CASE STUDIES OF BICYCLING & WALKING IN SMALL COMMUNITIES: WALKER, MINNESOTA



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COVER IMAGES

Front Cover Top: Information kiosk in downtown Walker, Minnesota, highlighting the community's Bicycle Friendly Community status, the North Country National Scenic Trail's logo, and the Shingobee Connector Trail's logo

Front Cover Middle: A multi-use portion of the Shingobee Connector Trail

Front Cover Bottom: A sign welcoming motorists to Walker, Minnesota

The back cover presents a photo collage of people walking and bicycling in Walker, Minnesota, 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 Walker, Minnesota that would be of interest to other peer communities. Walker is unique from all of the other considered communities because it is the only one that has achieved the League of American Bicyclist's Bicycle Friendly Community (Bronze) designation. In addition, numerous businesses have applied and received designation as a Bicycle Friendly Business. Walking and bicycling infrastructure of note include the two state road underpasses, the shared lane markings identifying the connection between multiuse pathways, the Walker Loop (made up of the Heartland State Trail, the Paul Bunyan State Trail and Shingobee Connector Trail), a multi-use pathway along Railroad Avenue, the availability of bicycle rentals, and the publicly available restrooms in the community's core. Even with all of the successes that Walker has achieved, the community has significant ambitions for the future, including an additional underpass to facilitate a safe crossing for all ages, as well as safer crossings of MN200/MN371, the main roadway through Walker.

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-ofcommunities-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 Walker, Minnesota.

BACKGROUND OF THE COMMUNITY

Walker, Minnesota has approximately 938 residents (2019), and experienced a 0.8% population decrease since 2010. It is located in and serves as the county seat for Cass County, in north-central Minnesota. The community's boundaries encompass 1.5 square miles, which is a very walkable and bikeable distance.



Figure 1: Location of Walker, Minnesota of Cass County in north central Minnesota.

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 Walker residents is 43.8 years old (2019). Approximately 21.9% (2019) of homes in Walker are vacant which includes seasonal housing, vacant housing for rent/sale, and vacant housing held off the market.

Approximately 25.8% (2018) of Walker 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. Walker has a 0.7% (2019) unemployment rate. Walker's median household income is \$42,500 (2019), with 10.8% of households earning less than \$10,000 and 0.9% earning more than \$200,000. Approximately 27.5% (2019) of Walker'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, 7.5% of people in Walker walk and 1.8% bicycle to work for their daily commute. While on-site, the researcher spoke to an employee who reported a daily work commute in the summer in excess of fifteen miles round trip by bicycle using the trails that connect to the community.

COUNTY TYPOLOGY

According to the rural classification methodology used in *Emerging Technology and Opportunities for Improved Mobility and Safety for Rural Areas,* Walker is located within a county that was designated as an Older Age County Type. An Older Age County Type is defined by having one-third of the population over 60 years of age.

COMMUNITY HISTORY

Walker resides on the shores of Leech Lake, the third largest lake in Minnesota. With its relative proximity to the Twin Cities area (Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota), Walker is a popular destination for weekenders. In addition, approximately fifty resorts are located within a ten-mile drive of Walker. Consequently, it is a small town with a cosmopolitan feel.

Walker has a strong historic tie to the logging industry, which was the dominant industry until the Depression. The industry waned as it takes decades for the forest to mature enough for logging. As a result, tourism began to take over as the economic driver.

Walker's name originated as an attempt to attract the attention of Minnesota lumber baron, Thomas Barlow (T.B.) Walker, in order to build a mill within the community. Due to T.B. Walker's requirement that the city's saloons must be closed before mills would be built, which the city rejected, the mill was built in another community. The community's forefather, P.H. McGarry, helped to establish the community as the county seat. He also brought electric lights to the community in 1898. In the early 1900's, the community was awarded a Carnegie Institute grant to build a library, making it the smallest city in the nation with a Carnegie-funded library. Unfortunately, the library was destroyed by an explosion in 1976. Many of the town's early infrastructure were built through Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects, including city streets. MN200 was first built in 1925 to better connect Walker with Remer, a neighboring community.

