

CASE STUDIES OF BICYCLING & WALKING IN SMALL COMMUNITIES: *LABELLE, FLORIDA*



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COVER IMAGES

Front Cover Top: Mural in the historic downtown LaBelle

Front Cover Middle: City of LaBelle's seal

Front Cover Bottom: Speed humps and oak trees on Fraser Avenue

The back cover presents a photo collage of people walking and bicycling in LaBelle, Florida, as observed by the case study researchers while on-site.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this case study was to identify bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure and programs in LaBelle, Florida that would be of interest to other peer communities. The northwest quadrant of the community (a division created by the intersection of SR80 and SR29) is the most walkable and bikeable. The streets are low-speed and have limited traffic. The Edward A. Upthegrove Elementary School is located in this quadrant, and it appears that as a result of the Hendry County Comprehensive Pathways Master Plan, a sidewalk had been installed in place of social trails that were present along Fraser Avenue. This sidewalk provides a walkable connection from the elementary school to the nearby LaBelle Nature Park. In addition, amongst the large, old oak trees, speed humps are present along Fraser Avenue (cover page, bottom left photo). Also in this quadrant is the historic downtown, dubbed the “Walking District,” which hosts many murals (cover page, top left photo), local businesses, historic buildings, and a parklet. Sidewalks in this quadrant have been recently repaired. While on-site, locals were observed walking for recreation and commuting from work (see the back page, second photo up, second from the right). The local grocery store had a bicycle parked in the bicycle rack at the front. As with many small communities, the state roads (SR80 and SR29) are economic lifelines but also largely divide the community from a walking and bicycling viewpoint because of limited defined crossings. Therefore, while LaBelle, Florida has examples of infrastructure that currently support walking and biking, there are opportunities in the future where improvements can be made to improve the connectivity of the community’s system, as noted in the Hendy County Comprehensive Pathways Master Plan.

INTRODUCTION

Walking and bicycling have become increasingly popular modes of transportation and the existence of dedicated infrastructure to support active modes offers benefits to a community and its residents. While examples of active transportation infrastructure found in larger communities are well documented, this infrastructure can look different in rural communities and documented examples are lacking. This research effort aims to address this gap. Case studies from fifteen communities with fewer than 10,000 residents were developed. The case studies feature existing rural bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure located across five states, to include: Arcadia, LaBelle, and Taylor Creek in Florida; Calvert City, Corbin, and Morehead in Kentucky; Pelican Rapids, Pipestone, and Walker in Minnesota; Ruidoso, Silver City, and Truth or Consequences in New Mexico; and Fair Haven, Morristown, and the Town of Hartford in Vermont. Communities were selected using a prioritization process developed through a cooperative effort between the state departments of transportation and the researchers. More details about the research project, Case Studies of Communities of Less Than 10,000 People with Bicycle & Pedestrian Infrastructure, as well as additional case studies can be found at:

https://westerntransportationinstitute.org/research_projects/case-studies-of-communities-of-less-than-10000-people-with-bicycle-pedestrian-infrastructure/

Case studies provide a detailed description of each community including a discussion of recent planning efforts related to bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, supporting programs, and partnerships. Site visits, approximately one day per community, were conducted from June through December of 2021. During these visits, researchers collected spatial data and photographs to document existing infrastructure. Within this day visit, researchers also captured photos of people walking and bicycling in the communities, which can be found on the back cover of each case study. They also reached out to local advocates and community leadership. Lessons learned and best practices were documented from reviewing the planning documents and speaking with advocates and community leadership. The case studies aim to provide peer communities with the knowledge and encouragement to support additional implementation of active transportation infrastructure in rural communities across the US.

This case study focuses on LaBelle, Florida.

BACKGROUND OF THE COMMUNITY

LaBelle, Florida has approximately 5,106 residents (2019) and has experienced a 10.0% population increase since 2010. It is the county seat of Hendry County in southwest Florida. The community's boundaries encompass 15.6 square miles.



