



Incentivizing Local Action for Safe Routes to Parks

WHAT IS SAFE ROUTES TO PARKS?

Safe Routes to Parks is a movement to increase safe, convenient, and equitable access to parks and green spaces close to home.



Funding reflects priorities. State funding allocations, grant programs, project selection criteria, and technical assistance programs shape communities across the state. These opportunities influence the type of projects that communities propose and determine which communities will be able to apply for funding or assistance. Incentives – and disincentives – are built into opportunities, whether intentionally or not, so states must think strategically about what they want to encourage and invest in. This fact sheet covers how states prioritize goals like equity, local planning, and project implementation by incentivizing actions that move communities toward those goals. It includes examples from multiple states to serve as inspiration and ideas for how to connect these approaches to Safe Routes to Parks initiatives.

HOW STATES CAN INCENTIVIZE SAFE ROUTES TO PARKS

Safe Routes to Parks is a movement that can address multiple agency priorities such as increasing physical activity, decreasing trips made via cars, and building safe networks to multiple everyday destinations, especially parks. State agency staff can start by thinking about the goals their agency seeks to accomplish and then match those to the programs, funding, and processes they can influence. The following sections walk through strategies that can be used to incentivize local jurisdictions to take steps toward safe, convenient, and equitable access to parks via walking and biking. But first, to identify the incentives, states need to identify their priorities and what they need local jurisdictions to do to move toward those priorities.

Think through the types of actions or investments that you want to incentivize. Safe Routes to Parks is a movement that addresses multiple fields of work, so look to your state's stated values, goals, needs, and challenges to get ideas about what specifically could be most useful to prioritize across agencies. It is also important to consider how your state's opportunities can be best used to support this ongoing work at the local level. What do municipalities need to take the best advantage of state processes and resources? Some potential categories of priorities include:

- **Equity:** Prioritize the populations that have been underinvested in within the context of your state. This is an opportunity to focus on vulnerable road users like children, older adults, and people with disabilities as well as communities that have traditionally been kept from receiving public investments, particularly communities with large populations of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. The context of each state varies, so the definitions should prioritize populations based on the state demographics and objectives. Look across agencies to identify if and how each one identifies the communities with the highest need and build on that definition.
- **Local Planning:** Plans can help establish an overarching vision for walking and biking which can increase efficient, strategic implementation over years rather than a series of piecemeal projects. Supporting and incentivizing local planning, project lists, and implementation plans can help localities identify high-priority projects through public engagement and connect them to state or regional resources. Established plans can also help localities submit stronger, more competitive funding applications for state and federal resources.



- **Implementation:** What are the typical barriers to getting projects built? Connect with staff at all levels of government to understand the points of friction and opportunity. Potential barriers may include but are certainly not limited to, staff not being sure where to start or how to prioritize projects, limited capacity to administer projects, and lack of funds to build infrastructure or make the required match for existing funds. If you pinpoint the challenge, you can better target your resources to address it.

Once your team has a sense of the priorities you want to address (the options above are just some suggestions), look into the opportunities you have to support and motivate actions that can help move communities toward those goals. Below you can explore a variety of opportunities for centering your priorities and examples of how states across the country have done similar work in grant program structure, funding allocation, project selection, and technical assistance. Every state is unique, so think of these examples as a starting point for inspiration to adapt to your state's needs rather than something to emulate exactly.

1. SET ASIDE FUNDS FOR PRIORITIES

State agencies have access to both state and federal funding to invest in walking and biking access to parks. For funding that has broad eligibility, states can often reserve a portion for the activity they're trying to incentivize. In doing so, they ensure that a minimum amount of funding goes to that priority. It can motivate more focus on that priority. Below are examples of how states are using flexibility within funding programs to prioritize walking and biking to everyday destinations.

A. USE FEDERAL FUNDING STRATEGICALLY:

While about half of federally-funded walking and biking projects are funded with Transportation Alternatives Program funds, projects that support walking and bicycling are broadly eligible within the suite of surface transportation funding programs. One program that multiple states are using to support walking and biking access to everyday destinations is the Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP).