All within a walkable distance, one can find a grocery store (or two), the pharmacy, the library, the post office, as well as other specialty stores (Figure 2). Many of these specialty stores benefit from the tourism generated as a result of the trails and the many lakes in the region.



Figure 2: City map of Walker, Minnesota showing boundaries and services.

TIMELINE

A timeline of events is provided in Table 1 to describe major milestones for bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure development and supporting programs in Walker, Minnesota.

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

Year	Event
1896	Walker is founded as a city in March of 1896
2005	Community members attended a Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) workshop on
	bicycling and walking in Bemidji; this resulted in the idea of a trail (the Shingobee Connector Trail) to
	link the Heartland and Paul Bunyan State Trails through the community
2010	The original draft of the Walker Area Comprehensive Plan was created
2012	MnDOT began offering Bikeable Community Workshops in partnership with the Minnesota
	Department of Health and the Bicycle Alliance of Minnesota
2016	The Walker Area Comprehensive Plan was updated
2018	A Bikeable Community Workshop was held in Walker
2018	Walker applied to be recognized as a Bicycle Friendly Community through the League of American
	Bicyclists (LAB)
2018	At least eleven businesses were awarded the Bicycle Friendly Business designation by LAB
2019	Walker achieves Bicycle Friendly Community designation by LAB through 2021
2021	Restrooms were made available to trail users in the center of town; parts of Railroad Avenue were
	converted to a one-way street with a ten-foot, concrete trail, along with a rolled curb

EVOLUTION OF *PLANNING* FOR BICYCLE AND PEDESTRIAN INFRASTRUCTURE

Plans reviewed include the Walker Area Comprehensive Plan and the 2016 and 2018 Parks & Trails Council of Minnesota state trail user count efforts.

WALKER AREA COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

The Walker Area Comprehensive Plan was originally developed in 2010 and updated in 2016. The plan included "Area" reflecting that, "building a healthy community requires cooperation and participation that doesn't start or stop at an artificial boundary line." The plan identified the following entities as partners: Cass County, School District 113, Shingobee Township, and the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe. The plan also identified that the United States Forest Service was planning to partner with the Leech Lake Chamber of Commerce on a visitor center within the city limits.

Walker was designed on a traditional grid pattern. The lake was designed to be the "stage" with all of the housing sloping up from the lake viewed as the "amphitheater." In addition, older homes and buildings were set close to the edge of the property line, with outhouses and garbage bins designed to be located at the back of the property. This is said to make the community more walkable, as it was designed at the pedestrian scale. In the 1950s, as buildings began to be designed with a vehicle in mind, buildings were set further back and driveways were put at the front of a property.

The plan emphasized a desire to not turn into "Anytown USA," as Walker views this as making them uncompetitive with other small communities. It suggests moving away from streets that are designed only to move automobiles on them as fast as possible. Instead, it suggests that streets should be complex. The plan notes that roads that are designed to efficiently move traffic can be described as having wide lanes, large shoulders, large sight distances, and an ample recovery area. Such a design, while often found in small communities like Walker, does not support the community character that Walker desires. Instead, the plan states, "The City of Walker should seek to establish pedestrian connections throughout and between all neighborhoods." The plan does not suggest removing the automobile, instead, it suggests finding a better balance between all modes.

The plan provides the following recommendations:

- 1. Maintain sidewalks and curbs
- 2. Narrow lane widths to make it easier for pedestrians to move about the street network
- 3. Create a "Heritage Trail" walking tour
- 4. Engage local art organizations to install public art
- 5. Add wayfinding, at the pedestrian scale.

