

Safe Routes to School in Small Rural Communities: Challenges and Strategies to Accessing Funding

Under the last two Federal transportation bills, States have been required to set aside a portion of their funding for active transportation and Safe Routes to School to support rural communities with 5,000 or less residents. However, the set-aside does not guarantee that these communities are able to access this funding or support students in safely walking and bicycling to school, and a variety of challenges can affect a community's ability to benefit from the funds.

Communities, whether rural, urban or suburban, often have a mix of reasons for needing increased attention on walking and bicycling. Rural communities have a special need for the benefits of Safe Routes to School and active transportation. Rural communities have higher

levels of physical inactivity than urban areas,^{1,2} high injury and fatality rates from collisions,⁴ and poorer infrastructure for safe and convenient walking and bicycling.⁵ Accessing funding for Safe Routes to School and walking and bicycling can be a real opportunity to address these needs. This informational brief provides an overview of the challenges that small rural communities face in accessing Federal funding for and implementing active transportation projects, describes State outreach, technical assistance, and partnership approaches that support these communities, and highlights places that have successfully used Federal funds to improve safety and accessibility for walking and bicycling.



Jackson, Wyoming

Overview

Starting in 2012, the Federal transportation bill, Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21), required States to set aside a portion of their Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) funds, funds for walking, bicycling, and Safe Routes to School projects, to nonurban communities with 5,000 or fewer residents. This requirement continues today as part of the Transportation Alternatives (TA) Set-Aside under the current Federal transportation bill, Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act (FAST Act). After deducting Recreational Trails Program funding, States can use half of the TA Set-Aside anywhere in the State through a statewide competitive process. For the other 50 percent, each State must divide the funding among geographic areas based on their relative share of the total State population. There are three categories for these divisions: urbanized areas with populations over 200,000, small urban areas with populations of 5,001 to 200,000, and nonurban areas with 5,000 or fewer people.⁴ This informational brief focuses on small rural communities, nonurban areas with 5,000 or fewer people. These include small cities and towns, tribal communities, and unincorporated communities. However, small communities located within urbanized areas represented by a metropolitan planning organization (MPO) are not eligible for this funding category, even if they have a population of 5,000 or fewer people.

Each State is responsible for selecting projects in small rural communities through a competitive process. Most States combine the application process for small rural communities with either the small urban areas (with populations over 5,000) or the statewide competitive process in order to streamline administration. However, how States handle project selection varies widely. Some consider the projects for the small rural set-aside separately, while others select projects across all areas and then only distinguish the areas during reporting.

As of June 2016, over \$335 million in TAP/TA Set-Aside funds are available to States to spend in small rural communities. Overall, the percentage of available funds in this category that have been obligated (committed by the State towards funding a selected project) is slightly lower than the percentage of TAP/TA Set-Aside funds obligated for all communities. However, obligation of the funds for small rural communities varies widely across the States. Many States have obligated a high percentage of their funds and are seeing projects successfully implemented in rural communities. In Florida, for example, almost 96 percent of these funds have been obligated. Conversely, there are seven States that have not obligated any funds for communities in this category.⁶

Barriers to Walking and Bicycling in Rural Communities

In addition to the challenges specific to accessing and using Federal funding, rural communities often face other barriers related to Safe Routes to School and active transportation. While many of these challenges also exist in other areas, they can be more pronounced in rural areas and create barriers for people walking and bicycling.

- Long distances between home and school. Although distance is one of the biggest barriers to children walking and bicycling to school in the United States as a whole, the distances can be much further in rural areas. The closing of small rural schools and school districts has worsened this trend.⁷
- Limited sidewalks and other infrastructure for walking and bicycling. Without sidewalks and bicycle lanes, people are often walking and bicycling along shoulders or on makeshift paths.
- County roads and State highways bisecting towns. These roads and highways are often the major thoroughfares in rural communities and their design accommodates all sizes and types of vehicles including large trucks and freight.
- High speeds. Rural roads and highways often allow for higher speeds than other areas, creating hazards for children and other people walking and bicycling. Particularly when combined with the scarcity of sidewalks or bicycle lanes, these high speeds increase the likelihood of a driver hitting a child who is walking or bicycling, and also increase the severity of injuries if a crash occurs.
- Stray animals and wildlife. Aggressive dogs and other stray animals and wildlife pose a danger to people walking in some rural areas. In addition, in areas where wildlife is abundant, animals can wander onto roadways and trails, and children may feel threatened while on foot or bicycle.

Common Challenges in Small Rural Communities

While the set-aside of funding is available for small rural communities, it does not guarantee that they are able to access funding or successfully implement projects and programs. Challenges communities often face in using the TAP/TA Set-Aside, and other Federal transportation funds include: not having the staff capacity to apply for the funds and implement projects; limited fiscal resources; reduced competitiveness for the very small projects proposed by small rural communities; and low prioritization of walking and bicycling projects.