Figure 1: Location of LaBelle, Florida of Hendry County in southwest Florida.

The following paragraphs provide demographic and socioeconomic data about the community, so that peer communities can better understand similarities and differences between their community and this case study community.

The average age of LaBelle residents is 32.4 years old (2019). Approximately 16.0% (2019) of homes in LaBelle are vacant which includes seasonal housing, vacant housing for rent/sale, and vacant housing held off the market.

Approximately 12.9% (2018) of LaBelle residents are employed within the community; a statistic which may provide a level of understanding regarding residents' commute distance and potential interest in walking or biking to work. LaBelle has a 6.7% (2019) unemployment rate. Considering both the average and extreme household incomes, LaBelle's median household income is \$35,393 (2019), with 7.9% of households earning less than \$10,000 and 0.0% earning more than \$200,000. Approximately 29.2% (2019) of LaBelle's population lives in poverty, as defined by the Office of Management and Budget's Statistical Policy Directive 14.

According to the 2019 American Community Survey, 0.1% of people in LaBelle walk and 3.7% bicycle to work for their daily commute. Photos of some community members that are likely commuting to or from work can be found on the back cover.

COUNTY TYPOLOGY

According to the rural classification methodology used in *Emerging Technology and Opportunities for Improved Mobility and Safety for Rural Areas*, LaBelle is located within a county that was designated as a Micropolitan County Type. A Micropolitan County Type is defined by having one or more urbanized areas with a population over 10,000 but less than 50,000 people or are adjacent to and linked economically with such a county.

COMMUNITY HISTORY

LaBelle, Florida, the City under the Oaks (see city seal on the front page on the right), is nestled along the Caloosahatchee River midway between Florida's two coasts. The community is well-known for its heritage oak trees. Today, locals describe it as a laid-back community.

Since the early 1900s, LaBelle is well known for cattle ranching. It was incorporated in 1911 into a town to restrict livestock from the streets; it incorporated into a city in 1925. Since its formation, Barron Park, on the southern border of the Caloosahatchee River, has served as a community gathering place. Restroom facilities within the park have a mural (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Mural on restroom facilities in Barron Park.

It is also home to the Swamp Cabbage Festival. This annual celebration began in 1965 and pays tribute to the official state tree, the Sabal or Cabbage Palm. The Swamp Cabbage Festival draws approximately 35,000 to 50,000 people at the end of February.

More recent annexations, including a more than 4,700-acre property, has the potential for an additional 15,000 homes, stores, public parks, and a trade school campus. Therefore, in the future, LaBelle may eventually surpass the 10,000 people mark.

LaBelle has made commitments to encourage revitalization efforts in their downtown area. The LaBelle Downtown Revitalization Corporation's mission is to "encourage the redevelopment of LaBelle through public, private, and nonprofit investment in the downtown." In 2020, the LaBelle Downtown Revitalization Corporation received designation as an Accredited Main Street America™ program. It demonstrates: 1) commitment to comprehensive commercial street revitalization, and 2) a proven track record for applying the Main Street Approach™.

Close to the SR80 and SR29 intersection, LaBelle is compact. However, heading south, the community becomes more spread apart. A larger grocery store is located at the corner of Cowboy Way and SR29 (see center of Figure 3). The Azteca Market is also located on

Cowboy Way. The historic Barron Library and the post office are in the northwest quadrant of the community (quadrants created by the intersection of SR80 and SR29).

