

Tips on Leading a Walk Audit

Walk audits (or walkabouts) are facilitated walks for an interdisciplinary group of community stakeholders, often led by design expert, with the following potential goals:

- **Education.** Guides people to *experience* and assess the physical activity and healthy eating “friendliness” of an area, not just look at it theoretically.
- **Inspiration.** Helps leaders and policy makers to explore what could be possible.
- **Practical planning.** Outstanding way to get everyone--professionals and not--actively involved in project or policy development, valuing each person’s input.

Participants. Anyone who can influence or is affected by the built environment: Planners, public works, engineers, architects and landscape architects, public health and safety, school officials, ; elected and appointed officials (city/county council, planning commission, school board); business and development leaders; parents, children, elderly, people with disabilities, everyone!

Distance. Typically 0.5 to 2.0 miles; for a 30 to 90 minute walk, allowing time to stop for observation, discussion. A one-hour, roughly 1.5 mile walk can work very well.

Route. Should be determined ahead of time, and ideally pre-scouted by the facilitator. Can include a mix of supportive and challenging (good & bad, below) settings for healthy eating and active living, with safe (out of traffic) places for the group to stop and talk.

- Good e.g.: Park, trail, walk- & bike-friendly facilities & downtown, traffic calming (curb extensions, islands, raised crossings), community garden, farmer’s market.
- Bad e.g.: Wide roads, no crosswalks, speeding traffic; malls & sprawling subdivisions, giant parking lots, no bike racks, fast food strip development.
- Surprises: Goat trails, bikes parked at trees or parking meters (or other evidence of user demand), overlooked gems (small neighborhood park or green grocer).

Four major elements of the walk.

- **Introductions**, brief, to connect the group and understand the mix of perspectives.
- **Education/set-up.** This could be an hour-long PowerPoint presentation, or a 10-minute discussion of elements that support community health. Either way, start the walk by first thinking about what leads to healthier behaviors:
 - o A varied mix of land uses (live, work, shop, play, learn, pray in close proximity).
 - o Good connections for pedestrian, bicycle, and transit use (sidewalks, trails, etc.)
 - o Functional, inviting site designs (buildings at the sidewalks, trees, benches, etc.)
 - o Safety and access for users of all ages, abilities, incomes (lights, traffic calming)
 - o Accessible, appealing, and affordable healthy food options.
- **The Walk.** Consider having participants use a 0 to 10 scoring system for considering the environment, 10 being the most health supporting, 0 the least. At occasional stops, have participants state their scores, and give examples of why it is what it is (“too much traffic, only a 4;” or “great trees & benches & lots of people, 8”). No right or wrong answers, just a device to help all to observe and share.
- **Discussion/planning.** Immediately following a walk is an ideal time to develop specific conceptual plans, project details, and ordinance recommendations.

A recommended “script” for facilitating a walk audit.

Opening instructions - Remind walk participants of three rules.

1. **Be careful.** You are walking in the real world with real hazards; be careful crossing streets, watch out for traffic and one another, make room for other pedestrians & cyclists.
2. **Think of all users.** Imagine very young or old users, those on bikes or accessing transit, or with disabilities (e.g. blind, in a wheelchair, on crutches), those pushing a stroller or pulling a grocery cart; those of different backgrounds or incomes.
3. **Score the walk on the 0 to 10 scale;** 0 if it utterly discourages walking, cycling, and transit use, 10 if it is very encouraging. Instruct participants to be scoring on every step of the walk, and stop to discuss at points along the walk.

During discussion stops. Instruct participants to think of their scores since the start of the walk (or since the last ‘scoring’ stop), and then pass your hand over the group having them shout out their scores for all to hear as you pass them. First ask why they did not all give perfect 10’s, having them list challenges one at a time. Then ask why they did not give all 0’s, listing positives one at a time. Do not allow this to turn into a discussion of blame, just a summary of what you experienced and how it can be made better. Give all a chance to comment, and don’t let “professionals” dominate the conversation!

Typical questions about facilitating a walk audit . . .

What if the weather is challenging—rainy, snow on the ground, etc?

I encourage participants to dress and mentally prepare for any typical conditions for that time of year. For example, rain and even snow is common in much of the country, and people still have to get to work, kids to school, etc. So why not get out and see what they are up against--un-cleared sidewalks? Snow piled in crosswalks? Bike parking that is out in the open, uncovered, and unprotected? Transit stops without shelters? These are real-world conditions we should be forced to confront. Obviously horrific weather (frost-biting cold, dangerous lightning) would keep us inside, but that's all. Just in case I often prepare a "virtual" walk audit, going out ahead of time and taking photos of our planned route which we can show and discuss as we would a real-live walk.

What if our meeting or event is occurring in an area that is very unappealing or unfriendly to walking?

I am very hesitant to use this as a reason not to go for a walk audit. No matter how unsavory, someone actually works or lives in the location where you'll be meeting, and no doubt they should still be able to get 30 or more minutes of physical activity a day, and to have access to healthy food choices. If there is no place reasonable to walk and no healthy food available within walking distance, then we're seeing a very real world example of the environment that many US residents face every day. Thus, if the meeting setting is not very conducive to walking, all the more reason to venture out and ask the question: How do we stop building stuff like this, and make places that are likely to be more supportive of routine physical activity and healthier lifestyles? How would we improve this for the people who live or work here every day?

Videos on leading walk audits:

How to Lead a Walk Audit w/ Mark Fenton – Prevention Speaks; 4:00 minutes

<http://preventionspeaks.org/stories/view/walkable-neighborhoods>

Walk Audit with interview in Oak Park, IL; 8:00 minutes

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRsBPbXoZew>

Walk Audit in Dyersburg, TN, glimpse of a workshop in a small community; <4:00 mins.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gczf26eGo9Y>

Select resources.

Active Living by Design program; www.activelivingbydesign.org,
www.activelivingresearch.org. *Model programs & extensive on-line bibliography.*

AmericaWalks; www.americawalks.org

The nation's leading pedestrian advocacy and education organization.

Better Block initiative: www.betterblock.org. *Detailed instructions on tactical urbanism – low cost, short term road and lot redesigns for walk- & bikeability.*

Complete Streets initiative; www.completestreets.org. *National campaign to have all roads accommodate pedestrians, bicyclists, & transit as well as cars.*

Environmental Protection Agency smart growth initiative, Washington, DC;
www.epa.gov/smartgrowth. *Excellent summaries of implementation principles, and the economic benefits of healthy design to developers and communities.*

League of American Bicyclists, Washington, DC; www.bikeleague.org.

National advocacy group advancing the Bike Friendly Communities program.

Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center, Chapel Hill, NC.; www.pedbikeinfo.org. *A comprehensive resource and technical support site for communities; walk- & bike-ability checklists, facility design guides, and image library.*

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Washington, DC.; www.railtrails.org. *Great help for trails advocates, including research supporting trails' benefits.*

Safe Routes to School programs; www.saferoutesinfo.org; saferoutespartnership.org.
Information on organizing events & national registry, and launching programs.

The Walkable & Livable Communities Institute, www.walklive.org. *Education and technical assistance focused on “building leaders and professionals to rebuild the world's communities.”*