An Active Roadmap: Best Practices in Rural Mobility

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Smart Growth America
Improving lives by improving communities

National Complete Streets Coalition

WHO WE ARE

Smart Growth America envisions a country where no matter where you live, or who you are, you can enjoy living in a place that is healthy, prosperous, and resilient. We empower communities through technical assistance, advocacy, and thought leadership to realize our vision of livable places, healthy people, and shared prosperity.

Learn more at www.smartgrowthamerica.org.

The National Complete Streets Coalition, a program of Smart Growth America, is a non-profit, non-partisan alliance of public interest organizations and transportation professionals committed to the development and implementation of Complete Streets policies and practices. A nationwide movement launched by the Coalition in 2004, Complete Streets is the integration of people and place in the planning, design, construction, operation, and maintenance of transportation networks.

Learn more at www.completestreets.org.

PROJECT TEAM

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Cover image: Mackinac Island, MI (Population: 583) | Source: grandhotel.com

A letter from Calvin Gladney

PRESIDENT AND CEO, SMART GROWTH AMERICA

When we set out to conduct this field scan of best practices in rural mobility from across the country, we didn't have to start from scratch. The Smart Growth America team was able to reach out to many communities, old friends, and partners we have worked with in the past. In fact, thanks to our longstanding history of working in rural communities, more of SGA's work has taken place in smaller communities than anywhere else.

From delivering a housing affordability workshop in Sitka, Alaska, to creating a redevelopment plan for an economically vibrant future in Erwin, Tennessee, to supporting the return of passenger rail through many small towns along the Gulf Coast, we've worked alongside rural communities to identify what makes them special, to double down and develop around what makes them unique, and to invest in their thriving future.

Through the many workshops we've led and the great partnerships we've forged, we've learned that problems that rural communities face are often the same in context yet different in scope from the issues experienced in larger, more urban communities. We've also learned that there's no one type of rural community. That's why, through this report, we've identified seven common typologies that help to identify and describe the many differences and similarities across the diversity of rural communities in the U.S., with many communities exhibiting more than one typology. We also address some of the most common myths we've heard regarding rural communities, among the most prominent being that there's no demographic diversity when it comes to rural places, discounting the rich but distinct communities across the US.

By dispelling misconceptions about the identities and experiences of rural communities and through case studies of the strategies that a range of rural communities have used to build healthy, stable, and thriving places, we hope to inspire decision makers to not only better understand the rural context, but effectively invest in tailored solutions that help these dynamic communities reach their potential.

At Smart Growth America, we envision a country where no matter where you live, or who you are, you can enjoy living in a place that is healthy, prosperous, and resilient—and that vision includes rural communities. To achieve this vision, communities big and small should prioritize active transportation and location-efficient land-use practices—and we hope that the tools included in this Roadmap can be a good place to start.

Contents

Introduction

There is an urgent need to invest in active and multimodal transportation systems for rural communities and small town centers.

The risk of death in a car crash is 62% higher on a rural road compared to an urban road for trips of the same length.[1]

Rural communities in America vary across many dimensions including population and demographic trends, economic and health indicators, and others. Some communities have continued to thrive with improving quality of life and stable or growing economies, while others have experienced a long and slow decline. What is clear is that there are many strategies, including improving rural transportation options, that can help improve quality of life by allowing better access to daily needs. In this report, we explore the different ways that rural communities can adapt to thrive in a changing America, with a primary focus on active and multimodal modes of transportation as a tool. Today, **few people in rural communities would choose to drive farther than they did a decade ago for the same basic trips; however, development patterns are making it a necessity in much of the country.**[2] Land use and trip distance act as barriers to jobs and economic opportunities, and also impact access to crucial services such as health care, education, and broadband.[3]

The goal of this report is to assess multimodal and land use conditions in rural America, and recommend strategies that promote growth and help rural communities across the country reach their potential.

The report is organized into four distinct parts:

Part 1: What is rural? Defining rural typologies.

In Part 1, we discuss the difficulty in defining what constitutes rural because of the great diversity of rural communities in the United States. To better understand the complexities of rural communities, this part introduces seven rural typologies—ways to identify and describe similarities and differences across diverse rural communities. It is important to note that these typologies are not mutually exclusive, as rural communities may exhibit characteristics of more than one typology, but understanding a community's relevant typologies can facilitate the implementation of strategies that may be more likely to succeed based on that community's unique needs and challenges.

1. Rural Roads Are among America's Most Deadly. (2022, October 10). State Smart Transportation Initiative. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://ssti.us/2022/10/10/rural-roads-are-among-americas-most-deadly/

2. Rural Communities Need Better Transportation Policy. (2021, September 13). Third Way. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.thirdway.org/memo/rural-communities-need-better-transportation-policy

3. Redefining Rural America. (2019, July 17). Center for American Progress. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.americanprogress.org/article/redefining-rural-america/

Part 2: What are the unique needs and challenges of rural communities? Debunking myths about rural America.

The needs and challenges of rural communities vary greatly depending on their typology, but it is important to acknowledge the barriers they can create. These needs and challenges impact community health, built environments, economic competitiveness, and the quality of life. In Part 2, we present a data synthesis and interpretation of key indicators that uniquely affect rural America, including demographics, economy, public health, travel patterns, and mode choices. We also revisit some of the common questions and popular notions about rural America using recent studies and literature to fact-check if they still stand true, including healthier living environments, driving trip distances, transit feasibility, and access to parks and nature.

Part 3: How can active and multimodal transportation be encouraged in rural America? Strategies for success + case studies.

In Part 3, we present strategies to address the issues identified in Part 2. These strategies for success are presented alongside success stories from rural communities across the country that have successfully implemented transportation planning, complete streets, and land use approaches to make their communities activity-friendly and increasingly accessible by walking, biking, rolling, and using transit. These real-world examples are organized based on the rural typologies discussed in Part 2.

Part 4: How can your rural community improve? The roadmap and takeaways.

The lessons, findings, and outcomes from the previous parts of the report informed the recommendations in this section. In Part 4, we discuss particular actionable steps to build more activity-friendly communities in rural America. Also included in this section are success stories focused on formulating strong visions, thoughtful community engagement, and the strength of building strong partnerships locally and regionally.

Erwin, TN (Population: 5,994)
Source: unicoicountyapplefestival.com/

About the report and methodology

This report was developed with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity (Cooperative Agreement CDC-RFA-OT18-1802). The views presented in this product do not necessarily reflect the views and/or positions of CDC. These efforts are part of the CDC's Active People, Healthy Nation[SM] Initiative that is working to help 27 million Americans become more physically active by 2027.

The report followed these key stages as part of the methodology:

Literature review

Smart Growth America (SGA) conducted a review of existing literature to understand the current state of knowledge around rural multimodal and active transportation systems in the country and to identify the gaps that this report can bridge through case studies, tools, and resources. SGA reviewed the most recent data available, though in some areas, there were gaps in available recent data.

This review also included an examination of broader barriers rural residents face in accessing everyday necessities such as land use, employment, health care, and availability of healthy food. This review of existing literature was used to define rural and to identify the different rural typologies, as well as the shared and distinct needs that exist across those different rural community typologies, and where regional and local jurisdictions are already implementing valuable strategies to improve activity-friendly routes to everyday destinations that other communities could adopt.

Another key part of the review was the synthesis of existing quantitative research conducted by SGA and other organizations to evaluate and break down popular but outdated notions about rural communities.

Case studies

Smart Growth America's technical assistance work over the last couple of decades and relationships with various communities across the country enabled us to tell the stories included in the report. SGA developed a list of over 75 rural communities that have successfully implemented multimodal and active transportation strategies by leveraging the relationships, conducting a literature review, and input from CDC. For the case studies included in this report, SGA selected different communities for interviews to represent the identified typologies and reflect the geographic, economic, and demographic diversity of the population as much as possible. SGA conducted 12 semi-structured interviews on topics that varied across communities such as transit investments, community partnerships and engagement strategies, complete streets policies, and others relevant to understanding specific local successes, barriers, and challenges. The interviews informed the text of this report, and selections of the experiences captured in the interviews can be found throughout. To ensure representativeness for each typology, some case studies were handpicked, while others were selected through a snowballing methodology.

Part 1: What is rural? Defining rural typologies.

Many definitions

According to the US Census, about 60 million people, or **one in five individuals, live in rural America.**[4] The perception of what a rural area is varies extensively, but for many, what comes to mind is a landscape consisting of farms, rolling foothills, and shuttered factories, inhabited by predominantly white communities.[5] But the truth is, rural areas are as diverse as they are vast in terms of landscape, communities, and people. In addition to representing 97% of America's land mass and contributing to 10% of the country's gross domestic product, almost 22% of the rural population identifies as non-white.[6]

The key point is that there is no one all-encompassing definition of rural. **The US government has at least 15 different official definitions of the word rural, including 11 at the Agriculture Department alone.**[7] The diverse history, cultures, and needs of people that make up rural communities vary from place to place—rural areas are different from suburban and urban areas and different from other rural areas. Understanding these differences is essential to support evidence-based decision-making at the local, state, and federal levels.

4.   One in Five Americans Live in Rural Areas. (2017, August 9). United States Census Bureau. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2017/08/rural-america.html

5.   Rural America is not a monolith. (2020, October 15). Center on Rural Innovation. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://ruralinnovation.us/blog/rural-america-is-not-a-monolith/

6.   Ingraham, C. (2020, January 3). The harmful, popular misconceptions about rural America. Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/01/03/five-myths-about-rural-america/

7.   The federal definition of 'rural' — times 15. (n.d.) Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-federal-definition-of-rural--times-15/2013/06/08/a39e46a8-cd4a-11e2-ac03-178510c9cc0a_story.html

Top: Palouse, WA (Population: 1,025) | Source: Mary Welcome
Middle: Phoenixville, PA (Population: 19,029) | Source: phoenixvillechamber.org
Bottom: Ithaca, NY (Population: 31,710) | Source: frominwoodout.com

Rural community typologies

SGA's work in numerous communities across the country over the past couple of decades has positioned us to identify seven general typologies of rural communities. These typologies are a way to identify and describe similarities and differences across diverse rural communities.

It is important to note that these typologies are not mutually exclusive as rural communities may and often do exhibit characteristics of more than one typology. Additionally, some rural areas do not fit within these typologies (in particular, those rural areas that are most spread out and least densely populated); however, these typologies help categorize the most common rural community characteristics.

Gateway communities are those adjacent to public lands including but not limited to national parks, state parks, wildlife refuges, forests, and historic sites. These communities rely on visitation as a primary economic driver and provide support to the nation's public lands and parks.[8]

Resource-dependent communities are those established around a single natural resource that their economic base relies on or used to rely on. Examples of this typology include agricultural, trade, or mining communities. In some cases, the resource in question is no longer a major economic driver, prompting a need for new economic development strategies.

Retirement, second-home communities typically contain a relatively large share of the population that lives there full or part-time but does not work there—for example, because it is their vacation home. In many cases, these communities are those that are set up particularly for serving the needs of older adults.

Traditional main street communities have a walkable, centrally located downtown core with a tightly knit urban fabric and a "main street" with buildings that are often small-scale, with narrow frontages and set close to and addressing the street.[9]

College communities are towns and cities that have a large university-associated population, including students, faculty, and staff. As a result, these communities tend to have major fluctuations in population size coinciding with school breaks.[10]

Edge communities are those that are rural but on the edge of a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). These have concentrations of businesses and shopping just outside or on the "edge" of traditional downtown or MSA areas and business/shopping districts that are not suburban.

Tribal and Native American communities are those that are located on tribal lands with sovereign tribal governments. Tribal communities vary greatly across the country—and not all are rural—but many share some common experiences, such as large expanses of tribal land and seclusion from other population centers, that make it more challenging to access health care and services.

Each of these typologies is unique and requires strategies designed to meet the specific needs and to capitalize on their strengths. Strategies may also depend on whether the community is stable in population, growing, or declining. See Part 3 for strategies and real-life examples of their implementation in communities that fit into these various typologies.