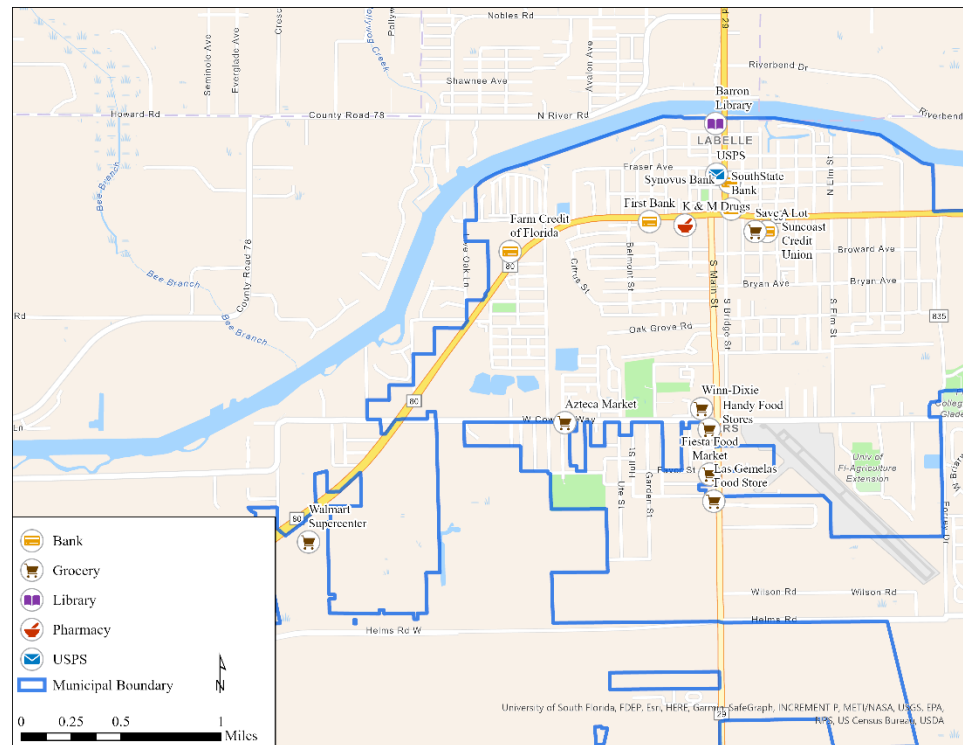


Figure 3: Destinations of interest in LaBelle, Florida.

TIMELINE

A timeline of events is provided in Table 1 to describe major milestones for bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure development and supporting programs in LaBelle, Florida. Overall, there seems to be a gap in activity from around 2009 to 2020.

Table 1: Timeline of major milestone events for bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure.

Year	Event
2004	The Downtown LaBelle Walking District Future Land Use designation was established
2007	Downtown LaBelle Committee began meeting monthly in June
2007	A visioning workshop was held from November 14-16
2008	A Transportation Workshop was held in January
2009	A workshop, part of the Hendry County Comprehensive Pathway Plan, was held in LaBelle on April 30
2009	The Hendry County Comprehensive Pathway Plan was published in December
2015	The Downtown Business District was established
2020	The LaBelle Downtown Revitalization Corporation receives National Main Street Accreditation

EVOLUTION OF *PLANNING* FOR BICYCLE AND PEDESTRIAN INFRASTRUCTURE

Two plans were reviewed for LaBelle: the Historical Downtown Plan and the Hendry County Comprehensive Pathways Master Plan.

HISTORICAL DOWNTOWN PLAN

The Historical Downtown Plan was created to spur the revival of the community's historic core. In addition, as expansion of SR80 into its current configuration resulted in the loss of heritage oak streets and historic buildings, creating the plan was intended to set aside some of LaBelle's history. Yet, much of the content within also supports the walkability of the community, at least in the historic core. To develop the plan, the Downtown LaBelle Committee was created. Two of the six vision statements in the Historical Downtown Plan highlight a desire to support the walkability of downtown LaBelle. In fact, the Plan suggests referring to that part of town as the "Walking District." The plan further suggests that the street grid (a classic American small-town design), which orientates buildings to the street, supports walking, except where there are sidewalk gaps. As an example, Figure 4 shows how close the entrance to the orange and red building on the left is to the street (SR29).



Figure 4: Historic building with short setback from roadway.

