

GET ACTIVE WASHOE



Physical Activity Engagement
and the Built Environment
Assessment

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NORTHERN NEVADA
Public Health



PHYSICAL ACTIVITY & THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

The increase of sedentary lifestyles and decrease in outdoor physical activity has had a negative impact on the health outcomes and wellbeing of many community members. Outdoor activity and exercise levels are linked to the walkability of communities. Unfortunately, communities with lower socioeconomic status (SES) are less walkable compared to higher SES communities and are therefore more affected by lower outdoor activity and exercise levels. Lower SES residential areas suffer in the development/planning department when plots of land are being allocated for residents. Either due to a lack of funding, planning foresight, or even a combination of the two. Infrastructure issues, zoning, and crowded spacing contribute to the decreased walkability for a lot of urban/suburban areas.

Barriers to physical activity can include anything from heavy motor traffic to unkept sidewalks and walking trails. With the increase in motorized traffic and the compact nature of urban residential areas, outdoor exercise opportunities are sparse due to unsafe walking conditions. There is sufficient evidence to support that improving built environments to better support outdoor physical activity can increase those activity levels. Removing barriers to physical activity access has been suggested to reliably increase physical activity levels as compared to introducing new infrastructure that would “encourage” physical activity.

Public Health Problem

In 2023, the percentage of Washoe County adults who were physically inactive, meaning they did not participate in the 150-minutes of recommended exercise, was reported to be around 20% (Washoe County, 2023). Although Washoe County is above the state and national average for percentage of adults who are physically active (and subsequently below the state and national average for adults who are physically inactive), these numbers could still be improved. Meeting the recommended amount of exercise for adults can decrease the likelihood of developing negative health outcomes such as cardiovascular disease, obesity, and stroke.

COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

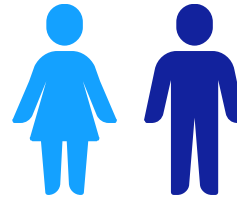
PHYSICAL ACTIVITY SURVEY

To answer the question of how to increase the number of physically active adults in Washoe County, Northern Nevada Public Health's Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention Program team collected feedback from residents to understand, identify, and highlight areas of improvement in these communities. Surveys were administered at eight food distribution events through the Food Bank of Northern Nevada's Mobile Harvest across the Reno/Sparks area. The survey allowed community members to elaborate on their exercise experiences in their communities. In total, 154 participants were surveyed. Twenty unique home zip codes were recorded from the surveys with the most frequent home zip codes being 89502, 89431, and 89506 respectively.

126 participants indicated they could safely walk, ride a bike, or do other outdoor activities in their preferred exercise setting. Among the 26 participants who indicated that they could not exercise outdoors safely, 13 of those participants explained that their lack of safety is due to personal health issues such as nerve damage, knee injuries, spinal injuries, and arthritis. However, another 13 participants testified that they could not exercise safely outdoors due to several issues such as inattentive drivers, a high volume of motor traffic, loose dogs, and homeless encampments in nearby parks or along exercise paths.

An overwhelming majority of the survey participants felt safe while exercising in their preferred exercise setting. Once expanded more, it was found that over 80% of survey participants conduct home/independent exercises.

Thematic analysis revealed a common consensus among participants was that more speed limit signs, speed bumps, and stop signs were needed to address inattentive and unsafe driving from motorists. Additional infrastructure recommendations for improvements included fixing cracks and potholes on streets, repairing or replacing cracked sidewalks, installing more streetlights, and redoing faded crosswalk/bike lane markings.



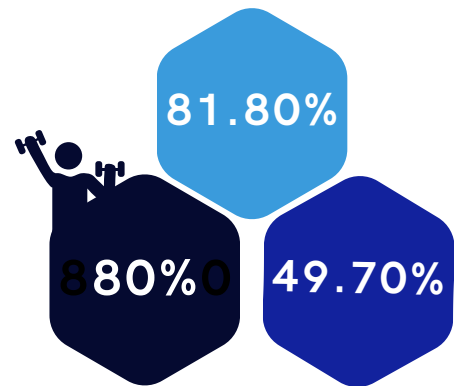
Sample size=**154**
Age Range: **22-88**

Gender: **74.7%** - Female **24.7%** - Male

Ethnicity

- 50.6%** - White
- 31.8%** - Hispanic or Latino
- 7.1%** - Asian/Pacific Islander
- 2.6%** - Black or African American
- 0.6%** - Native American or American Indian
- 5.2%** - Other

Participants felt safe exercising participating in their preferred setting.

