



Creative Funding Strategies for Walkability Improvements in Rural and Small Towns: Ideas from Arkansas

INTRODUCTION

Improving walkability in rural and small towns is a challenging yet rewarding endeavor. Rural communities typically have populations of less than 5,000 people, with some having as few as 1,000 residents. These communities often face limited funding, small tax bases, and a lack of pedestrian infrastructure. However, creative funding strategies can bridge these gaps and transform rural areas into walkable, bikeable, and healthier communities. This article outlines various innovative funding sources and strategies used in rural Arkansas.

Arkansas is predominantly rural, with many communities having populations as low as 1,000 to 2,300 residents. In 2021, the Arkansas Department of Health invited the National Association of Chronic Disease Directors (NACDD) to their state to



implement an Active People, Healthy NationSM [Walkability Action Institute](https://www.walkabilityactioninstitute.org/) (WAI). The WAI brings together cross-disciplinary teams representing public health, planning, transportation, elected officials, and other disciplines to participate in an intensive, applied-learning course on improving walkability with a focus on community and transportation design.

After participating in the WAI, several communities across the state pursued a variety of funding strategies to make it easier for people to walk or bike to everyday places such as grocery stores and parks.

The key funding sources identified by Arkansas communities and general examples of how these funds can be used are outlined below.



1 Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP)

Overview: This federal program provides funding for projects that enhance transportation alternatives, including pedestrian and bicycle facilities.

Example: State Departments of Transportation can adjust the grading matrix for TAP grants to favor rural communities working to improve walking and biking options. Learn more about [basics of TAP funding](#) and the [10 eligible project types](#). Visit the Federal Highway Administration's Transportation Alternatives [website](#) for technical guidance and use their [directory](#) to find your State Transportation Alternatives Coordinator.

2 Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Grants

Overview: The EPA offers grants aimed at reducing environmental impact, such as nocturnal lighting grants.

Example: Communities can apply for grants to install solar lights, which reduce light pollution and support nocturnal wildlife. These lights also improve safety and walkability in rural areas. [Learn more](#) about EPA Grant Programs and Other Funding Opportunities and [subscribe](#) to the EPA Grants Update Listserv for grant updates and new trainings and webinars.

3 Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Grants

Overview: FEMA provides funding for natural disaster preparedness and recovery, which can be leveraged for community centers.

Example: Rural towns can use FEMA grants to build community centers that double as shelters during disasters. These centers can serve as gyms or community hubs during normal times. [Learn more](#) about the different types of FEMA Grants.

4 Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) Grants

Overview: These grants focus on reducing crime and improving community safety.

Example: Funds can be used to create parks and recreational spaces that foster community engagement and trust between residents and law enforcement. Subscribe to the [BJA Listserv](#) to receive funding announcements.

5 USDA Economic Development Loan & Grant Program

Overview: The USDA offers grants and loans for community and economic development in rural areas.

Example: Use these funds for small projects that contribute to a larger community action plan. Visit the USDA's Rural Economic Development Loan & Grant Program [website](#) for technical guidance and use their [directory](#) to find contact information for your state office.

KEY FUNDING STRATEGIES

6 American Heart Association (AHA) Social Impact Funds

Overview: The AHA offers grants to drive equitable health and well-being for all, specifically through the lens of adverse social determinants of health and related structural inequity.

Investments through these funds are designed to address the needs of communities from within the communities themselves.

Example: Apply for grants to fund initiatives that promote physical activity and healthy lifestyles, particularly those at risk for heart disease. [Learn more](#) about the focus areas of AHA's Social Impact Funds.

8 National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) Broadband Grant Programs

Overview: NITA's Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment Program (BEAD) Program prioritizes funding for unserved locations, specifically those that have no internet access or lack reliable broadband service. Through BEAD, NTIA allocates funding to all 50 states, Washington D.C., and U.S. territories to subgrant out to their respective communities.

Example: Conduct a broadband study and use the data to apply for state-level BEAD grants. Use the funding to establish Wi-Fi hotspots throughout the community to support telemedicine and other online services. Wi-Fi hotspots can be placed community centers and parks, which give community members and families access to internet while providing a place for recreating and being physically active. Learn more about BEAD and other NTIA [broadband grant programs](#).

7 AARP Community Challenge Grants

Overview: AARP funds quick-action projects across the country, helping urban, rural and suburban communities make immediate improvements and jumpstart long-term progress to support residents of all ages.

Example: Apply for grants to fund initiatives that promote physical activity and healthy lifestyles, particularly for older adults. [Learn more](#) about AARP's Community Challenge and [email](#) program leads for technical assistance.

9 Local and State Economic Development Grants and Loans

Overview: Economic development organizations often offer funding and technical assistance for economic development projects.

Example: Utilize these resources to revitalize [Main Streets](#) and other critical areas and to enhance walkability and community engagement. Find and connect with your state and local economic development organizations using the U.S. Economic Development Administration's [directory](#).

Contact Information

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Center for Advancing Healthy Communities
NACDD

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR SECURING FUNDING

The Arkansas communities that leveraged these innovative funding sources recommend the following tips to help other rural communities secure funding:

1 Incorporate Active Transportation Principles into Comprehensive Plans

Ensure that transportation plans outline the community's goals and strategies for improving walkability and bikeability. Engage local stakeholders, including the mayor, city council, and community members, to ensure broad support.

2 Leverage Multiple Funding Sources

Combine funds from various grants to cover different aspects of a project. For example, use EPA grants for lighting, FEMA grants for community centers, and USDA grants for overall development.

3 Engage in Persistent Networking

Reach out to federal, state, and local agencies, as well as private foundations and organizations. Attend meetings, workshops, and conferences to build relationships and learn about new funding opportunities.

4 Conduct Community Engagement

Hold meetings in various neighborhoods to gather input and build support. Ensure that community members feel heard and involved in the planning process.

5 Document and Showcase Successes

Keep detailed records of funded projects and their impacts. Use this data to support future grant applications and to demonstrate the benefits of walkability improvements.

CONCLUSION

Improving walkability in rural and small towns requires creativity, persistence, and collaboration. By leveraging a variety of funding sources and engaging the community, it is possible to create vibrant, healthy, and walkable environments.

The strategies and tips outlined in this article provide a roadmap for rural communities to achieve their walkability goals and improve the quality of life for their residents.