The plan highlights the challenges with the community's aging infrastructure. In addition, the plan talks about how the cluster of businesses in the downtown results in businesses supporting each other. For example, someone may make a trip to the bank and then also pick up a coffee because once this person parks, these business are in proximity to each other. In contrast, the plan discusses how an auto-centric design results in so much space between businesses that one has to consciously make the choice to access each business (i.e. move their vehicle from one parking lot to the next). Within, the age-old question of how much parking is enough is also addressed. The plan discusses the balance between providing space for housing (i.e. a taxable base) and employment with providing space for vehicles to park. Walker is constrained; there is not an endless amount of space. It also highlights that county zoning policies have resulted in commercial and industrial developments just outside of Walker that are directly competing with the businesses in the downtown core.

Several strategies were identified in the plan, including the following:

- 1. Install "permanent public restrooms in the downtown area and in other public areas...."
- 2. "Work with the Minnesota Department of Transportation to ensure that crosswalks across State Highways are appropriately striped and maintained over time so as to create a safe pedestrian environment."
- 3. Pass a resolution opposing a bypass around the city and expanding the highway to four lanes within and just outside of Walker

The plan makes an interesting point of considering how implemented infrastructure will be maintained; where will the funding come from? If the revenue generated as a part of said infrastructure is not sufficient to allow for its maintenance, then the money to maintain it must come from another source (i.e. taxes levied on the community). The plan notes that "a future generation will need to find a way to maintain a system that is too inefficient to

support itself," thus highlighting the need to make smart investments. The plan itself does identify a potential funding source: the State Community Development Block Grants (Small Cities CDBG).

STATE TRAIL USER COUNT: AN EXPLORATORY LOOK AT HOW MINNESOTA'S STATE TRAILS ARE USED

In 2015, realizing that what gets counted counts, a State Trail User Count was led by the Parks & Trails Council of Minnesota with the support of volunteers. The results can be considered "order-of-magnitude estimates," as they were based on short duration, manual volunteer counts that were extrapolated from more extensive counts conducted in the Twin Cities area. Consequently, the result is a low, average, and high estimate for each location where short-term counts were conducted. Because large group events were excluded from the counts and because the counts were in September whereas many of the counts typically see their peaks from June through August, the estimates are expected to undercount the true number of events. Volunteers were asked to count for six hours anytime, Tuesday through Thursday, and four hours, anytime on Saturday and Sunday from September 12 through September 20, 2015. Volunteer counters were asked to classify users as: a bicyclist, a walker, a jogger, a skater, an equestrian, or other (i.e. Segway user). The counts, conducted on both the Heartland and Paul Bunyan State Trails, were by "event," meaning that if a person traveled via an out-and-back route, they would be counted twice. Counts were grouped every fifteen minutes. Volunteer counters were asked to classify the age of an individual as above or below eighteen years of age. Overall, findings from all of the counts in 2015 indicate that bicycling is the most frequent activity. The majority of users (more than ninety percent) are adults. Trails are busier on the weekends than the weekdays were not found to be frequently used by dog walkers.

The counts near Walker, Minnesota were conducted near the Heartland State Trail/Paul Bunyan State Trail junction on September 5, 2015, and September 23, 2015, for a total of six hours of counts. Averaged estimated traffic from April through October in 2015 was 62,000 events (with no fewer than 37,000 events and no more than 86,000 events based on estimates of error). The estimated average daily traffic was 288 events (with no fewer than 173 events and no more than 403 events based on estimates of error). Seventy-one percent, twenty-six percent, three percent, and less than one percent of trail users were bicyclists, walkers, runners, and inline skaters, respectively. Ninety-seven percent of users were estimated to be over the age of 18. There were an estimated two dogs per one hundred people. Monthly traffic formed a bell curve, with July and August having the greatest number of users. The weekend-to-weekday ratio was 170% (i.e. substantially more weekend users).

