

MAPA

Block Talk Toolkit



January 2019

What is a Block Talk?

Defining “Block Talk,” a.k.a. Walk Audit:

Mark Fenton, a national public health, planning, and transportation consultant, defines a walk audit as a “facilitated group walk to explore the level of support for physical activity and active transportation” that is “best combined with a feedback and planning session to develop recommendations for action.” Block Talks, the Greater-Omaha-specific program of walk audits, are an “effective tool for education, inspiration, and practical planning.”¹

A Block Talk is an unbiased evaluation of the active transportation environment. Omaha’s Active Living Advisory Committee defines active living as a way of life and a community culture that integrates physical activity into daily routines through transportation, recreation, and neighborhood choices that support walking, biking, active play and healthy options for all abilities and ages.² Active living is also a cornerstone of the Heartland 2050 initiative, Close the Gap. The general purpose of a Block Talk is to “identify concerns for pedestrians and bicyclists related to the safety, access, comfort, and convenience of the environment.”³

But, how? In addition to identifying problem areas, a Block Talk can be used to identify potential alternatives or solutions, such as programs, projects and policies: the three P’s. Changes could include neighborhood level projects, such as litter pick-up and/or creating art murals, or projects that require city resources, such as curb extensions or putting up a light post in a dark park. Block Talks promote change only when the neighborhood owns the Block Talk and the ideas that come from it.

Explanation of Program, Project, and Policy:⁴

Program, project, and policy represent three levels of change that serve as a way to organize the ideas that come out of a Block Talk in the post-walk workshop. Short-term and long-term goals will be identified for each level during the workshop. A short-term goal is defined as something that could start being worked on in the next month, but may take several months to complete. A long-term goal is defined as something that requires time and planning, they usually take more than 12 months to achieve.



Programs are community driven efforts to raise awareness and create support and demand for improvements in the neighborhood environment. These programs are usually quick to start and low cost. Programs can educate neighborhood residents, city officials, and local organizations and nonprofits about an issue affecting the wellbeing of the neighborhood as well as help to create more concrete, permanent plans for change.

*Live Well Omaha’s bike rodeos are an example of a **program** and teach children the importance of safe and active transportation for a healthy lifestyle.*



Projects are neighborhood level actions that work to change the behavior of residents and others who use the streets, sidewalks, and space within the neighborhood. Projects might have the goal of encouraging more walking and bicycling, such as completing sidewalks or improving crosswalks; making the environment safer for residents through traffic calming efforts to reduce the speeds of vehicles or adding lights and cameras in alleys to ensure safer mobility at night; or beautifying an area by planting trees, putting up benches, etc. to encourage more outdoor activity.

*This temporary area, called Trugs, is an example of a **project** and utilizes modular planters and seating to reclaim parts of Leavenworth Street in Omaha for pedestrians. Spaces that are suited for pedestrians rather than vehicles lead to lively, welcoming spaces for residents and businesses.*



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GET INVOLVED



Policies are meant to reflect the long term goals of the neighborhood and address things that may have been poorly designed in the first place. Common places neighborhoods look to foster long term behavioral change include making changes in zoning codes, rules and regulations for residential subdivisions, street standards, and standards for neighborhood schools as well as advocating that local businesses and organizations implement policies that promote the well-being of the neighborhood.

*Complete Streets Omaha is a practical public **policy** that will guide the future development of Omaha's streets to provide safe, accessible streets for all users. Other communities in the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro, such as Ralston and Bellevue, have adopted Complete Streets policies as well. Complete Streets are designed and operated to enable safe access for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and transit riders of all ages and abilities. Complete Streets make it easy to cross the street, walk to shops, and bicycle to work.*



How to Build Support

After deciding to hold a Block Talk, the first step is to gain local buy-in. This should come from neighborhood residents and members of other organizations that will play a key role in the outcome of the walk. Building support is important because the ideas that come out of the feedback session will be more representative of the needs of the neighborhood as a whole and will increase commitment to carrying out solutions.