In addition, it suggests that the "pedestrian scale" makes the downtown area "idyllic." The planning document also suggest that oak-canopied streets (see bottom left photo on the cover) create a "small town charm." It also appears to show a previous version of Fort

Thompson Avenue (Figure 4) along with some potential renderings for modifications, a version of which appears to have been implemented. The changes were even highlighted in an informational sign posted on a building along Fort Thompson (Figure 5).

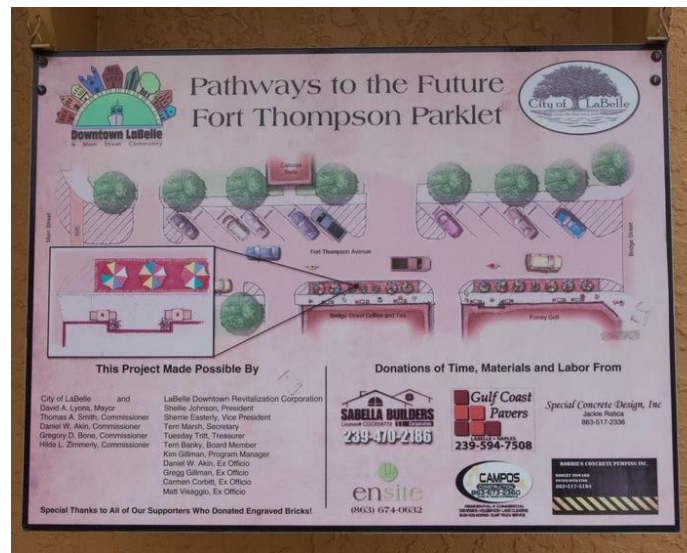


Figure 5: Fort Thompson parklet information.

The City of LaBelle’s comprehensive plan created a special land use for the downtown area: the Downtown LaBelle Walking District. It is roughly between State Road (SR) 80 (the southern border) and the Caloosahatchee River (the northern border), from Main Street (the western border) to Riverview Street (the eastern border), with Bridge Street (a.k.a. SR 29) within what is roughly a rectangle (see the green area in Figure 6). Traffic issues on SR29 and SR80 were identified as limiting the pedestrian-friendly feel. The plan suggested that paved crosswalks that more clearly define pedestrian crossings could support the walkability of downtown LaBelle. As an outcome of the visioning workshop awarded to LaBelle by Visit Florida, a biking and walking trail with interpretative signage was identified as a need.



Figure 6: Outline of the Downtown LaBelle Walking District

The plan also identifies a need to improve the condition of existing sidewalk and expand the sidewalks so that people can walk side-by-side. It also recommends signage to identify the Walking District. Downtown LaBelle is identified as a Historic District by the State of Florida. All aspects of the Downtown Plan were described as “based on creating places that

are comfortable for people to walk, shop, play, and interact (i.e., pedestrian scale).” The plan recommended the formation of an “Implementation Committee” to create focus and provide energy to the process.

An aspect that could have a significant impact on downtown LaBelle is the future of the drawbridge on SR29; potential plans include adding a bridge that would create a one-way street on Main Street and transition Bridge Street from two-way to one-way to pair with Main Street. The future of SR29 is still undetermined. In fact, the plan highlights that neither the city nor the county have control over this facility. The plan notes that another presented option, expanding SR29 to four lanes, would also be in direct conflict to the community’s desire to make the area more pedestrian friendly. In addition, the community is concerned about a third option, which is to create a bypass. The businesses are concerned that this will take traffic and consequently possible business away. The plan also indicates that the noise created by the traffic and the speeds at which the traffic travels (above 35 mph, which is the lowest speed allowed by the Florida Department of Transportation based on the roadway’s designation) is detrimental to the objectives for downtown LaBelle.

HENDRY COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PATHWAYS MASTER PLAN

The Hendry County Comprehensive Pathways Master Plan identified LaBelle as having a good system of sidewalks, although it noted that it was incomplete and has gaps. The plan also identified Florida as being the lightning capital of the world, a safety concern for walkers and bicyclists. The plan also identified some interesting programs that can support walking and eco-tourism: 1) “checklists of birds or plants that might be seen may be printed online,” 2) “scavenger hunts along different trail loops consisting of items, colors, species, etc.,” and 3) “nature walks led by volunteers.” Suggested nature walks include night walks, birding walks, native plant walks, or “children’s walks to explore native habitat.”

