

Bemidji'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 the Headwaters Regional Development Commission (HRDC), the City of Bemidji, the Greater Bemidji Area Joint Planning Board (GBA-JPB), and other community leaders to host a WCW. The planning team surveyed community leaders, non-profits, and government agencies to determine locations where walkability improvements are needed. Top areas of concern included the area around the Ridgeway Court apartments, Sanford Health, Gene Dillon Elementary, and South Bemidji. The team chose to focus the workshop on South Bemidji, and designed a walk audit route that highlighted key walking destinations and multiple types of streets and intersections.

Together with students from Bemidji State University (BSU), the project team reached out to community members to encourage them to participate in the walk audit. Participants chose either a virtual walk audit with video filmed along the route or an independent in-person walk audit, and then filled out surveys about their level of comfort walking the route.

Key Takeaway

Bemidji's Walkable Community Workshop resulted in a popular demonstration project to improve a crossing near Lincoln Elementary. Next steps include reinstalling the project in 2023, taking steps toward a permanent change, and developing a city-wide demonstration project program.

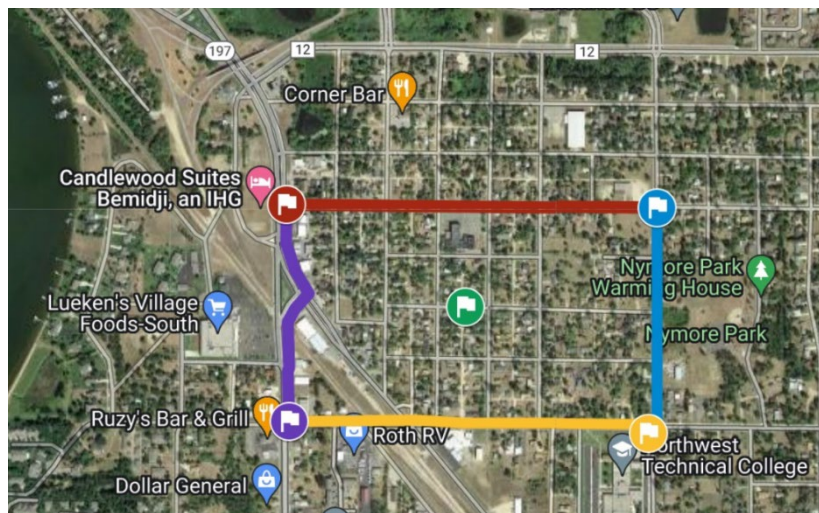


Figure 1: Walk Audit Route

Walkability Concerns in South Bemidji

The project team held a Virtual Walkable Community Workshop for South Bemidji in April 2022 to discuss the walk audits and brainstorm actions to improve walkability. Over 20 people brought their ideas and enthusiasm to the two-hour interactive workshop, including:

- Local elected officials: Mayor, Ward 5 City Council Member, Beltrami County Commissioner
- Key agency staff: Beltrami County Engineer, GBA-JPB Planning Director, MnDOT District 2 Planning Director and Project Manager, Bemidji Parks and Recreation Board Director, Bemidji Area Schools Superintendent, HRDC Executive Director
- BSU students and BSU professor
- Local residents and business owners

Participants shared that the walk audit was an eye-opening experience. **Many people felt unsafe, noting areas with limited buffers between the sidewalk and street, disconnected sidewalks, snow and ice blocking sidewalks, fast moving traffic, and long crossing distances.** Portions of the route with less traffic and slower speeds felt more comfortable than high traffic, high speed areas.

Several action steps for making walking better in Bemidji emerged from the workshop, including **investment in walking infrastructure** (filling sidewalk gaps, adding buffers from traffic, improving crossings of busy streets, and removing snow and ice), **identifying priority routes** that connect to key destinations like Lincoln Elementary, and **implementing quick build improvements** to make changes in the short term.

Implementing 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. They decided to focus implementation efforts on a demonstration project at Gould Ave NE/SE & 1st St E/W. They selected this location to improve the safety of children walking to and from school at Lincoln Elementary and residents in the Nymore area to access the Bemidji Trail System. The team designed a demonstration protected intersection with the aim of slowing vehicle speeds, increasing the visibility of people walking and biking and shortening the crossing distance for people walking, while allowing school buses to turn safely.



Figure 2: Demonstration Project Design

With traffic control assistance from the City of Bemidji, a group of volunteers led by Alta Planning and Design installed the demonstration project over about six hours on August 31, 2022. They painted a crosswalk, laid down reflective removable tape, and secured white flex posts to the pavement with butyl pads. During installation, many people driving and walking through the area voiced their support for the project and requested the same treatment at other intersections. One nearby resident was so pleased that she spontaneously joined in the installation! The installation received positive press on Lakeland PBS.

Community feedback, both shared verbally with team members and online, was overwhelmingly positive. The following is representative of the feedback from Bemidji residents:

- “Thank you for working to make Bemidji more walkable! Work on this intersection is a great idea, and I hope the City Council and Engineering Department will follow up with a permanent solution.”
- “I believe this great opportunity to provide another great access point to our trail system. Also it gives drivers another reminder to ease up a little in this distracted era that we live in. The safety factor alone is well worth it. Great to those behind this project”
- “This project provides excellent awareness for a busy area with so many pedestrians and vehicles. I’d love to see more of these in our community!”
- “I sincerely appreciate this project creating a safer, pedestrian friendly environment. Particularly for our young people who may be walking to school or area parks.”
- The layout of this project forces drivers to pay attention and recognize a potential hazard. Car/Pedestrian crashes are on the rise and fatalities have dramatically increased. Crosswalks deserve the attention of drivers.”
- “This should be made permanent. Excellent improvement for the safety of children walking to school, and for others!”



Figure 3: Volunteer Installation Team



Figure 4: Installed Demonstration Project

One community member voiced concern that making a right turn in a vehicle at the intersection felt tight, which was consistent with the intent of the demonstration project (to slow down turning vehicles).

The demonstration protected intersection remained in place until November 4th. The materials held up well over the course of the two-month period. Only one of the 27 flex posts was knocked down by a vehicle.

Recommended Next Steps

HRDC plans to reinstall the treatments in coordination with the City in Spring 2023.

Recommendation for the 2023 installation include:

- Conduct an evaluation of before and after conditions related to traffic speeds, vehicle yielding, and number of pedestrians crossing 1st and Gould Ave.
- Extend the project to the trail that ends just west of Walborg Ave NE.
- Systematically collect feedback from people traveling in the area by all modes.

Given the evident appetite to make the change permanent, the City may consider applying for funding for a permanent infrastructure project.

The city may also consider developing a program to deliver low-cost demonstration projects in more locations.