Identifying Who Should be Involved

Block talks are led by the neighborhood to serve the residents, so the most important players at the table are the people. Having as many residents as possible involved in the Block Talk will a) make any outcomes of the Block Talk more representative of the needs of the whole neighborhood and b) increase support and follow-through in accomplishing desired changes in the neighborhood.

Of course, there are other players that can play a key role in facilitating, supporting, and developing not just the walk itself, but the ideas and potential changes that come from it. Other people to consider bringing to the table include, but are not limited to:

- Neighborhood association(s)
- Local businesses or other organizations (churches, senior centers, social services, schools, non-profits, etc) that are in the neighborhood
- Issue “experts” (for example, if your focus for the walk is to improve disability access in the neighborhood, invite organizations that serve people with disabilities and community members with disabilities)
- Potential project funders
- City agencies (such as the planning department or the police department)
- Elected officials (city councilperson, mayor, school board members)⁵

Including members of these organizations in the Block Talk connects members of the community. Most importantly, it shows that residents want to be in charge of what happens and how it happens. If you are not sure of neighborhood assets and potential partners, ONE Omaha and MAPA can help identify and facilitate those connections.

Ground-Work Activities to Gather Support

The timing of the Block Talk can foster greater interest and involvement. First, do some research: Is the city planning a project in your neighborhood in the future (check out the city’s annual Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) or Long Term Transportation Plan)?

How will this walk address the needs of those involved?

Get support from your neighborhood (without expecting ONE and MAPA to be there for all meetings) and then reach out to city agencies/elected officials.

How do You Know When You are Ready?

Once support to hold the Block Talk has been established, the next step is for residents to identify what to address on the walk. Agreeing on a centralized topic or issue will help maintain support and narrow the scope of the walk. After the neighborhood has decided on something to focus on, it is time to develop a route and find a meeting location.



PRE-BLOCK TALK CHRONOLOGICAL CHECKLIST

30 TO 90 DAY PLANNING PROCESS

- Meet with Neighborhood Association and involved organizations and decide to hold a Block Talk
- Set a date and time that works for MAPA and/or ONE Omaha
- Scout route ahead of time & contact MAPA for map
- Secure location for introductions and post-walk workshop
- Invite Facilitators (at least 2)
- Create Flyers/Promotional Material
- Invite members of the community (neighbors, partner organizations, nearby schools, elected officials, councilmen, stakeholders in area, etc.)
- Assign a note taker and photographer
- Arrange food and beverages

This is a checklist for a Block Talk and is a good resource when in the initial phases of planning.

Organizing Your Block Talk

Initial Meeting

It is a good idea to have an initial meeting with core organizers of the Block Talk. This could include the neighborhood or community leader, organizers from ONE/MAPA, other partnering organizations, and facilitators. The goal of this meeting is to have a clear understanding of the roles individuals and organizations will take, initial ideas about the route, and to set a date.



Invitations

Once you have an initial meeting to determine who, what, and when, you can begin inviting members of the community to your Block Talk. The following is a list of community members that should be invited: elected officials, facilitators, partner organizations, nearby schools, notetaker(s), photographer(s), and residents.

Timing

Keep in mind that planning and promoting an effective Block Talk properly can take between 30-90 days; it will not be effective after only a week or few days of planning.

We recommend first engaging the neighborhood association board (if your neighborhood has one) and inviting a representative from ONE Omaha or MAPA to speak to residents about Block Talks. From there, ONE and/or MAPA will work alongside your neighborhood to identify a meeting place, route, and who else should be at the Block Talk, such as local government staff, elected officials, and other neighborhood organizations.

Location for Workshop Portion

The location for the workshop should be an open space large enough to fit all those expected to participate in the Block Talk. It is also beneficial to have access to a projector to introduce and debrief ideas through a Powerpoint presentation.

