

# The benefits of conducting a walk audit

By Greta Hacker

**E**conomic prosperity and the quality of the built environment go hand in hand. Communities with vibrant, thriving public spaces and high quality physical infrastructure set themselves up for better economic outcomes because of their desirability as places to live and work.

Communities looking to increase economic opportunities through improvement of their built environments have a variety of tools at their disposal to assist with these efforts. One method of achieving this goal is known as a walk audit. This program provides a professional on-site assessment of a community's physical environment around an identified area. Walk audits engage communities in critically evaluating city infrastructure and provide recommendations for how to move forward in improving community assets.

The programs are most effective when diverse community stakeholders are involved in the process. Common participants in walk audits include mayors, public works officials, local merchants, city engineers and outside engineering consultants, chamber of commerce officials, and other leaders. While these programs can be customized to address specific community needs, walk audits often focus on evaluating how safe, pedestrian and bike-friendly, and accessible to those with disabilities the surveyed area is.

Generally, walk audits focus on a 3x3-block area of a community and are often concentrated on the downtown area. This trend has decisive economic development impacts.

"When a company or industry visits a potential location for a new site, one of the first places they go to is the downtown," said Dave Roberts, vice president of business development with Crafton Tull and Associates. "Think of the downtown as the community's living room. That space brings everyone together so it needs to be an active, growing destination that is accessible for all to enjoy."

Another unique benefit of walk audits is the ability to help community leaders identify little-considered environmental issues and recognize how seemingly small infrastructure disparities can have adverse consequences for citizens.

"I always hear a mayor or public works director say 'I've never noticed that' when talking about a barrier in the built environment," Roberts said. "Sometimes it is



City and community leaders in Beebe, above, and De Queen, right, participate in walk audits to determine what they can do to make their cities more walkable, more accessible, and more beautiful.

a little thing they stepped around for most of their life, such as a lack of curb cuts and crosswalks that make access for a wheelchair user very difficult."

Walk audits are also beneficial because they have the potential to contribute to sustainable change. Roberts notes that though the program's focus is on small areas of a community, "the safety, accessibility, and circulation recommendations can be transferred to other parts of town that may have some of the same issues."

The hope is that outcomes ripple through the community rather than just address one specific issue in one location.

The cities of Beebe and De Queen participated in walk audits earlier this year in partnership with Crafton Tull and the University of Central Arkansas Center for



Community and Economic Development. Both cities have worked hard to put the program's recommendations into effect.

"We appreciate the opportunity to participate in a walk audit of our downtown area," said Mayor Mike Robertson of Beebe. "It provided us with some fresh ideas and productive discussion for improvement. Our group consisted of leaders from various facets of our community, which offered a great dynamic."

Following the program, Crafton Tull provided reports to community leadership in Beebe and De Queen that outlined recommendations for improvement based upon on-site evaluations of the surveyed areas. The reports identified beautification opportunities, accessibility recommendations, crosswalk opportunities, recommended changes in sidewalk structure, and included other specific suggestions for each community, such as increasing the connectivity between downtown Beebe and the campus of ASU-Beebe and creating a pocket park in downtown De Queen.

In the short months following this process, the cities have rallied behind the opportunities for improvement.

"Since the walk audit, we have installed crosswalks, benches and a new mural downtown," Mayor Robertson said.

Lisa Taylor, economic development coordinator at the University of Arkansas Cossatot said, "During the walk audit in De Queen, participants became aware of the challenges faced by the approximately 12 percent of our citizens who have a disability. Since then, community leaders have been making incremental changes to our physical environment to support these individuals and others in our community. We also just kicked off a major project to construct an inclusive playground where every child in our community will have the opportunity to play, learn, and grow with one another."

A community's participation in a walk audit and implementing its recommendations can increase its livability, beauty, and viability. If your community is interested in participating in a walk audit, please contact Shelby Fiegel at (501) 450-5269 or email [sfiegel@uca.edu](mailto:sfiegel@uca.edu).



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