8. Rollins, C.B. (2014). The Gateway Approach: Design Guidelines for Rural Gateway Communities. https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/mlatp/17/

9. Urban Design Guidelines for Development along Traditional Mainstreets. (n.d.) Ottowa. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://ottawa.ca/en/urban-design-guidelines-development-along-traditional-mainstreets#:~:text=Traditional%20Mainstreets%2C%20in%20contrast%20to,to%20and%20addressing%20the%20street

10. College Towns. (n.d.) American Communities Project. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.americancommunities.org/community-type/college-towns/

Talkeetna, AK (Population: 1,199) | Source: Wiki user Photographer is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

Among the most misunderstood rural areas are rural Tribal and Native American communities.

A careful understanding of the appropriate definition of a "rural" area, helps bring rural Native America into focus. A majority of Native people live in rural and small-town areas; the Housing Assistance Council (HAC) provided an analysis of race and ethnicity in America in a 2012 report and found that 54% of the nation's American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) population resides in rural or small-town areas.[11] While this report includes Tribal and Native American communities as one of the typologies in the next section, it recognizes that not all Native American communities are rural, and not all rural typologies describe places where Native Americans exist.

11. Dewees, S., & Marks, B. (2017). Twice Invisible: Understanding Rural Native America. https://www.usetinc.org/wp-content/uploads/bvenuti/WWS/2017/May%20 2017/May%208/Twice%20Invisible%20-%20Research%20 Note.pdf

Part 2: What are the unique needs and challenges of rural communities? Debunking myths about rural America.

Understanding rural communities

Rural communities are often thought of as opposites to urban areas when it comes to economies, demographics, culture, and other factors.[12] While there cultural differences across US communities do exist, dividing our nation into such a binary has immediate, lived consequences for people in all corners of America.[13] It is necessary to re-evaluate outdated understandings of rural America to bridge the gaps, strengthen rural economies, and implement safer, sustainable, and equitable transportation networks, and services for these communities.

This section focuses on the unique needs and challenges of rural communities, addressing misconceptions, and setting the stage for the strategies that can strengthen them.

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12.   Love, H., & Powe, M. (2020, December 1). Building resilient rural places: Strategies from local leaders to strengthen rural assets, diversity, and dynamism. https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/building-resilient-rural-places-strategies-from-local-leaders-to-strengthen-rural-assets-diversity-and-dynamism/

13.   Love, H., & Loh, T.H. (2020, December 8) The 'rural-urban divide' furthers myths about race and poverty—concealing effective policy solutions. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2020/12/08/the-rural-urban-divide-furthers-myths-about-race-and-poverty-concealing-effective-policy-solutions/

Excelsior Springs, MO (Population: 11,688)
Source: excelsiorcitizen.com

Population characteristics

Rural communities are home to more people over the age of 65 than urban communities (see Figure 1), and studies show that the share of older adults may continue to grow in the next few decades. An analysis by the Urban Institute suggests that by 2040, 25% of households will be 65 years or older in rural communities, compared to only 20% in urban areas.[14] As more older adults continue to live in rural places, active transportation and transit options can allow more older Americans to maintain their independence without relying on a personal vehicle.

Rural counties also have higher proportions of people with disabilities. According to the CDC, about one in three adults in rural communities live with a disability, compared to one in four in the US overall.[15]
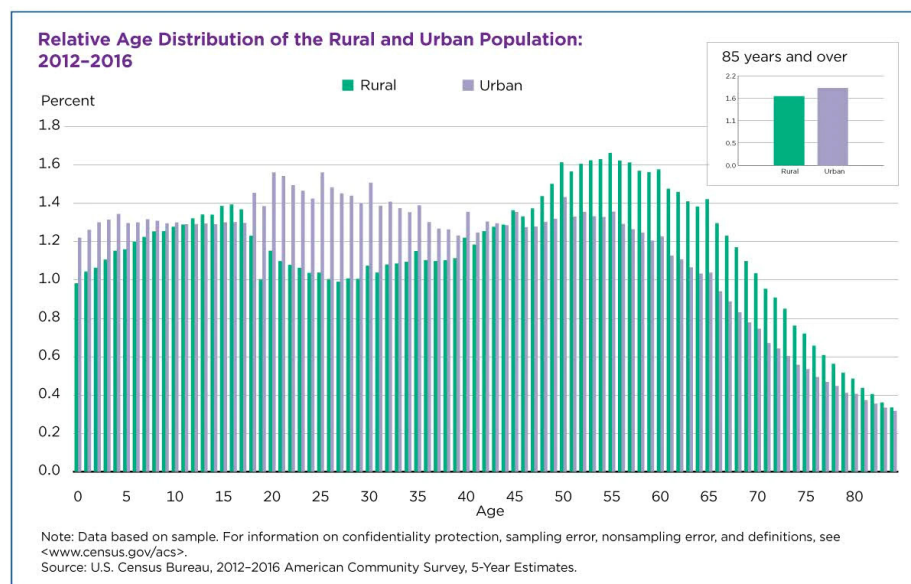
Figure 1. Relative age distribution of the rural and urban population from 2012 to 2016.

Population change

As the decades have passed, communities once classified as rural have graduated to urban areas as their populations and local economies grew. Successive US Census efforts have reclassified many of these locations as urban over the decades, despite these communities often having more in common with rural places than with cities.[16] Due to the reclassifications, the 2020 Census showed a population loss for rural areas, hitting an all-time low of 14% of the total US population.[17] Of those areas still classified as rural in the 2020 Census, some are growing and thriving, but many others are disadvantaged and experiencing population decrease.

These communities are often characterized by a history of waning industry such as mining, logging, farming, nuclear, or other resource-based activities. When these industries decrease, the population and economy lost are difficult to recover. Rural areas in decrease appear to be concentrated in the Great Plains, Appalachia, the Deep South, and other areas where little replacement industry has developed. Conversely, rural areas in the Mountain West, West, and other recreation-oriented areas nationwide have grown and thrived.

14. People and homes are aging quickly in our rural communities. (2016, October 20). Urban Wire. Urban Institute. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/people-and-homes-are-aging-quickly-our-rural-communities

15. Prevalence of Disability and Disability Types by Urban-Rural County Classification – United States, 2016. (2021, October 27). Disability and Health Promotion. CDC. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/features/disability-prevalence-rural-urban.html

16. Dam, A.V. (2019, May 24). The real (surprisingly comforting) reason rural America is doomed to decline. Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/05/24/real-surprisingly-comforting-reason-rural-america-is-doomed-decline/

17. Johnson, K.M. (2022, November 16). Population Redistribution Trends in Nonmetropolitan America, 2010 to 2021. Rural Sociology, 88(1):193-219. https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12473

Still, numerous rural communities throughout the country have shown that they can diversify their job base, attract new residents, and thrive once more.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has also had an immediate impact that appears to have at least initially reversed the overall rural decrease shown in the 2020 Census. According to the Census Bureau, between April 2020 and July 2021, the US rural population grew by 77,000 people. While this is encouraging on the whole, the majority of this gain is attributed to migration into high-amenity recreational (gateway) and retirement, second-home rural communities.[18] Rural areas without these amenities continue to lose population. It is still too early to tell if this trend will continue or revert to previous trends over time.

18. Johnson, K. (2022, December 6). Recent Data Suggest Rural America Is Growing Again After a Decade of Population Loss. https://carsey.unh.edu/publication/snapshot/recent-data-suggest-rural-america-is-growing-again

DEBUNKING MYTHS ABOUT RURAL AMERICA

There are many misconceptions about rural and small-town communities, The rest of Part 2 addresses a number of common questions about Rural America using recent studies and literature. As the research shows, the realities of rural life are often different than you might expect. Talking about these realities helps illustrate why smart growth strategies are equally important in rural communities and small town centers, as they are in more urban communities.

FAQ #1: Do rural communities enjoy a healthier living environment than urban areas?

As discussed in the section on community health outcomes, the relatively wider open spaces in rural communities don't necessarily equate to improved health outcomes overall. In fact, rural areas face a number of health challenges.

FAQ #2: Do people in rural areas have longer driving trips than in urban areas?

The section on trip distance and access to services explains how living in a rural area doesn't necessarily mean longer driving trips, and that in fact there are similarities between some urban and rural areas. Although, longer trips have the potential to create much greater burdens on rural Americans with loss of services.

FAQ #3: Is transit a feasible option in rural areas?

Although transit is sometimes thought of as an urban solution, the transit availability section shows not only that there is demand for transit in rural areas but also that transit can be a feasible and affordable option for these areas.

FAQ #4: Do rural communities have better access to parks and nature?

As the section on access to recreation and parks shows, proximity to natural areas is not the same thing as access. Especially for those rural residents without access to a car, visiting parks and recreation areas can be a challenge, even when those areas are relatively nearby.

Community health outcomes

There is a relatively common assumption that rural communities enjoy a healthier living environment than urban areas. Rural America is often portrayed as having fresher air, fresher food, and nearby access to the natural environment for recreational and physical activities. While these can be true in some rural communities and small towns, those factors don't necessarily make rural Americans healthier than their urban counterparts.

ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

Accessing health care can be difficult because, on average, rural residents have lower incomes and lower rates of health insurance compared with their urban counterparts, and they live farther away from health care resources.[19] In 2017, on average, US residents traveled 9.9 miles one way for medical/dental care, but **rural residents traveled more than twice the distance for care than urban residents**—8.1 miles for urban residents and 17.8 miles for rural residents.[20]

Rural Americans are more likely to die from heart disease, cancer, unintentional injury, chronic lower respiratory disease, and stroke than their urban counterparts.[21] Access to health care or emergency services can be the difference between life and death. Longer travel distances may mean more people skip preventative care like routine cancer screenings that can help address risks before they become more dangerous.

Between 2005 and 2014, nearly 200 rural hospitals across the nation closed, and the financial viability of remaining rural facilities is of ongoing concern.[22] This makes getting to a health center for a job (the largest national employment sector with 20 million employees nationwide[23]) or for medical care an increasingly longer trip.[24]

This reduction in services and lack of convenient access to them doesn't impact all rural residents equally.[25] There are significant disparities by race and income level. For example, at the peak of the Omicron wave during the COVID-19 pandemic, the virus killed Black Americans in rural areas at a rate roughly 34% higher than white Americans.[26]

19.   Meit M, Knudson A, Gilbert T, et al. (2014). The 2014 update of the rural-urban chartbook. Bethesda, MD: Rural Health Reform Policy Center. https://ruralhealth.und.edu/projects/health-reform-policy-research-center/pdf/2014-rural-urban-chartbook-update.pdf

20.   Akinlotan, M., Primm, K., Khodakarami, N., Bolin, J., & Ferdinand, A.O. (2021). Rural-Urban Variations in Travel Burdens for Care: Findings from the 2017 National Household Travel Survey https://srhrc.tamhsc.edu/docs/travel-burdens-07.2021.pdf

21.   About Rural Health. (2023, May 9). Rural Health. CDC. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.cdc.gov/ruralhealth/about.html

22.   Rural Hospital Closures. (2014). UNC. Sheps Center. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.shepscenter.unc.edu/programs-projects/rural-health/rural-hospital-closures/

23.   Dowell, E.K.P. (2020, October 14). Census Bureau's 2018 County Business Patterns Provides Data on Over 1,200 Industries. Health Care Still Largest U.S. Employer. U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/10/health-care-still-largest-united-states-employer.html

24.   Bellis, R. (2020, May 15). More than one million households without a car in rural America need better transit. Transportation for America. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://t4america.org/2020/05/15/more-than-one-million-households-without-a-car-in-rural-america-need-better-transit/

25.   About Rural Health. (2023, May 9). Rural Health. CDC. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.cdc.gov/ruralhealth/about.html

26.   Mueller, B. (2022, July 28). In Rural America, Covid Hits Black and Hispanic People Hardest. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/28/health/covid-deaths-black-hispanic-rural.html

OBESITY

It has been estimated that the **prevalence of obesity is approximately 6.2 times higher in rural than in urban America.**[27] The growing prevalence of obesity in rural communities makes improving opportunities for daily physical activity through active transportation a key opportunity to increase physical activity as well as access to healthy foods—two components found in the built environment that influence obesity (see Figure 2).