Some locations for the workshop could include:

- Community centers
- Churches
- City building (i.e. Park pavilion)

Make sure to get permission from the management of the buildings in advance.

If all else fails, a brief introduction and debrief could take place outdoors (weather permitting). A park or picnic area could also make a great place for conversation.



A group debriefing in a local community resource center after a Block Talk

Promotion

The first step to promotion should be creating a flyer that is simple and easy to read. ONE and MAPA have flyer templates and may be willing to help with the creation of the flyer. Otherwise, simple applications such as canva.com or Microsoft Word templates make easy and professional flyers for the event. The flyer can be distributed to houses, during neighborhood meetings, or even at other events such as Spring Clean Up, Neighborhood Garage Sales, and more. Facebook, NextDoor, and other social media are also great places to share events with a larger audience.



An example of the template flyer used for Block Talks

Scouting Route Ahead of Time

Choosing the right route is essential in having a successful walk and outcome. When choosing a route consider:

- The length, a good distance would be 1 mile to 1 and $\frac{1}{4}$ mile at the most.
- Include a mix of residential, business, churches, schools, community centers, and transit access points.
- If there is a particular area of concern in your neighborhood, be sure to include this as a stop.
- Likewise, if there is a spot that is highly valued in the neighborhood be sure to highlight it on the walk.
- Three to five stops would be ideal to show different areas of the area.

When considering the route, remember to include a notetaker and photographer. These are essential for thorough documentation and for evaluating the walk.



Post-Walk Workshop

After the walk, the facilitator will divide participants in smaller groups, preferably creating groups of people who do not usually work together and having varying backgrounds. The facilitator will explain the table (below) of definitions of Programs, Projects, and Policies as well as what it means for a solution/alternative to be short-term or long-term. After groups have brainstormed, they will share their top ideas with the larger group. The facilitator will write down common ideas on a table for all to see.

This is the format of the table that groups will fill in during the post-walk workshop. This table is filled in with examples of short-term and long-term programs, projects, and policies.

	Fast & Cheap	Longer & More Expensive
Programs	Local art pieces Local market on street (street fair) Weekly litter pick-up walk	Bike lane education Planters
Projects	Planters as model curb extension Cones for temporary bike lanes	City directed cement curb extension Painted bike lanes
Policies	Enforcement of city codes Involving neighborhood and residents	City/private funding for enforcement of complete streets Sidewalk funding ordinance

Food and Beverages

The organizer in the group is responsible for arranging food and beverages for the attendees, preferably from a local vender. Ask local businesses in the neighborhood if they would be willing to sponsor snacks such as fruit, granola bars, and bottled water.

The Role of the Facilitator

The trained facilitator will guide the group participants along the route designated for them. If you want to be trained to be a Block Talk facilitator, email info@oneomaha.org or mapa@mapacog.org. At the designated stops (and impromptu stops, if the facilitator feels it is necessary), the facilitator will ask the group to rank the previous portion of the walk from 1 (least walkable) to 10 (most walkable). The facilitator will ask the group questions about significant aspects of the walk to guide the conversation, while keeping the conversation open. The walk itself and the workshop will be handled by the facilitator. It is important to also designate a notetaker and photographer for the Block Talk, which cannot be the same person as the facilitator.





Participants listening to the facilitator talk and open discussion about route stop

Duration of Block Talk (2 Hours)

- 20 minutes: introductions and overview
- 45 minutes: walk audit
- 10 minutes: individual worksheets 3 Ps matrix
- 20 minutes: small group exercise to identify action steps, timeline, and partners for each of the 3 Ps
- 15 minutes: report out
- 10 minutes: concluding remarks

Follow-Up From Block Talk

Follow-up includes reporting outcomes with the Block Talk report.

