

## **Report on Road Safety Demonstration Projects – a.k.a. Tactical Urbanism – in Pennsylvania**

### *Pennsylvania Needs This Powerful Tool to Improve Safety and Health*

Have you ever struggled to cross a street safely or wondered at the impossibility of allowing a child to walk to a neighborhood park and thought to yourself, “they ought to do something to make this street safer”?

That is the root of the movement behind tactical urbanism: a desire to see changes in the physical environment to improve the community – in this case, to make the street safer and the community more walkable.

The 2016 Tactical Urbanism Guide by Street Plans defines the strategy as “an approach to neighborhood building that uses short-term, low-cost and scalable interventions and policies to catalyze long term change.” The terminology may vary from place to place, with similar design interventions called demonstration projects, experimental pop-ups, DIY urbanism, or pilot projects, but the concept remains the same – trial-and-error workshopping to make the community better.

Some state Departments of Transportation and national nonprofits put out guidance documents to assist with this process. And now the federal Department of Transportation even provides funding for street reconfiguration demonstration projects as part of the Safe Streets and Roads for All grant program under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

All these resources, both information and financial support, are intended to help people do what they can to make their streets safer for individuals walking and wheeling. Unfortunately, there is currently no clear path for such lighter, quicker, cheaper interventions in the public realm in Pennsylvania. There is an understandable reluctance on the part of those in charge of designing and delivering road infrastructure to deviate from known and established processes and practices for fear that anything done hastily or imprecisely could inadvertently create a road hazard. However, the desire to try something — sometimes anything — different usually arises from a recognition in a community that the existing conditions already create an intolerable hazard. It just happens to be a hazard that people are familiar with, even comfortable with, and accustomed to ignoring – that is, not being able to cross the road safely.

The Pennsylvania Department of Health has a vested interest in improving public health by reducing risk to pedestrians and cyclists on roads and expanding safe opportunities for people to walk and bike to everyday destinations. Safer streets help with both injury prevention and averting chronic health conditions. Walkable and bikeable communities encourage healthy physical activity, which reduces the incidence of heart disease, diabetes, obesity, arthritis, dementia, and even some forms of cancer. The health benefits go even further to include mental health and general wellbeing, as regular physical activity and time outdoors can reduce depression, address social isolation, and improve sleep.

Through the WalkWorks Program, the Department of Health supported three communities in 2023 as they worked to implement some form of tactical urbanism. The following is a summary of the challenges and opportunities West Scranton, Hazleton, and Oxford experienced in the process of realizing their projects.

## SCRANTON

NeighborWorks, a community organization in West Scranton, in Lackawanna County, went through several demonstration project proposals before finding one they were able to actualize. Though they worked with the city and the municipal engineer from the start, their initial idea of enhancing crosswalks with artwork, also called asphalt art, in the vicinity of neighborhood schools proved to be a problem because it would have impacted a state-owned road. When that did not work out, they looked at doing something similar on local roads next to a neighborhood park, with painted curb extensions rather than proposing to change the design of the crosswalks themselves. That plan was also stymied because the city felt other improvements should be made to the intersection before such a high-visibility intervention was installed. In reality, demonstration projects are a good fit for a site that is due to be updated in the near future, as it can allow for different design ideas to be tested. Rebuilding the intersection with the same layout before testing alternatives would make future adjustments far less likely.

Eventually, as part of a grant program offered by the National Safe Routes Partnership, NeighborWorks settled on the idea of enhancing road safety along a high traffic corridor on one of the busiest days of the year for walking – Halloween. Earlier in the day, they literally rolled out the red carpet, or rather, the black and white carpet, creating temporary high visibility crosswalks by painting broad white stripes on black rubber mats, which were deployed along Main Avenue at intersections with local streets. They also set up Yield to Pedestrian signs to remind drivers of the state law that requires drivers to yield to pedestrians in crosswalks at unsignalized intersections. They had hoped to also install temporary curb extensions at one key intersection, but that was not feasible, in part because there was no clear approval process. As it was, PennDOT approved a Special Event Permit application for the Halloween celebration, but also noted that the permit was not required, since the state road was never actually closed to cars.

NeighborWorks displayed flyers and signs explaining the temporary road safety project and asking for feedback. The response to the survey conducted both online and in person was unanimously in favor. People did ask why the crosswalks across Main Avenue did not receive the same treatment, however.

## HAZLETON

In Hazleton, the Downtown Hazleton Alliance for Progress also went through multiple proposals before realizing a successful pop-up public space and temporary street art as part of a celebration of kids and the arts.

The initial proposal was to decorate crosswalks on local streets along the route from a neighborhood school to the community art center. Those streets were under the control of the city, but there was concern about the lack of guidance available from the state Department of Transportation. Examples from outside of the state were not seen as helpful without having a Pennsylvania-specific design guide.

