Report on Road Safety Demonstration Projects in Pennsylvania
A Technical Assistance Resource from WalkWorks

Video link:

https://vimeo.com/974255011

Script:

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 impulse 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.

Unfortunately, there is currently no clear path for such lighter, quicker, cheaper interventions in the public realm in Pennsylvania.

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.

Through the WalkWorks Program, the Department of Health has supported three communities in the last year as they have worked to implement some form of tactical urbanism.

NeighborWorks, a community organization in West Scranton, in Lackawanna County, went through several different demonstration project proposals before finding one they were able to realize. 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, proved to be a problem because it would have impacted a state-owned road.

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 for walking of the year – Halloween. They created temporary high visibility crosswalks by painting broad white stripes on black rubber mats. 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.

NeighborWorks put out 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 unanimous in favor.

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

Sidewalk art, especially chalk art, is certainly 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.

At that point, 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. It's a festive mural and it was a festive day!

In Oxford in Chester County, the Borough collaborated with Oxford Main Street and the Oxford Arts Alliance. Together, those local organizations worked with the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission to develop a tactical urbanism concept, design it, and execute it.

Oxford was in the process of developing an Active Transportation Plan and had identified several problem locations for pedestrian safety. 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.
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.

These examples from Pennsylvania highlight their potential as a strategy for increasing road safety, access, and engagement across the Commonwealth. If we could just establish a process to do these projects here, we could improve safety for all road users.

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 in the course of trying to get to everyday destinations and the value of making those mobility options safer, more accessible, and more inviting.

Whether we use the term tactical urbanism or talk about experimental pop-ups or demonstration projects, these can be powerful tools to improve safety and public health.