Report Table of Contents

- I.** Overview
- II.** Attendance Roster- report people that attended, organization affiliation
- III.** Map of Route
- IV.** Findings- be very specific, simple
- V.** Recommendations- for the city and recommendations for the neighborhood, steps to take: present data, talk to council, form neighborhood committee for projects, be general to each community



The overview of the report is a brief 1-2 paragraphs but gives more information of what happened, when it happened, who was present, what neighborhood it was in, and what results came out of the day. The attendance roster is simply the list of people who signed-in to the event on the day including residents, partner organizations, and facilitators, with their affiliated organization. The map of the route is provided by MAPA and shows where participants walked and the different stops. The findings are a general overview the post-walk discussion and includes the chart with the 3 P's and short and long-term goals. Recommendations are the last part that include recommendations for the city government, the neighborhood group, or whoever else is responsible for executing the proposed plans.

Taking Ownership of Proposed Ideas

Ownership goes along with the Recommendations aspect of the outline. It is to keep those who are involved and who participated in the Block Talk accountable for the proposed ideas. After MAPA creates the report, it should be distributed back to the attendees so that they can use that data (attendance roster, route, pictures, 3 P's chart, etc.) to move ideas forward. The initiation should come from the residents that attended, but could be supported by a city or community organization. This is to ensure that the Block Talk has tangible and real results.

Distribution of Report

The report, created by MAPA staff, should be distributed to the neighborhood in which the Block Talk was held as well as all those on the Attendance Roster. It is a good idea to give it to stakeholders as well as those who were not able to attend the Block Talk to keep it inclusive to the larger community. The report should be an available resource and open to anyone interested or involved in the area.

Next Steps

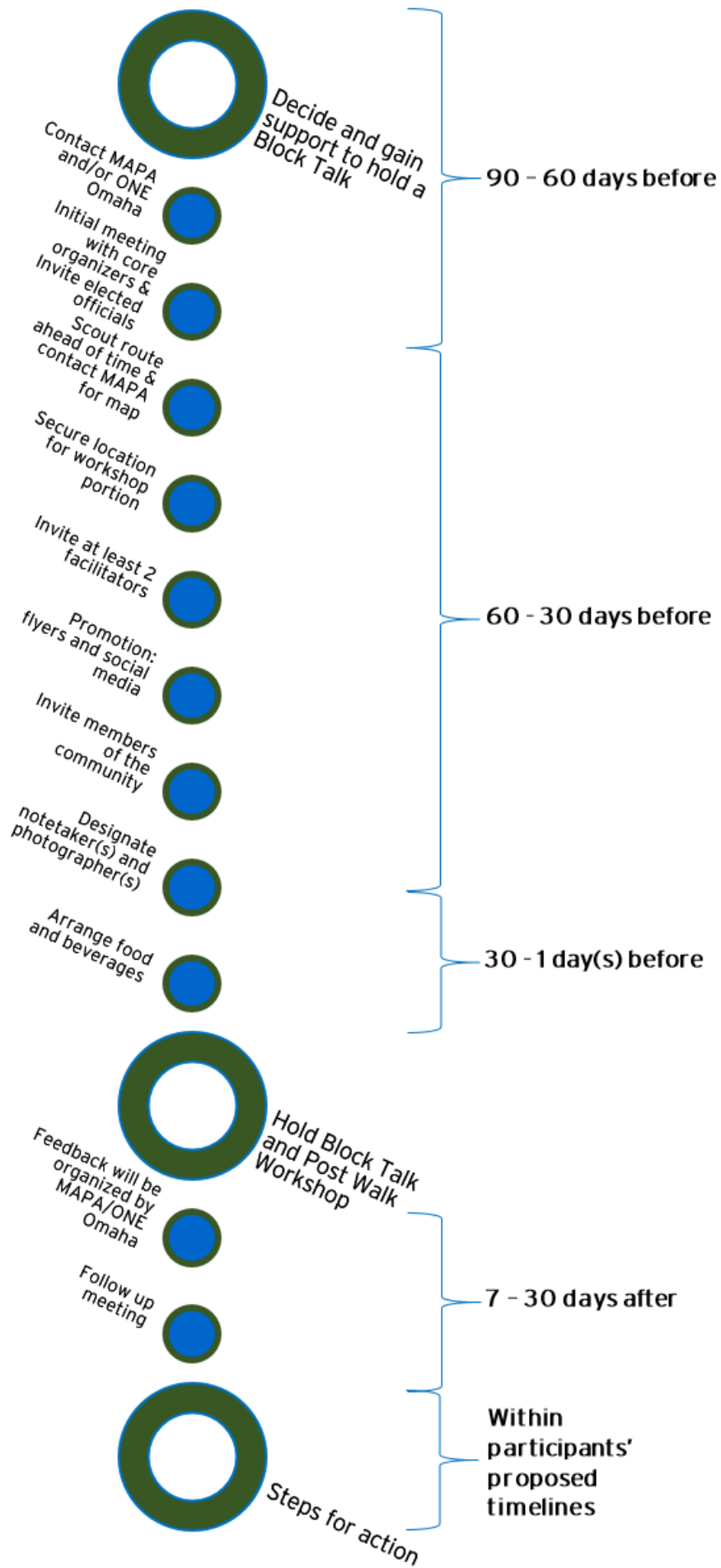
A follow-up meeting with ONE Omaha and MAPA will be scheduled after the Block Talk. Invitations to this meeting will be sent to everyone who registered for the Block Talk, even those who did not attend. At this meeting, potential options for moving forward will be discussed and goals will be set to get the neighborhood/community started on improving their area's walkability.

