
# LET'S GO FOR A WALK!

## *PLANNING GUIDE FOR A WALKABLE COMMUNITY, 2nd EDITION*

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

alta

## Introduction

Walking is a great way to get around your neighborhood, visit with your neighbors, and be healthy at the same time! The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) uses the term “walking” to include all forms of mobility devices, such as a wheelchair, cane, or walker. Walking trips can be long or short distances and include walking to/from public transit or a parked car.

Neighborhoods with paths or sidewalks between destinations and with amenities like trees and lighting are safer and more comfortable for walking, but not all neighborhoods were designed with walking in mind. In the past, many communities prioritized moving cars as quickly through neighborhoods as possible even if it made walking unsafe. Federal and local policies such as redlining and zoning contributed to racial segregation in housing and separation between homes and destinations. These decisions, made over many years, have contributed to the existing conditions in each neighborhood today.

If you want to walk for short trips or for fun, but are not comfortable doing it in your neighborhood, this planning guide will help you improve conditions for walking by going on a “walk audit.” A **walk audit** is a group or solo activity in which people evaluate the walking environment and identify issues that impact their comfort and safety.

This guide includes:

- Why walking matters
- Information about how streets and communities are planned
- Steps to plan a walk audit
- A fillable walk audit form

## Getting Started

1. Review this planning guide for tips that make a walkable community.
2. Go for a walk in your neighborhood and fill out the "Walk Audit Form." Use the sample form at the end of this document for ideas.
3. Take the action steps to make your community more walkable.

# Why Walking Matters

## Health & Safety Benefits

- Replacing time spent sitting with time spent walking boosts health outcomes: Time spent sitting in a motor vehicle is associated with chronic diseases like cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and type 2 diabetes as well as increased stress.
- Less driving means cleaner air: Cars emit $CO_2$, nitrous oxide, sulfur oxide, and other gases that are associated with asthma attacks and cardiovascular disease. Pregnant people, newborns, children, and people with chronic illnesses are especially vulnerable to air.
- Walking can provide mental health benefits from spending time outdoors and reducing social isolation.

## Community Benefits

- Walkable communities are more equitable: Many people rely on walking and cannot drive due to age, disability, immigration status, poverty, and other factors. Walking infrastructure can provide access to green space, which communities of color are less likely to have access to.
- People prefer walking: While people prefer walking to driving, most say they drive because they have no other options.
- Walking is key to reducing air pollution: Transportation is the biggest source of greenhouse gas emissions in the U.S. To avoid the worst effects of climate change, we must reduce transportation energy use. Encouraging more people to walk, bike, and take public transit, especially for short trips in the neighborhood, is key to fighting climate change.
- Replacing trips taken by car with walking trips can also help reduce noise pollution.
- Walkability enhances quality of life and provides opportunities for social connection: 88% of those who agree that there are places to walk to nearby also report that they are more satisfied with their quality of life.

## Economic Benefits

- Reducing vehicle use is better for family budgets: Living in a walkable community can allow families to go car-lite or car-free. The average cost to own and operate one car is $8,500/year. Rural households are especially cost-burdened: they earn less than urban

families, but own more cars, and spend more on gasoline and motor oil driving to destinations that are more spread out. Walking can also provide a free opportunity for physical activity.

- Reducing vehicle use is better for community budgets: Walkable communities developed according to smart growth principles are more efficient and cheaper to administer. Walkable neighborhoods also generate larger tax revenue per square foot than other types of development.

## Tools for Creating Walkable Communities

The following tools make it easier and more pleasant to **walk along a roadway**:

***Pedestrian-only Street / "Shared Street"***

***Shade Trees***

***Paved Shoulder***

***Lighting***

***Sidewalk***

***Benches***

***Sidepath***

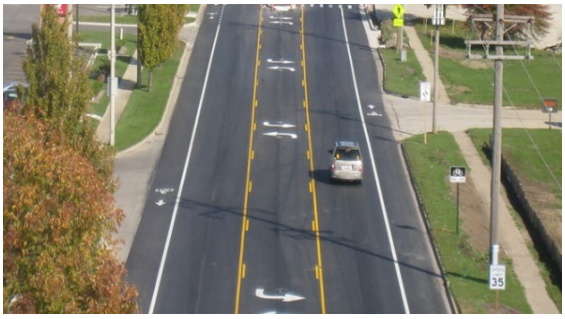
The following tools make it easier and more pleasant to **walk across a roadway**:

***Curb ramp***

***Pedestrian refuge island or median***

***Curb extension***

***Road diet or travel/parking lane narrowing***



***Crosswalk***

***Pedestrian crossing warning sign***

***Raised crosswalk***

***Pedestrian crossing beacon***

## How to Create More Walkable Neighborhoods

The streets, sidewalks, bike lanes, and trails that we see in neighborhoods across Minnesota were planned by people working in local and state government, and influenced by national investment policies. These transportation features have historically been planned and built over many years of development, often without participation from everyone impacted by a project. Knowing more about this process will help you identify opportunities for creating more walkable neighborhoods.

