

Keep Up the Momentum!

Sustaining Safe Routes to Parks Efforts

While it may seem illogical to start thinking about how to keep work going when you have just begun, it can be an effective strategy to sustain your Safe Routes to Parks efforts. Thinking about long-term plans when you first begin a project is an important way to ensure that your processes are organized and create positive community change. To continue work effectively after funding or a defined project period ends, it is important to anticipate what actions you will need to take to keep the work going. This fact sheet explains why planning for sustainability should happen early on in Safe Routes to Parks efforts, details strategies to support sustainability planning, and offers examples of organizations sustaining their Safe Routes to Parks efforts.

Positive community change takes time

Anyone who has worked to improve park access, safe opportunities for active travel, or any form of community improvement knows that this type of change takes time. It requires an abundance of determination, ongoing interest and enthusiasm, and funding to support your efforts. The high-impact, lasting change that advocates seek to make often takes more time than afforded by grant funding, and sometimes fellow advocates and community members lose interest at the slow pace of change. By anticipating these challenges, and “beginning with the end in mind,” you can take steps from early on in the process to help sustain your work after funding ends.

What Does “Sustainability” Mean?

Depending upon your industry, the word “sustainability” likely conjures one of two meanings: environmental stewardship (“going green”) or funding. For the purposes of this fact sheet, “sustainability” refers to the continuation of work or efforts, especially after dedicated funding or attention to these efforts ends.



What is Safe Routes to Parks?

Safe Routes to Parks aims to make parks more accessible for people walking, bicycling, and taking public transportation. This occurs by creating routes that are safe from traffic and personal danger for people of all ages and abilities, and ensuring that well-maintained and well-programmed parks are conveniently located within a 10-minute walk (approximately one half mile) from where people live. Safe Routes to Parks provides advocates with the tools to champion safe and equitable access during consideration of park siting, community engagement, allocation of funds, planning, and implementation of traffic and public safety initiatives, as well as park improvements. Over the long term, with increased safety and accessibility, Safe Routes to Parks seeks to increase park usage and improve health and wellbeing for people of all ages, races, abilities, and income levels. To learn more, visit Safe Routes to Parks.

How do organizations sustain Safe Routes to Parks efforts?

Thinking about long-term sustainability early on in your efforts means thinking about how each stage of the Safe Routes to Parks action framework can be used to not only achieve its individual goal, but also be used to keep momentum up so that the action plan gets implemented and people's access to and use of parks continues to increase. At the core of sustaining grant-funded efforts is giving thoughtful consideration to what you can accomplish with available funding in the short-term that sets you up for ongoing efforts. In some cases, this may involve determining how action steps can tie into existing efforts. For example, rather than developing an entirely new coalition of partners to work toward Safe Routes to Parks, an organization can work through existing groups of partners and invite additional stakeholders and partners specific to this work. Another effective strategy is to embed safe, equitable park access strategies and goals within a jurisdiction's policies and plans. Policies can help to create more ambitious, transformative change in a community that lives on after a particular project has ended. Key opportunities for sustaining Safe Routes to Parks efforts include pursuing future funding, using early wins to advocate for future investments, using data to tell stories of progress, engaging community members in an ongoing manner, and identifying aligned efforts.

Funding

No discussion of project sustainability is complete without a discussion of funding! A difficult reality of grant-funded work is that funding comes and goes. To the extent possible, it is beneficial to identify new funding opportunities early on in the process. One way to do that is to develop a Safe Routes to Parks action plan that you can use as a jumping off point for pursuing future funding opportunities. A few examples of sources of funding to implement Safe Routes to Parks improvements include:

- Local government budgets: Influence local budget decisions focused on maintenance of streets, sidewalks, lighting, and personal safety.
- Public health funding, including local nonprofit hospital and health systems' community benefit: Pursue funds that support increasing physical activity by walking and cycling to local parks and recreation within parks.
- State and federal transportation funding: Larger state or federal transportation funds may be needed when your goal is to install new infrastructure to support walking and bicycling to parks.
- Private fundraising, including crowdfunding: while local governments should invest in improving safe access to parks, sometimes it is helpful to show that community members are stakeholders in the process. Additionally, some improvements are relatively low-cost and the effort needed to pursue government or philanthropic funds may exceed the cost of the project. Crowdfunding can help small projects get off the ground quickly and with community support.
- Philanthropic grants: Explore local philanthropies in your community and show how investing in improving park access can help improve health and social equity where you live.

Use early wins to advocate for future investment

As you work to improve park access, it can be beneficial to host early implementation activities that make it easier and safer for people to walk and wheel to local parks. These early implementation activities serve a number of purposes: keeping community partners engaged, creating an opportunity to collect data to support advocacy efforts, showing community partners and decisionmakers what is possible, and many more. Most importantly, these early wins generate momentum for continued interest and investment in Safe Routes to Parks.

In Birmingham, Alabama, a pop-up bike lane installed by Zyp Bikeshare, a 2018 Safe Routes to Parks grantee, was embraced by neighbors who had voiced safety concerns over bicycling in the street with cars. Zyp shared the positive survey results from people riding bikes, drivers, and neighbors with the Birmingham Department of Transportation, and the department has made plans to permanently stripe a bike lane along the route that connects Smithfield Library to Memorial Park.



Use data to tell stories of progress

Telling your story effectively can help secure funding and support. In the Assessment stage of the Safe Routes to Parks framework, communities collect data to determine which park to focus on, what barriers to safe access are, and to engage community residents in the process. As Safe Routes to Parks improvements progress, these baseline data collected during the Assessment phase are compared to data collected as part of the Evaluation stage to understand the impact made to date. These same data, and the stories they tell, can also be used to help sustain Safe Routes to Parks work! Use these data to tell a compelling story about the progress your community is making. As a resource-strapped organization, it can be challenging to find time to tell the impact stories, but they are a powerful tool for attracting new or ongoing funding and support for your project. Potential story topics include increases in the number of people using parks because of your efforts, improvements in public perception of safety, and before and after photos and stories.

