



Building Resilient Inclusive Communities Grant

Evaluating Tactical Urbanism Efforts in PA

March 2024

In 2021, the Pennsylvania (PA) Department of Health (the Department) received the National Association of Chronic Disease Directors' Building Resilient Inclusive Communities (BRIC) grant, which aims to promote nutrition security, physical activity and social connectedness among communities disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes communities of color, older adults, and low-income communities. Special attention is given to centering equity, including cultural relevance and historical discrimination.

During the first year of BRIC funding, the department aimed to uncover common barriers and challenges that prevent communities in priority counties from applying for WalkWorks mini-grants. WalkWorks is a program that supports communities in developing active transportation plans by providing funding and technical assistance directly to communities. These plans are meant to increase opportunities for physical activity by facilitating active, safe, and convenient transportation to everyday destinations for people of all abilities. Some plans focus on street planning and design to optimize safety and access (Complete Streets Policy), and some plans focus on eliminating traffic fatalities and injuries (Vision Zero Policy). Other plans focus on walking, wheeling and public transportation (Active Transportation Plans). The department also aimed to get feedback on the application process itself, including challenges associated with the application process that could potentially hinder participation from communities in priority counties.

In the second year of BRIC, the department sought to understand less formalized, community-lead efforts to increase road safety and active transportation by examining tactical urbanism and demonstration projects across PA. Tactical Urbanism (TU) is "an umbrella term used to describe a collection of low-cost, temporary changes to the built environment, usually in cities, intended to improve local neighborhoods and city gathering places."¹ The key to TU is that projects are "short-term and community-led."² Other commonly used names for TU projects are demonstration projects DIY (Do-It-Yourself) urbanism and pop-ups quick builds. Tactical urbanism allows communities to temporarily test out a change to the physical design of the neighborhood before making a permanent or long-term structural change. These efforts can help garner interest and support for the change and raise awareness about transportation/complete street/multimodal street design issues and needs.

Starting in late 2021 the department sought out communities that were interested in experimenting with TU as a way to pilot street safety or public space improvements. Initial efforts were focused on trying to implement TU in a priority county in a rural area. As there were many challenges associated with such an effort and no clear process established in Pennsylvania to enable pop-up projects, the search expanded to any communities willing and able to expend the considerable energy needed to realize a project. Eventually, in mid- to late-2023, three communities enacted different TU projects.

Methods & Participants

Research & Evaluation Group (R&E Group) developed an interview guide with input from the department and the PA Downtown Center. The interview guide included questions about the demographics and needs of participants' communities, how project activities were decided, challenges and facilitators to carrying out the projects and plans to continue or sustain TU efforts.

Once the communities' interest and willingness to participate in the interviews were confirmed, the PA Downtown Center shared the contacts' information with R&E Group, who scheduled and conducted the interviews. Two representatives from Oxford Borough in Chester County, one representative from the city of Hazleton and one representative from the City of Scranton were interviewed. Interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams. Audio

¹State of Maine Department of Transportation. (2021, February 11). MaineDOT procedures for implementing demonstration projects and non-project related roadway changes. [Microsoft Word - Procedure for Implementing Demonstration Project and Non-project Related Roadway Changes.docx \(maine.gov\)](#)

²Vermont Agency of Transportation. (2022, October). Guidance document: demonstration projects in state highway right of way. <https://vtrans.vermont.gov/sites/aot/files/planning/documents/planning/Demonstration%20Project%20Guidance%202022.pdf>

was recorded with verbal consent of participants. These and automatically generated transcripts of the interviews were used for qualitative coding. Financial incentives were not provided for participation. All participants were alerted that responses given in the interviews could likely identify them, due to the small sample size, and that the results may be shared with other state agencies such as PennDOT. All participants had the option to skip any questions in the interview.

Key Findings

Theme 1: Safety is a primary motivation to do tactical urbanism or demonstration projects. Data from these projects can be used to make more long-term or permanent changes to improve safety for non-drivers.

