for Thrive Allen County, emphasized the importance of community engagement in their numerous efforts.

One of the notable projects Thrive has completed is the construction of the Southwind Rail Trail, which connects the two largest towns in the county, Iola and Humboldt. The trail connects two very large employers that together employ approximately 1200 people and has seen many commuters using the trail since its completion. They began the engagement process by inviting individuals focused on cycling in the communities together to talk about the technical aspects of trail development, which turned into the creation of the Southwind Trail Committee. Through the use of social media and local newspaper articles, Thrive reached out to cyclists, the local college cross-country team, and individuals to build support.

Community volunteers were completely responsible for building the trail and continue to maintain the trail. In fact, to demonstrate the importance of volunteers maintaining the trail, sponsors decided to allow a 100 ft. section of the trail to become overgrown

so they could show the full effects of neglect. However, they lost their "teaching moment" when a neighboring property owner and supporter of the trail saw the neglected patch and took it upon himself to clean it up (!) Without knowing it, he came at the "lesson" from another angle, showing the sense of responsibility and pride he felt for the project, and the difference it can make.

Engaging civic groups also proved to be successful for the completion of the Southwind Rail Trail, most notably the Rotary clubs within Iola and Humboldt. Together, the two Rotary clubs built a shelter on the trail and provided amenities that would otherwise have been left out. To continue support, the Southwind Trail Committee and Thrive Allen County continually update social media with pictures of activity along the trail, including wildlife, promoting the trail as an active and safe place.

Thrive also conducts "community conversations" where they gather citizens at the township and county level regularly to hear the dreams, hopes, successes and failures of the community.

Kunkler said that "Thrive has created a culture of conversation. We have good community conversations and they [the communities] now expect it. Grants have been written off of those conversations; they tell us what they need." She emphasized there are a variety of ways to engage with a community, and sometimes that looks like reaching out to tell citizens what's going on, and sometimes it looks like just sitting back and listening. Kunkler emphasized, "You don't have to have any resources to sit and listen."

Kunkler can be reached at Damaris.kunkler@thriveallencounty.org, or by phone at (620) 365-8128 and is more than happy to act as a resource for other communities.

Lawrence, Kansas Pedestrian-Bicycle Issues Task Force. In some communities, decision-making is influenced by input from bicycling and pedestrian committees. This



Thrive Allen County used a word collage to advertise a public meeting, using words conveying active transportation and cities in their community, and leadership.





The City of Lawrence hosted open houses to gain feedback from citizens on walking and bicycling issues.



allows citizens a more active and direct role in a project. Lawrence, KS, created a task force of citizens to research specific information related to bicycling and walking in the city, and provide recommendations directly to the City Commission.

The Pedestrian-Bicycle Issues Task Force was established by Resolution No. 7106, adopted by the City Commission on March 24, 2015. The Task Force is composed of 11 citizens of Lawrence who have an interest in the subject of pedestrian and bicycle issues within the community.

The scope of work of the Task Force is extensive and includes:

- Review of history of City pedestrian and bicycle issues, including policies, laws, and funding;
- Review best practices from other communities on pedestrian and bicycle issues;
- Review the City’s current advisory board structure for pedestrian-bicycle issues, and provide recommendations to the City Commission;
- Review the City’s current practice for funding and building sidewalks within the community, including sidewalks built during development, sidewalks built during street projects, and sidewalks built to connect gaps in the sidewalk network; provide recommendations on this practice and possible improvements in prioritization and funding;
- Review the City’s current practice related to sidewalk improvements for individuals with

- disabilities and provide recommendations;
- Review the City’s current practice related to pedestrian and bicycle safety for school-age children; provide recommendations on this practice and possible improvements in prioritization and funding;
- Review State and City

laws concerning sidewalk maintenance responsibilities, review related staffing and funding issues related to City practices, and make recommendations on this issue; Review City practices concerning bicycling within the community, including bicycle facility construction, funding issues for bike facilities and other issues related to the promotion of bicycling within the community;

- Provide other recommendations, including recommendations for sustainable funding as it relates to pedestrian and bicycle issues.

