



Promoting Walking and Biking in Walla Walla Valley, Washington

Walla Walla Valley, encompassing the City of Walla Walla and the smaller city of College Place, has a population of about 50,000 people. The valley is characterized by its mix of urban and rural landscapes, with extensive agricultural fields. The region faces transportation challenges, including legacy infrastructure designed primarily for automobiles, poor connectivity between urban and rural areas, and a lack of attention to the needs of pedestrians and cyclists, which makes it difficult to create a safer environment for all residents.

In 2021, a cross-sector team from Walla Walla Valley attended the National

Association of Chronic Disease Directors' Active People, Healthy NationSM [Walkability Action Institute](#) (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. Since their attendance at the WAI, Walla Walla Valley leveraged over \$3 million in funding to implement a variety of collaborative efforts to create a safer environment for pedestrians and cyclists. Some of the strategies are outlined below.

Community Walk Audits

The Walla Walla Valley Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) led community walk audits to identify and address barriers to walkability. The walk audits engaged residents, transportation experts, public health officials, and city administrators to collaboratively identify and prioritize needed improvements. The audits emerged as a significant method for community engagement and education about the health benefits of walking and how to analyze pedestrian and biking infrastructure. Due in part to the walk audits conducted near Pioneer Park, safe and accessible pedestrian park access has been improved by adding a Rectangular Rapid Flashing Beacon, ramps that comply with the Americans with Disability Act standards, curb extensions, and new sidewalks at several intersections adjacent to the park.

Safe Routes to School Program

The metropolitan planning organization collaborated with local school districts to develop safe routes to school maps and informational flyers. The initiative aimed to educate students and parents on safe biking and walking practices, encouraging more children to walk or bike to school. The project also included the distribution of printed maps and the organization of walking school bus events to promote safe, walking and biking among students.

Temporary Infrastructure Projects

To address immediate safety concerns and gather data for long-term improvements, the City of Walla Walla implemented temporary infrastructure projects. For example, they installed temporary plastic bollards and curb extensions at key intersections to slow traffic and make pedestrian crossings safer. The positive community response and data collected from the projects helped inform city council funding for permanent infrastructure changes.

“The WAI was the catalyst for everything. Without it, none of this work would have started. NACDD’s continued technical assistance and support through the WAI has been instrumental in implementing of our action plan and connecting us to resources and people.”

- **Timothy Barrett**, Washington State Department of Transportation

Project Sidewalk

Using a web-based tool called [Project Sidewalk](#), the Walla Walla Valley team began gathering data on sidewalk conditions and usability issues. The tool allows users to virtually walk through neighborhoods using Google Street View imagery, marking areas that need improvement. The project aims to build a comprehensive dataset to inform future infrastructure projects, ensuring they address the most critical needs in the community. The approach also involves training community members to use the tool, fostering broader community engagement and ownership of the process.

Revised Grant Application Process

The MPO revised its grant application process to include considerations for pedestrian needs and health outcomes. The changes better aligned financial resources with the community's goals of improving walkability and bikeability, ensuring that projects promoting these forms of transportation would be prioritized for funding.

Collaboration with Educational Institutions

The Walla Walla Valley team has begun working with students from a local university to collect data for Project Sidewalk activities. By engaging students, the Walla Walla team hopes to provide future engineers and planners with practical experience while also expanding the pool of data collectors and walking and biking supporters.

The success of Walla Walla Valley's efforts to promote walking and biking highlights the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and community engagement to collectively achieve long-lasting change. Initiatives sparked by the team's participation in the WAI have led to significant improvements, making the region safer for pedestrians, cyclists, and people with disabilities.

“Temporary projects can be a great way to kick off community interest and conversations about changes to a certain location. The City of Walla Walla added a temporary curb extension with plastic flexposts at a pedestrian-heavy intersection. The community was able to experience the changes which generated positive support and led to city council action and funding for a permanent change.”

- **Timothy Barrett**, Washington State Department of Transportation

Contact Information

Timothy Barrett

Senior Multimodal Transportation Planner

timothy.barrett@wsdot.wa.gov

Washington State Department of Transportation



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