The systems approach to physical activity fully acknowledges that an individual’s community can exert major influence on his or her ability to insert consistent exercise into a life already crowded with other responsibilities. To help individuals attain the 150 weekly minutes of physical activity endorsed by Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, 2nd Edition, physical activity-friendly routes to everyday destinations and destinations where people can be physically active may need to be assessed, improved, or installed (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2018. This approach takes time to build relationships and understanding with partners with whom Extension professionals may not typically collaborate — local and county law enforcement, city street supervisors, county road superintendents, regional planners and Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) staff members.

This factsheet provides perspective on the importance of this work for potential long-term resident health improvement and how to approach this work as experienced by team members of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s High Obesity Program that was conducted in Hardeman County 2019-2023 and is provided for use at the county level.

Notes on the transportation system

Particularly beyond residential areas, the transportation system in the Southeast United States has grown to focus on moving people and goods as quickly and efficiently as possible through networks of local, county, state and federal thoroughfares. Walkers, riders and bikers are often viewed as road hazards to be avoided (Godwin and Price 2016).

Historically, new roads were built through areas where residents were less able to collaborate for a unified voice to curtail building through their neighborhoods. In other cases, governments have asked residents their opinion on traffic planning with little or no response.

Also, it is important to note: Many times, residents want more sidewalks, which provide a greater element of safety; however, these are quite expensive to install. Adding crosswalks, signage or speed humps are more affordable. They work best when the community is made aware of the changes and what they mean. These additions often work best when law enforcement is involved.
because that gets attention quickly.

**Local and county**

County Extension personnel may have the advantage of being acquainted or personal friends with police officers and city street and county road superintendents. Relationships with mayors and governing bodies are also important as these organizations are intertwined. While a relationship may already have been built, the latter of these individuals, as appointed or elected officials, answer to various concerns as detailed in “Notes on the Transportation System.” Yet, the established relationship can open the door to begin collaboration for deeper involvement for safer streets for everyone. An example of this is Extension’s ability to communicate about traffic planning surveys to the various constituent groups, such as Master Gardeners, 4-H volunteers or FCE club members.

It is important to understand that a street goes through a city or town, but it may be a state highway. This means that the local and county officials do not complete control of planning and/or changes. Many community members may not have a clear understanding of this. Rules and guidelines for state highways are part of a set of national standards — “Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices for Streets and Highways” (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2023).

**Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT)**

While major highways are more readily understood as having state or federal authority, this may not be as widely understood where a state highway also happens to be a main city street. When this is the case, knowledge of TDOT becomes more important because certain rules, such as traffic studies, apply.

To start, you need to know the TDOT region and district where you are located. Tennessee has four districts that can be found at https://www.tn.gov/tdot/find-local-information.html. Familiarize yourself with the regional contacts and their roles. If unsure which TDOT contact is responsible for your project needs, call the regional director’s office. The people in the director’s office are typically better able to correctly direct you. Federal fiscal year crunch time is July to October. These are the months to avoid making first contact. Regional TDOT offices are a multi-role units involved in safety, operations, studies, development and other special projects. The 49 district maintenance offices are responsible for day-to-day highway maintenance.

To help better communicate with traffic engineers and TDOT offices, become familiar with "Multimodal Networks" for small towns and rural areas because towns may begin to support safe and accessible active travel (e.g., walking and cycling) for people of all ages and abilities (US Department of Transportation, 2016). In addition, TDOT has an Office of Multimodal Planning that provides information state-level multimodal plans, grant opportunities and other resources (https://www.tn.gov/tdot/multimodal-transportation-resources/bicycle-and-pedestrian-program.html).
Navigating local transportation systems may seem like a daunting policy, system and environment task at first. However, learning how to collaborate with the various entities provides the opportunity for Extension professionals to make a greater long-term impact on community health.

References


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