MINNESOTA STATE TRAIL USER COUNT

In 2017, the Parks & Trails Council of Minnesota transitioned from manual counts to shortduration automated counts. The report identified the counts being useful for planning new trails, for identifying maintenance needs, to address safety concerns, and to provide a better understanding of the benefits associated with trails. Data was collected on fewer state trails than in 2015. While the Heartland State Trail was not included in 2017, the Paul Bunyan State Trail was included. Counts ranged from seven to twenty-five days between May 12, 2017, and October 24, 2017. The snowmobiling season statutorily runs from December through March; as such, non-winter, non-motorized use was defined as the opposite, and therefore ran from April through November (a month longer than for the 2015 counts). The short duration counts were then extrapolated using the day-of-year factoring method. The methods used in 2015 resulted in approximately a forty percent margin of error, while the 2017 method margin of error ranged from ten to fifteen percent (i.e. overall a significant reduction in error). Average estimated traffic along the Paul Bunyan State Trail from April through November in 2017 were 20,537 events. No data was available at the Walker location for the estimated shared user-types (e.g., bicyclists, pedestrians, joggers, inline skaters). However, at all locations on the trail, pedestrians were noted as being a "sizeable minority of trail users."

EXISTING BICYCLE & PEDESTRIAN INFRASTRUCTURE

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

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

Bicycle and/or Pedestrian Infrastructure in Case Study Communities	Presence in Walker
Bicycle Lane	Х
Bike Rack	Х
Shared Lane Markings	Х
Sidepath	
Defined Bike Route (by signage)	Х
Multi-Use Pathway	Х
Trail (soft surface)	Х
Rectangular Rapid Flashing Beacon (RRFB) Crossing	
Mid-Block Crossing	Х
Crosswalk	Х
Sidewalks	Х
Bridges that enable walking or biking	Х
Underpasses that enable walking or biking	Х
Parklet	
Benches	Х
Repair Station/Air Pump	Х
Speed Bump/Speed Table	
Speed Feedback Sign – Permanent	Х
Speed Feedback Sign – Portable	
Signage	
Bike/Ped Crossing Sign with light emitting diode (LED) lights	
Bicycle May Use Full Lane	

Bicycle and/or Pedestrian Infrastructure in Case Study Communities	Presence in Walker
Share the Road	Х
State Law, Yield/Stop for Pedestrian in Crosswalk	Х
Steep Grade	Х
Drive Slow in Residential Areas/Please Slow Down	
Traffic Calming Area	
Weight Limitations	
Interpretative/Wayfinding Information	Х
Walking Routes	Х
Entertainment District	

The story goes, fifteen years ago, when the idea of bike trails through Walker was presented, community members were not happy about it. The community started out with only two bicycle racks. Fast forward to present day, and Walker boasts a connection to more than one hundred and fifty miles of trail, including most notably, the Shingobee Connector Trail, which completes the Walker Loop. Bicycle racks are frequently available at local businesses. Bicycling is a significant tourism draw, as evident by numerous vehicles carrying bicycles as well as by bicycles parked all over the community, whether it be outside the local hotel or next to a local restaurant (sometimes in bicycle racks, sometimes not (Figure 3)).



Figure 3: Bicycles parked outside of a hotel in Walker.

Walker, Minnesota is home to three trails: the Heartland State Trail (#1 in Figure 9), the Paul Bunyan State Trail (#2 in Figure 9) and the Shingobee Connector Trail (#3 and #4 in Figure 9). The Shingobee Connector Trail was created to join the Heartland State Trail to the Paul Bunyan State Trail through Walker. The Heartland State Trail is forty-nine miles long, spanning from Park Rapids, Minnesota to Cass Lake, Minnesota. It is one of the first rail-to-trail projects in the country. The Paul Bunyan State Trail is one hundred twenty miles long, including a section through the Chippewa National Forest. It is the longest continuously paved trail in the country. The community has created the Walker Loop, which is a connection of the Heartland State Trail, the Paul Bunyan State Trail, and the Shingobee Connector Trail. The Leech Lake Area Chamber of Commerce offers a ribbon to those that complete this loop. The ribbon is offered in part, as emphasized by the handout for the loop (Figure 4), because the Paul Bunyan State Trail section of the loop has a rolling elevation profile. The rolling elevation may be intimidating to many beginning riders.