All four representatives mentioned that a primary reason they pursued a tactical urbanism project was because of safety concerns for pedestrians in their community, as opposed to other potential benefits like health and economics. The downtown areas of Hazleton, Oxford, and Scranton all have pedestrian infrastructure along many of their streets, but the road infrastructure prioritizes drivers and makes some of the roads and crosswalks unsafe for pedestrians and bicyclists. Additionally, while public transit does exist in these communities, the service is limited and often does not reach beyond the downtown area. This lack of public transportation and extensive pedestrian infrastructure make it difficult for people without a car to get around safely. TU is a tool to reimagine spaces with other modes of transportation in mind.

“This neighborhood city of Scranton is heavily car reliant.... transportation overall is designed for people in their own vehicles.... that said I believe there's right around 15% of households in the in the city of Scranton that don't own a vehicle. So for them...it's a challenge getting around you know we have in our public transit system [is] limited.... we don't have any trains or subways things like that. We do have a public bus system but that is generally pretty limited.... most would consider it you know inconvenient, unreliable in a lot of cases.” – Scranton representative

“Well, there there's a lack of transportation facility to be the industrial park. So people live here in Hazleton, but they usually have to commute and carpool to be able to go to their jobs....there's not public transportation available other than locally like taking you to like the Main Street, and the mall....there are roads are not that safe when it comes to using... bike lanes or transportations that could facilitate like for people that... want alternative forms of transportation or for younger kids that want... to get to the playground....they have been revitalizing a lot of our playgrounds, but then there's no... safe access to them.” – Hazleton representative

Both the Scranton and Hazleton representatives directly addressed the inadequacy of the local public transit systems to allow non-drivers to get from place to place. The Hazleton representative also brought up the need for bike lanes and trails (in addition to public transit) that would allow non-drivers to get from residential areas to the downtown and the industrial parks that employ a large number of the city's residents. Both representatives' quotes above clearly state that their cities are not safely walkable or bikeable for their residents to get from place to place.

To address the inadequate pedestrian safety and infrastructure of the community, the four representatives decided to pursue tactical urbanism projects to help stakeholders and community members reimagine what pedestrian-friendly public spaces could look like. Road safety data was collected in these three communities that informed the locations of

the tactical urbanism projects. For some of the representatives, the more temporary tactical urbanism projects served as pilot projects or case studies to help them secure future funding for more permanent interventions as well.

“What else I liked about this is that we could go through this project, make this strategic investment, small investment, raise awareness, and then use this as a case study to help us fund more expensive infrastructure improvements in the future. Like, I look forward to eventually submitting a grant application and working with PennDOT on how we can make permanent infrastructure improvements to address a similar problem in another place.” – Oxford representative 1

“In fact, because of that at our next council meeting, you know the folks at DVRPC [Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission] put together a post report because they took traffic counts and speed counts, and the data does show that the project did have slowed down the traffic there like it has yielded a positive results and the delineators have stayed up.” – Oxford representative 1

After the tactical urbanism project was completed, the Borough of Oxford collected road safety data at the location of their project. Since they had pre-project road data for this location as well, they were able to demonstrate that the tactical urbanism intervention resulted in lowering the average speed of cars in that location. This example highlights the importance of tactical urbanism projects as test projects and data sources that can be used to inform more permanent changes to the streets.

→ **Recommendation 1: When promoting tactical urbanism, highlight pedestrian and cyclist safety as benefits.**

→ **Recommendation 2: Encourage the use of WalkWorks funds to support public transit infrastructure.**

→ **Recommendation 3: Collect and share data on traffic and safety issues in the location of interest to make the case for the need for TU, garner support for the project, and advocate for change.**

Theme 2: State-owned roads pose significant threats to safety in small municipalities, but there are many administrative barriers that prevent municipalities addressing these threats.