Limited Staffing Capacity

Small rural communities often have limited agency staff available to seek funding, implement projects, or run programs. In larger urban and suburban communities, cities and towns may have dozens of staff in their planning and transportation departments, with staff dedicated to transportation engineering, bicycle and pedestrian programs, and grant writing. But in many rural areas, staff assume many different roles. They may find it very challenging to add new responsibilities or find extra time to seek funding for new programs or infrastructure. In addition, staff in these areas may be less able to stay current on new trends in active transportation and Safe Routes to School. The many steps necessary to follow a funding idea through to implementation—preparing an application, overseeing grant administration, and adhering to Federal funding requirements—can be a large burden when there are only one or two staff who can dedicate time to planning and transportation. Federal regulation provides that the State department of transportation and the local community must provide a full time employee to be in “responsible charge” of the project⁸, a challenging requirement to meet for a very small town with no staff or only a few full-time staff.

Limited Fiscal Resources

When a community receives TAP/TA Set-Aside funding for a project or program, it is responsible for providing matching funds of up to 20 percent of the project cost. Some States provide the match with State funding, or allow in-kind contributions of staff time and donations toward the match, but most require the local project sponsor to pay the match. Twenty percent of the cost of an infrastructure project can be a large burden on rural communities that often have limited fiscal resources. Compounding this, limited staffing reduces the ability of a rural community to provide an in-kind match even when it is allowed.

In addition, some States do not allow the project award funds to pay for preliminary engineering for infrastructure projects. Agency staff or a consultant paid through other funds completes preliminary engineering in large cities and towns. Small rural communities often do not have the staff with the technical expertise or time available to do preliminary engineering.

Challenges can also arise when the actual cost for engineering and construction exceeds the cost estimate in the application and funding award. At such times, the community might struggle to find the extra funding to cover what the grant does not.

Reduced Competitiveness of Very Small Projects

Improving routes to school often involves smaller projects, such as closing sidewalk gaps, installing crosswalks, or improving school zone signing and pavement marking. A variety of considerations that pertain to small rural communities can result in a community proposing very small projects. Limited staffing to manage projects, limited fiscal resources to provide required matching dollars, concerns about the viability of expensive proposals for the benefit of small populations, and the small physical scale of these communities can all lead to very small project proposals. But Federal funding usually comes with a high administrative burden, and while not unique to communities with a population under 5,000, States are often hesitant to award TAP, TA Set-Aside, and other Federal funds for infrastructure improvements that are small scale or have relatively low costs. Small projects proposed by rural communities may be crucial locally, but lack State support over larger projects.



Manitou Springs, Colorado

Competing Priorities and Lack of Awareness

Some States have difficulty obligating the TAP/TA Set-Aside funds and seeing projects implemented due to low prioritization of walking and bicycling initiatives in rural communities. Rural communities often have many needs for new and upgraded infrastructure, not just in the areas of roads and transportation, but also water, sanitation, communications, and others. When it comes to roads, some rural communities prioritize infrastructure to support local agriculture and commerce. Projects and programs to support walking and bicycling are often less of a priority and, with limited staffing, pursuing funding for these projects may not occur. In addition, rural communities can be isolated from larger active transportation movements in urban and suburban areas and may be disconnected from the State department of transportation (DOT), leading to a lack of understanding of the benefits of active transportation or awareness of funding opportunities and types of improvements that could be made locally.



Elkton, Oregon—Before and After

Successful Strategies Used By States

State departments of transportation are doing a variety of things to support small rural communities in successfully obtaining Federal funding and implementing walking and bicycling projects. While small rural communities often face challenges with staffing capacity, fiscal resources, appropriate funding to meet local needs, and competing interests that overshadow Safe Routes to School and active transportation, many State departments of transportation have helped communities overcome these challenges. State implementation practices such as regional level outreach, pre-application and post-award assistance and education, encouraging partnerships, and bundling projects and funding, are building success for active transportation and Safe Routes to School projects in rural communities.

Regional Level Outreach

Rural communities may be more engaged and more likely to respond to calls for projects if they are supported by local or regional organizations,

agencies, or other partners, rather than those far away at the State capitol. State departments of transportation use a variety of strategies to achieve regional level outreach to small communities.

In some States, the regional offices of the State department of transportation have developed relationships directly with the local communities. In other States, regional organizations and agencies are tasked with outreach to and support of the communities in their areas. For example, the New Mexico Department of Transportation tasks the regional transportation planning organizations and councils of government with administering the call for projects and assisting with preliminary project application review before the DOT conducts the application scoring process.

One State DOT employee commented that “Local consulting firms frequently were the instigators of communities applying for funding, because the consulting firms had established relationships with these communities and had the technical expertise to match the funding opportunity with communities’ needs.”

Pre-Application Assistance and Education

States that have seen success in TA Set-Aside projects often provide pre-application technical assistance to communities. The State departments of transportation (DOTs) help rural communities with limited staff to ensure projects are well developed and positioned for funding, as well as set up for successful implementation. The assistance ranges from helping identify the best types of and locations for projects to planning projects and estimating project costs. Some State DOTs and their partners provide extensive online and in person training and guidance on preparing the grant application. In Oregon, the DOT assists local agency staff with project cost estimates, understanding the environmental process requirements, and other aspects of developing a competitive project. Other States provide a tiered review. For example, in Minnesota, the community first submits a simple letter of intent so that the State DOT can work with the community to better define or develop the project before the community submits the grant application.