School officials were invited to participate in a School Needs Evaluation. From LaBelle, this included the Edward A. Upthegrove Elementary School, LaBelle Elementary School, LaBelle Middle School, LaBelle High School, and LaBelle Youth Development Academy. (Note: The plan did not mention the Florida Southwestern State College – Hendry/Glades.) The focus was on a 2-mile radius of schools. The plan also created a Sidewalk Inventory Map for LaBelle.

The Edward A. Upthegrove Elementary School reported flooding, broken sidewalks, speeding, and dark conditions as issues. Suggested safety needs were speed bumps, periodic sheriff patrol and lighting along Fraser Avenue. Their discussions with Edward A. Upthegrove Elementary specifically identified sightlines along Fraser Avenue as an issue. It noted that thirty students walked to school and sometimes a student biked to school. Furthermore, the sidewalks do not extend into the community from the school.

For LaBelle Elementary, fifty students were identified as walking to school. Identified issues included a significant amount of traffic along Cowboy Way and a need for street lighting.

Both LaBelle Middle and High School also identified Cowboy Way as their main routes and suggested more sidewalks to help provide connections from the students' residences to the school. The middle school identified about fifty to seventy-five students as walking or bicycling to school, with the high school identifying twenty-five students as walking to school. However, both the middle school and high school noted that the sidewalks do not lead off campus, thereby limiting connectivity with the larger community.

The Hendry County Comprehensive Pathways Master Plan identified two other features that could bring additional walking and bicycling connectivity to LaBelle: the Sugar Trail Greenway corridor and a vacant rail bed east of SR29 (16.49 miles in length). An important point made in the plan is that while some sidewalk pieces may be isolated from the larger sidewalk network, developing these individual pieces can “create momentum to develop additional sidewalk segments” thereby supporting the development of a sidewalk network, piece by piece.

During the workshop held as a part of the Hendry County Comprehensive Pathways Master Plan, the public identified a lot of people walking along J.C. Lions Drive. They also identified a gap in the sidewalk along Cowboy Way near the soccer field and a gap in another sidewalk between the elementary school and the LaBelle Nature Park (Figure 7) along Fraser Avenue.



Figure 7: LaBelle Nature Park.

There are reportedly many people who bicycle from a recreational vehicle park (Grandma's Grove) along SR80. An important connection was noted as being between the Moss Landing community and the City of LaBelle, as many within this community were identified as not owning a vehicle. The public requested more non-motorized connectivity between SR80 and Cowboy Way, suggesting Birchwood and Cedarwood Parkways as potential connection options, although these roadways are in Port LaBelle, not the City of LaBelle. A group of seniors bicycling together were identified as living in the Belmont Woods area. Similarly, the Riverbend Motorcoach Resort was identified as having three hundred units, where many people within this development reported enjoying bicycling.

EXISTING BICYCLE & PEDESTRIAN INFRASTRUCTURE

The Historical Downtown Plan describes the street grid as encouraging walking. However, they acknowledge that the connectivity of the sidewalk network could be improved.

Table 2 summarizes bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure identified across all case study communities, noting which ones were observed while on-site in LaBelle, Florida.

Table 2: Bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure found across all case study communities, with those found in LaBelle noted.