Rural residents are less likely to meet federal physical activity guidelines.[28] **In 2017, only one in four (25.3%) urban residents and one in five (19.6%) rural residents met the combined aerobic and muscle-strengthening physical activity guidelines.**[29] According to the 2016–2017 National Health Interview Survey, 17.9% of rural Black adults met physical activity guidelines, compared with 27.8% of urban white adults. Regionally, states in the South (27.5%) had the highest prevalence of physical inactivity, followed by the Midwest (25.2%), Northeast (24.7%), and West (21.0%).[30] Rural areas may lack access to the types of places and infrastructure that encourage residents to walk and be active, like parks and sidewalks.[31]

Additionally, the obesity rate for rural children ages 2 to 18 is 22%, compared to 17% for urban children.[32] Transportation options for children, especially school buses, vans, and ride-shares scheduled for students in after-school activities, can potentially expand opportunities for rural children living in remote areas to take advantage of after-school physical activity programs.

Figure 2. Overall causes of obesity. Source: CDC (2022) https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/basics/causes.html#print

27.   Okobi, O.E., Ajayi, O.O., Okobi, T.J., Anaya, I.C., Fasehun, O.O., Diala, C.S., ... & Okobi, R.K. (2021). The Burden of Obesity in the Rural Adult Population of America. Cureus, 13(6). doi: 10.7759/cureus.15770

28.   Kegler, M.C., Gauthreaux, N., Hermstad, A., Arriola, K.J., Mickens, A., Ditzel, K., ... & Haardörfer, R. (2022). Inequities in Physical Activity Environments and Leisure-Time Physical Activity in Rural Communities. Prev Chronic Dis, 19. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5888/pcd19.210417

29.   Whitfield, G.P., Carlson, S.A., Ussery, E.N., Fulton, J.E., Galuska, D.A., & Petersen, R. (2019, June 14). Trends in Meeting Physical Activity Guidelines Among Urban and Rural Dwelling Adults — United States, 2008–2017. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep, 68:513–518. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr. mm6823a1

30.   Adult Physical Inactivity Prevalence Maps by Race/Ethnicity. (2022). Physical Activity. CDC. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/data/inactivity-prevalence-maps/index.html

31.   Whitfield, G.P., Carlson, S.A., Ussery, E.N., Watson, K.B., Berrigan, D., & Fulton, J.E. National-level environmental perceptions and walking among urban and rural residents: Informing surveillance of walkability. Prev Med, 123:101-108. doi: 10.1016/j.ypmed.2019.03.019.

32.   Purdy, C. (2018, June 20). Rural America needs help solving its growing obesity crisis. Growing Problem. Quartz. https://qz.com/1310428/obesity-rates-are-much-higher-in-rural-children-than-urban-kids-in-the-us-according-to-new-research/

OTHER HEALTH CONCERNS

According to the CDC, rural Americans tend to have higher rates of cigarette smoking and high blood pressure, report less leisure-time physical activity, and lower seat belt use. Unintentional injury deaths are also 50% higher in rural areas than in urban areas, partly due to greater risk of death from motor vehicle crashes.[33] When it comes to some of these disparities, increasing access to physical activity in rural areas would help create a built environment that would encourage daily physical activity.

Tribal and Native American communities face particular challenges to overall community health as a result of disruptions to traditional ways of life, loss of land, and government policies that have resulted in historical trauma. These factors contribute to higher rates of chronic disease and underlying risk factors, such as obesity and tobacco use.[34]

While rural communities play a major role in the country's food production, unfortunately, they experience overwhelming levels of food insecurity and hunger with 87% of the nation's food-insecure counties being rural.[35] These areas are called "food deserts" (i.e., areas with limited access to fresh, affordable foods). Many rural areas don't have a population base large enough to support a grocery store that stocks a variety of affordable and healthy food, but limited transportation connectivity also makes it a requirement to own a car or personal vehicle to get to the nearest town to access healthier food options adding financial burden.

Trip distance and access to services

Long car trips aren't a part of daily life for all rural residents. More than 1 million rural American households without cars face unique barriers as alternate modes are not always accessible or affordable.[36] And for households with cars, research from Transportation for America and Third Way finds that _households in rural areas and urban areas alike are driving significantly farther per trip on average as of 2017 than they were in 2001_ to accomplish their commutes and daily tasks, 12 percent and 10 percent farther, respectively. Trip distances have increased across all types of trip destinations, especially for work and shopping. Most people wouldn't choose to drive farther than they did a decade ago for the same basic trips, but development patterns in much of the country, and some loss of services in rural communities are driving this trend. And while these trends look similar across rural and urban areas, longer trips have the potential to create much greater burdens on rural Americans, negatively impacting their economic opportunities, quality of life, and health care access. Many rural communities today are heavily reliant on just a few employers and medical facilities that serve a large share of the dispersed population. If any of those employers and institutions consolidate, close, or relocate farther from housing, residents may not have any other options, forcing them to take longer and more costly trips at best, or lose access to that work or service altogether.[37]

33.   About Rural Health. (2023, May 9). Rural Health. CDC. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.cdc.gov/ruralhealth/about.html

34.   Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity Within American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Populations. (2020, June 23). Healthy Tribes. CDC. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.cdc.gov/healthytribes/nutrition-activity-obesity.html

35.   Hardebeck, A. (2021, April 15). 4 Facts You Should Know About Hunger in Rural America. Feeding America Action. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://feedingamericaaction.org/blog/rural-hunger/

36.   Bellis, R. (2020, May 15). More than one million households without a car in rural America need better transit. Transportation for America. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://t4america.org/2020/05/15/more-than-one-million-households-without-a-car-in-rural-america-need-better-transit/

37.   Ellison, A. (2021, March 16). Why rural hospital closures hit a record high in 2020. Becker's Hospital CFO Report. https://www.beckershospitalreview.com/finance/why-rural-hospital-closures-hit-a-record-high-in-2020.html

Small and rural towns have great potential for creating viable networks that serve residents and visitors. In many rural communities, residents live long distances from services, but most small towns provide a compact center well-suited for walking and bicycling trips.[38] **Households closer to development in both rural and urban areas have much shorter daily trips than households located further from concentrated development (see Figure 3).**[39]

Average Distance per Trip by Community Type

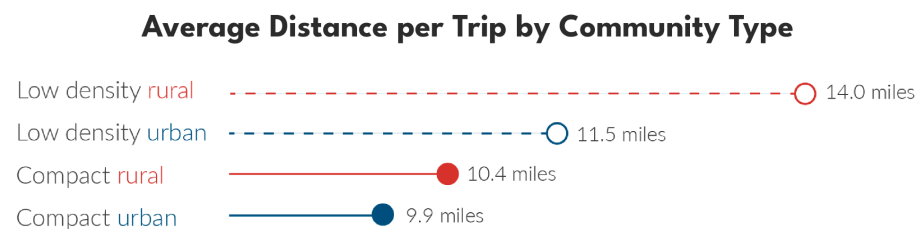|	
Low density rural	- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - ○ 14.0 miles
Low density urban	- - - - - - - - - - ○ 11.5 miles
Compact rural	──────● 10.4 miles
Compact urban	─────● 9.9 miles

Figure 3. Average distance per trip by community type. Source: Graphic made by Transportation for America using data from the Federal Highway Administration's National Household Travel Survey: https://nhts.ornl.gov

Transit availability

The presumption that living in a rural area inevitably means being dependent on a personal vehicle and driving long distances to access essential services negates the identities, experiences, needs, and inconveniences of the people in these complex and diverse communities. It also negates the opportunity to think creatively and holistically about ways to improve mobility for all residents. As stated previously, *more than 1 million households in predominantly rural counties do not own a personal vehicle.*[40]

Rural non-drivers—including older adults, low-income individuals, school-aged children, and people with disabilities—need independent mobility options to take advantage of social and economic opportunities.[41]

While transit is sometimes perceived as a solution available only for urban areas, there is demand and capacity for it in rural areas. With the right design, planning, and community input, it can be a feasible and affordable option that addresses mobility needs while creating economic opportunities, including:

- According to a report by the Victoria Transport Policy Institute, rural area and small-town public transit services typically cost $20 to $40 annually per capita, which is lower than national per capita transit spending.[42]

- Investment in public transportation boosts both the local and the national economy. Public dollars devoted to making capital improvements to public transportation systems support thousands of manufacturing jobs, in communities small and large, in nearly every state across the country. [43]

- In reviewing data from 2000 to 2005, the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) found that nearly 9% of public transportation trips were for medical purposes in areas with populations less than 200,000.[44]

38.   Federal Highway Administration. (2016). Small Town and Rural Multimodal Networks. https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/bicycle_pedestrian/publications/small_towns/

39.   Rural Communities Need Better Transportation Policy. (2021, September 13). Third Way. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.thirdway.org/memo/rural-communities-need-better-transportation-policy

40.   Bellis, R. (2020, May 15). More than one million households without a car in rural America need better transit. Transportation for America. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://t4america.org/2020/05/15/more-than-one-million-households-without-a-car-in-rural-america-need-better-transit/

41.   Victoria Transport Policy Institute. (2023, May 9). Rural Multimodal Planning:Why and How to Improve Travel Options in Small Towns and Rural Communities. https://www.vtpi.org/rmp.pdf

42.   Victoria Transport Policy Institute. (2023, May 9). Rural Multimodal Planning:Why and How to Improve Travel Options in Small Towns and Rural Communities. https://www.vtpi.org/rmp.pdf

43.   The benefits of transit investments reach communities from coast to coast. (n.d.). Transportation for America. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://t4america.org/maps-tools/transit-supply-chain/

44.   Rural Public Transportation Systems. (2019, September 17). U.S. Department of Transportation. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.transportation.gov/mission/health/Rural-Public-Transportation-Systems

- As reported in the National Transit Database (NTD), 1,301 agencies provided transit service in 2018. Many rural transit agencies (1,136) offer strictly an on-demand service, while 339 offer both on-demand and fixed-route service and some (468) offer just fixed-route service.[45]

- Transit services are a particularly high priority on reservations and tribal communities as the population exists in low densities, travels long distances, and has a higher percentage of low-income households.[46] According to the American Community Survey (ACS), 25% of reservations experience a poverty rate of 35% or higher.

Rural residents without cars face unique barriers as alternate options are not always accessible and affordable. A 2004 study found that older adults who no longer drive make 15% fewer trips to the doctor, 59% fewer trips to shop or eat out, and 65% fewer trips to visit friends and family, than drivers of the same age.[47] As the importance of community livability for people of all ages becomes more evident, it's critical for elected officials, local leaders, businesses, and nonprofits to understand the issues, challenges, and opportunities facing rural communities. Aging in the home where a person lived comfortably for years can be difficult when distance or a lack of transportation is a barrier to needed services. Distance isolates people who no longer drive.[48]

Access to recreation and parks

Another common assumption about people living in rural areas is that they have better access to natural areas and other recreational destinations, including national parks, state parks, and other public lands. In many cases, this is technically true. For example, the majority of the 63 national parks in the United States are not located within urban boundaries. But access isn't just about proximity to nature—residents also need to be able to affordably reach local parks and green spaces.