Receiving approval to perform a tactical urbanism project on the city’s state-owned roads was a barrier for each of the communities that were interviewed. All four representatives discussed having to either do the project in a less-preferred location or having to pivot the entire project to another strategy because the initial project was not approved by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT). The representatives from Oxford Borough discussed how the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC) conducted a safety study of the borough’s streets to assess which had the highest numbers of speeding violations and other unsafe driving practices. The study determined that the most hazardous roads were the state-owned roads that led through the downtown area. However, they were not able to get approval from PennDOT, so they had to perform their tactical urbanism project on a borough-owned road, which still resulted in a successful project but was not the area of the city in greatest need of the intervention.

“One of the limitations that was hard to work around for us was that PennDOT’s policy is to not allow these types of projects on their road...where we wanted to have the project that would have been most ideal and most visible, we couldn’t because it was a PennDOT road... we had to try to find another area that we felt had visibility and was still a safety concern that could maybe address a similar issue, but was completely within the borough’s control and we were able to identify an area like that.” -Oxford representative 1

The representative from Hazleton shared that they could not get in touch with PennDOT at all to discuss the permitting process.

"...I tried several times to hold meetings with people from PennDOT but they just didn't respond. It was like you need to get PennDOT's approval if you want to do anything permanent on the streets or sidewalk but we could not get a response." – Hazleton representative

While Oxford was able to get around the permitting issue for state roads, the representative from Scranton shared that the city council did not want to do these demonstrations even on the locally owned roads because they did not want to go against any guidance from PennDOT.

"... we have control over the street, but...we want to make sure like you know this would still fly for PennDOT and meet their specifications even though technically it wouldn't have to.... I think [PennDOT has] kind of like this oversized... power over even...local roads...."- Scranton representative

This shows that the lack of state-level guidance for performing tactical urbanism projects is prohibiting communities from trying to do this work on their locally owned roads. Even when presented with research and evidence that these types of projects are effective and do not compromise driver safety, PennDOT refused to deviate from their established guidelines.

"...we would often point to like research has been done elsewhere.... and [PennDOT is] still going to say '... white straight crosswalk is the best' and...'asphalt art going to be distracting to drivers'... So it's ...frustrating for us being able to point to these other things and saying, '...we have concrete examples and we have data that shows like what you're telling us isn't the case', but...it doesn't seem to make a difference."- Scranton representative

Even when these projects are not being implemented on state-owned roads, guidance and support from PennDOT are critical to successful tactical urbanism projects.

→ **Recommendation 4: Engage in regular dialogue with PennDOT and local planning commissions to identify places in which state-owned roads present a safety threat to locally owned roads and determine how these hazards can be addressed.**

→ **Recommendation 5: Empower communities to continue tactical urbanism projects to the extent possible or permissible on locally owned roads, even if PennDOT does not buy into such activities.**

Theme 3: Logistical and resource-related factors determined the types of projects that communities were able to do.

Planning and completing a tactical urbanism or demonstration project requires coordination from a wide variety of stakeholders, each with unique expertise and specialized skillsets. Including experts in city planning, construction, engineering, marketing, and visual arts can truly help enable projects to succeed and run efficiently. However, engaging these specialized professionals can take time and be prohibitively expensive. Some communities were unable to accomplish their vision due to a lack of resources and specialized professional knowledge.

"...we're not traffic engineers...we don't know how to design this stuff. So ... the barrier there is cost in a lot of cases...in order to do...a traffic study or ... get engineered drawings...that's not an insignificant expense.... that was that was certainly a barrier like

*we were just looking for people...to do it for us...and they weren't able to do that.”-
Scranton representative*

However, even when all the needed experts were engaged, rules and regulations about what activities were permissible remained unclear. Some communities felt that answers to questions about policy changed depending on who was asked.

