

# Aitkin's Walkable Community Workshop: Results and Next Steps



## Background

The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) hosts Walkable Community Workshops (WCW) to support community efforts to become more walkable. In a walkable community, walking is a practical, safe, comfortable, and enjoyable mode of transportation. The workshops introduce core principles to support walkability and begin with a walk audit where community members evaluate the walking environment and identify issues that impact their comfort and safety. Following the walk audit, there is an action planning session. MDH provides post-workshop technical assistance and seed funding to jump-start implementation of ideas from the action planning session. MDH contracts with Alta Planning and Design to deliver the workshops.

MDH partnered with Aitkin County CARE, Aitkin County Public Health, the City of Aitkin, and other community leaders to host a WCW. To determine a geographic focus area for the WCW, the planning team reviewed upcoming street projects and connections between destinations within Aitkin. The team selected a route looping around the downtown and down to a key park access point.

The project team reached out to community members to encourage them to participate in a walk audit. Participants chose either an independent in-person walk audit or a group in-person walk audit, which

## Key Takeaway

*Community members, public agency staff, and key stakeholders identified a need for walking infrastructure improvements in Downtown Aitkin and along Hwy 210 and 169. A committed group of stakeholders is implementing a demonstration project to improve walking conditions along Hwy 169 in Spring 2023.*



Figure 1: Walkable Community Workshop Flyer



Figure 2: Walk Audit Route

was held the morning of the workshop. During the group walk audit, participants had the opportunity to use a wheelchair to experience the walking route from a different perspective.

## Walkability Needs in Aitkin

The project team held a Walkable Community Workshop in July 2022 to discuss the walk audit and brainstorm actions to improve walkability. 16 people brought their ideas and enthusiasm to the interactive workshop, including:

- Local residents
- Key public agency staff: City of Aitkin Interim Street Commissioner, MnDOT District 3 Project Manager, Aitkin County Engineer, City of Aitkin Police Chief, Aitkin County Public Health Supervisor
- Community stakeholders: Growth Innovations, Aitkin County CARE, Aitkin Manor



Figure 3: Group Walk Audit

Participants said that the route needs **consistently wide and more even sidewalks** that are buffered from the roadway and free of debris and obstructions, accessible **curb ramps** at every intersection, and **shorter distances between crossings**. The curve in Hwy 169 near Holiday, railroad tracks, wide roadways, heavy vehicle traffic, and cars parked near crossings made walking uncomfortable. They noted that in winter, **snow and ice make walking difficult**, with property owners inconsistently clearing their adjacent sidewalks. The intersection of Minnesota Ave and 3<sup>rd</sup> St felt comfortable and friendly; a recent project removed several parking spaces and added curb extensions with planters and benches.

Participants were excited about several action steps for making walking better in Aitkin, including **improving sidewalk conditions**, filling in **sidewalk gaps**, creating a **5k route map**, designating a **maintained route for winter walking**, incentivizing **walking to businesses**, improving **crosswalk signage**, **narrowing roadways** and clarifying lane markings, and **implementing quick build improvements** to make changes in the short term.

Highway 210 and Highway 169 are scheduled for reconstruction in 2030, presenting an opportunity to overcome many of the barriers to walking in Aitkin.



Figure 4: Brainstorming Action Steps at Workshop

## Testing a Solution

After the workshop, a subset of workshop attendees met to determine how to use \$5,000 of implementation funding and 100 hours of technical assistance from MDH. After considering multiple options, they decided to focus implementation efforts on a demonstration project along Hwy 169. In consultation with MnDOT, the team is designing curb extensions and a temporary on-street pedestrian path on the west Hwy 169 to fill in a sidewalk gap from 3<sup>rd</sup> St SW to 1<sup>st</sup> St SW, as well as curb extensions at the existing crosswalk across Hwy 169 near 1<sup>st</sup> St SW. The team secured additional funding to augment the seed funding from MDH, and has ordered traffic paint, removable reflective tape, and white flex posts in preparation for the installation.



*Figure 5: Demonstration Pedestrian Access Lane Example*

## Next Steps

The implementation team will continue to meet monthly until installing the demonstration project in Spring 2023 with support from Alta Planning and Design. The team will plan community engagement and project evaluation strategies, and recruit volunteers for installation. The demonstration project is intended to remain in place until Fall 2023.