With limited transit access, these parks are difficult to access for those who do not own a personal vehicle or can't drive. People trying to reach parks and recreational areas from adjacent communities without a car are often required to walk, bike, and roll along high-speed roads with no separation from vehicles. In fact, even when within national recreation areas, motor vehicle crashes are the second-leading cause of death.[49]

"A lot of people in Montana don't think twice about taking their car and driving three hours to go camping for the weekend. And in fact, that's part of the lifestyle... This not only has accessibility issues for those who do not own a car, but also has significant environmental consequences due to increased air pollution amongst various other impacts.
MATT PARSONS, TRAILS DIRECTOR, GVLT - BOZEMAN, MONTANA

45.   Mattson, J., & Mistry, D. (2020). Rural Transit Fact Book. https://www.ugpti.org/resources/reports/downloads/surtcom20-02.pdf

46.   Mielke, J. (2011). Tribal Transit Funding: Assessing Impacts and Determining Future Program Needs. UGPTI Report DP-243, Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute, North Dakota State University. https://www.ugpti.org/resources/reports/downloads/dp-243.pdf

47.   Bailey, L. (2004). Aging Americans: Stranded without Options. https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/Resources/resources/reportsandpublications/Documents/aging_stranded.pdf

48.   AARP. (2020). Rural Livability Workshop Report. https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/livable-communities/tool-kits-resources/2020/AARP%20Rural%20Livability%20Report-singles-091222.pdf

49.   Wilson, K. (2022, June 1). Why It's So Hard To Visit National Parks Without A Car. Streetsblog USA. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://usa.streetsblog.org/2022/06/01/why-its-so-hard-to-visit-national-parks-without-a-car/

In 2019, the National Parks Conservation Association estimated that 96% of National Park Service-owned sites struggled with "significant air pollution problems" caused largely by private motorists, despite the fact that many are located in remote areas with few drivers besides park visitors.[50] *It also reported that 33 of America's most-visited national parks are as polluted as the 20 largest cities.* National parks, forests, wildlife refuges, and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands, State and County parks, and other forms of public lands play important roles in the economies of many rural communities and small towns across America. Improved walking and bicycling access to public lands can also provide opportunities for physical activity in communities.[51]

The National Park Service is increasingly focusing on expanding transit systems and providing alternative transportation options to reduce fossil fuel consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. Multimodal infrastructure improvements such as greenways, trails, shared-use paths, accessibility enhancements, and trails combined with additional interventions, community engagement, programming, and wayfinding contribute to connectivity, increased physical activity, and infrastructure use.[52] Many rural communities are located near public lands that serve as popular destinations. Creating options to access these places through various modes of transportation in an affordable and comfortable way, in effect, extends these public lands into their surrounding communities.[53]

Land use challenges, funding, and investment

Rural communities need thoughtful land development policies that encourage compact development and reinvest in more traditional patterns such as town centers rather than strip malls along highways on the periphery of communities. *Over the past 40 years, research has shown that low-density, unconnected development is more costly to the public and local governments than compact development, like a small walkable downtown core.* Every city and town considering new development should understand the financial impacts of where that development is located. In rural communities, it can be tempting to see any new development as a positive force, but development on the low-density outskirts of communities can make it harder for people to access daily needs without a car while undermining the long-term resilience of the community's economy in the process.[54]

50.   Richardson, J. (2019, June 13). 96% Of National Parks Negatively Impacted By Air Pollution (Report). Air Quality, CleanTechnica. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://cleantechnica.com/2019/06/13/96-of-national-parks-negatively-impacted-by-air-pollution-report/

51.   Federal Highway Administration. (2016). Small Town and Rural Multimodal Networks. https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/bicycle_pedestrian/publications/small_towns/fhwahep17024_lg.pdf

52.   Community Preventive Services Task Force. (2021). TFFRS – Physical Activity: Park, Trail, and Greenway Infrastructure Interventions to Increase Physical Activity. https://www.thecommunityguide.org/pages/tffrs-physical-activity-park-trail-greenway-infrastructure-interventions-increase-physical-activity.html

53.   Federal Highway Administration. (2016). Small Town and Rural Multimodal Networks. https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/bicycle_pedestrian/publications/small_towns/

54.   Smart Growth America. (2015). The Fiscal Implications of Development Patterns A Model for Municipal Analysis. https://smartgrowthamerica.org/resources/the-fiscal-implications-of-development-patterns-overview/

These investments are important to support economic growth and keep working-age populations in rural and small-town communities.[55] For example, "prime-age workers"[56] continue to be the highest proportion of the labor force. They continue to show that they prefer to live in walkable communities with multimodal transportation options that don't require them to drive to get to all of their daily needs and activities, whether in urban cities or rural small towns.[57]

Younger generations also tend to make decisions about where to live based on lifestyle preferences, not jobs. Therefore, it is important for communities including rural and small towns to invest in creating great places to live if they want to attract and retain these members of the workforce. *The National Association of Realtors showed that millennials more than any other generation prefer walking to driving. But survey respondents overall reported that they drive because they don't have other options.*

55.   Love, H., & Powe, M. (2020, December 1). Building resilient rural places: Strategies from local leaders to strengthen rural assets, diversity, and dynamism. https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/building-resilient-rural-places-strategies-from-local-leaders-to-strengthen-rural-assets-diversity-and-dynamism/

56.   According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, prime-age workers (ages 25 to 54) are the highest proportion of the labor force.

57.   2017 Community & Transportation Preference Survey. (n.d.) National Association of Realtors. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.nar.realtor/infographics/2017-community-transportation-preference-survey

Holland, MI (Population: 34,024) |
Source: midwestliving.com

Part 3: How can active and multimodal transportation be encouraged in rural America? Strategies for success + case studies.

Strategies for rural communities

Active travel and smart growth—that is, land-use development practices that create more resource-efficient and livable communities, with more accessible land-use patterns—will look different in different types of rural communities. It can mean putting a new post office near the elementary school, creating more affordable homes near existing job centers, or reinvesting in historic downtowns.[58] Making streets safe for active travel will also look different in different types of rural communities. Many small and rural communities are located on State and county roadways that were built to design standards that favor high-speed motorized traffic, resulting in a system that makes walking and bicycling less safe and uncomfortable.[59] Local communities might be limited in the direct changes they can make to roads controlled by other jurisdictions or find it difficult to collaborate across levels of government to improve conditions in a timely fashion.

58.   Smith, J.R. (2017, April 26). Three new toolkits for smart growth in rural places. Smart Growth America. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://smartgrowthamerica.org/three-new-toolkits-smart-growth-rural-places/

59.   Federal Highway Administration. (2016). Small Town and Rural Multimodal Networks. https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/bicycle_pedestrian/publications/small_towns/fhwahep17024_lg.pdf

Crested Butte, CO (Population: 1,666)
Source: Colorado Spring Gazette

An isolated rural road may be a "Complete Street" if it has wide shoulders or a separated shared-use path for walking and biking, while a rural community with denser downtown or residential areas might benefit from features like wide sidewalks, frequent crossings, or bicycle lanes.[60] In Part 3, we explore strategies that lead to the development of healthier, connected, and safer rural communities.

HEALTHY, STABLE COMMUNITIES

For the many rural communities that have experienced a decline, stabilizing or reversing population loss will require many strategies. Such strategies[61] are complex and reviewing what has made other rural communities successful can be used as a basis for consideration:

- **Attract higher-paying jobs:** Improved economic opportunities can attract new, and keep existing, residents.
- **Attract former residents to return:** Residents who moved away in the past can often be enticed to return through their attachment to the community.
- **Attract retirees:** Retired people are not as sensitive to the local job market and can boost the local economy if enticed. Retirees can also build a market to keep local healthcare services.
- **Invest in rural broadband internet:** High-quality internet provides opportunities for remote work and increased access to critical educational and health services for residents.
- **Focus on quality of life:** This is an umbrella term for outdoor recreation opportunities, active transportation facilities, and local amenities. Investing in this strategy can improve the competitiveness of the community.

- **Develop tourism and tourist-based experiences:** Providing reasons for external visitation can bolster the economic viability of local businesses and create jobs funded by visitation.
- **Invest in schools and workforce development:** Good local schools and other educational opportunities are an investment in young families and keep them in the community.

POLICY CHANGES

Policy changes at the local level can guide how and where new development projects occur. Land use, neighborhood and site design, roadway design, and other elements can be guided through local policy. The following subsections provide more specific strategies.

▶ *Energize downtowns*

The past several decades have seen rural main streets change as local businesses have closed, to be replaced by larger chains spread out on external highways, often inaccessible by active transportation. Research has shown that low-density, unconnected development is more costly to the public and local governments than compact development, like a small walkable downtown core.[62] Many rural communities have found success by reinvesting in their downtowns and main streets and rediscovering their sense of place. Revitalizing these historic town centers can also create resilient economies and also makes it easier for people to live closer to work, groceries, health care, dining, and shopping, allowing them to walk or bike to these daily destinations. To be most successful, these revitalization efforts also need to be paired with improved systems for active travel.

60. Active Living Research. (2015). Promoting Active Living in Rural Communities. Research Brief. https://activelivingresearch.org/sites/activelivingresearch.org/files/ALR_Brief_RuralCommunities_Sept2015.pdf

61. Marré, A. (2020). Rural Population Loss and Strategies for Recovery. Econ Focus. https://www.richmondfed.org/publications/research/econ_focus/2020/q1/district_digest

62. ICF International & Freedman Tung & Sasaki. (n.d.). Restructuring the Commercial Strip: A Practical Guide for Planning the Revitalization of Deteriorating Strip Corridors . USEPA. https://archive.epa.gov/epa/sites/production/files/2014-04/documents/restructuring-the-commercial-strip.pdf

Excelsior Spring Resiliency Capabilities

Location: Excelsior Springs, MO

Population: 11,688 (2020)

Typologies: Traditional Main Street; Edge

Located 30 miles northeast of central Kansas City, MO, Excelsior Springs was built as a "health community," attracting visitors who wanted to access one of the five natural supplies of ferro-manganese mineral water in the world. This spring is responsible for the growth of Excelsior Springs as a tourist and health treatment center.

Much of Excelsior Springs' local economy today depends on visitors and tourists. Therefore, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, the town was faced with a huge challenge to support the economy and to provide support to local businesses, while making sure residents, business owners, and visitors were safe. A combination of various successful local efforts did the trick, and the city reported that none of their local businesses closed because of the pandemic. While there was a 22% decrease in visits between 2019 and 2020, the visits were back up in 2021 with an increase of 33% compared to 2020 and were even 4% higher than the pre-pandemic numbers in 2019.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Downtown Excelsior Partnership (i.e., their Mainstreet Program) began hosting Facebook Live meetings with merchants on a private page to collaborate on the best ways to support each other. City restaurants quickly transitioned to curbside pickups. City staff saw more people eating outdoors and using their walking trails and parks more often. The City allowed for special parking signage to go up along the sidewalk or in parking lots reserving parking for curbside pickups. A few of their local businesses also put chairs and tables outside their buildings for public use and have continued the curbside pickup.

One major concern from merchants in downtown Excelsior Springs was that they weren't set up to go virtual. The city immediately realized that with much uncertainty about the pandemic, an online presence was critical for their local businesses to succeed.

Morgansites, a local business with over 20 years of experience in helping area businesses get online, offered to build free websites with online e-commerce, not only for businesses located in downtown Excelsior Springs but also in the surrounding communities of Kearney, Lawson, Raytown, and Richmond. Any business negatively impacted by the pandemic was invited to take advantage of this opportunity, which included a professionally built six-page e-commerce website at no cost for six months.

Fifteen businesses took advantage of this opportunity and saw the direct benefits of online revenue streams throughout the emergency shutdown. On top of that, the city reported that the businesses have continued to benefit from diverse revenue streams through reopening and recovery. Morgansites' service provided a chance for businesses to survive a time of uncertainty, without fear of having to shut down permanently.

KEY TAKEAWAY

By applying a combination of strategies to support local businesses during a global health crisis, Excelsior Springs was able to minimize negative effects to their local economy, continue to attract visitors, and maintain the healthy, stable community that existed pre-pandemic.