“... being clear about...what's permissible and...what the processes are. And I think that's been most frustrating part of this is that...it's not as if we could look at something and say like, 'yes, we can do this or no, we can't.' It's all like in this gray area ... we're trying to do what's right. But it's not clear... what the processes are that we should be following what we need to do.... It's kind of like it's subjective. It depends on who you talk to, who you're working with.”- Scranton representative

One community was able to accomplish a fairly complex design for their tactical urbanism project because they were working with the local arts alliance where they had access to a graphic designer who could take care of the design and implementation logistics.

“I would recommend having somebody with [graphic design] skills or similar skills where they do... a one-to-one scale mock up...having somebody who is a technical artist, a mural artist is a really solid choice because they're doing that type of thing. [Or a]professional painter... not just the paint company, but...someone who paints houses because they're going to know you have how much square foot do you...do you have? One of the one of the biggest issues we ran into was what type of tools to use [to paint the mural].... So I had to do a lot of my own digging to find what would work.”- Oxford representative 2

→ **Recommendation 6: State and local officials should collaborate to develop guidance on what activities are and are not currently permitted, and support efforts to conduct the allowable activities.**

Theme 4: Community and partnership engagement is critical to the success and impact of tactical urbanism and demonstration projects.

Partnerships with other organizations in the community that provided specialized expertise facilitated the successful implementation of tactical urbanism and demonstration projects. All communities reported establishing partnerships with local nonprofits such as arts organizations, government entities such as public works, police departments, and regional planning commissions to execute their projects. Others engaged local chapters of national organizations that were dedicated to this work. Such partnerships may mitigate the challenges mentioned above.

“...having [Safe Routes] involved made a world of difference just because...they were the subject matter experts here and...they understood active transportation and pedestrian safety and... some of the tools that were out there and available.... it's a national organization. But they were familiar enough with...how state Departments of Transportation operate to kind of like steer us in the right direction. Tell us... who we should be trying to get ahold of and what processes, you know, we might need to go through.” -Scranton representative

Engaging local partners can also help garner support and buy-in for the project from local leaders and community members and raise awareness about the project. Many of the organizations engaged in these tactical urbanism projects were local art alliances, civic associations, and schools, all of which have vast connections to the community as a whole. The spirit of tactical urbanism is community-driven projects, so community partnerships and community engagement were critical to a projects' success.

“The community itself [is] very tight knit. So all the projects that happen throughout the town usually tie into some other organization's goals.... I think that's what led this project to be viable...without having that type of connection, I...think people would be like, ‘OK, let's not do, let's not spend money to paint the road for tactical urbanism’ because they don't think of it in those terms. They think of it as just art on the road.” - Oxford representative 2

“I approached parks and recreation since we were going to use their park then they suggested we talk to zoning for the sidewalk projects. Then I just worked directly mostly with the Art League.... Then the Mexican Committee as a strong partner for the Cinco de Mayo event.... Immanuel Christian school did a sidewalk survey on walkability because they have kids walking in the downtown. So we took a walk together with some of their students and we analyzed the needs of the sidewalk...” - Hazleton representative

The Hazleton tactical urbanism project involved a local high school where students were involved with analyzing sidewalk conditions and planning the tactical urbanism event. Even though Hazleton's tactical urbanism project did not end up focusing on the sidewalks, the engagement of the school and students has created community interest and investment in future tactical urbanism projects that will address the sidewalks.

→ **Recommendation 7: Engage local businesses, community members, artists, and government offices early in the project planning process.**

→ **Recommendation 8: Identify national, regional, and state-level organizations that specialize in tactical urbanism, transportation safety, and other specialized topics relevant to the project. Even if these organizations cannot offer funding or services, planning resources and technical assistance may be available.**

Theme 5: Tactical urbanism and demonstration projects have a positive impact in the short-term, while also increasing public support for future projects.

Participants reported overwhelmingly positive reception to tactical urbanism projects from community members and residents. Some of the TU projects discussed long-standing safety concerns of the community, and people expressed appreciation that these issues were being addressed in some way. According to the four representatives, the tactical urbanism projects created significant interest in making permanent changes to improve safety and increase walkability. With the support of their communities, all four representatives stated that they would like to continue to do tactical urbanism projects in their downtowns and would also like to pursue permanent changes to make their roads safer.

