

Louisiana Leads the Way: Supporting Activity-Friendly Rural Communities



Louisiana State University (LSU) AgCenter leads a walk audit in Assumption Parish, Louisiana.



www.saferoutespartnership.org

At-a-glance

Millions of federal dollars have been left unused in rural America because communities must match them with some proportion of local funding to qualify to receive them. In Louisiana, this financial barrier has left millions of dollars in federal Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) funding unused which can be used to make small towns safer places to walk. In response, a collaboration led by public health partners supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), including the Louisiana High Obesity Program (LA HOP) and Safe Routes Partnership worked with state transportation officials to use a new provision in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to lower the local match requirement for rural communities. This change unlocked access to millions of federal dollars, helping small towns support economic development and community revitalization by building more walkable communities with more access to shops, schools, and parks. Through community engagement events, including walk audits, and a Rural Complete Streets Summit, 11 rural towns secured over \$13 million in federal funds. This initiative not only transformed these communities but also set a new standard for how public health can support creating thriving places to live.

Financial Barriers Kept Rural Communities from Accessing Transportation Funding

For small towns in Louisiana, applying for federal funding to build sidewalks, crosswalks, and other infrastructure to help communities thrive felt out of reach. The Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP), which sets aside funds for communities with fewer than 5,000 people, required a 20% local match. For many rural areas, this was an impossible hurdle.

The costs didn't stop there. Even if a community could manage the local match, it was also responsible for construction engineering and inspection fees—adding another 20%. For a \$500,000 federal project, that meant coming up with \$200,000 locally. This financial strain kept many towns from even applying.

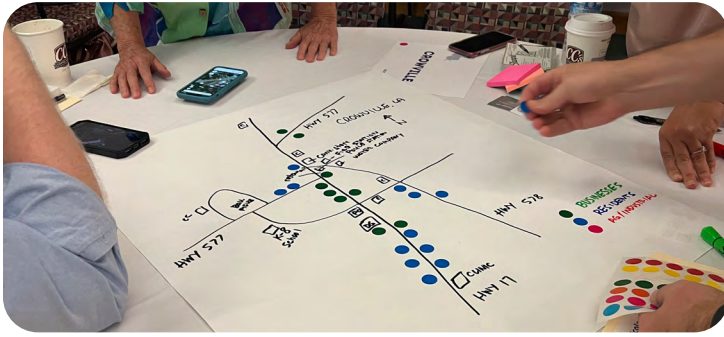
As a result, TAP funds meant to benefit rural communities often went unused. Between 2012 and 2020, only three Louisiana towns with populations under 5,000 successfully applied for TAP funding. Without help, many small, under-resourced

communities continued to struggle with lack of access to places to be active, such as sidewalks and trails.

Public Health Paves the Way for More Activity-Friendly Rural Communities

Small towns across Louisiana faced major obstacles to places to play, walk, and enjoy everything the community has to offer. LA HOP, funded by CDC's Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity, stepped up to help. Its goal? To promote economic development and revitalization in small communities.

Activity-friendly rural communities support rural leaders of America to continue thriving and using their community's history and identity to promote economic development, revitalization, social connection, aging in place, and investments that will last generations.



LSU AgCenter lead walk audits throughout rural communities in Louisiana.

First, LA HOP worked with local Louisiana State University Agricultural Center (LSU AgCenter Cooperative Extension staff to understand the everyday challenges residents faced. People in these small towns needed better sidewalks, safer crossings, and other infrastructure to connect their neighborhoods to places they need and want to go. But to make these changes, they had to tackle a big roadblock: the local funding match required for TAP.

In 2021, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law introduced changes to lower the financial burden for rural, small, and low-income communities. LA HOP partnered with the Safe Routes Partnership to explore how the changes could benefit rural communities in Louisiana.

Together with the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development, they made it happen. For communities with fewer than 5,000 people, the state reduced the local match requirement to 5% (down from 20%) and eliminated other costs like design and inspection. For slightly larger communities (5,000–49,999 people), the match was lowered to 10%. These changes removed the biggest financial hurdles small towns faced.

But lowering costs wasn't enough. Many communities didn't realize these funds were within reach. That's where LA HOP stepped up again. They conducted activities like walk audits and a Rural Complete Streets Summit, bringing together leaders from 13 parishes. These hands-on activities helped communities develop project ideas and understand the TAP application



Communities participated in the Rural Complete Streets Summit and worked through TAP project ideas.

process. After the summit, LA HOP and LSU AgCenter Cooperative Extension staff worked closely with towns to turn those ideas into fully developed applications.

A Victory for Louisiana's Rural Communities and a Model for other States

The changes to Louisiana's TAP funding requirements made a dramatic, positive difference for rural communities. In 2023, 15 small towns with fewer than 5,000 residents applied for TAP grants—five times more than in the previous decade combined.

In total, eleven communities received over \$13 million in federal funds to improve sidewalks, crosswalks, and other infrastructure, to support more activity-friendly communities.

Louisiana's leadership sets an example for other states. It became the first state to combine local matches at the state program level. The success didn't happen overnight. It was made possible by the public health leadership of LA HOP, CDC's investment in technical assistance, and strong partnerships with organizations like the Safe Routes Partnership.

Now, the door is open for other states to follow Louisiana's lead. With the TAP program, many more rural communities have the chance to unlock funding and build more vibrant places to live. To learn more about opportunities in other states to create thriving, healthy communities, review the [2024 Making Strides State Report Cards](#).



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