Bicycle and/or Pedestrian Infrastructure in Case Study Communities	Presence in LaBelle
Bicycle Lane	X
Bike Rack	X
Shared Lane Markings	
Sidepath	
Defined Bike Route (by signage)	
Multi-Use Pathway	
Trail (soft surface)	X
Rectangular Rapid Flashing Beacon (RRFB) Crossing	X
Mid-Block Crossing	X
Crosswalk	X
Sidewalks	X
Bridges that enable walking or biking	X
Underpasses that enable walking or biking	
Parklet	X
Benches	X
Repair Station/Air Pump	
Speed Bump/Speed Table	X
Speed Feedback Sign – Permanent	X
Speed Feedback Sign – Portable	
Signage	
<i>Bike/Ped Crossing Sign with light emitting diode (LED) lights</i>	
<i>Bicycle May Use Full Lane</i>	
<i>Share the Road</i>	X
<i>State Law, Yield/Stop for Pedestrian in Crosswalk</i>	
<i>Steep Grade</i>	
<i>Drive Slow in Residential Areas/Please Slow Down</i>	X
<i>Traffic Calming Area</i>	X
<i>Weight Limitations</i>	X
<i>Interpretative/ Wayfinding Information</i>	
<i>Walking Routes</i>	
<i>Entertainment District</i>	

Several murals exist in the community, including one on the side of a historic building along SR29, marking a honey business (see Figure 8, the top left photo on the cover, and the previous mural identified at Barron Park).



Figure 8: Mural on a honey business building on SR29.

A new development being built on the west side of the community, north of SR80, has sidewalks laid (#1 in Figure 10). In the same area, a new restaurant has a direct sidewalk connection between the sidewalk along SR80 and its front doors (#2 in Figure 10). While sidewalks are not present on the local roads extending north from SR80 in the northwest quadrant of the community, speed bumps are present (#3 in Figure 10). A mid-block crossing south of the SR29/SR80 intersection allows pedestrians access from a parking lot on the east side of SR29 to the historic county courthouse on the west side (#4 in Figure 10). Multiple speed humps were present along Fraser Avenue (#5 and #6 in Figure 10; and Figure 9). Fraser Avenue has a concrete sidewalk in place on the south side of the road on the west end and on the north side at the east end near the Edward A. Upthegrove Elementary School. Fraser Avenue also has some of the heritage oak trees for which LaBelle is known (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Heritage oak trees along Fraser Avenue.

In addition, some of the sidewalks as identified in the Hendry County Comprehensive Pathways Master Plan needing repair, have recently been rehabilitated (#7 in Figure 10). Signage, including a low-speed limit, a notification of the presence of children, and a weight restriction are present on many of the roadways that connect to SR80 in the southwest quadrant (#8 in Figure 10). Several businesses, including the grocery store and the bank, have bicycle racks (#9 and #10 in Figure 10).