Downtown revitalization efforts can have economic benefits for local governments, especially in small towns and rural communities where tax bases have shrunk, infrastructure has deteriorated, and service needs are growing. Every city and town considering new development should understand the financial impacts of where that development is located. In rural communities, it can be tempting to see any new development as a positive force, but development on the low-density outskirts of communities can make it harder for people to access daily needs without a car while undermining the long-term resilience of the community's economy in the process. It is important to critically evaluate potential development. How much will it cost to support that new development in the coming years? Would the development bring more net revenue if designed differently? A wide body of research has also confirmed that compact, walkable environments enjoy significant value premiums, or value per square footage of real estate, of 20% and higher, over sprawl.[63] Zoning reform such as through Form-based Codes can be policy solutions to help guide productive investments in the community. For example, form-based codes create people-oriented communities with an emphasis on providing a variety of person-oriented options such as biking, walking, and gathering spaces; by focusing on the design of streetscapes, and the quality of open spaces and facades versus conventional zoning which focuses on the separation of uses and arbitrary design standards that leads to auto-dependant development. Form-based Code zoning can help foster more equitable development by offering a wider array of tools than conventional zoning does.[64]

Rural cores should support walking and biking on main commercial corridors and main streets. As the street transitions out of the core area, the facility design that accommodates people walking and biking should change.[65] Requirements for amenities such as sidewalks, landscaping, benches, art, bicycle parking, crossings, lighting, or awnings promote a human-scale frontage that welcomes active transportation.

In communities where destinations are far apart, pedestrian-oriented design can encourage a shift from auto-oriented development to spaces where community members have the option to walk. Adding pedestrian-oriented design features can strengthen a community's sense of place and support sustainable economic, environmental, and social conditions that contribute to healthy, walkable places.[66]

Development of regulations through zoning can support community investment. Such policies ensure that new buildings are accessible to the sidewalk and not surrounded by parking. Development may rely on street parking or locate parking on the side or behind the building. This would also help build a sense of place and character on the street that is likely to feel more inviting for people to walk, bike, and roll.

63. Smart Growth America. (2015). The Fiscal Implications of Development Patterns A Model for Municipal Analysis. https://smartgrowthamerica.org/resources/the-fiscal-implications-of-development-patterns-overview/

64. Form-Based Codes Institute & Smart Growth America. (2021). Zoned In: Economic Benefits & Shared Prosperity with Form-Based Codes. https://smartgrowthamerica.org/resources/zoned-in-economic-benefits-shared-prosperity-with-form-based-codes/

65. Federal Highway Administration. (2016). Small Town and Rural Multimodal Networks. https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/bicycle_pedestrian/publications/small_towns/fhwahep17024_lg.pdf

66. Connecting Destinations through Pedestrian-Oriented Design. (n.d.). Everyday Destinations. American Planning Association. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.planning.org/blog/9227407/connecting-destinations-through-pedestrian-oriented-design/

Erwin's Thriving Downtown Activity Center

Location: Erwin, TN

Population: 5,910 (2020)

Typologies: Retirement, second-home; Traditional main street; Edge

Source: blueridgecountry.com

While some rural communities have struggled in the face of economic shifts, and continue to face the challenges to expanding broadband access, Erwin, TN—a town of just 6,000 people—is successfully adapting by attracting investment to its historic downtown, expanding broadband, and improving access to local amenities and commercial areas in the process. Erwin already has a relatively compact town center and lots of potential for revitalization, with commercial activity clustered around the downtown area and two of the largest employers in the area located in the southwest area of the city, a short drive from downtown.

Erwin has had great success with improving broadband access which supported businesses in the downtown and easy switch to remote work during COVID. But the city realized it's still not a great downtown from a walkability perspective. They did a sidewalk assessment study during COVID with an intern walking all streets in the town and grading them on a scale which is now being used by the local government for their long range plan so they have a strategy to create a walkable network rather than merely a walkable Main Street.

Erwin has also worked to transform its downtown into a thriving activity center, in part due to the work of grassroots organization, RISE Erwin. Erwin changed some of the town's ordinances to allow residences in the commercial downtown area, marketed the downtown to businesses, and installed several public art projects, including securing Tennessee Arts Commission funding to install a large mural on the pavement of downtown streets in an area with a skate park, library, and two art studios. The city reported that traffic has since slowed on the streets with the mural, making it safer for people walking to the library and skate park.

KEY TAKEAWAY

By focusing on attracting investment to its historic downtown, expanding broadband, and improving access to local amenities and commercial areas, Erwin has created a thriving downtown activity center, where residents can safely walk to the various amenities and services that draw them to the area.

⬗ Create connected, dense neighborhoods

It is equally important to invest and use strategies that support connected, dense, walkable, and bikeable neighborhoods in rural areas and small towns. Low-density development makes the provision of critical services such as utilities, streets, sidewalks, and emergency services inefficient and more costly per resident. Additionally, communities with good street connectivity offer multiple options to reach nearby destinations and provide options for travel that may not require the user to travel along busier roadways. New development should include pedestrian and bicycling connections to adjacent neighborhoods and major streets, even if street connectivity cannot be achieved. Neighborhoods with few access points isolate residents and increase travel distances.

INVEST IN ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION NETWORKS

Activity-friendly routes to everyday destinations play an important role in rural communities: they connect all the amenities that make rural places unique. Whether it be a shared-use path to a work site, a bus stop to a park, or walkable dining and shopping in the town square, activity-friendly routes can help people move safely, and connect to the excellent natural landscapes, attractions, and sense of community that rural places have to offer.[68] They may be smaller than urban neighborhoods, but rural communities can be equally connected and just as vibrant and walkable. Many rural communities around the US have sidewalk, bike, or trail systems that contribute to a higher quality of life for residents. Some communities have networks residents can use to reach necessities such as schools, grocery stores, health care, entertainment, and jobs, while some are suitable for recreational use only. **Studies show that people in rural areas are just as likely to walk to places for leisure and transportation as those located in urban areas if the options are safe and accessible.**[69] Active transportation

Land use decisions are key policy levers for local governments— it allows them to guide the policy process to encourage sound fiscal decisions in new development. By evaluating the use of land and new development based on its impact to municipal budgets, local leaders can improve their community's bottom line and make sound fiscal decisions about how to grow.[67] Smart Growth America developed a Guide to provide information of the kinds of fiscal impacts associated with Smart Growth.

networks, in addition to providing transportation options, can also provide a solution to combat obesity and other chronic health diseases.

According to a recent study, there are 292 counties in the US where at least 10% of households don't have access to a car (out of 3,142 total counties nationwide). Of those 292 counties, 56% are majority rural. These 164 rural counties are primarily located in Kentucky, West Virginia, South Dakota, Arkansas, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alaska.[70] Seven of these states made it into the top 20 states with the highest number of pedestrian deaths according to the Dangerous by Design report 2022: South Carolina (3), Louisiana (6), Mississippi (7), Georgia (9), Alabama (11), North Carolina (14), Arkansas (18).[71]

67.   Smart Growth America. (2022). Using smart growth to make fiscally healthy places. https://smartgrowthamerica.org/using-smart-growth-to-make-fiscally-healthy-places/

68.   Smart Growth America & National Complete Streets Coalition. (n.d.). Small Towns and Rural Communities Activity-Friendly Routes to Everyday Destinations. https://smartgrowthamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/routes-to-destinations-rural-communities.pdf

69.   Whitfield, G.P., Carlson, S.A., Ussery, E.N., Watson, K.B., Berrigan, D., & Fulton, J.E. National-level environmental perceptions and walking among urban and rural residents: Informing surveillance of walkability. Prev Med, 123:101-108. doi: 10.1016/j.ypmed.2019.03.019

70.   Bellis, R. (2020, May 15). More than one million households without a car in rural America need better transit. Transportation for America. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://t4america.org/2020/05/15/more-than-one-million-households-without-a-car-in-rural-america-need-better-transit/

71.   Smart Growth America & National Complete Streets Coalition. (2022). Dangerous by Design. https://smartgrowthamerica.org/dangerous-by-design/

Quality of Life is Key in Ruston, LA

Location: Ruston, LA

Population: 21,987 (2020)

Typologies: Retirement, second-home; Traditional main street; College

Source: ruston.org

Ruston, LA, is in some ways an island. With no major metropolitan area nearby (the nearest city, West Monroe, is about 30 miles away) and commuter traffic through the area decreasing over the last decade, Ruston has developed an internal resilience, focused on the quality of life of their residents, including supporting Complete Streets, walkability, local restaurants, and downtown programming.

Ruston's Monroe Street Corridor is a multi-use greenway that will run from the north city limit to the south city limit, and connect to Louisiana Tech University. The trail will provide a walkable and bikeable connection between the southern part of town, which has historically been a lower-income area with higher percentages of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and the northern, wealthier, and predominantly white part of town—two groups that have been divided by interstate highways in the past.

"Downtown has been reborn as a cultural, entertainment, professional, and retail hub, much like its glory days when the town center was the heartbeat of the city."
MAYOR RONNY WALKER, RUSTON, LA

Ruston's other recent efforts to enhance quality of life include pedestrian-friendly site design. The city's 2016 Reimagine Ruston plan included a major walkability component, including a requirement for all new buildings and businesses throughout the city to put in sidewalks. They've also explored zoning changes to reduce the amount of land used for parking and implemented using a parking calculator to look at private lots with different uses between daytime and night, which resulted in a 20% reduction and increased parking efficiency.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Ruston is implementing changes to their built environment to encourage walking and to connect their communities. These changes have enabled them, in spite of their distance from a large metropolitan area, to remain a vibrant small city that can attract new residents, including students graduating from the local college, while improving the quality of life of their current residents.

Creating Connections in Montpelier, VT

Location: Montpelier, VT

Population: 7,434 (2020)

Typologies: Traditional main street

Source: montpelieralive.com

Vermont's capital city, Montpelier, looks like it could have been drawn straight out of a storybook, with beautiful brick buildings from the 1800s set along the Winooski River and backed by a wooded hillside. But this little rural city, which had a thriving economy before the COVID-19 pandemic, has seen a significant economic impact from the loss of state office workers that resulted from the emergency shutdown—a loss that has continued to affect the town.

Amid the pandemic, the Sustainable Montpelier Coalition, a local community organization, saw a need to build communication channels and connect neighbors across Montpelier, reinstated the *Capital Area Neighborhoods* program. The program identified 50 different neighborhoods across the city and began assigning neighborhood coordinators who encouraged civic engagement and held community events to get residents talking about these issues and how people can work together. Along with encouraging communication connections, Sustainable Montpelier Coalition is working toward making Montpelier a more physically connected community with denser neighborhoods within the city to provide more affordable housing options, including through mixed-use housing and invisible infill strategies such as accessory dwelling units and duplexes.

KEY TAKEAWAY

In small cities and rural areas, the effects of emergency situations like a global pandemic can hit especially hard. Finding ways to connect the community during crisis can be essential for resiliency in rural areas.

"Boomers and millennials, both generations who think they have nothing in common, actually want the same things—everybody wanted to have that house and now everybody's aging. No one wants to drive. Everyone wants to have a place downtown."
ELIZABETH PARKER, CFO, SUSTAINABLE MONTPELIER COALITION, MONTPELIER, VT

Without robust active transportation networks, people walking, biking, and rolling in rural areas face unique dangers since rural roads are less likely to be designed with these uses in mind. They often lack sidewalks, bike lanes, shoulders, curb ramps, and safe options to cross the street, which leads to increased risk of traffic crashes.

People using active modes are at particular risk, but those traveling by any mode in rural areas face increased risk of traffic death compared to their urban counterparts: _while only 19% of the US population lives in rural areas, they account for 49% of all traffic deaths._ About 75% of all roads in the United States (around 3 million miles) are in rural areas and are vital for transporting goods and connecting communities,[72] and small-town main streets are also often state highways that carry significant regional and truck traffic. According to a study published by the Governors Highway Safety Association, the risk of dying in a car crash, whether inside or outside a vehicle, was 62% higher on a rural road compared to an urban road for trips of the same length.[73]

Nationally, pedestrian and bicycle fatalities have been increasing in recent years. In 2020, 67% of pedestrians killed by vehicles occurred along roadways without sidewalks.[74] People of color, particularly Native and Black Americans, are more likely to die while walking than any other race or ethnic group.[75] Studies have shown that even having wide shoulders along roads can reduce pedestrian crashes by up to 70%[76] with sidewalks providing up to an 88% reduction.[77]

The Federal Highways Association (FHWA) released the _Small Town and Rural Multimodal Networks Guide_[78] in 2016 which covers rural active transportation issues in greater detail and provides model facility types that fit rural and small-town contexts.