Figure 4: Walker Trail Loop handout.

Where the Heartland State Trail passes over MN371 north of the community, an existing rail underpass allows for trail users to avoid the high speed, high volume, potentially heavy vehicle traffic on MN371 (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Existing rail underpass for the Heartland State Trail.

Within town, a spur from the Shingobee Connector Trail passes under a newly constructed, wider underpass, which provides a connection between the schools and Leech Lake without having to pass over MN371/MN200 (#6 in Figure 10). However, south of town, the Shingobee Connector Trail still passes over MN371/MN200, where the speed limit is posted as forty-five miles per hour, but which much of traffic reportedly travels at closer to sixty miles per hour. It is a priority of the community to provide a separated crossing at this location (currently designed as another underpass).

The community is looking to address the non-compliance of motorists in stopping for pedestrians in the core of the community (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Pedestrians waiting to cross Main Street.

There are two traffic signals in this central corridor. However, with limited connections, pedestrians have been observed crossing outside of the crosswalks found at the traffic signals. This may be in part because the pedestrians may not want to walk several blocks from one traffic signal to another. It highlights the different network needs of pedestrians as compared with vehicles, where the distance between the crossing for a pedestrian needs to be closer than that for a vehicle. In addition, while many would like to see curb extensions in this area to reduce the amount of time crossing pedestrians are exposed to traffic and increase their visibility, there has been some push back regarding concerns with snow plowing around this infrastructure.

An upgrade to the Shingobee Connector Trail infrastructure where it travels along Railroad Avenue was completed in 2021. Along several parts of this trail, Railroad Avenue was reduced to a one-way street, thereby reducing the crossing distances for pedestrians and consequently increasing the walkability of this area (Figure 7 and #8 in Figure 10).



Figure 7: Shingobee Connector Trail along Railroad Avenue.

Previously, the road had a shared lane marking in this area, and as one travels from the core of the community south, first the multi-use pathway becomes a bike lane (#5 in Figure 10) and then it transitions to shared lane markings (#4 in Figure 9).

A coordinated visitor center between the Leech Lake Area Chamber of Commerce and the United States Forest Service connects to the Shingobee Connector Trail via a spur using an underpass (#8 in Figure 10). Creation of this coordinated visitor center was identified as an objective in the 2016 Walker Area Comprehensive Plan. If a rider continues on this trail, it leads to the community's school. Bicycle racks can be found at the visitor center (#7 in Figure 10). The visitor center clearly displays the community's ability to provide information about bicycling in the region (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Bike Info sign at the Cooperative Visitor Center.

In 2021, public restrooms were made available in the core of the community (#9 in Figure 10). This was also another goal identified in the 2016 Walker Area Comprehensive Plan. The construction of the restrooms was part of the aforementioned project that converted Railroad Avenue into a one-way street and added the wide concrete multi-use pathway next to the roadway. The project also repaired sidewalks and replaced storm sewers. The public restrooms in the community's core were reported as a huge win for the community as bicyclists no longer have to approach businesses to ask to use their restrooms. Nearby the restrooms is a trailhead kiosk that proudly displays the community's Bronze Level Bicycle Friendly Community award, information about the trail system, and the Shingobee Connector Trail logo (#10 in Figure 10).

BICYCLE & PEDESTRIAN INFRASTRUCTURE MAP



Figure 9: Walker Bicycle & Pedestrian Infrastructure Map, Part 1



Figure 10: Walker Bicycle & Pedestrian Infrastructure Map, Part 2

SUPPORTING PROGRAMS FOR BICYCLE AND PEDESTRIAN INFRASTRUCTURE

Compared with the other case study communities, Walker has implemented only one program, a defined walking route, similar to the other case studies that were observed while on-site or documented in reports (Table 3). However, Walker has implemented several other programs that support walking and bicycling within the community.