“...the number of people that...just came up to us... and just said...how much they appreciated the improvements, how much safer they felt... how they wanted to see these things permanent... how they've thought for a long time...the street was unsafe. Like we're just surprised by the number of people that, you know, were really kind of engaged in it... and were pretty passionate about it and... wanted us to do similar projects and continue...kind of pursuing some of these permanent safety improvements.”- Scranton representative

This illustrates how residents and community members are aware of the current safety issues, and therefore likely have thoughts on what the priorities of TU or demonstration projects should be. However, while all the projects were very well-received by the public, the community reps shared that if given more time, they would have liked to incorporate community input into the planning and implementation phases of the project.

“I think if we would have had more time, it would have been good to engage the public more in the design and that would have given us more of an opportunity to use it as a tool to raise awareness about pedestrian safety and walkability and active transportation. We needed to do it within a certain time frame to be in coordination with the active transportation plan and to hit certain weather, you know, So I think if we had a little bit more time, we would have, we could have engaged the public more.” Oxford representative 1

Thinking about future projects, municipalities should leave time for more community engagement during the planning and implementation process, to have these voices represented and to learn more about the community’s needs.

→ **Recommendation 9: Establish a community advisory board to ensure that diverse community voices are included in all steps of the project.**

→ **Recommendation 10: Collect data to learn about residents’ experiences and priorities, in addition to those of local businesses and government agencies.**

Conclusion

This series of interviews was conducted to learn more about the community-led tactical urbanism and demonstration projects that are occurring in Pennsylvania. The results of the interviews show that there is a desire for and motivation to create tactical urbanism projects in Pennsylvania communities. Safety improvements were the main motivation for communities to undertake tactical urbanism projects, and interviewees shared that after the projects were completed, community members showed an interest in continuing pedestrian safety efforts and implementing more permanent interventions for their communities.

Interviewees concluded that while their projects were successful, they faced substantial administrative challenges to secure the approval that was required to complete their projects. All interviewees shared that they were confused by the process to obtain permission for doing TU projects, and that they were unable to acquire guidance from PennDOT, from whom the approval was required. Because of these administrative challenges, all interviewees shared that they had to change the original idea or location of their tactical urbanism project, which lessened the overall impact of the project. Guidance and support from PennDOT are critical to supporting communities’ future tactical urbanism efforts in Pennsylvania.

Summary of Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1:** When promoting tactical urbanism, highlight pedestrian and cyclist safety as benefits.
- **Recommendation 2:** Encourage the use of WalkWorks funds to support public transit infrastructure.
- **Recommendation 3:** Collect and share data on traffic and safety issues in the location of interest to make the case for the need for TU, garner support for the project, and advocate for change.
- **Recommendation 4:** Engage in regular dialogue with PennDOT and local planning commissions to identify places in which state-owned roads present a safety threat to locally owned roads and determine how these hazards can be addressed.
- **Recommendation 5:** Empower communities to continue tactical urbanism projects to the extent possible or permissible on locally owned roads, even if PennDOT does not buy into such activities.
- **Recommendation 6:** State and local officials should collaborate to develop guidance on what activities are and are not currently permitted, and support efforts to conduct the allowable activities.
- **Recommendation 7:** Engage local businesses, community members, artists, and government offices early in the project planning process.
- **Recommendation 8:** Identify national, regional, and state-level organizations that specialize in tactical urbanism, transportation safety, and other specialized topics relevant to the project. Even if these organizations cannot offer funding or services, planning resources and technical assistance may be available.
- **Recommendation 9:** Establish a community advisory board to ensure that diverse community voices are included in all steps of the project.
- **Recommendation 10:** Collect data to learn about residents' experiences and priorities, in addition to those of local businesses and government agencies.