The Dangerous by Design 2022 report highlights the need to make safety the top priority governing all street design decisions. The COVID-19 pandemic unleashed significant untapped demand for more walking in nearly every community across the country. With walking trip rates increasing, the pandemic uncovered a massive unmet demand for walking for all purposes, including transportation. The default approach should be building good, protected sidewalks and paths, and slowing traffic down to speeds that are appropriate for the inherently frenetic environment in busy corridors.[79]

72. Westling, A. (2022, October 10). Rural roads are among America's most deadly. State Smart Transportation Initiative. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://ssti.us/2022/10/10/rural-roads-are-among-americas-most-deadly/

73. Governors Highway Safety Association. (2022). America's Rural Roads: Beautiful and Deadly. https://www.ghsa.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/America%E2%80%99s%20Rural%20Roads%20-%20Beautiful%20and%20Deadly%20FNL.pdf

74. Governors Highway Safety Association. (2022). Pedestrian Traffic Fatalities by State. https://www.ghsa.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Pedestrian%20Traffic%20Fatalities%20by%20State%20-%202021%20Preliminary%20Data%20%28January-December%29.pdf

75. Smart Growth America & National Complete Streets Coalition. (2022). Dangerous by Design. https://smartgrowthamerica.org/dangerous-by-design/

76. Federal Highway Administration. (2008). Toolbox of Countermeasures and Their Potential Effectiveness for Pedestrian Crashes. https://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/ped_bike/tools_solve/ped_tctpepc/

77. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, & Federal Highway Administration. (2002). An Analysis of Factors Contributing to "Walking Along Roadway" Crashes: Research Study and Guidelines for Sidewalks and Walkways. https://trid.trb.org/view.aspx?id=719134

78. Federal Highway Administration. (2016). Small Town and Rural Multimodal Networks. https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/bicycle_pedestrian/publications/small_towns/

79. Smart Growth America & National Complete Streets Coalition. (2022). Dangerous by Design. https://smartgrowthamerica.org/dangerous-by-design/

Oxford's Complete Streets Add Economic Benefits

Location: Oxford, MS

Population: 27,662 (2020)

Typologies: Traditional main street; College

Source: visit-oxford.com

Oxford, MS, is home to the University of Mississippi with a population of about 27,000 residents and a picture-book downtown square. Oxford has a rich history as the former home of William Faulkner, and a successful food and retail scene. Oxford recognizes that safe, walkable streets are a key part of making downtown economically prosperous. Since the 1990s, Oxford's economic development foundation has focused on creating an environment where people enjoy everyday life.

Oxford focused on creating good design standards for streets to make them safer and more comfortable for people walking, biking, and rolling. These strategies paid off—Oxford was ranked ninth for strongest micropolitan economy in the US in 2019. Today, Oxford's Complete Streets resolution is improving safety for people walking in the downtown area. The City is converting East Jackson Avenue in downtown into a more walk-friendly corridor. This is important since although it has a row of restaurants, retail, and heavy foot traffic, it is one of the least walking-friendly streets in the community.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Improving safety and comfort for people walking, biking, and rolling can improve not only the safety and enjoyment of people in a rural community but also the economy of the community.

SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL

As an additional focus area for active transportation, safe routes to schools are an important component of any thriving community. As noted, the obesity rate for rural children is a growing concern in the US. Many rural communities have constructed new schools on the periphery of a community where it is unsafe to walk or bicycle. Keeping centralized schools that are close to neighborhoods or school sites that have good connectivity by active transportation makes it safer and more appealing for students living nearby to walk, bike, or roll to school.[80]

The National Center for Safe Routes to School supports communities that want to encourage active transportation to reduce child obesity, decrease traffic congestion near schools, and increase community connectedness. As of 2011, 41% of Safe Routes to School grants went to small towns and rural areas.[81]

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSIT

More than one million households in predominantly rural counties do not have access to a vehicle. As stated previously, the latest American Community Survey (ACS) data indicated that in 164 rural US counties, at least 10% of households don't have access to a car.[82] Rural communities can benefit from accessible transit service that connects people to the greater region. Transit is essential for many rural residents, such as families without access to a vehicle, and older residents who are no longer able to drive to reach health care, groceries, and other crucial services. Rail service through Amtrak or regional services may also provide economic and transportation benefits to some communities that have access to it, as in the case of Sacco and Brunswick, ME (see page 32). The preservation of these services should be a priority. Unfortunately, around 30% of rural areas have no access to any type of transit service at all.[83] Other strategies for improving transit service in

Source: Eddie Moore

rural areas include exploring on-demand bus service options (see the example from Chillicothe, OH on page 36) and establishing community partnerships to make fixed-route bus service affordable for residents (see Paris, TX example on page 43).

"I lived in Green River, Utah which is way more remote than Palouse but has an Amtrak station. And because of that, you could pop into Salt Lake City or the nearest town with a bigger grocery store. I was blown away at how different that community was because of their access to a daily Amtrak station. [In Palouse], we have lots of people going in different directions every single morning but there is no way to get there other than a single-use commuter car, which is pretty wild."

MARY WELCOME, ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE, WSDOT, PALOUSE, WA

80. https://www.thecommunityguide.org/findings/physical-activity-interventions-increase-active-travel-school.html

81. https://www.saferoutespartnership.org/sites/default/files/pdf/SRTS-policy-report-fact-sheet.pdf

82. Bellis, R. (2020, May 15). More than one million households without a car in rural America need better transit. Transportation for America. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://t4america.org/2020/05/15/more-than-one-million-households-without-a-car-in-rural-america-need-better-transit/

83. Rural Communities Need Better Transportation Policy. (2021, September 13). Third Way. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.thirdway.org/memo/rural-communities-need-better-transportation-policy

Downeaster Rail Service Connects Communities

Location: Saco, Brunswick, and Surrounding Rural Communities, ME

Population: 19,716 | Saco (2020); 15,974 | Brunswick (2020)

Typologies: Gateway; Resource-dependent; Retirement, second-home; Traditional main street; College; Edge

Source: NNEPRA

A number of rural communities have expanded transit service and have seen significant benefits. The Amtrak Downeaster rail service in Maine began over 20 years ago through a citizen-initiated bill, the first of its kind, called the "Passenger Rail Service Act." The service acts as an anchor for interconnectedness of smaller communities in Maine, for students to get to colleges and universities in Saco and Brunswick, and for a large proportion of the senior population to access medical services in Boston.

Changes brought by COVID-19 have created opportunities for rural communities like those in Maine. Many young adults have moved to fewer urban parts of Maine because of the increased flexibility of remote work. For example, Saco, Maine, has a walkable downtown; is one of the fastest-growing communities in Maine; and saw an increase in its younger population during the initial years of the pandemic. The Downeaster train connects this growing population to cities like Boston for services and entertainment, which according to agency officials, is often cited as an attractive factor for younger people to live in parts of

Maine. For older residents, Downeaster has a partnership with the American Cancer Society to offer $15 fares for people going from anywhere in Maine to Boston for medical appointments. The discounted fair applies to both the patient and a travel companion.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Transit service can make living in rural areas more attractive for young adults who want access to attractions and resources in nearby cities, and more feasible for older adults who need access to health care services.

"Each train has its own distinct personality. For example, 682 is the second Southbound Train to Boston, so we get a couple business travelers, some leisure travelers, seniors that are going to medical appointments. That's very different from 686 which is usually the sports fans and that's where we sell beer and chicken sandwiches."
PATRICIA QUINN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NNEPRA, DOWNEASTER, ME

Part 4: How can your rural community improve? The roadmap and takeaways.

The future of transportation in rural America

In Part 3, we outlined many strategies that will help small and rural communities face the challenges described in Part 2 in order to become healthier, more economically successful, and more resilient places in the future. Strategic transportation investments and improvements are important for building sustainable and resilient rural communities for people to thrive, not just survive. There is a demonstrated need to support and equip rural communities with tools to design transportation systems that meet the needs of their residents, as directly and cost-effectively as possible, now and in the future. The recommendations listed here can serve as a framework of starting points for rural and small-town communities.

1. Have a vision for your community

2. Establish systems to support economically sound transportation and land use decisions

3. Realign transportation priorities to support the community vision

4. Invest in transit and focus on tailoring it to work for your community

Chillicothe OH (Population: 21,668) | Source: City of Chillicothe

1. Have a vision for your community

Every community, whether it is rural or urban, has unique features and assets that make them special. Identifying what those are, how to build on them, and how to ensure your development and transportation approach support what is essential to establishing a vision for any city, town, or village. A vision will look different for each community and may address desired outcomes such as retaining local culture, building walkable places, maintaining or bringing back the vibrancy of the downtown, promoting tourism, attracting new residents, developing recreational opportunities, and incentivizing development. Developing a vision can be challenging for smaller, lower-capacity communities, but it is a critical first step to realizing a variety of benefits. Visioning processes can be standalone efforts, or executed as part of a larger community master planning process, which could provide a more clearly defined and prioritized list of actions, each crafted specifically to realize the established vision.

KNOW YOUR LOCAL IDENTITY

Rural communities often have rich histories, natural assets, and culture that can be used to revitalize rural economies and improve quality of life for future generations, while preserving what makes a community unique. In order to develop a vision for the future, a good first step is to look at the past. Every community will have a unique identity that originally drew people to the place and a shared history of those currently living there.

DEFINE ACTIVITY CENTERS

When it comes to knowing a community's strengths, historic town centers and main streets are important assets to rural communities and should be viewed as event and activity centers. This can be challenging, as often the main streets of rural communities and small towns are also state highways, and local stakeholders may encounter difficulties making changes to roads they don't control, maintain, or own. While it can be difficult to envision them differently, communities across the country are actively investing in their downtowns to revive the sense of place and renew the character of main streets beyond just being a state highway.

Downtown revitalization is about more than making physical improvements; it's about bringing people together and giving people as many reasons as possible to interact and build community together.

Activity centers may also exist in communities or regional parks or where events regularly occur. These locations support and supplement commercial cores within communities and provide additional amenities and opportunity for interaction and a sense of place.

BUILD PARTNERSHIPS

Thriving communities require a shared vision, executed by many individuals, community groups, and agencies. Partnerships help spread out the effort over a wider base, allowing more simultaneous projects to succeed. These groups and individuals should be a key part of the visioning process and the actions that result from it. Groups such as downtown associations, chambers of commerce, schools, libraries, business leaders, local professionals, and concerned citizens all can have an impact in crafting and achieving the vision.

CASE STUDY

Osage Nation Tribal Community Develop A Vision For The Future

Location: Pawhuska, OK

Population: 3,456 (2020)

Typologies: Gateway; Traditional main street; Edge; Tribal and Native American

The leaders of the Osage Nation of Oklahoma had a vision for improving the health of their community, and they have strategically taken on projects in recent years that align with that vision. One such project was the completion of the WahZhaZhe Heritage Park and Trails in 2021. Completed during the COVID-19 pandemic, this ecopark and trail system near the downtown area was particularly successful as a place for community members to safely socialize, and it continues to serve not only the Osage Nation but also the City of Pawhuska, providing a community asset that improves the quality of life and health for residents.

WahZhaZhe Heritage Park and Trails includes 2 miles of trails, workout stations, a playground, a frisbee golf course, a picnic area, and an outdoor classroom to teach about the nation's culture and history. The park is also adjacent to Harvest Land, a tribe-owned working farm and food store, which provides access to healthy food options, including native species the Osage has traditionally harvested. The Nation plans to expand on the success

of this project with a large health and sports complex nearby. The Nation has also partnered with the City of Pawhuska in applying for a streetscape project to revitalize the downtown area with new sidewalks to make walking safer, improving traffic flow and vehicular safety, and updating street infrastructure, a step that has benefited the economic development of not only the tribe but of the entire region.