What Steps do You Take to Make Sure Something Happens as a Result?

- **Form a committee** to work together towards progress on a project identified during your Block Talk
- **Identify Potential Funding Sources:** City of Omaha Mayor's Grant Program, Peter Kiewit Foundation Neighborhood Grant Program, In Our Backyard (ioby) crowdfunding
- **Present the data** to city officials, community organizations, and elected representatives
- **Report back to MAPA**



Timeline of Activities



Why Focus on Walkability

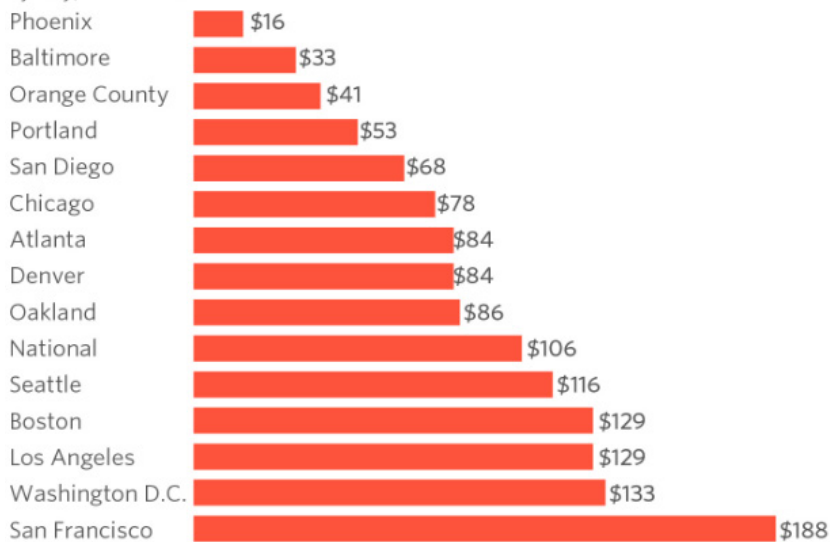
Improving walkability leads to a better quality of life for all. If routes can be made more enjoyable to walk or bike than to drive, more residents will embrace active living, creating a healthier community. In other words, more people walk, more often, in communities where walking is safe, convenient, and attractive. And, they are healthier as a result. Walkable communities also have better air quality, which is good for the environment and health of the residents.

