

Walking with a purpose: Walk audits reveal opportunities for change

By Marquette Stricklen

Take a moment to walk around your community—you might start your journey in your residential neighborhood or a local park. You see flowerbeds, benches, a bike lane and a walking trail that leads to the town square. During the walk you see neighbors, shop owners, and children playing. Ask yourself: What does your environment say about your community? If what you see isn't pleasant, can you think of ways it could be improved? If you've done this, you've completed an informal version of a community walk audit.

Walk audits are assessments conducted on foot to assess the built environment, infrastructure, and to find opportunities to improve the aesthetics and accessibility of a specific area within a community. Walk audits also assess walkability, which includes the quality of pedestrian facilities such as clean and clear sidewalks, appropriately placed and defined crosswalks, bicycle lanes, roadway conditions, parking, safety, wayfinding and beautification. The types of businesses located downtown, the ease of access to downtown from surrounding areas, and quality and accessibility of curb cuts also influence a community's walkability.

Walk audits are conducted by professional planners, elected officials, city engineers, park directors, public work directors, business owners and community advocates. Typically, the group conducting the walk audit focuses on a community's downtown or main square.

During a walk audit, a community is given a walk score. A walk score analyzes the routes to nearby amenities and produces a score based on the aforementioned factors. Places with beautiful landscaping and multiple mobility choices get higher walk scores. Once the area is observed, those conducting the walk audit develop a strategic plan for improvement, working with urban



Lonoke Council Member Ryan Biles asks a question during a recent walk audit of his hometown conducted by community leaders, UCA and Crafton Tull.

planners and contractors to bring new life to the area and sometimes to create a new community identity.

Walk audits can also be a tool to create a long-term plan for a community's infrastructure. For example, the University of Central Arkansas (UCA) Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED) and Crafton Tull conducted a walk audit in Lonoke in 2020



Crafton Tull's Dave Roberts leads the Lonoke walk audit through the city's historic downtown.

PHOTOS COURTESY UCA CENTER FOR COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

that has spurred momentum in the city. Valerie Turner, a citizen and leader for Lonoke 2022, said, “The walk audit pointed out some legal concerns and helped us develop a vision for the future.”

A diverse group of local leaders and citizens participated in Lonoke’s walk audit. Council Member Ryan Biles shared that it helped to create a common vocabulary regarding pedestrian access and a shared understanding of Lonoke’s existing infrastructure conditions. The walk audit was also beneficial because it gave citizens the opportunity to walk around their town, discuss the changes they wanted to see and create a plan of action to implement those changes. After the walk audit, Lonoke leaders used the feedback and next-step suggestions from Crafton Tull and UCA to begin to make improvements. “Lonoke has proceeded to engage with Crafton Tull planners and engineers to undertake a Bicycle Pedestrian Master Plan as a direct outgrowth of the walk audit,” Biles said.

Lake Village and Bryant have also seen success in conducting walk audits. Leesa Freasier, the State Physical Activity and Nutrition (SPAN) program’s physical activity coordinator at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, conducted the walk audits in Lake Village and Bryant alongside community leaders. Based on recommendations in Lake Village, Freasier shared

that a pocket park was created downtown and students from the local high school developed crosswalk art for safe crossing.

In Bryant, a walk audit was conducted on Reynolds Road. There were no sidewalks or bike lanes, and access management was poor. SPAN worked with the city engineer to add sidewalks, bike lanes and open the area for improved accessibility. Freasier also worked with the city to develop form-based code, which was formally adopted by Bryant City Council.

Walk audits have the potential to take a community from desolate to thriving. They are a great tool to develop a foundation to begin moving in the right direction. If you think your city or town could benefit from a walk audit, contact the UCA Center for Community and Economic Development at 501-450-5269 or email Shelby Fiegel at sfiegel@uca.edu. 🏠



Marquette Stricklen is a 2021 spring intern for the Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED). Marquette is from Forrester City and a senior at the University of Central Arkansas. She is seeking a bachelor’s in public administration with hopes of one day starting a nonprofit organization that gives back to small communities like her hometown.