- Use HSIP for Systematic Pedestrian Safety Improvements:** Ohio's Department of Transportation uses a portion of HSIP funding to prevent pedestrian crashes by supporting proactive infrastructure changes and proven safety countermeasures that prevent these crashes. They are focusing on this because it is one of the crash types linked to high severity crashes in the state.¹ Countermeasures they are promoting through this program include crosswalks, lighting, and geometric changes like curb extensions, reduced curb radii, road diets, and raised crosswalks. Pedestrian projects are focused on specific road types (principal arterial, minor arterial, and major collector) as well as base levels of demand and need.²

- Use HSIP for Routes to Everyday Destinations:** Louisiana focuses a portion of HSIP funding on walking and biking access to everyday destinations in its Safe Routes to Public Places Program, which includes public parks. They point to the troubling fatality and serious injury data for pedestrians and bicyclists to justify their focus. Public roads, whether state or locally owned, are eligible for funding to install safer walking and biking facilities with features such as curb extensions, buffered and separated bike lanes, and traffic calming. Projects from existing state or local plans (such as complete streets, master plans, and bicycle and pedestrian plans) get "positive consideration."³



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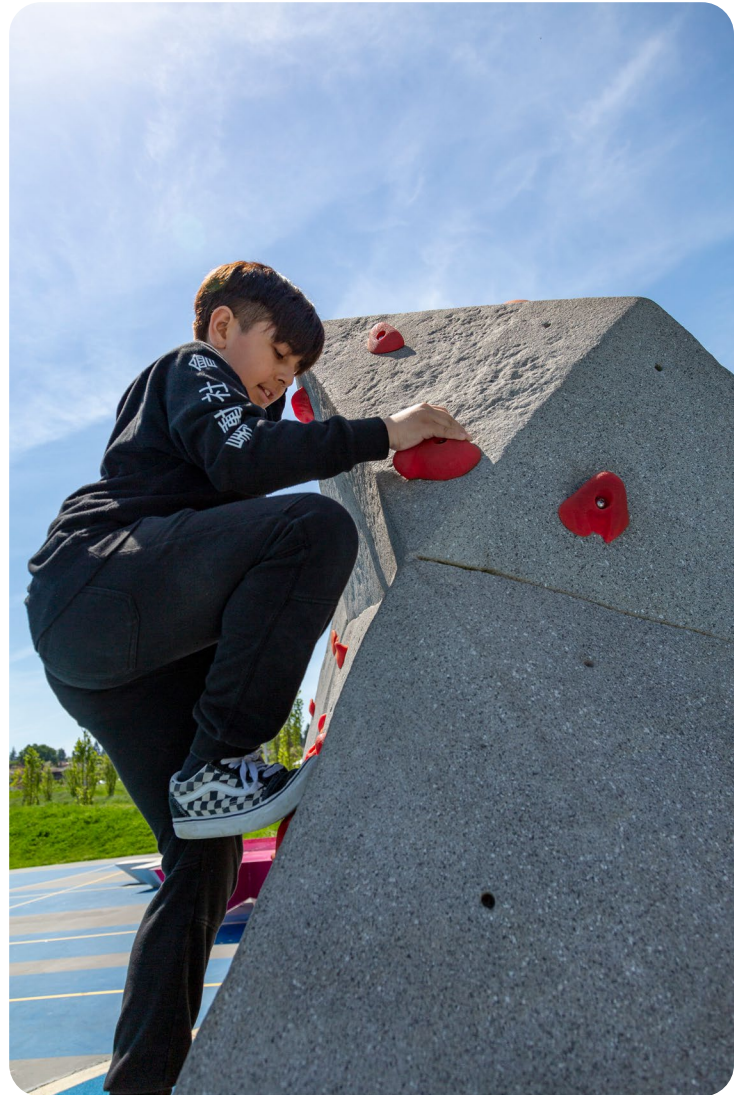
Look at opportunities to target existing funding streams and programs toward the most vulnerable road users and make it easier for them to get to the places they need to go. Make the case to prioritize areas around parks because they are pedestrian and bicyclist generators. Partner with parks and recreation staff to understand priority routes to access their parks and connect smoothly to the bike and pedestrian infrastructure within the park.

