

Rural Community Profiles: Physical Activity

Rural Places Make Active Spaces

West Jefferson, North Carolina

West Jefferson was designed as a manufacturing town. Nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains, the town grew up around a railroad that hauled lumber from the mountains to regional cities. West Jefferson, like many rural communities, prioritized building roads to accommodate large trucks and through traffic. With little funding and a small population dispersed across miles of county land, the town couldn't justify infrastructure investments to support walking and biking. But as the town's economy shifted, a downtown redesign became increasingly important for residents' health and the burgeoning tourist industry. West Jefferson drew up new plans, but with few resources to make those changes a reality, the town was forced to table them.

While many rural leaders – like those in West Jefferson – may face initial resistance to streetscape improvements, **towns that have taken steps to create safe environments for people walking and biking have reaped both health and financial benefits.**

The town's big opportunity arrived when the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) decided to resurface West Jefferson's main thoroughfare. Realizing the state could cut maintenance costs and increase safety by replacing two traffic signals with stop signs, NCDOT presented the town with a plan to allocate supplementary funding to improve their streetscape. After weeks of conversation between NCDOT, the town alderman, and the Chamber of Commerce, West Jefferson's town council passed a resolution to formalize support for the project. The policy

Strategies to increase opportunities for physical activity in rural communities:



Create safe environments for recreation and play



Create an active, vibrant business district



Create and maintain safe trails

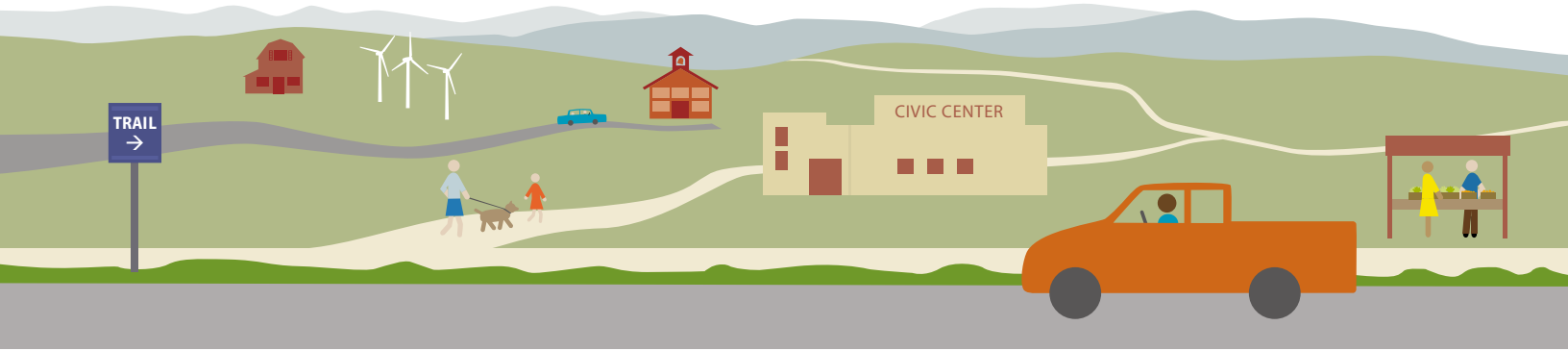


Improve policy and infrastructure to support active transportation

authorized the removal of traffic signals and approved the new street design with an emphasis on pedestrian safety.

"Those drivers saw those green lights and really nothing was going to slow them down. Their focus is always far ahead of them and always above street level," noted Dean Ledbetter, an engineer with NCDOT. "By replacing the signals with stop signs, **we've created an environment where people realize it isn't just about getting through town, it's about interacting with the environment.** They get to see the new shops that have come to town or a new display in the window." According to the Chamber of Commerce, the new street design has helped boost the local economy. In the first two years after the redesign, ten new businesses opened, 56 new jobs were created, and more than \$500,000 in private investment came to the town.





Trails to Wellness

Kansas

“Perhaps what’s most surprising to people who are unfamiliar with rural areas,” Elizabeth Stewart of the Sunflower Foundation explained, “is the need to have infrastructure to facilitate physical activity. In frontier counties, you have nothing but miles and miles of land, so one might wonder, why can’t people just go out and walk or bike?” Like many of the rural communities the Sunflower Foundation serves, rural towns face real challenges providing publically accessible space for physical activity. Much of the land is privately owned, and most rural highways and roads don’t have shoulders that make it safe to walk or bike. Even if traffic is light, drivers barrel down country roads at high speeds. Stewart explained, “the need and desire for a safe place to walk is so great that residents in rural Kansas will drive into a small town to walk or jog on a public trail.”

“Trails often do more than just offer opportunities for physical activity, which in and of itself is important,” Stewart noted. **“Trails often serve as a catalyst for further action around health and a point of local pride.”** Trails can improve the quality of life in a small town and depending on the trail (e.g., rail-trail), can attract tourists and visitors.” Finally, Stewart says trails can serve as real community builders because the goals tend to be universal. “Regardless of politics, just about everyone agrees on the value of a public place where people of all ages and abilities can convene, recreate, and enjoy the outdoors.”

Building Buy-In

Shelby, Montana

“We started out with the belief that local government should play a role in the health of a community. A healthy community is a better tax paying community,” Mayor Larry Bonderud said of the physical activity initiatives in Shelby, Montana. So if wellness makes good economic sense, where do you begin? Shelby’s City Council decided to start with a small initiative.

“We started by renovating our civic center to make it healthier. We built an exercise room and then got funding to add racquetball courts, treadmills, and weightlifting. But if parents wanted to exercise, what were their kids going to do? We built a teen area and then a tot area. We gave keys to every member so we could save on staffing and because everyone has different schedules. Then we hired a recreation director to make it fun and run programs.” Mayor Bonderud explained.

Eventually, 25 percent of the population was making use of the facilities, which helped build community buy-in for larger policy initiatives. Mayor Bonderud explained: **“We got a real buy-in that community wellness is important.”** That led to the development of a trail. We now have a 5.5-mile trail, with a second trail in development. We have adopted a Complete Streets ordinance that encourages shared-use pathways and a trail system that’s easy and accessible.”