### How did my neighborhood get built?

Depending on where you live there are many answers to that question. However, there are a few trends that impacted most cities and towns across the U.S., including communities in Minnesota. For example, federal policies around home loans in the 1950s meant that some areas were "redlined," or marked as not eligible for certain types of investment. These communities were largely communities of color, and faced many years of low investment in the housing stock and public amenities.

Many neighborhoods were also shaped by highway development in the 1950s and 1960s. When the federal government funded highway construction, local governments often chose to tear down neighborhoods with a greater concentration of households with low incomes and households of people of color to route these new roadways into the heart of a city. This left some neighborhoods divided by polluting highways while other neighborhoods kept their tree-lined boulevards, creating division by social structures such as race, ethnicity, and income. To this day, many highways are a barrier for people walking between neighborhoods, and make it less comfortable for people walking nearby.

One of the most important laws impacting walking conditions in your community is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), passed in 1990 after years of work by disability activists. One of the ADA's requirements is that streets be accessible to people with disabilities. Although streets since the early 1990s have been built to meet ADA standards (like including curb ramps at crossings), many communities have older streets that are still inaccessible. In addition, inconsistent snow and ice removal may cause some streets and sidewalks that are ordinarily accessible in the summer to become inaccessible during the winter.

## Who makes decisions?

Many government agencies are involved with transportation planning because streets are owned by different levels of government. For example, the street outside your home might be owned by the city. The busy "main street" that goes through your town center might be owned by the county where you live or the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT).
Various departments within each public agency have different responsibilities for providing safe, convenient, scenic, and comfortable walking infrastructure. Your city or county's Public Works Department is likely the most relevant office to discuss improvements to streets and sidewalks, but the Parks department may have a role in making sure changes improve the environment or connect to existing parks, for example.

Knowing which level of government owns the streets along your walk audit route will help you know who to work with to improve walkability. The MnDOT website has an online mapping tool called Enterprise MnDOT Mapping Application (EMMA). You can use this free online map to look up the ownership of streets near you.

***Example Diagram of Typical Street Ownership***


## How are decisions made?

It is important to start advocating for improvements now because road projects require significant planning before construction begins. Projects vary in scale and include temporary demonstration projects, resurfacing, and reconstruction projects. Reconstruction projects are intended to last for decades. They typically involve large changes, such as excavating the street and sidewalk. These projects are planned years in advance and often offer the greatest opportunities for walkability improvements. Resurfacing projects are more limited in scope but can still impact walking. They can include road diets, curb extensions, and other changes. It can be helpful for people to experience potential improvements over a shorter term before

committing to long-term solutions. Demonstration projects are short term opportunities to try out a new design before investing in a permanent fix. Getting involved in these temporary projects can help ensure that the long-term solution will work for everyone.

Even projects that are not focused on walking impact walkability in a myriad of ways. For example, adding a new lane of traffic will increase the distance someone must walk to cross the street. Sharing the impact that a transportation project will have on the way you move around your community is important, because even well-intentioned decisionmakers can overlook the unintentional effects of a project, such as making it more challenging or less comfortable to walk.

***A demonstration road project.***

***A road is resurfaced.***

***A road is reconstructed.***

- **Capital Improvement Program** (CIP): Governments create CIPs to plan transportation investments for the next 5-10 years (e.g., bridge projects, resurfacing, reconstruction). These projects are often funded by a combination of grants, taxes, and bonds. Looking ahead to future projects in the CIP can help advocate for walking improvements early in the planning process.
- **Active Transportation Plan**, **Comprehensive Plan, Corridor Study, Safe Routes to School Plan, or other planning process**: Plans consider what it is currently like to walk in a community and how infrastructure improvements, policy changes, and education programs could improve that experience. Planning processes are a good time to share specific ideas and feedback about streets that you think would benefit from walking improvements. Plans help communities identify and prioritize desired changes. Sometimes, changes to a street are tested as temporary demonstration projects. Instead of reconstruction or resurfacing, demonstration projects use low-cost materials to gain feedback about potential future changes to the street.

## Planning a Walk Audit

On a walk audit, community members and decision makers observe and identify opportunities to improve the comfort and safety of the surrounding environment. Because walking experiences can vary depending on the time of day and season, walk audits conducted while it is dark and during the winter can help to support walking in all conditions.

Proactively including people with physical and cognitive disabilities is important because they are more likely to rely on walking for daily trips and may be more aware of and impacted by problems in the transportation network. When a street is accessible for people with disabilities, it is accessible for all people.