B. SET ASIDE FUNDING FOR PRIORITY POPULATIONS:

If a state agency wants to increase the diversity of funding recipients and/or focus on equitably distributing funding to groups that have been historically disinvested in, they can reserve a certain amount of funding to support a baseline number of applications for high-priority populations. This allocation should not act as a ceiling for funding strong applications that address the needs of high-priority populations, but as a baseline.

Understanding the context and history of the state and this funding program can give insight into where funding gaps may currently exist and help shape the definition of “high priority” within the program.

- **Allocate a Percentage of Funds for High-Need Populations:** Illinois’s Transportation Enhancement Program (ITEP) includes federal Transportation Alternatives Program funding and, as of 2020, \$50 million from the state’s Road Fund to further support walking and biking. At least 25 percent of projects funded from this state supplement are in high-need communities and the local match is determined on a sliding scale.⁴



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Studies have shown that people who live in communities with primarily Black or Latinx populations and/or low-income, urban neighborhoods often have less access to green spaces.⁵ Consider using targeted funding allocations to rectify this underinvestment and increase access to parks in the communities that need it. These commitments can hold the programs accountable for focusing on high-need populations. Find opportunities to make funding matches more achievable for high-priority communities by either instituting a sliding scale or covering the match entirely.

C. ASSIST WITH FUNDING MATCH: Most federal programs require a local match. Using state funding to help meet that requirement can help a community that might not otherwise have the resources to do so move a project forward.

- **Use State Funds to Leverage Federal Dollars:** The new federal Safe Streets and Roads for All grant program will fund up to 80 percent of awarded projects to improve safety on local roadways. To apply for Safe Streets and Roads for All implementation funds, local communities must have a Safety Action plan. To support local communities to apply for these funds, Kansas will provide a minimum of 10 percent of the total cost to communities to develop a Safety Action Plan for applicants to the program. Regional and joint applications, as well as smaller cities and counties, may qualify for an additional five percent of the state-funded match.⁶
- **Support Research-Backed Programs:** Michigan and Florida use toll credits to help communities meet the 20 percent match for transportation projects if the project is focused on Safe Routes to School. Learn more about [toll credits](#) and [how states are using toll credits as the match for Safe Routes to School Programs](#).



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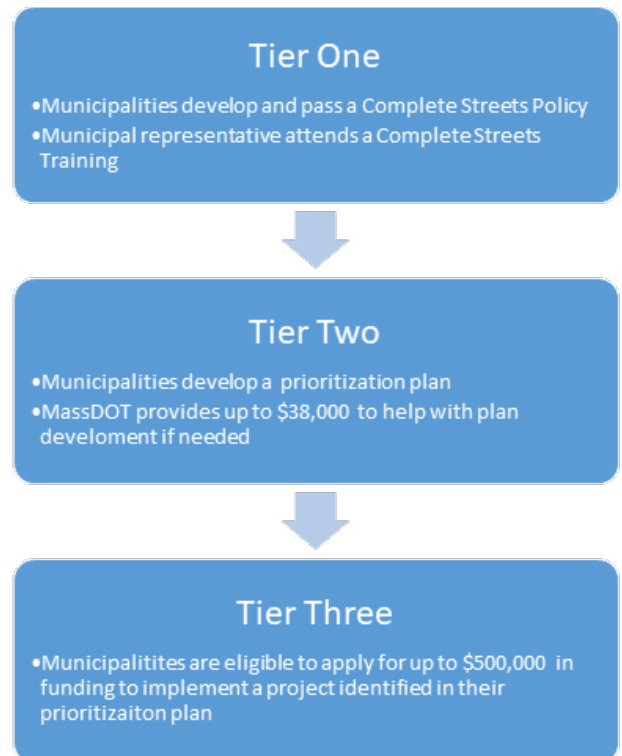
State agencies working on Safe Routes to Parks should consider how they can use their state funding to support funding matches for people walking and biking to everyday destinations, especially parks. Consider providing a portion of the match if the project supports Safe Routes to Parks goals.