Moving on from the crosswalk idea, the focus shifted to sidewalks. Sidewalk art, especially chalk art, is a familiar way of claiming public space temporarily. However, sidewalks in Pennsylvania, though forming a critical part of a municipality's transportation infrastructure, are under the control of the adjacent property owners. As a result, the city did not feel they could give permission for a third party to organize the school kids to paint the sidewalks.

The discussion then shifted to whether there could be temporary road closures to facilitate painting on the day of the event. Like most municipalities, Hazleton has existing processes to allow for such closures, but there was resistance to closing anything other than the alley directly behind the art center.

At that point, the Downtown Hazleton Alliance decided to work on territory that the organization, rather than the city, controlled. They took an unused lot adjacent to the arts center and envisioned a way of activating it as a public plaza. They made it more accessible from the adjacent buildings and the alley, installed decorative lighting, and brought in planters and furniture, including interactive plywood boxes that can be set up, climbed on, and rearranged by users of the space.

They also took advantage of the one alley that *was* closed off for the day and marshalled students to decorate the pavement with temporary paint, and a storage container in the adjacent municipal parking lot with a permanent painted mural. It was a festive day!

## OXFORD

In Oxford in Chester County, the Borough collaborated with Oxford Main Street and the Oxford Arts Alliance. Together, the local organizations worked with the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC) EXPO Program to develop a tactical urbanism concept, design it, and execute it. EXPO stands for Experimental Pop-ups. The DVRPC provides technical assistance and some financial support to communities in the region looking to “test innovative solutions to transportation problems.”

Oxford was in the process of developing an Active Transportation Plan and identified several problem locations for pedestrian safety. The idea of testing design solutions on a temporary basis came up during planning meetings. Therefore, when the Borough Manager heard about the EXPO program in a regional coordination meeting, she reached out to see if Oxford might be eligible to participate. Working with the EXPO staff, they selected a location and worked through various possibilities for making the road safer for pedestrians.

The site they chose was on a local road where it intersected with a state road. DVRPC staff advised the Borough on what would be feasible and facilitated communication with the PennDOT District. The final design used graphic talent from the Arts Alliance to build on the theme of the school mascot to decorate the roadway. In addition to those arresting visuals, new high-visibility crosswalks were installed as well as some modest curb extensions, marked with both paint and flexible plastic delineators. The curb extensions help to slow traffic turning into the street and make pedestrians more visible to drivers.

Part of the EXPO team’s goal in assisting with pop-up projects is to ensure that the impact is measured. The temporary installation was set up to be in place for as long as the paint lasted, which was expected to go into fall. But when a massive fire destroyed the heart of an adjacent block of the historic downtown the very next month, the focus of the community shifted away from the proudly painted pavement.

Thanks to the DVRPC program, which brought much experience and professional background to bear on the project, the Oxford effort went more smoothly than the West Scranton and Hazleton demonstration projects. Arguably, though, it illustrates how high the bar is raised in Pennsylvania when it comes to delivering these short-lived experiments.

## CONCLUSION

Tactical urbanism can be promoted or led by enthusiastic residents or more formally by community institutions or non-profits, or even by municipalities or planning organizations.

Over the past decade, in communities large and small around the country, pop-up demonstration projects have been shown to be an effective tool to test out design interventions and collect feedback on them. The examples from Pennsylvania highlight their potential as a strategy for increasing road safety, access, and engagement across the Commonwealth. If a process could be established to enact these projects in Pennsylvania, there could be marked safety improvements for all road users, including the most vulnerable, at a much faster pace than business-as-usual can manage.

This is an exciting time in the world of active transportation. It is also a challenging time. There is growing recognition of both the danger people walking, biking, and using wheelchairs encounter while trying to get to everyday destinations, and the value of making those mobility options safer, more accessible, and more inviting. People are realizing how much is lost when communities don't have a full array of transportation options available to them. Ultimately, places where the car is not just a familiar default, but the only viable transportation option, suffer from many disadvantages:

- Increasing danger for people as they walk and wheel to get around,
- Damaging health outcomes from sedentary lifestyles,
- Increasing traffic congestion even with short trips completed by car,
- Increasing air, water, and noise pollution,
- Rising household travel costs for ownership and maintenance of more vehicles, driven further, and
- Rising municipal costs to design, construct, and maintain ever-expanding, space- and resource-inefficient motor vehicle transportation infrastructure.

If communities can instead be made more walkable, bikeable, and accessible, those challenges can be reversed and transformed into numerous benefits:

- Increasing safety for people as they walk and wheel,
- Improving health outcomes from more active lifestyles,
- Reducing traffic congestion with many short trips accomplished without a car,
- Reducing air, water, and noise pollution,
- Lowering household travel costs, and
- Lowering municipal costs to design, construct, and maintain more space- and resource-efficient active transportation infrastructure.

Whether the term tactical urbanism is used or it is referenced as experimental pop-ups or demonstration projects, these can be powerful tools to improve safety and public health.