BICYCLE & PEDESTRIAN INFRASTRUCTURE MAP

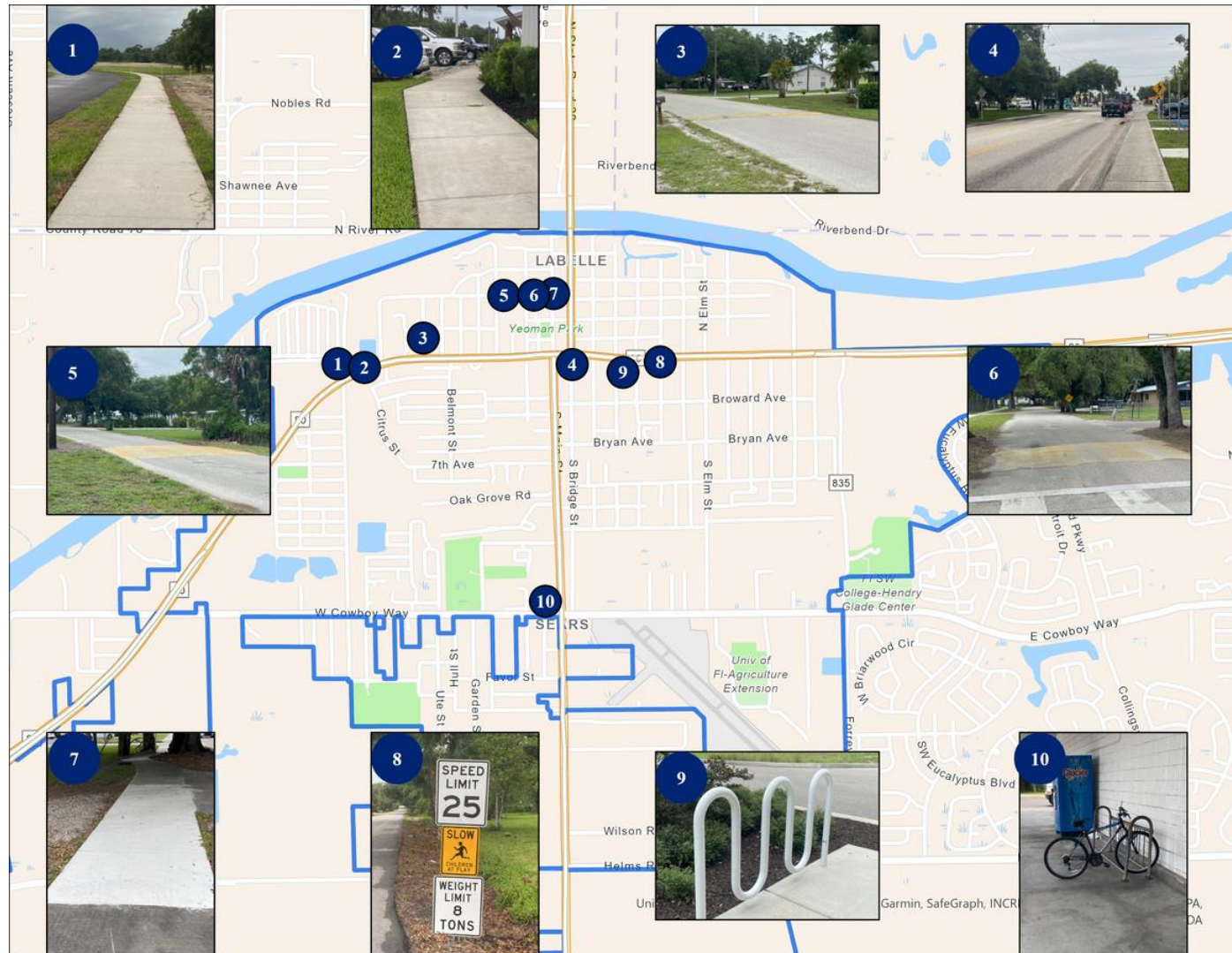


Figure 10: LaBelle Bicycle & Pedestrian Infrastructure Map.

SUPPORTING PROGRAMS FOR BICYCLE AND PEDESTRIAN INFRASTRUCTURE

LaBelle was found to have at least one example of a program (multiple murals) that supports walking and bicycling within the community that were observed while on-site or documented in reports (Table 3).

Table 3: Bicycle and pedestrian supporting programs in case study communities noting those found in LaBelle.

Bicycle and/or Pedestrian Supporting Programs in Case Study Communities	Presence in LaBelle
Demonstration/Pilot Projects	
Art Walks/Historical Walk/Children's Walk/Health Walk	
Sculpture(s)/Statue(s)	
Mural(s)	X
Little Free Library	

In the past, the Hendry County Sheriff's Department was provided with equipment to "implement the 'Bicycle Rodeo/Training Trailer' to educate children on bicycle safety." A local church group also reportedly hosted long bicycle rides once a week. There were also reports of an individual who was working to set up a bicycle tourism company, although the focus appears to be more specifically centered on neighboring Clewiston, Florida (roughly 32 miles east of LaBelle on SR80).

Previously, there was a Downtown LaBelle Committee, that was focused on advancing the interests of downtown LaBelle, which includes the walkability of this part of the community. Similarly, a Pathway Advisory Committee (PAC) was formed during the development of the Hendry County Comprehensive Pathways Master Plan. The plan suggested that the PAC needed to remain active to support the Hendry County Comprehensive Pathways Master Plan's implementation. Neither one of these committees seem to be active at present; they appear to have disbanded.