2. MAKE FUNDING ELIGIBILITY CONTINGENT UPON DESIRED ACTION

Motivate communities to take action by establishing requirements to qualify for funding opportunities or create an opportunity to simplify the application process. Asking municipalities to take policy, planning, and funding steps as a condition of state funding can help communities frame their work as part of a larger vision while addressing the state's broader goals.

A. OPEN GRANT PROGRAMS TO MUNICIPALITIES THAT HAVE PASSED COMPLETE STREETS (OR OTHER) POLICIES:

Multiple states have Complete Streets grant programs (Maryland, Washington, and Massachusetts). Massachusetts's program has been particularly successful. The department of transportation provides free Complete Streets trainings and technical assistance to help communities develop and pass Complete Streets policies and prioritization plans. Once a municipality has those two documents, they are eligible for up to \$400,000 in construction funding to implement a project in the prioritization plan.⁷ When the program began in 2016 just five percent of the 251 municipalities in MA had Complete Streets policies, since then, over two-thirds have adopted policies.⁸



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This successful program structure could be adapted to support Safe Routes to Parks-specific planning. However, a broader program that emphasizes access to everyday destinations such as parks, grocery stores, and libraries could also have a strong impact. Here are a few ideas:

- **Project Prioritization:** In model Complete Streets (or other) policy language, identify routes to everyday destinations as a priority for implementation and specifically name those locations. This priority can be explicitly called out in project prioritization criteria.
- **Build Partnerships:** For Complete Streets or other active transportation trainings, invite parks and recreation professionals interested in park access and public health advocates who are interested in physical activity and the built environment. In the training, underscore how partnerships with these groups can help boost implementation. They can help with data collection, community engagement, and even identify additional funding.

For more specific recommendations, read [Safe Routes to Parks in Complete Streets Policies](#).

B. STREAMLINE APPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITIES THAT HAVE COMPLETED LOCAL PLANNING AND SUPPORT IT WITH OTHER SOURCES OF FUNDING:

The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection runs the Green Acres program that provides funding for localities to purchase land for recreation and conservation. Within the program, they have a Planning Incentive (PI) category that incentivizes local communities to write– and regularly update– an Open Space and Recreation Plan and adopt a stable funding source for open space acquisition, such as an open space tax (property tax). The benefit to localities is a single application for acquiring eligible properties identified in their Open Space and Recreation Plan rather than submitting an individual application for each property. Their applications are also eligible for 50% of project funding as opposed to the 25% available for the standard acquisitions. Once an applicant is approved for the PI category, they can come back each year with their plan to request funding in a streamlined application process, and Green Acres will consider the requests based on available funding and local progress to date. Today, all of the counties in the state have passed local open space taxes and many run their own funding programs similar to Green Acres.⁹



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Think about what actions can best support implementation and encourage grant applicants to do that by rewarding that action with a streamlined application process. This could look very similar to the Green Acres program where municipalities could apply for transportation, parks, and/or public health funding using existing plans and a short narrative on progress to date if they identify a steady, local stream of funding to support implementation. This is also an opportunity to pinpoint what challenges are coming up if a jurisdiction has a plan but is having trouble making progress on it. They may not end up qualifying for additional funding, but they could be a candidate for additional assistance to help get projects moving again.

3. ASSIGN ADDITIONAL POINTS OR SPECIAL CONSIDERATION IN GRANT APPLICATIONS

States can use grant scoring criteria and funding application questions to ask how projects benefit high-need communities or address other priorities, such as access to specific everyday destinations like schools or parks. Targeting clear priorities – and communicating with applicants about how it affects their scoring -- motivates applicants to put forth projects that will score more favorably. This can be done through questions that allow applicants flexibility to expand on community needs within the application and/or through standardized maps that link demographic information based on the project location.

A. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: California’s state park grants prioritize strong community engagement as a prerequisite for receiving their grant money. California State Parks uses their parks grant to encourage better community engagement and provides a broader vision than what is considered “traditional” engagement in their grant requirements. They specifically say community engagement meetings are essential, and there is no relaxing that requirement (even during the early days of the covid pandemic). They ask people to document who was there, when they met with the community, how convenient that meeting was, and what ideas came from it that are now part of the project. They look past the polish which can often be distracting. Applicants get full points for one of the goals if “the residents identified their preferred recreation feature(s) (not limited to a few predetermined options presented by the applicant). Then, the residents selected recreation features for the proposed project.”¹⁰

B. USE INDICATOR MAPS TO GUIDE PROJECT SELECTION: New Mexico created this [Composite Equity Map](#) for the New Mexico Prioritized Statewide Bicycle Network Plan, and in 2022, it was adapted for prioritizing federal Transportation Alternatives funding. The tool assigns a score to each census block based on six variables linked to historic underinvestment: age, race, income, educational attainment, limited English proficiency, and access to a vehicle. Each census block group gets a score based on the six variables that are linked to historic underinvestment. A higher score can make a project more competitive.



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Incentivizing having specific plans or taking certain actions in grant applications can be a good motivation for municipalities and provide the funding to implement good work. Include parks, trails, and green space as priority everyday destinations for walk/bike funding (state and regional). Look for what different state agencies are using to understand community needs or target projects. Consider working together to adapt that for Safe Routes to Parks. If your team chooses to build something new, consider the information that is most useful for your Safe Routes to Parks effort. Consider the various goals that different agencies bring to the table and eliminate information that does not directly connect to those goals. Look into data sources that can help you understand relevant information like park access. [Trust for Public Land](#), for example, has park access data available to understand the geographic distribution of parks in urban areas.

NOTE ABOUT THE TRANSPORTATION ALTERNATIVES PROGRAM (TAP)

Federal law now requires states to define high-need communities and prioritize them in TAP project selection. As states implement the new law, this may offer further examples for states about how to prioritize particular communities or projects in competitive grant selection processes.



4. PROVIDE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES AND PLANNING ASSISTANCE

Educational resources can help communities understand the possibilities available to them and help improve the quality of applications that they submit. Think about collecting case studies or hosting regional, nearby field trips to inspire people to think about what they can accomplish in their community.

A. PARTNER UP TO PROVIDE FREE PLANNING WORKSHOPS WITH TRANSPORTATION FUNDS:

Indiana Department of Health's Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity (DNPA) partners with Health by Design, a statewide active living nonprofit, to help communities across Indiana plan for more active communities. With State Planning and Research funding from the department of transportation and support from the department of natural resources, Health by Design hosts workshops for communities to gather stakeholders and create an action plan. They follow up with action planning and review to help communities select and implement a final project. Since 2012, this collaborative partnership has hosted 50 workshops and reached over 3,000 leaders around the state, mostly in small and medium-sized communities. During these workshops, they connect participants to implementation funding opportunities and build community capacity to use local funding to build out the network of routes for walking and biking. The [Indiana Active Living Guidebook](#) is available for free online.¹¹

B. ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION PLANNING CAN MEET MULTIPLE AGENCIES' GOALS:

The Pennsylvania Department of Health partners with the Pennsylvania Downtown Center to help municipalities produce and adopt active transportation plans and policies to increase physical activity.¹² They recently added Safe Routes to Parks plans to their list of eligible plans for applicants to work on. The program uses funding from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) has committed additional funding through 2023. PA DCNR sees the program as an opportunity to increase equitable park access, and the investment directly aligns with their goals for park access in the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan.¹³



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Ensure there are strong partnerships between public health, transportation, and parks and recreation staff so that they can identify programs and processes that can align with multiple agencies' goals. Identify specific opportunities to work together in workshops and codify that in action plans with specific deadlines and ideally, funding commitments.

CONCLUSION

There are many opportunities to fine-tune state funding allocations, grant programs, project selection criteria, and technical assistance programs to better align with state goals and priorities. Future research could be useful to understand how different mechanisms affect implementation and what benefits they have for people across the state, especially priority populations.



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