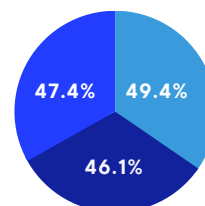


Participants preferred to exercise independently or at home.

Participants preferred to participate in exercise at the **park.**

EXPLORING OUTDOOR FEATURES

Participants reported the following outdoor features need improvements:



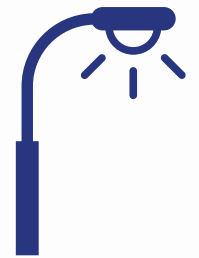
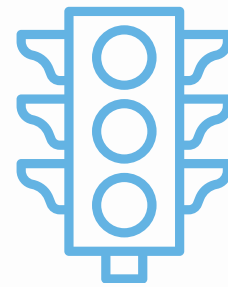
- Road Markings
- Sidewalk or Streets
- Outdoor Lighting

WALK AUDIT

Based on the results of the community surveys, a walk audit plan was drafted to include areas of focus that need a higher degree of attention.

A walk audit is an assessment used to determine the viable walkability of an environment. Walk audits focus on pedestrian safety features such as the presence of sidewalks, condition and maintenance of walking paths, ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliance with crosswalk ramps and tactile bumps/ridges, proper speed limit signs and traffic signs posted at appropriate zones, the presence of speed bumps, length of a crosswalk and seeing if the signal gives an appropriate time for crossing, etc.

Involving community members in the walk audit can produce more compelling results. Not only is it symbolic to have residents participate and actively improve their communities, but their input and observations steeped in years of living in the community can add much needed perspective. For example, even if a community is built to code and is technically “walkable”, a resident may find room to add a crosswalk island in the middle of a large intersection to give slower pedestrians a chance to cross, or even recommend putting more speed limit signs along long stretches of road to remind motorists to not speed.



RECRUITMENT

To recruit Sun Valley residents for the walk audit, flyers were distributed at outreach events and sign-up sheets were available. Additional recruitment efforts were taken by contacting various Sun Valley businesses, churches, and the General Improvement District (SVGID) for assistance in posting the flyers on bulletin boards and/or physical distribution, but there were restrictions on where we could distribute the flyers in the area. Staff attended a community meeting held by the Sun Valley Citizen Advisory Board (CAB) to get the information out to residents. The most successful option for recruitment was through contacting individuals from the previous Mobile Harvest survey events who expressed interest in walking and left their contact information.

SUN VALLEY DISTRICT

The Sun Valley area was in the top six zip codes and was selected to conduct the walking audit. It was found that pedestrian infrastructure for Sun Valley was in need of repair, improvement, and/or replacement. Despite the presence of public-access parks, open-space trails, and a community pool, attempting to do physical activity outdoors in Sun Valley is still being hampered by the barriers created through abysmal walking surfaces and unsafe pedestrian-motorist interactions.

PLANNING

In preparation for the walk audit, an audit toolkit worksheet was developed by taking inspiration from a similar walk audit toolkit by AARP. This toolkit provided a general list of items to take note of during a pedestrian survey of the surrounding area, as well as room to document findings through handwritten notes, sketches, or even pictures taken from a mobile phone. Dates for the walk audit were chosen to take place on a Tuesday and Saturday. The dates were chosen to observe and compare traffic conditions in the early morning and on a weekday versus a weekend. In total, two individuals participated in the walk audit along with NNPH staff. One participant was a local resident and the other had family in the area.

WALK AUDIT ROUTE

On the first day of the walk audit, the team walked the route as indicated in Figure 1. This route was mainly focused on the residential aspects of Sun Valley and took approximately 50 minutes to complete. Along the route, walk audit participants indicated areas that needed immediate attention due to safety concerns or comfortability as a pedestrian. Other features that catered to ADA compliance or biker safety/comfort were also taken into consideration. Along the route, there were multiple points where participants stopped to debrief and share with each other on what they noticed and what their recommendations for change would be.