KEY TAKEAWAY

With a clear vision, shaped based on an understanding of their history and identity, the Osage Nation implemented a series of projects that worked together toward a common goal of improving the health of the Osage community, and by extension, the surrounding community of Pawhuska.

Chillicothe Building Relationships

Location: Chillicothe, OH

Population: 21,668 (2020)

Typologies: Traditional main street; Edge

Source: City of Chillicothe

Chillicothe, Ohio's first (and third) capital city, sits in southern Ohio, near the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. US Routes 23 and 50 dissect the city, and like in many small towns and rural communities, these major corridors built to prioritize cars above all else have also divided the community. But leaders of Chillicothe have been working hard to improve access and mobility in the community for everyone to safely walk, bike, roll, and use public transit.

From November 2020 to August 2021, Chillicothe participated in the Bloomberg Harvard Innovation Track, a Leadership Initiative program where 11 interdisciplinary city teams from across the US developed innovative solutions to a pressing city problem. Chillicothe focused on improving public transit throughout the city. The city's journey over the year led to a complete revamp of service, from a fixed-route only service with extremely inefficient and long routes, to a mix of 30-minute fixed routes coupled with on-demand point-to-point service. The new transit system covers the whole city and two outlying regions where major employers exist. The city also partnered with the library to locate a transit transfer hub and introduced a new trolley system, an idea that came from their community engagement sessions. The trolley was piloted in December 2021 and received an overwhelmingly positive response with over 750 visitors in the pilot week, which led to the service being officially launched in June 2022.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Chillicothe's process was successful because the decisions the city made were driven by and through the extensive community engagement that was conducted. This led the city to pursue a hybrid option of preserving the fixed-route service while also adding the on-demand option for flexibility where the fixed route didn't reach.

"Instead of a forum or interview, if you hop on the bus and say, "Hey, what do you like or not?" They start chatting with you. And then the only other piece is getting them to trust you. When we first started talking, people didn't want to say anything bad. They were like, "Oh, it's fine." and I was like, "Well, ma'am, you've been on the bus for 45 minutes. Is it really fine?"

ASTI POWELL, DIRECTOR OF PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT, CHILLICOTHE, OH

2. Establish systems to support economically sound transportation and land use decisions

Once the vision is established, the focus shifts to supportive policies and practices. Reviewing transportation and land use policies and development approval procedures that are in place—or not in place—is key. Many rural communities don't have regulations or policies in place to determine where new development is located and what that development should look like. While this may lead to growth that feels like economic development in the short term, it ultimately undermines a community's long-term goals. For example, locating major employers, schools, or shopping on the outskirts of a rural community can contribute to hollowed-out downtowns, ultimately undermining economic vitality while also making it harder for people who aren't able to drive or afford a vehicle to reach these places. While it takes more time and resources to put land development policies in place, it can produce better economic outcomes in the long term. This can be achieved in a number of ways, as outlined in the following subsections.

ADOPT A ZONING OVERLAY/ORDINANCE OR A FORM-BASED CODE

Adopting a zoning ordinance, especially a form-based code, a type of land development regulation that preserves the aesthetic character of rural places by regulating building form rather than use—can be a powerful tool to help rural places guide the development that comes to their community to ensure it's in line with their vision. But adopting a zoning guidance can sometimes feel out of scale for rural communities and small towns, often resulting in lack of zoning in many communities. An alternative starting point that can allow incremental improvements other than community-wide zoning is an overlay focused on specific areas with existing commercial activity and businesses. This approach may face less resistance while creating opportunities for community engagement. Over time, if the community sees positive economic or quality of life impacts, it can strengthen the case for broader land use changes.

Smart Growth America has developed a three-course curriculum of one introductory and two advanced courses on form-based codes. The course provides an overview of the process of creating a form-based code, moving from an initial place-based community vision to an adopted code and beyond. The advanced courses (201/301), teach advanced skills in code creation and implementation, and include "hands on" interactive exercises. Find more information here: https://smartgrowthamerica.org/fbci-courses/

REVIEW AND EVALUATE PROJECTS WITH THE VISION

Aside from having a zoning guidance in place, it is also valuable to develop a formal process for evaluating potential development projects, to determine whether it aligns with the community vision before approval. This could be as simple as developing basic materials, such as a list of principles or a visioning document, whereby a community's priorities are listed, and having a standard step of evaluating any new potential development against those principles.

CREATE AN INVENTORY OF ASSETS IN THE COMMUNITY

Another key is to take a step back and create an inventory of assets in the community, if one doesn't exist already. This would include conducting an inventory of facilities such as underutilized or vacant structures or lots in and around the community center, parks and recreational amenities, and sidewalks, to get a sense of the needs and potential for new developments. Consideration should also be given to the most valued and utilized resources and facilities of the community as well, which could be further invested into or held onto as potential new developments are evaluated. This could include natural resources, heritage structures, and community spaces that may hold cultural, historical, or utilitarian importance for the community.

ALIGN AND COORDINATE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT POLICIES AND INCENTIVES WITH LAND USE POLICIES

It's also important to align development incentives with the goal of encouraging land use decisions that allow people to travel actively—that is, compact, mixed-use development in existing town centers. Good economic development should be about building places that benefit everyone, where everyone has access to jobs and opportunities, and where the economic benefits are evenly distributed.[84,85] But resources are at a premium for local governments, and this is particularly true for many small towns and rural communities where the tax base has shrunk.

84. Bicycling Provides $137 Million in Economic Benefits to Northwest Arkansas. (2018, March 29). Walton Family Foundation. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/about-us/newsroom/bicycling-provides-137-million-in-economic-benefits-to-northwest-arkansas

85. Library of Trails Benefit. (n.d.). Headwaters Economics. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://headwaterseconomics.org/trail/

Park City, UT (Population: 8,457)
Source: visitparkcity.com

3. Realign transportation priorities to support the community vision

For rural areas, where town main streets frequently function as state highways with significant through traffic, prioritizing safety over speed can make the difference between a vital, thriving economic hub and a noisy, empty downtown where no one wants to stop, walk, or do business.[86]

Local, regional, state, and tribal governments need to make safe active travel a top priority. And to do that, they need to emphasize accessibility—providing greater access to and between housing, jobs, and services. **Providing access for people is the fundamental purpose of transportation,** yet we have traditionally evaluated the success of our transportation system based on whether vehicles can travel quickly in free-flow conditions, a poor substitute.

Communities should work closely with State Departments of Transportation to ensure that any future roadway projects include adequate pedestrian or bicycle accommodations. There can be challenges in collaborating across agencies at the local and state level, including competing visions, funding, maintenance, and schedules. In addition to adding pedestrian and bicycle facilities, existing pedestrian facilities may not meet current accessibility standards. The issue of providing accessible paths of travel for pedestrians has substantial legal ramifications in the US.[87]

ADOPT A COMPLETE STREETS POLICY

In many rural communities, investments in new transportation infrastructure happen infrequently. Often, rural communities struggle to maintain the roads they have; however, having a Complete Streets policy in place can help ensure that every time a maintenance or construction project is proposed, the opportunity is seized to make it safer and more inviting for everyone. Adopting a Complete Streets policy is a feasible task for communities of all sizes; many small or rural communities around the country have adopted Complete Streets policies.[88] Some elements of these policies may be more sensitive to resource-limited communities.

Adopting a Complete Streets policy is a crucial first step to reducing traffic violence, improving health equity, responding to the climate crisis, and rectifying a long history of inequitable transportation practices. The Best Complete Streets Policies report (2023) spotlights the communities that have taken that first step and outlines how they made it happen.

86.   Rural Communities Need Better Transportation Policy. (2021, September 13). Third Way. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://www.thirdway.org/memo/rural-communities-need-better-transportation-policy

87.   Curb Ramps and Pedestrian Crossings Under Title II of the ADA. (n.d.). ADA Best Practices Tool Kit for State and Local Governments. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://archive.ada.gov/pcatoolkit/chap6toolkit.htm#:~:text=Title%20II%20of%20the%20ADA%20requires%20state%20and%20local%20governments,%2C%20pedestrian%20crossings%2C%20or%20walkways

88.   Complete Streets Policy. (n.d.) Smart Growth America. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://smartgrowthamerica.org/program/national-complete-streets-coalition/policy-atlas/

RIGHT SIZE STREETS

Many rural communities have streets that are far larger than they need to be and act as barriers to people walking or bicycling (see Figure 4 for the typical capacity of a street based on the number of travel lanes). While these streets may currently work against the community vision, they also serve as opportunities for reconfiguration to better serve the community's needs. Simply put, extra street space can be repurposed into sidewalks, bike lanes, trails, medians, and other features that can make the street safer and more attractive to active modes while also meeting existing traffic demand (see Figure 5).

FOCUS ON PEDESTRIAN ACCESSIBILITY

As projects are implemented both through private development and through roadway construction and maintenance, special focus should be placed on ensuring pedestrian accessibility. This means sidewalks should be at least five feet wide, have accessible ramps, and provide direct access to businesses. High-quality pedestrian networks also provide landscaping, appropriate lighting, and a tree canopy. Intersections have short crossings, pedestrian features at signals, roundabouts where signals are not needed, and median islands to break up crossings into multiple stages. The pedestrian network should be connected, with separation (such as curbs) between pedestrian facilities and those for other modes.

Travel Lanes		Vehicles Per Day
2		< 12,000
3		< 20,000
4		< 34,000
5		< 40,000

Capacity depends on directional parity, peak volumes, turns, transit, heavy vehicles, and walking and bicycling volumes.

Figure 4. Conceptual capacities of various lane configurations.

Lexington, MS | Population: 1,496 (2018)

Figure 5. Example of before and after roadway conditions

USE DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS

A number of smaller communities have tested safety improvements and built support by making temporary changes to street design, partnering with businesses, emergency services, and other stakeholders, to work through concerns about access to the streets and curb space, before making them permanent. These quick-builds, also called demonstration projects, are short-term, low-cost improvements that test changes to street design, allowing communities and transportation departments to try new ideas and gather feedback before making the changes permanent. They also give elected officials a low-risk option to see how their community reacts to a change, before committing to a permanent solution or policy change.

PURSUE DIVERSE FUNDING SOURCES

The communities that are most successful at attracting investment do so through diversifying project funding and leveraging resources from multiple local, state, and national resources. Such strategies can result in rapid tangible change even in communities that are fiscally constrained. For example, even small amounts of local funding can be used as matches for larger grants or even as enhancements to projects.

Airway Heights, WA (Population: 10,030) | Source: smartgrowthamerica.org

In early 2020, The National Complete Streets Coalition (NCSC) a program of Smart Growth America, launched the Washington Complete Streets Leadership Academy where three smaller Washington cities—Airway Heights, Arlington, and Wenatchee—learned and built their skills in safer street design, creative placemaking, and community engagement through quick-build pilot projects with a stipend of $15,000 to each city to support purchasing temporary materials for their projects. Each city engaged a team of multidisciplinary stakeholders to participate in a series of workshops, culminating in planning and implementing quick-build demonstration projects on a local street in their city.

4. Invest in transit and focus on tailoring it to work for your community

While transit looks different in rural areas, it is essential for many families and older residents with no other means to reach health care, groceries, and other crucial services. A number of rural communities, such as Paris, TX, and the communities served by the Downeaster in Maine (see case studies on pages 43 and 32, respectively), have expanded transit service to meet that need and have seen significant benefits.

Innovative partnerships can make transit more viable and affordable to provide in rural areas. For example, major employers like hospitals in the case of Paris, TX, have sometimes stepped in to help fund transit because they see the benefit to their employees and the reduced long-term costs when residents have better health care access. The availability of reliable transportation impacts a person's ability to access appropriate and well-coordinated health care, purchase nutritious food, and otherwise care for themselves.

