

Parks & Sidewalks – A Challenge for Small Towns and Rural Areas

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At the STAR division meeting at the APA conference in Chicago, focus groups discussed the challenges of bringing parks and sidewalks to small towns and rural communities. The topics have become increasingly important as rural communities deal with an aging population and the desire among seniors to age in place. Sidewalks allow seniors to remain independently mobile even though they may no longer be able to drive, while access to park space and recreational facilities has been shown to greatly increase health among people of all ages and abilities. Both amenities create attractive places to live and work for people of all ages and abilities.

Yet bringing sidewalks and parks to small towns and rural areas is not without its challenges. One participant at the STAR meeting noted that bringing sidewalks to rural areas is “nothing short of revolutionary.” Although it’s difficult to imagine sidewalks along backcountry roads, they are certainly feasible in small towns. In fact, seniors often migrate from rural areas to small towns close by as they age to capture some of the benefits of a denser urban area. Thus bringing sidewalks to small towns is a way to give seniors from both rural areas and small towns more mobility.

One approach that is gaining traction in rural areas is [joint use of public school facilities](#). Schools often have recreational facilities—such as fitness centers, playgrounds, and park space—that are often lacking in rural communities. Indoor facilities are particularly important in areas that experience extreme weather conditions, such as cold and heat, providing year round recreational use to the community. And a few slight modifications to a sprawling rural schoolyard can transform it into a park. Paved walking paths have proven [especially popular](#), particularly [among seniors](#), allowing the public a relaxing place to recreate away from traffic-oriented streets. In fact, many communities are now [designing their schoolyards to serve multiple generations](#). In doing so, they are maximizing the full extent of limited public funding while providing valuable recreational resources to the community.

Bringing sidewalks and parks to small towns and rural areas is not without its challenges. Joint use of public schools is one strategy for attaining the benefits of both at limited costs. The benefits of both are well documented and help small towns and rural areas better serve residents of all ages.