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

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

There are at least two shops where one can rent bicycles. This is a significant resource, as many small communities considered for the case studies had few if any available options to purchase or rent a bicycle. At least one of the Walker bicycle shops had a state certified bike safety trainer.

The community has offered bicycle rodeos for its children, although these were put on hold for the coronavirus pandemic. A bike fleet (thirty-two bikes and one to enable participation by a person with a disability) and trailer to store them in were purchased and shared with the local school. School children were also encouraged to bike during the Walk-Bike-Fun Day. In addition, through the League of American Bicyclists, several train-the-trainer events have been held where locals were trained so that they could teach other adults how to bicycle.

Formerly called the Shingobee Connection, and now the Bike Friendly Committee, the community has many passionate advocates that are well-versed in applying for and obtaining funding for bicycle infrastructure to complete and enhance that which has been developed to date. However, current participants noted that fifteen years ago, there were a lot more people involved, noting that over time, attrition has occurred as some previous participants have moved or just lost interest.

Communities in Cass County, including Walker, have walking clubs that meet weekly. The formation of these clubs was facilitated by the Cass County health and nutrition educator.

Walker has hosted two events to support bicycling. The first is the Spring Bike Fling. Previously, it was held earlier in the spring. However, since northern Minnesota can experience cold weather late into the spring, it was moved to June in 2021. This resulted in a spike in participation, with almost one hundred participants in 2021. Three rides are offered: a forty mile ride, a twenty-six mile ride, and a two mile family ride. The family ride was entirely along the off-road trail network. The second event, called Safe Summer, was held in September of 2021. Participants would begin at a local brewery. A participant would take the ride and then return. Upon returning to the brewery, the participant could enjoy live music as a part of the event.

BICYCLE FRIENDLY COMMUNITY STATUS

Walker, Minnesota is the only Bicycle Friendly Community (a designation administered by the League of American Bicyclists (LAB)) included in these case studies. Walker was awarded the Bronze Level from 2019-2021 and hopes to be recognized with the Silver Level when they reapply. In addition to the Bicycle Friendly Community designation, Walker is also notable in that several businesses have submitted and achieved LAB's Bicycle Friendly Business designation. In 2018, there were as many as eleven businesses that had received this designation. A bicycle-friendly business is one that makes it easier for customers and employees to bike as part of their business model. The Leech Lake Area Chamber of Commerce helped businesses apply to receive the Bicycle Friendly Business designation. The Community Health Educator for Cass County also offered to pay for the application fees and purchase a bike rack (valued at \$250) for those businesses that had applied (Figure 11 captures bikes parked in bicycle racks and beyond at a local business). These incentives really reinforce what is already realized by a brewery and other businesses downtown with bicycles outside of them – being a Bicycle Friendly Business is good for business.



Figure 11: Bicycles parked outside of businesses in Walker.

BIKEABLE COMMUNITY WORKSHOP

The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT), in cooperation with the Bicycle Alliance of Minnesota (BikeMN) and the Minnesota Department of Health, began offering Bikeable Community Workshops starting in 2012, modeled after Michigan's Training Wheels program, to support community implementation of on-road bicycle infrastructure. However, MnDOT expanded the scope of their workshops to consider how each community

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that participated could be more bikeable. In order for a community to be considered for a workshop, an elected official and city engineer must each write a letter of support. The workshop is said to have directly resulted in the community applying for designation as a Bike Friendly Community in 2018 (awarded in 2019). As of June of 2019, Walker had the greatest number of bike-friendly businesses per capita in the United States. It is thought that the Bikeable Community Workshops helped contribute to the number of businesses willing to apply for this designation in Walker. Walker was the smallest community in Minnesota that held a Bikeable Community Workshop. After the workshop, Walker's former mayor became co-chair of the Minnesota Mayoral Active Transportation Caucus. Other workshop attendees noted that it was instrumental in connecting people in the community that had an interest in making the community more walkable and bikeable. Overall, Walker's enthusiastic adoption of becoming a bike friendly community is said to tie in with the community's interest in diversifying its economy.