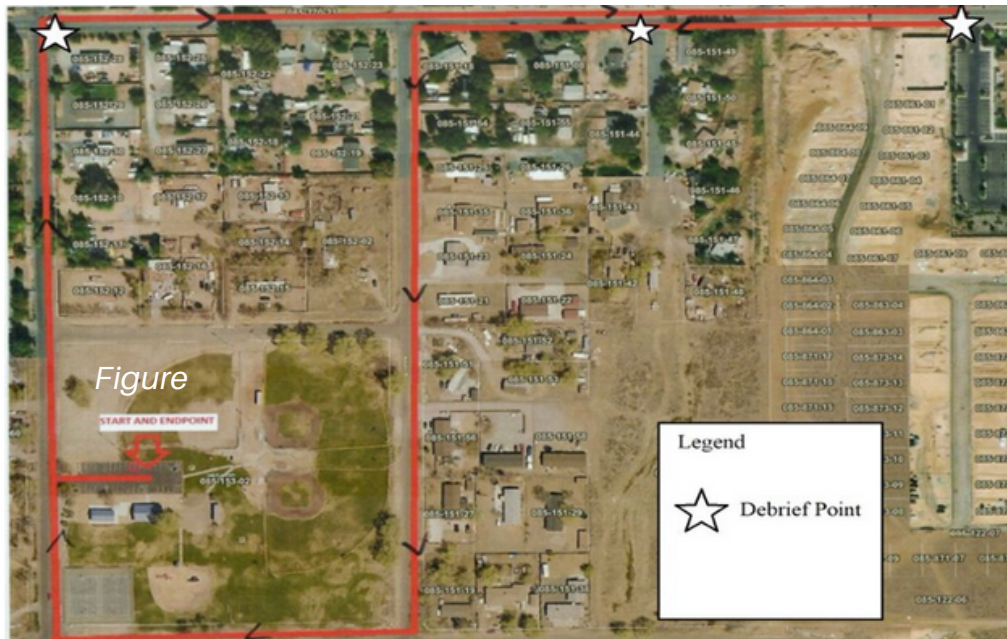


Figure 1: Walk audit route covering 4th Avenue, Gepford, Leon Drive, and Woods Drive. Planned for 08/08/23. (Source Washoe GIS)

On the second day, the route for the second walk audit event was changed to include sections of the main Sun Valley Road with business plazas, as well as a school zone on 5th street. Stop points were also specified on the route to improve upon the first walk audit format where stops were infrequent and impromptu. Only NNPH staff were present for the second walk audit.

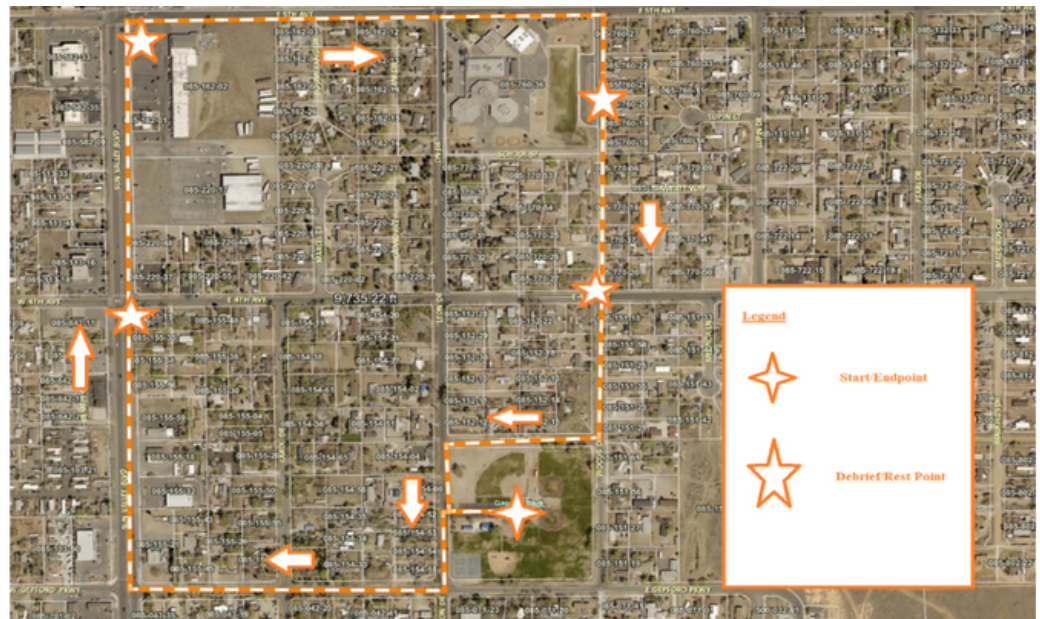


Figure 2: Walk audit route covering Gepford, Sun Valley Blvd, 5th street, and Woods Drive. Planned for 08/12/23. (Source Washoe GIS)

Walk Audit Findings: Day 1

The walk audits revealed several issues with the Sun Valley area regarding pedestrian safety measures. On the first walk audit which focused on residential roads, the walk experience along the walk route was uncomfortable and unsafe at multiple points. The entirety of the route was characterized by the lack of proper paved sidewalks. Instead, common walk paths were often dirt or gravel by nature, often being covered by overgrown vegetation or being somewhat obstructed by trash. Separating the walk path from the road were open drainage culvert or ditches. These open ditches would make the walk path narrower and present a potential hazard for passing cars to potentially drive into and get stuck in.



