



KUTC Fact Sheet

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Active Transportation: Improving the Health of Rural Communities in More Ways Than One

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“Active transportation, sometimes referred to as non-motorized transportation, mostly involves walking and biking as a means of transportation. For the last several decades, the pervasiveness of motorized vehicles has resulted in built environments that typically prioritize moving vehicles through communities more than pedestrian and bicycle access.

However, the Urban Land Institute (ULI) has found that, “In recent years, investments in infrastructure that accommodates those who walk and ride bicycles have begun to reshape communities.”¹ The ULI cites its *America in 2015* report, stating that half of U.S. residents say walkability is important in deciding where they live, and the U.S. Census has determined that bicycling is the fastest growing form of transportation among commuters.

These growing trends aren’t isolated to large cities. In fact, a Rails to Trails Conservancy report found that the trips of commuters by bike are nearly double in small towns compared to urban centers.² With smaller populations and less heavy traffic, towns and rural communities are ideal for walking and biking as transportation. The growing popularity of these non-motorized modes of transportation is causing many communities to reconsider how they prioritize



The City of Iola installed new wayfinding signage along Prairie Spirit Trail in 2015 through a grant from local nonprofit Thrive Allen County.



transportation funding. This fact sheet highlights the benefits of investing in active transportation in Kansas communities.

Benefits of Active Transportation

Research has identified many concrete benefits of active transportation, including improved public health, community unity and economic development.

Health Benefits

In a country and state with high obesity rates and related diseases among both adults and children, active transportation can introduce exercise into a person’s everyday routines. The introduction of light

exercise, such as biking or walking, has been shown to improve overall health and quality of life for residents. In fact, one study found that, “There is evidence that health benefits can be observed for levels of activity at lower durations and intensity than the minimum public health goal—i.e., adding a number of five minute walks to the bus, the store, or to the neighbors can add to your health.” Thus, very small changes in daily routine can effect health outcomes.

The health benefits are valuable not only for individuals, but also for communities. The cost of additional health care due to obesity-related illnesses adds up. The Rails to Trails

Conservancy estimated that health benefits from active transportation reducing premature death are valued at approximately \$235 billion per year (2009).⁴

Community Benefits

Active transportation is commonly associated with urban areas, but biking and walking are important parts of rural life and transportation, as well. In fact, the Rails to Trails Conservancy report *Active Transportation Beyond Urban Centers* cites that, “When it comes to work, residents of certain kinds of rural communities walk and bike almost as much (and in few cases, even more) as residents of cities and inner suburbs.” Communities of 2,500 to 10,000 people report residents walking for work purposes (commuting and during work) at rates similar to cities. Supporting facilities for active transportation helps foster a sense of community in many towns.

walking clubs, as well as day-to-day use, trails and sidewalks can become social and active spaces.

Economic Benefits

Building and maintaining trails can be costly, and it’s worth exploring the potential economic impacts before undertaking expensive projects. When looking at the economic gains of active transportation, the impacts go beyond business or job creation to increasing the value of surrounding land. In fact, the ULI found that, “Numerous studies have shown that real estate values increase with proximity to bicycle paths and walking trails.” Incidents of increased value are not isolated. A 2009 nationwide study by CEOs for Cities found that houses in areas of above-average walking and biking facilities are worth up to \$34,000 (national average) more than similar homes in areas with less supportive active transportation

and park a bike, are getting more people in the door to shop. While it’s true that shoppers who walk or ride bikes generally buy less than shoppers who drive, a report by the Alliance for Bicycling and Walking says, “Customers who bike to a store return more often and spend more overall per month,” providing an overall net gain.

Active transportation, and biking in particular, can also boost tourism, drawing in people from outside the community. Bike touring and races are common tourist attractions, with cyclists pedaling across states on multiple trails, through multiple communities. Communities that are already tourist destinations can use biking and walking to become even more tourist-friendly while also reducing the impact of tourism traffic on local road systems.