PARTNERSHIPS TO PLAN & IMPLEMENT BICYCLE & PEDESTRIAN INFRASTRUCTURE

In 2021, the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) was already planning for the reconstruction of the main street (MN371/MN200) through Walker in 2027. Walker has asked to have a representative sit on the planning committee. Desired elements include curb extensions and pedestrian lighting (an interest identified in their comprehensive plan). The community reported a few challenges working with local districts of the state department of transportation, citing that a drone "walk through" was conducted leaving community members to feel that they did not have the opportunity to participate. While the MnDOT project is set to be constructed in 2027, MnDOT reportedly requires all plans to be complete four years prior to construction (2024). This long timeline has frustrated at least one community member who expressed concern over not being able to implement the desired underpass at the south end of the community sooner. They have reported that they are told that statistics (i.e. a bicyclist or pedestrian death) is needed. Fortunately, no such statistics exist. Consequently, they have pursued direct congressional spending by working with their state representatives, noting that the majority of the design work for the underpass has already been completed.

Several people within the community have been identified as enthusiastically making Walker, Minnesota more walkable and bikeable. This includes the Leech Lake Area Chamber of Commerce, the county level health advocate, past elected officials, and local community members. As people in these positions have changed over time, those that remain continue to bring the meetings of the Bicycle Friendly Committee to elected officials to allow for engagement.

Walker has somewhere around four hundred taxable properties. As such, they are well aware that they cannot build their way into new taxable funding revenues. Walker's inability to expand its taxable properties is in part a reflection of the surrounding forests and Leech Lake. As a result, Walker realizes the value in coordinating with other entities that surround them, including the neighboring township. The interest in coordinating with their neighbors is also reflected in the community's plan, which specifically calls out the use of the word "Area" in the "Walker Area Comprehensive Plan," as a reflection of the need for coordination.

Walker has been able to leverage the skills of many people to implement bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure. As an example, while one proponent of walking and bicycling is very good at identifying grant funding, they did not grow up with modern day computing skills. As such, this individual reported writing up the idea and then enlisting an administrative aid from a local business to type it up in Microsoft Word. It is a great example of working collaboratively, using everyone's skills sets, and pitching in where possible.

FUNDING FOR BICYCLE & PEDESTRIAN INFRASTRUCTURE

Walker, Minnesota reports having applied for many funding sources, finding both successes and in some cases not receiving funding or receiving only part of the requested funding. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and Minnesota Department of Transportation were identified as two primary funding sources. The community also reports leveraging federal trail grant programs in years past.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) owned land within Cass County and after the sale of some of the land, a portion of the funding was given to Cass County. Through this sale, Fund 73 (an endowment fund) was created at the county level. Every year, interest earned from that set aside is used to support projects in Walker and other communities within Cass County. It can range from \$10,000 to \$30,000 towards match. It allows the community to provide match funding to state projects, whether through the Minnesota Department of Transportation or the Minnesota DNR. The community has identified this funding source as instrumental in providing the match for many of the transportation funds offered at the state level. The community noted that when they were able to find other funding sources, as Fund 73 is shared amongst all of the communities in Cass County, they return any unused funds.

The underpass that connects the Shingobee Connector Trail to the school (#6 in Figure 10) reportedly cost approximately \$600,000. Safe Routes to School funding was used to construct this facility.

The seven miles of the Shingobee Connector Trail cost an estimated \$3.2 to \$3.6 million, most of it paid for through grants applied for by the community.

The public restrooms that were installed in 2021 reportedly cost an estimated \$290,000 (#9 in Figure 10). It was funded in part by grants and also with funds from the community.