At all intersections, there were no ADA compliant ramps to help pedestrians get onto the curb after crossing the street. The only section of 4th Avenue with proper paved sidewalks built to modern code was near the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Days Saints and a new development of rental homes. Once cleared of this specific area, the sidewalks returned to being unsafe and uncomfortable. In fact, the end of the sidewalk once past the church is punctuated by a deep drop into a culvert that is only obstructed by metal poles sticking out of the ground with no visible signage to warn pedestrians of a serious hazard ahead.



Walk Audit Findings: Day 2



Once onto the main Sun Valley road, there were interrupted sections of paved crosswalks that only lead to bus stops. However, the same issues that plagued the residential roads can be found on Sun Valley Blvd where there were only gravel paths blocked and interrupted by rocks and trash. Walk paths into business plazas were consistently interrupted by ADA noncompliant features such as rocky ramps that lead onto asphalt walk paths. Street lighting was also found to be intermittent as well, only being the most common along sides of the road with more businesses in the plaza. Bike lanes were found to be present on Sun Valley Blvd and were properly marked. However, drivers would sometimes cross into these bike lanes and come close to a standoff lane reserved for pedestrians or emergency parking. Turn lanes were too close to the “curb” as well, making it potentially easier for cars to hit pedestrians when making right-hand turns without paying attention.



The only section of properly paved sidewalks with ADA compliant ramps was on 5th Avenue near the school zone. Despite this proper application of modern construction code, road signs such as school zone indicators and speed limit signs were obstructed by overhanging trees.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



- 80% of participants marked that they do home/independent exercises, which would explain the large number of individuals who feel safe.
- As individuals begin to spread out further from their homes and into nearby parks or around their neighborhoods, the percentage of individuals who prefer these outdoor locations immediately drops to around 40%.
- School, gyms, and work become less frequent as well considering the demographic of participants are no longer in school, are not interested in gyms, and do not use work as a medium for exercise.
- Outdoor features that get used the most while exercising outdoors were revealed to be crosswalks, crossing signals, parks, and sidewalks.
- During the Sun Valley CAB meeting, the immediate concerns of Sun Valley residents were revealed, including sustainable food supplies and energy sources.
- Attendees gave their explanations as to why they felt the walk audit was not a large priority. Issues of pedestrian access and the conditions of the roads and walk paths have been brought up before the Sun Valley GID over the years. The continuous petitioning to fix these obvious issues were met with slow progress due to budget constraints.

RECOMMENDATIONS

PEDESTRIAN SAFETY IS STILL AN ONGOING ISSUE AS DEMONSTRATED BY THE SURVEY RESULTS AND WALK AUDIT AND AS SUCH, SHOULD STILL BE ADDRESSED AS A MATTER OF PUBLIC SAFETY AND HEALTH.

1

Proper sidewalks and pedestrian paths

The most immediate recommendation is to pave over open drainage ditches with a proper sidewalk with a gutter system. Have a walking path that is up to code and ADA compliant. Create enough buffer room for bikers and pedestrians alike.

3

Maintain Landscaping

Landscaping efforts to maintain overgrown foliage for adequate visibility of roadways, pedestrians, and signage.

2

Adequate signage, lighting, and road markings

For crosswalks and stop lines, the markings on the road are heavily faded and need to be repainted. Additional speed limit signs would be helpful on long stretches of road. Installing more residential streetlights would be advisable.

4

Next Steps

Through the pilot run for this initiative, it is hoped this activity can be implemented in other areas of Reno/Sparks to help improve the quality of life for all Washoe residents. NNPH will share these findings with stakeholders in efforts to collaborate on future projects focused on physical activity and the built environment.

'PUTTING FORTH THESE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS WILL DEMONSTRATE CONTINUED INTEREST IN IMPROVING PUBLIC SAFETY MEASURES AND BY EXTENSION THE QUALITY OF HEALTH AND LIFE FOR RESIDENTS.'

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