Post-Award Assistance and Education

Receiving funding is just the beginning for a project or program. DOTs in many of the States with successful programs provide a large range of post-award assistance and education. Basic education may include trainings for local agency staff on reporting requirements. For example, in Iowa, agencies are required to attend a one day training on the Federal aid process to understand project implementation. At the highest level of assistance, the State DOT may do the design and construction administration work in-house, or hire consultants and oversee the projects on behalf of the local community. In New Mexico, the DOT district offices and design centers work with the communities to handle project design and construction. In this case, the local community acts as the project sponsor and is still required to provide the local match. However, the administrative burden falls on the State DOT, and the local agency does not need dedicated staffing time or expertise to oversee implementation. No matter the level of assistance the State DOT provides, many State DOT staff believe that providing a point of contact that can communicate and work directly with the community throughout the project helps prevent project delays.

Encouraging Partnerships

When small rural communities have limited resources or capacity for walking and bicycling initiatives, States can improve communities' chances of success by encouraging or requiring partnerships with other agencies.

How State Departments of Transportation Are Supporting Small Rural Community Applications

Below are strategies that some States have taken when working with small rural communities:

- Engage regional level partners or regional staff in reaching out to small rural communities.
- Establish a consistent point of contact for each community to communicate with during the application process and after the grant award.
- Provide technical assistance through meetings and conference calls.
- Look for ways to pair projects in small rural communities with others, whether it is a State highway project or a project in an adjacent community. Use TA Set-Aside funds to make improvements to sidewalks, crossings, bicycle routes, and other facilities for walking and bicycling in conjunction with a State project like highway repaving.



Langley, Virginia

Often these partnerships are with the county or a larger agency with more experience and staffing resources. Some States, such as Minnesota, require communities with less than 5,000 people to have their project sponsored by a larger entity, usually by their county.⁹ In other States, this partnership is not required, but has still proven beneficial, with successful projects resulting from partnerships between small towns and counties in which the counties have provided the required matching funds along with the technical expertise.

Bundling Projects and Funding

To address concerns related to the relative administrative burden on small projects, some States encourage bundling projects within one community or between two or more communities. Just as with the strategy of encouraging partnerships, project bundling reduces the burden on small rural communities. In addition, some States have bundled two or more years of funding, allowing for more money to be available to fund these bundled projects or larger projects.

Success Stories



Elkton, Oregon —Before and After

Elkton, Oregon

In Elkton, Oregon, population 193, Federal Safe Routes to School and Transportation Enhancements funds built much needed sidewalks and crosswalks connecting residential neighborhoods with schools and community facilities.¹⁰ Elkton Charter School is located adjacent to busy Highway 38, a road with a high volume of trucks, buses, and other vehicles, and lacking sidewalks or space to walk. Despite parents raising concerns about dangers to their children walking and bicycling along the route, an average of 35 to 40 students still walked between the grade school and high school daily. With the construction of new sidewalks and crosswalks, students and other community members now have the opportunity to travel between their homes and community destinations on foot. The sidewalk connects the elementary school with the high school, the Elkton Community Education Center, and a campground. A crosswalk also allows students and community members to cross Highway 38 to the residential neighborhood across from the school.

Members of the school and community first identified the project through Elkton's Safe Routes to School Action Plan. The city combined the Safe Routes to School Funding with Federal Transportation Enhancements funds in order to build the project.

Highwood, Montana

In the unincorporated town of Highwood, Montana, population 176, a nonprofit group secured TAP funding after years of tirelessly working to construct a multiuse path.¹¹ The project, a path that meets the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards for accessible design, is adjacent to a State highway that has no shoulder. As children travel to and from school, they walk along the roadway ditch slope or in one of the few areas of mailbox turnouts. Students live in close proximity to the K-12 school and athletic fields, yet the streets discourage walking to these facilities. While engineers, planners, or technical professionals typically write grant applications for most infrastructure projects of this nature, in Highwood the project came through the County Commissioners and was spearheaded by the Highwood Pedestrian Committee



and the Highwood Commercial Club, a dedicated nonprofit organization. Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) staff remarked on the thoughtfulness of the project and how well the application was written. Highwood has plans for a pedestrian network throughout the entire community and a Recreational Trails Program Grant to build another phase of their multiuse path project, which includes a pedestrian bridge over Highwood Creek. District staff from MDT assisted the community with preparing the cost estimate and MDT designed the project in-house. Construction engineering will be done in-house by MDT staff as well.



Highwood, Montana

Conclusion

Small rural communities have a variety of challenges and considerations to address improving safety for walking and bicycling for children and adults. Many communities are successful in obtaining funding and implementing projects and programs through the set-aside for nonurban communities. States can support small rural communities through outreach, technical assistance, and developing and encouraging partnerships and joint efforts. By emulating these successful strategies and exploring others, States can assist small rural areas in creating safer, healthier, more active children and communities.

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