Examples: Kansas Communities Supporting Active Transportation

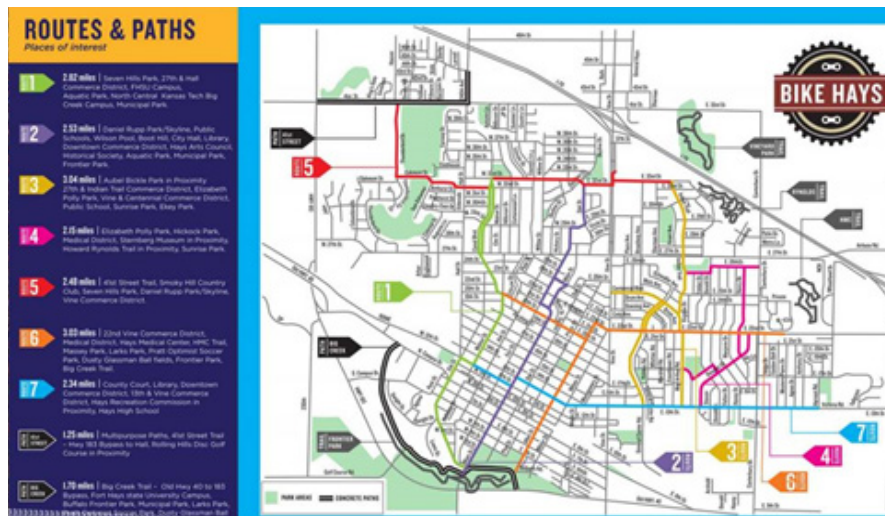
Bike Hays Master Plan

The City of Hays, Kansas was initially interested in building an extensive bike trail system to provide active transportation opportunities for the community. However, due to the cost of building trails and reductions in federal funding, the city instead turned to its existing infrastructure.

They contracted with RDG Planning and Design to help create a Master Bike Plan for the city that would lay out bike lanes and routes within the city street network. The plan establishes goals, principles, infrastructure design concepts, implementation strategies, and support structures. The City uses trails to help connect the gaps between road bikeways, creating a network with minimal interruption.

Iola Complete Streets Policy

In February of 2016, the City Council of Iola, Kansas passed the city’s Complete Streets Policy unanimously. Its passage makes Iola the ninth city in Kansas to adopt such a policy, following: Hutchison (2012), Kansas City, Kansas (2011), Lawrence (2012), Leawood (2011), Overland Park (2012), Roeland



Bike Hays provides route information and guidance on bike safety.



Many trails built in rural communities are planned, constructed and maintained by volunteers and various community groups. This initially brings the community together around a specific project. However, longer-term effects of community building are seen in the actual use of the trail as a “third place,” that is, a place separate from home and work where citizens can engage with one another. Through events, races and

infrastructure. Proximity to active transportation infrastructure has proven desirable not only to communities, but also to investors and homeowners.

Additionally, a growing body of literature is supporting the notion that active transportation supports retail, commercial sales and overall economic development. Shop owners are discovering that nearby bike lanes and trails, when combined with the ability to stop



Kansans bike on the Linear Park Trail in Manhattan. The trail currently wraps along the southern edge of the city, but the long-term plan will complete a loop of bicycle infrastructure around the city's perimeter, connecting trails and road bikeways.



Park (2011), Topeka (2009), and Wichita (2014). One county (Johnson County, 2011) and one Metropolitan Planning Organization (Lawrence-Douglas County MPO, 2011) have also adopted Complete Streets policies to provide sidewalks and connections for active transportation.

The National Complete Streets Coalition notes that, "Complete Streets are important in helping town centers and Main Streets thrive, too, by improving street connectivity and allowing everyone, whether on foot, bike,

or public transportation, to reach community focal points." They add that, "Creating Complete Streets can facilitate reinvestment and economic development in the heart of a small town."⁵

Manhattan Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee

The scope of Manhattan's 10-person Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committee is very broad. Its purpose statement includes: developing recommendations for the City Commission consistent with the Bike Plan, advising the

bicycle coordinator and city staff in establishing bike routes, planning and coordinating community cycling activities, and conducting fundraising for cycling activities and programs.

Committee members are appointed for three-year terms by the Mayor, with the consent of the City Commission.

The members represent various stakeholders, including the university, business community, county health department, school district, police department, and the community residents.⁶

Conclusion

Overall, when deciding whether facilities that support biking are walking are feasible, even small investments or phased investments over time can create a big impact.

The ULI emphasizes that, "Investments in trails, bike lanes and bicycle-sharing systems have high levels of return on investment. Regions and cities have found that relatively small investments in active transportation can yield high economic returns, due to improved health and environmental outcomes." As rural communities plan for the future, active transportation infrastructure can play an important role in reaching overall community goals. ■

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TOOLS TO FURTHER LOCAL ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION GOALS

- Bicycle/Pedestrian Committee
- Complete Streets Policy
- Bicycle/Pedestrian Plan
- Grants from Local, State and National Organizations
- Share the Road Driver Education Programs
- Protected Infrastructure at Street Crossings and Busy Intersections
- Bike Share Programs
- Safe Routes to School Programs
- Infrastructure to Serve Elderly and Disabled Populations

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