

## Tips on Leading Your Own Walk Audit from the 2015 Kansas Obesity Summit

*Based on Walk Audit tips and instructions provided by 2014 Obesity Summit Keynote Speaker and Community Design/Active Transportation Expert, Mark Fenton*

Walk audits (or walkabouts) are facilitated walks for an interdisciplinary group of community stakeholders with the following potential goals:

- **Education.** Guides people to *experience* and assess the physical activity and healthy eating “friendliness” of an area, not just look at it theoretically.
- **Inspiration.** Helps stakeholders, leaders, policy makers explore what could be *possible*, especially in their own communities.
- **Practical planning.** Outstanding way to get everyone--professionals and not--actively involved in *project and policy development*, valuing each person’s input.

**Participants.** Anyone who can influence or is affected by the built environment: Public health and safety, school officials, parks and recreation, extension, community organization representatives, planners, public works, engineers, architects and landscape architects; elected and appointed officials (city/county council, planning commission, school board); parents, children, elderly, people with disabilities, everyone.

**Distance.** Mark Fenton recommends routes of 0.5 to 2.0 miles, and a 30 to 90 minute walk, allowing time to stop for observation and discussion. A one-hour, 1.5 mile walk can work well.

**Route.** Scout and pre-determine your route ahead of time. Attempt to select routes with a variety of community features (business/retail, residential, schools, churches, bus stop, park/recreation, etc.) and a mix of supportive and challenging settings for active living and access to healthy foods, ideally with safe (out of traffic) places for the group to stop and talk.

- Supportive examples: Sidewalks, park, trail, walk- & bike-friendly downtown, traffic calming (curb extensions, islands, raised crossings), neighborhood garden/farmer’s market, advertising of healthy food options.
- Challenging examples: No crosswalks, speeding traffic, no/poor-condition sidewalks; giant parking lots, limited access to recreation areas, strip development; limited access or safety concerns for children or persons with mobility limitations; communications/messaging promoting unhealthy options.
- Surprises: “Goat” trails, evidence of user demand for more walkability/bikeability (e.g., bikes parked at trees or parking meters), overlooked gems (small neighborhood green space or unexpected messaging promoting healthy living).

## Four Major Elements of the Walk Audit

- 1. Education/set-up.** Provide a brief introduction to your participants of what supports community health and healthier behaviors, particularly increased physical activity and access to healthy foods. Use questions and discussion prompts to remind participants of these elements throughout the walk.
  - **A varied mix of land uses** (live, work, shop, play, learn, pray, & paly in close proximity).
  - **Good connections for pedestrian, bicycle, and transit use** (sidewalks, trails, etc.)
  - **Functional, inviting site designs** (buildings at the sidewalks, trees, benches, etc.)
  - **Safety and access for users of all ages, abilities, incomes** (lights, traffic calming).
  - Accessible, appealing, and affordable healthy food options
- 2. Introductions.** Brief, to connect the group and understand the mix of perspectives. Discuss the three rules.
  - 1) **Be safe.** For example, don't just follow the person in front of you across the street; check the signal. Use good judgment, look out for yourself and one another. When we stop to talk, step out of the way so others walking past aren't forced into the roadway.
  - 2) **Look through the eyes of all users.** Think of a much younger or older person in this setting; someone in a wheelchair, on crutches, or pushing a stroller; someone who is visually impaired. Consider how it works for all potential users of the setting. Be especially aware of the traffic and how local folks are interacting with the environment. Do you even see pedestrians, cyclists, and transit users? Where do they walk or ride or cross the street? How does traffic respond?
  - 3) **Rate the environment.** Have participants use a 1 to 10 scoring system for considering the environment, 10 being the most health supporting, 1 the least. Consider all aspects: physical activity, nutrition, and healthy messaging. Quality sidewalks in good repair may raise the score, while it's lowered by overgrown bushes forcing you into the street. Lots of fast food outlets or convenience stores may be a negative, a farmers market a positive. Be prepared to share your score at any time, and share what factors are making it higher or lower.
- 3. The Walk.** At occasional stops, have participants state their scores, and give examples of why it is what it is (“too much traffic, only a 4;” or “great trees & benches & lots of people out walking, 8”). No right or wrong answers, just a device to help all to observe and share.
- 4. Discussion/planning.** Immediately following a walk, participants may discuss their observations and how they will take back what they learned to their own communities. In your own community, immediately following a walk is an ideal time to develop specific conceptual plans, project details, and ordinance recommendations

## Typical Questions about Facilitating a Walk Audit

**What if the weather is challenging—rainy, snow on the ground, etc.?** People walk in all types of weather, so encourage your participants to dress and mentally prepare for any typical conditions for that time of year. For example, snow is common in the winter, and people still have to get to work, kids to school, etc. So why not get out and see what they are up against--un-cleared sidewalks? Snow piled in crosswalks? Bike parking that is out in the open, un-covered and un-protected? Transit stops without shelters? These are real-world conditions we should be forced to confront. Obviously horrific weather (hail, dangerous lightning) would keep your group inside, but that's all. Just in case, you could prepare a "virtual" walk audit, going out ahead of time and taking photos of our planned route which you can show and discuss as you would a real-live walk.

**What if your meeting or event is occurring in an area that is very unappealing or unfriendly to walking?** Similar to the weather, location is also not a good reason to forego a walk audit. No matter how unsavory, someone actually works in the location where you'll be meeting, and no doubt they should still be able to get 30 or more minutes of physical activity a day, and to have access to healthy food choices. If there is no place reasonable to walk and no healthy food available within walking distance, then we're seeing a very real world example of the environment that many US residents face every day. Thus, if the meeting setting is not very conducive to walking, all the more reason to venture out and ask the question: How do we stop building stuff like this, and make places that are likely to be more supportive of routine physical activity?