Learn more about Lawrence’s Task Force at <http://lawrenceks.org/node/5909/>. The site also has some excellent links to information on other communities’ bike and ped efforts.

The Task Force’s report to the

City Commission, dated February 29, 2016, can be found at https://www.lawrenceks.org/assets/boards/pedestrian-bicycle/PBITF_Final_Report_2.29.16.pdf.

Keep the Community Engagement Ball Rolling

Host events and activities. Your efforts at community engagement shouldn’t end with the completion of a project; it’s time to shift gears and re-focus. If your project was a trail, your focus should shift to how you can get more people on that trail. Events such as bike to work/school day, walking classrooms and hosting races or music festivals along trail are all ways you can encourage the continued use of active transportation facilities. Here are some examples:

Wichita, KS. Bike to Work Day is May 20th in Wichita, Kansas. Last year, free breakfast was served from 6:30 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. at six locations around the city to help encourage people to bike to work. Free helmets were also provided to ensure everyone had a safe ride. The event organizer, Becky Tuttle, said that part of the goal was to get people to think about biking as more than recreation—as a form of transportation. That same day a Bike to Lunch event was hosted as well.

Grand Island, NE. Walking classrooms have gained popularity as seen in Grand Island, Nebraska’s Stolley Park Elementary which received a mini grant for \$2,000 to fund their “Steps to Success” program. This grant supported their a walking classroom program that allowed 4th grade students to walk 15-20 minutes once or twice a week while listening to podcasts that supported their curriculum. The effort was aimed at improving overall physical fitness while supporting classroom curriculum in an innovative way.

Marshall County, KS. Some events combine active transportation with art or music, such as the Orchestra on the Oregon Trail that hosts the Topeka Symphony Orchestra. Each year, the orchestra gathers at Alcove Spring Historic Park which spans 246 mostly undeveloped acres along



Iola, Kansas, hosts the Portland Alley Pedalfest to promote bicycling.



BUILDING COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS 101

In rural communities, hard capital (funding) may be hard to come by for active transportation, but there may be a wealth of “social capital.” Social capital is the network of relationships within a community that can be used to support and enhance a project. Find other agencies, community groups and individuals that share the same values, and are willing to shoulder some of the burden; don’t forget your local elected officials and city or county staff! Not only will you be able to distribute some of the workload, but this will also help share some of the decision-making responsibilities.

The University of Kansas Community Toolbox has some basic suggestions for building relationships in the community:

- Build relationships one at a time.
- Be genuine.
- Ask people questions and tell people about yourself, open up.
- Assume other people want to form relationships, too. It’s easy to convince yourself that the public isn’t interested in participating, don’t shut yourself down before trying.
- Be persistent, trust takes time and so do relationships.
- Personally invite people to get involved. Many people are happy and eager to serve something larger than themselves.
- Enjoy people. If that goes against your nature, find someone within your agency who enjoys getting to know people.

When organizing stakeholder meetings, use the following list to help ensure you have a full representation of the various stakeholders within your community:

- City/county planners
- City/county engineers
- City/county public works staff
- City/county parks and recreation staff
- City/county elected officials such as mayors or commissioners
- School administration
- Senior citizens centers and nursing homes
- Civic groups such as Rotary
- Advocacy groups such as bike groups
- Faith-based leaders such as pastors
- Business owners
- Healthcare/public health professionals
- Youth groups such as Boy/Girl Scouts

the historic Oregon-California trail, just six miles south of Marysville in Marshall County, Kansas. Here they host an open air concert, enticing people to hike and enjoy music as it mixes with the meadows.

Use media. Regardless of the activities and events your community chooses, continue to leverage social media by making a bike/ped Facebook page where people can share photos and videos. Use local media such as newspapers to get the word out about special events.

Rally volunteers. Organize a committee that includes citizens to help maintain and continue improving the trail. People who participate in maintaining a facility become more invested in its success.

Conclusion

Community engagement has evolved beyond the simple public hearing; it has grown to represent an open process that reallocates decision-making influence to citizens. And while it takes longer, it has been proven time and again to increase positive perceptions of citizens seeking participation and foster a sense of community. No matter where your community is in the planning process of a project, there is the opportunity (and need) for community engagement. ■

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