

*Source: National Recreation and Park Association. Accessed February 2, 2024.*

# Open Streets ICT Brings Wichitans Together!

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This past fall, Wichita, Kansas, experienced its inaugural open streets event: “Open Streets ICT.” Open Streets, a movement that is prevalent in cities across the United States, is a free community-building event that calls for closing a street to traffic and opening it for biking, walking, running, dancing, arts, culture-related activities and more! The “more” is the most important ingredient: people interacting and socializing. What is ICT, you may ask? Well, Wichitans are very proud of their aviation history and airport, hence our airport code, ICT, is used in many local events as a great branding tool for our city.

September 24, 2017, saw an estimated 18,000 individuals participate in this over-the-top event. At a time of national division and a lack of acceptance, Open Streets ICT broke through the divide to unite the community. Stronger bonds were created by the residents of Wichita; the business community had a changed perception of street closures, transportation and bicycle usage; and those that have a vision for Wichita got a glimpse of what our city could be. This event also reenergized the desire to exercise more and use alternative transportation, which resulted in an economic impact for downtown and brought history lessons to life, along with a new appreciation and exploration of downtown Wichita.

## **The Inspiration**

The idea of hosting an Open Streets event in Wichita was inspired by the keynote speaker of the 2015 NRPA Annual Conference in Las Vegas, Gil Penalosa, executive director of 8-80 Cities. This quote from Penalosa helps explain the motivation and the heart in the event: “People traffic replaces car traffic, and streets become ‘paved parks’ where people of all ages, abilities and social economic, ethnic backgrounds can come out and improve their mental, physical and emotional health.” Additional inspiration and support came from trips to Open Streets conferences in Atlanta and Portland, where we participated in their events and pondered the possibilities for Wichita.

## **Coming Together**

After the inspiration came a call to action. It took a bit of doing to convince the police that using the streets for bicycles and people is a good thing. But, eventually, the Wichita Police Department, along with Wichita Park & Recreation, Wichita Festivals, ICT Health, Visual Fusion, Bike Walk Wichita and others, a coalition of community partners formed an energized and determined committee. That committee spearheaded efforts to promote and educate the community about the event and raise awareness of the benefits of Open Streets. It was also responsible for recruiting volunteers and for operations during the day of the event.

Sponsorships were established, and a grant from the Wichita Community Foundation, which funneled funding from the Knight Foundation, was the spark to begin planning efforts. Humana Health provided the much-needed cash to help with execution, and other sponsors, such as KAKE-TV, KMUW radio, Dr. Justin Moore and Wichita Screen Printing, also joined in with promotional support and funding.

Selling the idea of an event that nobody had tried before in Wichita was a challenge. The city has a very car-centric culture and the thought of using a street for people and not cars was counterintuitive. For two years, the committee and sponsors worked together to put in place the needed logistics and support — an accomplishment, in and of itself, as committee members came from different backgrounds and experiences, and with differing talents and visions. Many of them had never met prior to this endeavor and had to develop relationships while tackling a huge event. Another unexpected outcome of this event was the friendships that grew out of this partnership. During the many hours of meetings to plan the event and create a stronger Wichita, this coalition of volunteers, community leaders, activists and visionaries became unified around the philosophy of Open Streets ICT, expressed in the following mission statement:

*Open Streets ICT is designed to elevate the quality of life and health of the Greater Wichita community. It will become a public safe space to promote the interaction of local businesses and organizations with the community to help strengthen Wichita. Streets belong to everyone, they connect us to each other and the places where we live, learn, work and play across neighborhoods, cultures and economic status.*

Without the support of each member and partnering organizations, the event would not have been successful.

### **The Day of the Event**

Wichita Vice Mayor Janet Miller and City Council Member Lavonta Williams shared the stage and gave an energetic kickoff that highlighted the togetherness Open Streets ICT created. The presidents from each of the local universities — Wichita State University, Newman University and Friends University — were invited to speak, and this marked the first time they all had come together for a community event and the first time they partnered with the city of Wichita's elected officials. The coalition of community partners wanted the universities to support its goal of fostering an appreciation among community members, leaders, businesses and key decision makers for streets as multifunctional — places where the community could congregate, socialize and be free — and not just for motor vehicles.

The atmosphere along the approximately 4 miles of closed streets was relaxed and joyful. The inclusiveness and diversity vibe was felt by many, and the 18,000 residents who attended were more interested in engaging than just being entertained. A man in a wheelchair being pushed by his wife down the double yellow line in the middle of the street shared that he had never felt so much freedom as he did that day, rolling down the middle of the street greeting and meeting people. Another family that was taking in all the historic and interesting monuments and murals said: "Most days you are traveling down Douglas Avenue at 35 miles-per-hour. Today, I have the time to learn and enjoy the art that is in downtown." They also spent time viewing the 15 large murals that were created for the weekend as the result of the partnership with Avenue Art Days in the Douglas Design District.

Some attendees were using a smartphone app, created for this event, to track fitness during the event and provide information about the route. The app also included information about historic downtown events and historical markers, such as the Dockum Drug Store where a civil rights sit-in occurred in 1958. Led by the Wichita NAACP youth council, that event was a moving force for equality in the city of Wichita. "This event feels different than most," adds another family. "People want to use the streets as a gathering place. I feel this event can bring people together."

### **The Debrief**

Following Open Streets ICT, participants were asked to complete an exit survey that collected some amazing responses. The event made some people want to be more active, others learned more about their city, met new and connected with old friends, and some now want to purchase bikes! As predicted, the event had an economic impact. The feedback from many of the stores and restaurants was that they recorded fantastic sales, and several of the stores that were closed during the event this year have stated they will be open during the next Open Streets ICT event.

Open Streets ICT allowed Wichitans to see what their community has to offer and what it could be. They came together, putting aside biases and concerns to enjoy the freedom of the streets and create a more caring and unified community. The smiles told the story and the Wichita Park & Recreation team, along with the other coalition members have begun planning the Open Streets ICT as an annual or more frequently held event. In a small way, Wichita was changed for the better. The power of parks and recreation has an impact every day, in every community, working on social equity, health and wellness and making our work indispensable!

**Troy Houtman**, CPRE, is Director of Parks and Recreation for the City of Wichita, Park and Recreation Department.