

Removing Red Tape for Complete Streets Projects in Small Rural Communities

SUPER: Walking and biking are two of the most common forms of physical activity. With rural obesity and physical inactivity rates higher than the state and national averages in Louisiana, providing safe avenues for exercise and active transportation like walking and biking can help rural Louisiana residents be more physically active. However, many small towns face large barriers when it comes to improving bike and pedestrian infrastructure.

Jerry Bell, Former Mayor of Lake Providence, LA: Oftentimes small communities get left behind because their thinking gets left behind. I think complete streets would demonstrate that Lake Providence is kind of current on what's happening and open to forward thinking and we have to have things for people to get engaged in when they come and utilize and access our lakes and our natural resources.

Matthew Alexander, Mayor of St. Joseph, LA: Just from a psychological standpoint, a kid knowing that you've built something for them or people knowing that you put this here specifically to try to enhance the quality of their life, I think people probably underestimate the average awareness of citizens.

Jessica Stroope, LSU AgCenter Physical Activity Specialist: So, in Louisiana we've been working with our partners at the Center for Planning Excellence in our CDC high obesity parishes to develop complete streets implementation plans and these plans are based on extensive community input, working with people from all over the communities trying to focus hard on getting equitable input and we have these beautiful plans but then we come to a point where how do these plans become reality? There's just no money and so part of our work has shifted to how do we help these communities access funding? Previously, I was familiar with the Transportation Alternatives Program, but I never mentioned it to our communities because it was so expensive for them so I reached out to our and Department of Transportation and Development, our DOTD and our Transportation Alternatives Program manager and he was a very eager partner to help figure out how can we make this reality, and we tried multiple solutions trying to find something that would work, and he did. He came up in the end with one that was acceptable to all the partners, so he moved it from a functional 40% cost for these communities that are under 5,000 to a true 5% cash match. So, that makes that typical \$500,000 project now cost a community under 5,000 only \$25,000. So, as I'm having these conversations with the TAP manager in Louisiana and we're coming through these solutions in the back of my head I'm still thinking "even if all this becomes a reality, it's still going to be a struggle for rural communities to apply" so I planned a rural complete street summit in partnership with our colleagues at the Center for Planning Excellence and Safe Routes Partnership and a lot of colleagues from DOTD and together we had 13 communities come in. We had rotations on how do you get

equitable community input, how do you build a plan, how do you pass a complete streets policy, and then how do you apply for funding.

Janne Kiefer, Lake Providence Resident and Kendall Thompson, East Carrol Parish Police Jury President: We have some challenges to try to get the money to start the process, but this is probably the only opportunity we might could get with this low of a match and just being able to be in the game like this is probably one of the better opportunities we could have.

Kendall Thompson, East Carrol Parish Police Jury President: It would help us a whole lot and you learn a lot from the summit today and meet people that can help you and explain a lot of stuff to you that you didn't know and how to do things so this would help a whole lot. The opportunity is here and we're here to try to make sure that we jump on board with whatever we can get out of this.

Janne Kiefer, Lake Providence Resident: Yeah.

Brian Nunes, LaDOTD TAP Manager: I hope that first of all these communities realize the importance of complete streets, the importance of providing mobility networks for non-vehicular traffic, whether it be pedestrian, bicycle, or mobility impaired. I also hope that they realize that this funding is for them. It's not just for the MPO areas. It's for the rural areas. They're underserved at this time, and we need to get the word out that this money is there for them. And the last thing I want for them to know is that DOTD is here as an ally for them. We're not a roadblock. So, we're changing policies and we're reaching out and we're trying to make it more accessible for them to be involved in the program.

Jessica Stroope, LSU AgCenter Physical Activity Specialist: So, in Louisiana, in the history of Transportation Alternatives, in all the years it's been running, there've only been 3 applications for communities under 5,000 that have been able to be funded and that's been because of the barriers of cost, the barriers of the match, and so this year alone in the 2023 cycle and there were 15 applications just from communities under 5,000.

SUPER: Although the large number of applicants in 2023 marks significant progress for Louisiana, the LSU AgCenter Healthy Communities team plans to host the Louisiana Rural Complete Streets Summit every other year to continue making bike and pedestrian infrastructure funding more accessible for small rural communities. Visit our website or follow us on social media to learn more.

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