

Albert Lea Walkability Study Executive Summary

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This report summarizes a two-day event in early February including a series of interviews, a 2 hour walking audit, a walkability training session and small groups coming up with specific recommendations. The report focuses primarily on the physical environment of Albert Lea and provides ideas about how to adjust transportation elements and land uses to improve recreation, open space, commerce, parking, retail sales, and the town's overall connectivity and health. In fact, the report helps explain how combining land-use planning and transportation as a single community-building tool can help communities thrive and will be the mark of successful, sustainable communities in the future.



The walkability audit validated many things Albert Lea's leaders already know. The town has an abundance of "places" and a historic form that make the community a good place to live and invest. The presence of a well located, quality downtown, with good streets, roads, a waterfront, trails and great neighborhoods make for a good start for the future. The newly available Blazing Star Landing site will help complete and enrich the community. With only a modest number of added investments, it is possible to bring the town and region back to a more sound and solid economic, social, physical and psychological life.

Albert Lea has the opportunity to make a number of easy, short-term, affordable changes to improve its active transportation walkability, alternative transportation and livability. For instance, today, bicycle parking in the downtown lends little support to bicyclists. Seniors have too few places to sit. The absence of strong, hearty trees on Broadway allows poorly maintained buildings to cast a stark "no one home" image. Principal roadways lack bike lanes or other friendly features.

A number of other opportunities can be applied with little funding. Albert Lea should provide a number of tools leading to reduced speeds on major streets. An improved

entry to the town center and more emphasis on infill opportunities near the waterfront -- and stitching the two together visually -- would help declare the place.

Top Recommendations (Short Term)

1. Identify sidewalk gaps and prioritize their construction. Sidewalks are needed to support children walking to school, in and around all senior centers, and as approaches to all retail centers.
2. Identify and complete "missing teeth" in the trails system. Some short sections of trails can be built by volunteers, with staff design and oversight.
3. Identify locations for bike lanes and restripe these roadways. On most streets motorists only require two ten foot lanes, with an occasional third lane near key intersections. It is recommended that edge lines for bike lanes be 10-12" wide (double stripe).
4. Evaluate (audit) all crosswalks in town. Repaint and increase the visibility of crosswalks. Start this process in the downtown and near schools. Poorly marked crossings may be part of the problem identified by police that "yielding" behavior by motorists is poor.
5. Place a model median crossing, evaluate it, and then place many more. A good first crossing location is near the senior towers enroute to the new senior center. Individual prices will vary, but a range of \$10-15,000 is normal.
6. Place "Yield Paddles" in the center of other streets (like at the courthouse) where pedestrian crossings are high (or should be). Plan on replacing these paddles every other month, and taking them out in snow plowing seasons. Conduct a "before and after" yielding behavior study to document changes in courtesy.
7. Apply for a Safe Routes to School Grant from the state (\$30,000 minimum suggested). The grant should be to conduct the needed assessment and get one school program underway by summer.

Additional low-cost steps that can be taken short term include:

- Major streets with moderate to high volumes of traffic should be transformed into "Complete Streets." Bike lanes, bike trails, sidewalks, streetscaping, curb extensions, mid-block crossings and other tools are applied.
- Traffic calming and traffic management techniques should be used. On-street parking can be striped; curb extensions, tree wells and medians can be added. Such improvements not only bring down speeds, they improve the town center and connecting streets by reducing noise and perceived danger. Trails and new development near water can become integral partners.
- Most principal streets (including Bridge Avenue) should have lanes narrower than today, especially when combined with bike lanes. Bike lanes add a buffer to parking and sidewalks.

Featured highlights from our full report include the additional recommendations to address future city designs for maximizing active transportation, social engagement

and other community building steps. For example: *Blazing Star Landing*. Investment with a Traditional Neighborhood Design (TND) in this centrally located waterfront site is a top way to focus growth that will appeal to many new businesses. Connect Blazing Star Landing with Downtown. Make this connection strong, compelling and lasting.