Schools in LaBelle have participated in walk to school day events. For the 2008-2009 school year, the Hendry County Health Department funded the "Mileage Club" for the Edward A. Upthegrove Elementary School in LaBelle and two other schools in nearby Clewiston. The "Mileage Club" rewarded "children who walked on paths throughout the school campus and inside the gymnasium during designated times before school."

PARTNERSHIPS TO PLAN & IMPLEMENT BICYCLE & PEDESTRIAN INFRASTRUCTURE

The development of the Hendry County Comprehensive Pathways Master Plan seems to suggest prior cooperation with LaBelle and the county. It appears that much of the cooperative work occurred until the Great Recession (cir. 2009) and seems to have waned since then.

FUNDING FOR BICYCLE & PEDESTRIAN INFRASTRUCTURE

A visioning grant was awarded by Visit Florida to develop plans supporting the Historical Downtown Plan as well as generating ideas and layouts to support implementation. Visit Florida is the “official tourism marketing corporation for the State of Florida.”

Funds from the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) Local Agency Program (LAP) were used to fund the Hendry County Comprehensive Pathway Plan, which incorporates LaBelle. Within the plan, additional grants and funding sources were identified, including:

- Florida Forever Grant Program sponsored by the Florida Communities Trust
- Kodak American Greenways Awards
- Conservation Reserve Program
- Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) Office of Greenway and Trails
- Florida Recreation Development Assistant Program (FRDAP)
- Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)
- National Trials Fund
- Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA)
- Florida Boating Improvement Program (FBIP)
- Bikes Belong Coalition
- South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD)
- Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG)
- Federal Transportation Funds
- Safe Routes to School Program (SRTS)

LESSONS LEARNED

LaBelle is a good example of a community that had a lot of momentum to create a more walkable and bikeable community. Unfortunately, in recent years, the momentum seems to have been lost. Plans that were created (i.e. the Hendry County Comprehensive Pathways Master Plan) seemed to have spurred some infrastructure investment (i.e. sidewalks on Fraser Avenue). The City of LaBelle’s comprehensive plan created a special land use for the downtown area: the Downtown LaBelle Walking District. At present, reinvigorating these efforts and advancing some of the plans that had been created while also updating them to reflect more current conditions would be of value.

THE FUTURE OF BICYCLE & PEDESTRIAN INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE COMMUNITY

LaBelle has many opportunities for the future, but many challenges as well. The LaBelle Downtown Revitalization Corporation is doing their best to continue to move forward more opportunities to walk and bike.

KEY POINTS

The following are key points learned from this case study:

1. Document bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure objectives. LaBelle seems to have had a lot of enthusiasm around 2009. Since then, efforts have waned, potentially because of the Great Recession occurring around that time. However, because the community's interests had been documented through a written plan, these interests can be revived if the community identifies it to be of importance.
2. Create a MainStreet program. The LaBelle Downtown Revitalization Corporation, a MainStreet program, is presently active and has been a driving force in working to make LaBelle more walkable and bikeable. They were one of several communities where an organization involved within the MainStreet program has been instrumental in supporting walking and bicycling. Therefore, for any communities where a MainStreet program does not currently exist, this could be a mechanism to foster adoption of bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure and programming.

SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES TO APPLY IN OTHER SMALL COMMUNITIES

The LaBelle Downtown Revitalization Corporation, a MainStreet program, seems to be instrumental in continuing to make LaBelle more walkable and bikeable. Therefore, a community may choose to use this approach, where they engage with the MainStreet program as one way of moving forward efforts to create a more walkable and bikeable community.

As identified in the Historic Downtown Plan, LaBelle had significant concerns about the potential impacts of modifications to SR29. It appears as if the plan was successful, in that by specifically calling out the unique nature of the historic downtown, the reconstruction of SR29 has stalled. This has helped to retain the local feel of the northwest quadrant and its many heritage oak trees.

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