Walker's Capital Improvement Plan has laid out how trails within the town will be constructed and maintained. This includes restriping the bicycle lanes.

The bicycle fleet was paid for by grants through Cass County.

LESSONS LEARNED

Walker has been very successful in leveraging grants to support their efforts. They are very aware that they have a limited tax base and must coordinate with surrounding entities as well as maintain the funding sources that they currently have (e.g. serving as the county seat).

Like other communities, Walker has struggled with bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure implementation as leadership changes. However, they have worked to bring meetings to leadership to ensure continued engagement. Similarly, while the community's bicycle advocacy group was large about fifteen years ago, it has suffered from attrition over time.

The Leech Lake Area Chamber of Commerce has been an instrumental partner to the community in supporting the community's recognition as a Bicycle Friendly Community.

THE FUTURE OF BICYCLE & PEDESTRIAN INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE COMMUNITY

The community achieved a Bronze Level rating as a Bicycle Friendly Community by the League of American Bicyclists. Walker has ambitions and much of their investment centers around their desire to achieve a Silver Level designation when they reapply in 2022. Feedback they received identified a need for events as well as addressing concerns about the main street's (MN371/MN200) safety for pedestrians and bicyclists, an issue thing that has been reflected in plans for almost ten years. In particular, the community has an interest in reducing the distance that one is exposed to a vehicle when crossing the main street as well as generally providing more priority for pedestrians walking in the downtown area.

The Minnesota Department of Transportation has plans to reconstruct the main street in 2027. The city plans to leverage this project to help upgrade pedestrian infrastructure along the roadway as well as replace ailing storm and sewer pipes. This project would also likely address the community's desire to create an underpass at the south end of town beneath MN371/MN200, if funding is not identified and the facility constructed before then. The community sees the implementation of this underpass as a way to ensure that older adults and young children can more easily make use of the facility, allowing all to safely traverse the Walker Loop. The community has already worked to earmark grants to implement this underpass in the near future. Similarly, no sidewalk currently exists north of the MN200/MN371 and MN34 intersection, where there are clear social paths (Figure 12). The community envisions the 2027 MnDOT project will address this need.

Case Studies of Bicycling and Walking in Small Communities: Walker, Minnesota



Figure 12: Social Path.

The community would like to facilitate more bicycle give-aways particularly within the schools, as well as make greater use of the bike fleet. They would also like to create a bicycle recycling program.

KEY POINTS

The timeline suggests that Walker has been working to improve the walking and bicycling infrastructure within their community for more than fifteen years. Therefore, it takes time to develop infrastructure like that seen within. Early on, those who have continued to advocate for these modes recall that many community members and businesses were opposed. This changed as both the residents and businesses within the community started to understand the ties between allowing tourists (and residents) to access the trails and the Walker economy, particularly as they moved from a logging-based economy to a tourism-based economy.

SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES TO APPLY IN OTHER SMALL COMMUNITIES

The following are some successful strategies that other small communities may want to consider applying:

1. Hold a Bikeable Community Workshop. This workshop got the ball rolling for creating an interest by community members as well as creating the connections needed to make things happen.

- 2. Go to the leaders of your community if they will not come to you. Rather than holding a meeting about walking and bicycling in isolation, consider holding the meeting where it is easily accessible by representatives or individuals that you want to engage with.
- 3. Provide incentives to businesses. The Leech Lake Chamber of Commerce in cooperation with the county-level health advocate provided incentive for businesses to pursue a Bicycle Friendly Business designation. This can be a great way to get businesses interested in finding the value of this designation.
- 4. Engage one's state department of transportation (DOT) early. Advocates within Walker recently realized that the state DOT was planning a project for 2027. Yet, their timeline for the development of the design spans far in advance of this implementation date. Therefore, community members have learned to engage their state DOT early in the process to allow for coordination and ensure that the community's priorities are represented in the ultimate design.

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