Youngstown, Ohio Builds Sustainable Support for Its Safe Routes to Parks Efforts

The Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation (YNDC) took several steps to improve park access at Homestead Park in Youngstown, Ohio. Based on community feedback, YNDC removed an unmaintained tennis court that attracted dumping and crime and planted grass in its place. They built a split rail fence to prevent cars from driving on this new green space and installed an LED spotlight to illuminate the area to help people feel safer walking around and using the park after dark. These early wins have improved community residents' and decisionmakers' awareness of the benefits of Safe Routes to Parks. As a 2018 Safe Routes to Parks Activating Communities program grantee, YNDC also created an action plan that provided clear steps to address safe and equitable access to Homestead, Glenwood, and four other City of Youngstown parks for people walking, bicycling, and rolling. This plan included a recommendation to seek additional funding sources to address community-identified priorities. YNDC presented their plan to the councilmember whose ward covers the park, and showed how they were building momentum to improve use of Homestead Park. Councilwoman Lauren McNally, whose district covers Glenwood Park, dedicated \$10,000 to repair broken sidewalks leading to the park and these repairs are now underway. This is a great first step towards building sustainable support for Safe Routes to Parks!



Photo credit: Cultiva La Salud



CAN DO Houston Lifts up Community Voices to Show the Need for Permanent Crosswalk Artwork

In Houston, Texas, the nonprofit CAN DO Houston used data to understand the barriers to improving access to local parks. CAN DO Houston was a 2018 grantee of the Safe Routes to Parks Activating Communities program working to advance healthy living through community-driven solutions. Early on, CAN DO Houston worked with residents to conduct Safe Routes to Parks walk audits and complete a park safety survey to help them assess safety, quality, features, and access to local parks of interest. Residents identified safety concerns for three crosswalks near Castillo Park and Marshall Middle Academy of Fine Arts. CAN DO Houston organized a meeting with residents, school staff, the City of Houston Public Works and Planning and Development departments, the Houston Health Department, a councilmember's office, and a local foundation. The meeting focused on discuss community members' safety concerns in and around parks and schools and develop collaborative efforts to address them. As a result, residents, advocates, students, and community organizations engaged in a temporary enhancement of the three crosswalks, designing and implementing detailed eye-catching improvements. There was tremendous public support for the artistic crosswalks. Because the Department of Public Works was involved early on in conversations, they were supportive of the idea and the process. Although the grant ended, the Public Works Department agreed to make the changes permanent, committing to installing permanent crosswalks with community-selected artwork.





Photo credit: Health by Design

Show people they matter from the beginning, not just when you need them

As you recruit community members and organizations to improve park access, it is worth noting that these individuals and organizations are some of the best assets for sustaining Safe Routes to Parks efforts. As such, it is beneficial to invest time in developing relationships with people and organizations with long-term connections to the area, as they may become champions who keep the work going after funding ends. The recommendations for nurturing these relationships are grounded in principles of mutual respect.

- Relationships are a two-way street. They will wither if one partner is constantly asking for help without giving it in return. One way to show that you respect your partners is by showing up for their events the same way you ask them to attend and participate in Safe Routes to Parks activities.
- Engage early and often. People like to feel like their input and participation yields results. Bring community partners into your earliest conversations about improving park access; it can help establish buy-in to the process that will help carry the initiative forward.
- Give and take. While many Safe Routes to Parks activities request input and ideas from community partners, find opportunities to give back to participants. Dedicate time during meetings and activities to provide opportunities to share skills and build the capacity of community members to advocate for positive community change. Some examples include creating opportunities to refine public speaking skills through presentations to the group or testifying at city council meetings, teaching basic data analysis skills as part of the Assess and Evaluate stages of the Safe Routes to Parks framework, and developing painting and construction skills as part of tactical urbanism pop-up events.

Cultiva La Salud Continually Engages Merced County Residents to Create Sustainable Change

Cultiva La Salud is a non-profit organization based in Merced County, California and a 2018 grantee of the Safe Routes to Parks Activating Communities program. This non-profit has built relationships and trust with Merced County residents over the last twelve years through collaborative work to influence decisionmakers to pass policy and environmental changes that support wellbeing for all. Cultiva La Salud's work is grounded in the conviction that community ownership is key to the ongoing success of all community efforts. Therefore, when Cultiva La Salud received funding to improve safe and equitable access to parks, they already had strong relationships with these residents and community partners to help them lead the work. Residents participated in every stage of the Safe Routes to Parks framework through involvement in community meetings, walk audits, creating a Born Learning Trail connecting a park and local elementary school, and prioritizing improvement projects through a participatory budgeting process. Cultiva La Salud's work continues because it is a truly community-driven process.



Identify aligned efforts and join forces

It is well established that where people live significantly affects health outcomes. All across the country, coalitions of advocates and stakeholders have organized to improve health and well-being in their communities. Some of these are formal coalitions funded through public health or planning grants, others are convened by local hospitals or health systems, and some are informal gatherings of interested individuals and organizations. Identify whether such groups exist in your community, and work together to find connections between your work. Aligning efforts with these existing coalitions provides an opportunity to generate ongoing collaboration and support continued work on Safe Routes to Parks.

Conclusion

Improving safe, equitable park access takes significant time, partnership, and effort. By beginning with the end in mind and considering what is needed to sustain your work, you increase the likelihood of keeping park access efforts moving forward.



Photo credit: Cultiva La Salud