Additionally, the percent of the population that does not drive (because of age (young or old), ability, income, or choice) is increasing. So, a walk-friendly community is more inclusive. For seniors, it helps to maintain mobility, an extremely important determinant of health. Since all public transit rides begin and end with a walk, walkability is linked to transit access and use. Younger generations prefer to use alternative transportation and are drawn to cities that are walkable. Making your city walkable will help the city attract and retain young professionals.

There is a positive correlation between walk score and property values: a higher walk score indicates a higher property value and vice versa. A walk score represents an attempt to quantify how accessible a neighborhood is on foot. Scores are typically seen as good if the number is 70 or above, and many real estate search sites, such as Trulia and Zillow, feature walk scores prominently. A 90 or above is considered a “walker’s paradise” where no car is needed and most daily errands or activities can be accomplished on foot.⁶ Well-off home-buyers are passing up scenic views, overly spacious housing, and manicured lawns and looking for homes that provide convenience via proximity to urban amenities.

Home premiums for increasing walk scores from 60 to 80

By city, in thousands



Source: Redfin

Potential Outcomes

In 2014, WalkDenver⁷ created a petition calling on Denver city officials to form a Pedestrian Advisory Committee that would partner with city officials, city agencies, and the office of the Mayor on the development of policies, procedures, and infrastructure projects to improve the walkability of Denver neighborhoods. The petition also called on the city to establish Denver Moves Pedestrians, a plan for the city to follow as it implements improvements for Denver’s pedestrians. After receiving 1,100 signatures and letters of support from 50 local organizations, the Denver City Council included funding for Denver Moves Pedestrians in the 2015 city budget and established applications for the advisory Committee.



The Aksarben-Elmwood neighborhood just west of the University of Nebraska at Omaha noticed that university students were walking up an unpaved path in the neighborhood to get to school. This became an issue when the path turned muddy. Wanting to provide a safe and convenient way for the students living in the neighborhood to get to school, neighbors pooled together funds to get the path paved. The neighbors also noticed that the gate at the edge of campus that the path leads to was sometimes locked, spoiling the shortcut. Neighbors contacted the university about this issue. The once dirt path is now a smooth shortcut that leads to an unlocked gate at the edge of campus.

In Omaha, assessing the walkability and transportation safety in an area was needed in the Aksarben neighborhood on 63rd and Shirley Streets⁸ where the intersection was too wide. After assessments and input from residents, a bike lane was painted and a roundabout was installed to slow down traffic after a deadly accident in 2015. Overall, residents have mixed responses but most agree traffic has slowed significantly in a previously dangerous intersection.

As another example, Tom Hanafan River's Edge Park is transforming into the new front door to Council Bluffs. The trails in the park have been a popular route for bicyclists, so new development is directed to keep the park bike-friendly. The mixed-use development features bike lanes and bike roads, ensuring that everyone using active transportation will feel safe and welcome.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a walk audit, a.k.a. Block Talk, is a facilitated walk that surveys the active transportation environment of a community for ways to make it more safe, enjoyable, and convenient for all. The walk is followed by a feedback and planning session, which is used to develop recommendations for action items. These action items are categorized into six different groups: fast and cheap programs, projects, and policies as well as longer and more expensive programs, projects, and policies. The categorized action items are included in a report so that residents, stakeholders, city employees, business owners, etc. can learn about the changes residents want to see their neighborhood.

This toolkit includes many resources for those who are wanting to plan their community's Block Talk. It explains who should be involved; how to build support; when, where, and why meetings should be planned; as well as the promotion, route, and workshop of the Block Talk. Additionally, there is a section on how to create your own report to help with the follow-through and implementation of the action items. The key ingredient to a successful Block Talk is for community members to take ownership of these ideas: this is the only way the action items in the report will be realized and bring change to the community.



Citations + References

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The development of the Block Talks program in the Omaha metropolitan area would not be possible without the assistance and partnership of AARP Nebraska and ONE Omaha.