There may be other community groups who are less connected to organized planning processes, but could benefit from sharing their perspective through a walk audit or other opportunities for input. Connecting with these groups will likely require more effort and creativity. Keep these groups in mind as you read the walk audit preparation below, and try to connect with them in advance of the event. Consider committing a portion of the budget to compensating the community group's time.

### Before the Walk

Review the Minnesota Department of Health's Inclusive Walk Audit Facilitator's Guide for information about organizing walk audits that are inclusive of people with disabilities.

### 1-2 months before walk audit

- Connect with local disability organizations and cultural organizations with a presence in the community
- Select meeting location and date that works for organizers and key participants
- Plan for compensating attendees for their time and expertise
- Obtain disability simulation devices (if using)

### 1 month before walk audit

- Publicize walk audit and any accessibility considerations (such as language resources, trusted community member co-hosts, whether children are welcome, etc.) and request RSVPs
- Directly invite people with disabilities
- Research any languages spoken at the school or housing communities nearby, and invite community leaders or school interpreters to join the audit
- Plan walk audit route(s) and develop virtual walk audit materials
- Develop meeting agenda

### 2 weeks before walk audit

- Post screen-reader accessible versions of materials online and/or share via email

- Share information on accessing the meeting location
- Ask participants about additional needed accommodations

## 1 week before walk audit

- Remind participants of the meeting time and location, and what materials are available for them to review in advance
- Obtain/prepare compensation for confirmed attendees

## On the Walk:

- Walk the route and complete the walk audit form
- Discuss answers as a group or reflect individually
- Provide a forum for participants to share feedback after the event

## After the Walk:

- Follow up with the people and agencies who can help make improvements
- Reflect on the participants that were able to attend the walk audit and determine if any additional outreach is necessary to capture all perspectives that were invited

# Walk Audit Form

**Date**: **Walking Route Location**:

**Walking Route Stops**:

**Upcoming projects or planning processes** (if known):

*Instructions: Write down what you notice while on the walk. Note ideas for improvements, and identify action steps and individuals or organizations who might be able to help take action.*

| Considerations | Observations | Ideas for Improvements |
|---|---|---|
| Do you have room to walk? | | |
| Is it easy to cross streets? | | |
| Do you feel safe here? What makes you feel safe or unsafe? | | |
| Is the route pleasant? | | |
| How comfortable would you feel walking here with a child or elderly family member? With someone who has low vision or who uses a wheelchair? Waiting for the bus at night? | | |
| What else do you want to share? | | |

# Walk Audit Form

**Date**: September 27th **Walking Route Location**: City Hall to Central Park via Main Street

**Walking Route Stops**: Bank, Bus Stop, Library

**Upcoming projects or planning processes** (if known): Main Street (County road) to be reconstructed in 2-3 years; downtown parking study in progress; bicycle and pedestrian plan update next year

*Instructions: Write down what you notice as you walk. Note ideas for improvements, and identify action steps and individuals or organizations who might be able to help take action.*

| Considerations | Observations | Ideas for Improvements |
|---|---|---|
| Do you have room to walk? | Utility poles blocking path and overgrown bushes near bus stop. Wide sidewalk near library. | Trim vegetation- could city remind property owners? Move utility poles and build wider sidewalks when the street is reconstructed- talk to County staff |
| Is it easy to cross streets? | Long distances between intersections with traffic lights. Had to wait a long time for the walk sign. Drivers didn't stop at mid-block crossing near the bank. | The mid-block crossing could be more visible. Is there something the County could do now to help with that? |
| Do you feel safe here? What makes you feel safe or unsafe? | Drivers were swerving around another car waiting to turn. There wasn't a lot of space to wait at the crosswalk, and I felt uncomfortable so close to the cars. | If this road had a center turn lane, it would be easier to turn. Can this street change from 4 lanes to 2 lanes with a center turn lane? Could we test is out temporarily to see how it would work?<br>Could there be more room for people waiting to cross? |
| Is the route pleasant? | Area near the library had benches and shade trees- very comfortable. Near the bus stop there was no buffer from traffic. | When the street is reconstructed, we should make room for trees between the sidewalk and the road. Ask city staff about making sure the bicycle and pedestrian plan talks about trees and buffer space. |
| How comfortable would you feel walking here with a child or elderly family member? With someone who has low vision or who uses a wheelchair? Waiting for the bus at night? | Someone using a wheelchair would have a hard time on the narrow sidewalk by the bus stop. Lack of an audible signal to walk at the traffic light would make it hard for someone with low vision to cross. I'd never let my kids cross this street alone! | Find out if city or county has control over adding an audible signal. Talk with neighbors about what would make street safer for kids. |
| What else do you want us to share? | I see a lot of people waiting for the bus here coming from the senior center. | Could we get benches for the older folks so they can sit while they wait for the bus? |