Recently, some communities have also explored partnerships with ridesharing companies to help supplement their transit service, including in Lone Tree, Colorado,[89] and rural and tribal communities in eastern Oklahoma.[90] Other communities have developed their own on-demand transit program instead of fixed-route services, in partnership with ridesharing companies such as the Blackfeet Indian Reservation's micro-transit service in northwest Montana, the City of Wilson's RIDE service, or the University of Virginia's College at Wise partnership with Via for their MetGo service.

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89.   Lone Tree Link becomes Link-On-Demand, Lone Tree, Colorado, 2017-2019. (2019, February 4). SUMC MLC. Retrieved May 30, 2023, from https://learn.sharedusemobilitycenter.org/overview/lone-tree-link-adds-link-on-demand-uber-p3-lone-tree-colorado-2017/#:~:text=Lone%20Tree%2C%20CO%2C%20and%20Uber,circulator%20comprising%20four%20shuttle%20vehicles

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Streamline Bus Service in Bozeman, MT (Population: 53,293) | Source: Western Transportation Institute

Paris Tailors Fixed-Route Service To Community Needs

Source: ruralhealthinfo.org

Location: Paris, TX

Population: 24,814 (2020)

Typologies: Traditional main street

Paris is a town of 25,000 people located in northeastern Texas along the border of Oklahoma. It is part of a 10-county area serviced by the Ark-Tex Council of Governments Rural Transit District (TRAX), which only operated an on-demand service requiring reservations. Though the on-demand service was critical for residents who used it, the advanced notice required, limited availability of rides and small fleets were major limitations.

In 2016, Paris and other local partners supported TRAX to launch an affordable fixed-route bus service called Paris Metro. It costs 50 cents a ride, and 25 cents for students. They also recently partnered with the Texas Veterans Commission to provide free six-month ride passes for veterans living in a transitional shelter. The service, which includes four routes in Paris running hourly between 6:30 a.m. and 6:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, has filled a critical need in allowing residents to access jobs and social services. The Paris Metro was created with the specific transportation needs of each sponsoring partner in mind. For example, the Paris Regional Medical Center, the largest employer in the city, is located outside the city center and was previously inaccessible by transit. Now, the Paris Metro allows residents to get to scheduled appointments rather than coming in through the emergency room.

Lack of access to reliable transit was a barrier for students with disabilities at Paris Junior college. To give students the support they needed to reach classes and other daily destinations, TRAX and the college created a discounted semester pass for students, subsidized by Pell grant funds. Reliable, affordable transit allows more students to enroll and attend their classes.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Through community partnerships, Paris's fixed-route service was kept affordable for residents, and was tailored to the needs of the sponsoring partners.

"The impact of our bus system has exceeded all expectations when it comes to the impact on the local business community. I see people getting off the bus downtown to shop, visit our bank branches, and access medical care."
GREG WILSON, EXECUTIVE BOARD OF LAMAR COUNTY COC, PARIS, TX

Conclusion

Rural communities exist across every part of the United States within a spectrum of landscapes, histories, cultures, and economic realities. Most are exhibiting some form of either growth or decline. Those that thrive offer inspiration and lessons that can be applied to those experiencing decline.

This report explores many of the deep and interconnected trends, issues, and solutions that can impact rural communities. This document shows that while quality active transportation and transit facilities can play a significant role in creating a thriving rural community, they need to be solutions that work holistically with other non-transportation policies for the greatest benefit.

Smart Growth America and other organizations offer a wealth of resources that can assist local agency staff, elected officials, community champions, partner organizations, and service groups with improving their communities. As America continues to change, small and rural communities are important parts of the future and require investment to reach their potential.

Bethel, VT (Population: 891) | Source: teambetterblock.com/Bethel

Glossary

Access:[91] Access refers to the ability to reach destinations, goods, services, and activities. Most transportation is intended to provide access, except in instances where the purpose is recreation or physical exercise (e.g., cruising, historic train rides, horseback riding, jogging). Walking, rolling, bicycling, ridesharing, and using public transit all can provide access to jobs, services, and other activities.

Accessibility: Accessibility refers to the ability of people with disabilities to achieve the same level of access described in the preceding definition.

Active travel/transportation: Active travel simply means making journeys in physically active ways, like walking, wheeling (using a wheelchair or mobility aid), bicycling, or scooting.[92]

BIPOC: A term used to refer to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).

Built environment: The physical space designed and built by people, ranging in scale from cities to buildings, homes, streets, and other uses of space that have an impact on quality of life and public health.

Complete Streets:[93] Streets designed and operated to enable safe use and support mobility for all users. The concept of Complete Streets encompasses many approaches to planning, designing, and operating roadways and rights of way with all users in mind to make the transportation network safer and more efficient. Complete Street policies are set at the state, regional, and local levels and are frequently supported by roadway design guidelines.

Connectivity: Connectivity refers to the density of connections in path or road networks, and the directness of links. A well-connected network has many short links, numerous intersections, and minimal dead-ends (cul-de-sacs). As connectivity increases, travel distances decrease and route options increase, allowing more direct travel between destinations, creating a more accessible and resilient system that reflects Complete Streets principles. Connectivity can apply both internally (streets within that area) and externally (connections with larger arterial roads and other neighborhoods).[94]

Community Livability:[95] Community livability relates to the environmental and social quality of an area according to its residents and visitors. Safety and health, local environmental conditions, the quality of social interactions, recreational and entertainment opportunities, aesthetics, and the presence of unique cultural and environmental resources (e.g., historic structures, mature trees, traditional architectural styles) all affect community livability.

Demonstration projects/Tactical urbanism: Temporary improvements that test changes to the built environment. Also known as tactical urbanism or quick builds, these are effective, engaging tools for communities and transportation departments to test out new ideas, gather feedback, and show the flexibility of the built environment. They also provide elected officials a low-risk method to see how their community reacts before committing to a permanent solution or policy change.

91. Victoria Transport Policy Institute. (2019, September 6). Retrieved from https://www.vtpi.org/tdm/tdm84.htm

92. About Active Travel. (n.d.). Paths for All. Retrieved February 23, 2022, from https://www.pathsforall.org.uk/about-active-travel

93. National Complete Streets Coalition, Smart Growth America. Retrieved from https://smartgrowthamerica.org/program/national-complete-streets-coalition/

94. Victoria Transport Policy Institute. (2017, January 2). Roadway Connectivity Creating More Connected Roadway and Pathway Networks. TDM Encyclopedia. https://www.vtpi.org/tdm/tdm116.htm

95. Victoria Transport Policy Institute. (2017, July 18). Helping to Create Attractive, Safe, Cohesive Communities. TDM Encyclopedia. https://www.vtpi.org/tdm/tdm97.htm

Disenfranchised communities: Populations that have systematically been deprived of rights and privileges over time, impacting their access to jobs and essential services and their ability to accumulate wealth.

Health equity: A fair and just opportunity for everyone to be as healthy as possible. This requires removing obstacles to health such as poverty, discrimination, and their consequences, including powerlessness and lack of access to quality education and housing, safe environments, good jobs with fair pay, and health care. To achieve health equity is to reduce and ultimately eliminate disparities in health and its determinants that adversely affect excluded or marginalized groups.

Mobility: The movement of people and goods.

Multimodal transportation system: A transportation network that accommodates multiple modes of travel including, but not limited to, walking, rolling, bicycling, using public transit, and driving.

Resilience (also called reliability and risk management):[96] Resilience refers to a system's ability to accommodate variable and unexpected conditions without complete failure. For a community, it means that a transportation system can safely and efficiently accommodate construction projects, emergencies, special events, and other changes; and that the transport system can provide basic accessibility to people with low incomes or disabilities, or those who do not speak the local language.

Smart growth: Land-use development practices that create more resource efficient and livable communities, with more accessible land use patterns. An alternative to sprawl.

Sprawl: Dispersed, low-density, single-use, automobile dependent development patterns.

Streetscaping: Streetscape refers to urban roadway design and conditions as they impact street users and nearby residents. Streetscaping recognizes that streets are places where people engage in various activities, including but not limited to motor vehicle travel.[97]

Shared spaces refer to specific reallocations of public roadway space typically reserved for motor vehicles for the purpose of creating space for active uses—a phenomenon which was extensively seen as a COVID-19 response measure. These could be to provide spaces for other modes such as walking, biking, or rolling through sidewalk expansion, pop-up bike lanes, street closures etc. These could also be to support commercial activities and local businesses such as for outdoor dining, pop-up market streets etc.[98]

Placemaking: Placemaking means creating places and focuses on transforming public spaces to strengthen the connections between people and these places. Placemaking is a process centered on people and their needs, aspirations, desires, and visions, which relies strongly on community participation.[99]

Rolling: In the context of mobility, "rolling" refers to any method for moving around that uses wheels, like a wheelchair, roller skates, or a mobility scooter.

Transportation network: The infrastructure that allows us to move from one location to another throughout a given community

96.   Victoria Transport Policy Institute. (2019, September 6). Evaluating The Transportation System's Ability To Accommodate Diverse, Variable and Unexpected Demands With Minimal Risk. TDM Encyclopedia. https://www.vtpi.org/tdm/tdm88.htm

97.   Victoria Transport Policy Institute & Ritter, J. (2018, August 28). Streetscape Improvements Enhancing Urban Roadway Design. Online TDM Encyclopedia. https://www.vtpi.org/tdm/tdm122.htm

98.   Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center. (n.d.). "Shifting Streets" Glossary. Ped Bike Info. https://www.pedbikeinfo.org/resources/resources_details.cfm?id=5345

99.   Moreira, S. (2021, May 27). What Is Placemaking? ArchDaily. https://www.archdaily.com/961333/what-is-placemaking

Urban: For the 2020 Census, an urban area will comprise a densely settled core of census blocks that meet minimum housing unit density and/or population density requirements. This includes adjacent territory containing non-residential urban land uses. To qualify as an urban area, the territory identified according to criteria must encompass at least 2,000 housing units or have a population of at least 5,000.

Vehicle miles traveled (VMT): This is a measure of how much driving is happening during a certain period. It can be given in real terms or per capita, which involves dividing total miles by population. Decreasing annual VMT per capita can directly improve air quality and the overall health of a population.[100]

▶ *Rural definitions*

The U.S. Census Bureau and other federal agencies use different definitions of rural. This section summarizes the definitions in order to understand the different meanings and ways to measure rural communities.

U.S. Census Bureau: rural areas consist of open countryside with population densities less than 500 people per square mile and places with fewer than 2,500 people.

Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA): All non-metro counties; All metro census tracts with Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes 4-10[101] and large area Metro census tracts of at least 400 sq. miles in area with population density of 35 or less per sq. mile with RUCA codes 2-3; all outlying metro counties without a UA to be rural.

Office of Management and Budget (OMB): Micro area (urban core of 10,000-49,9999 people); Counties outside of Metro or Micro Areas.

United States Department of Agriculture - Economic Research Service (USDA-ERS): ERS has developed sub-county classifications that more accurately delineate different levels of rurality and address program eligibility concerns. They include the Rural-Urban Commuting Areas, and the Frontier and Remote Area Codes.

Federal Office of Rural Health Policy (FORHP): The FORHP accepts all non-Metro counties as rural and uses an additional method of determining rurality called the Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes. FORHP has designated 132 large area census tracts with RUCA codes 2 or 3 as rural. These tracts are at least 400 square miles in area with a population density of no more than 35 people.

National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS): NCHS has developed a six-level urban-rural classification scheme for U.S. counties and county-equivalent entities. The most urban category consists of "central" counties of large metropolitan areas and the most rural category consists of nonmetropolitan "noncore" counties.[102]

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100. U.S. Department of Transportation. (2015, August 24). VMT Per Capita. https://www.transportation.gov/mission/health/vmt-capita#

101. Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes are based on Census data that is used to assign a code to each Census Tract. Tracts inside Metropolitan counties with the codes 4-10 are considered rural.

102. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2020, June 25). Defining Rural Population. https://www.hhs.gov/guidance/document/defining-rural-population

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