

# 6.15 walk

MAKING MASSACHUSETTS MORE WALKABLE

BY NICHOLAS BULENS / GRANT WRITER & RESEARCHER

## Weymouth: Making Safe Routes for Seniors

In the summer of 2014, WalkBoston partnered with the Town of Weymouth to open a conversation between municipal staff and older adults about creating a safer, more attractive walking environment. The Safe Routes for Seniors initiative was a true convergence of advocacy and policy, resulting in a set of design guidelines and program alternatives to better coordinate the town's capital planning process with greater walkability. The initiative has helped springboard Weymouth toward a healthier approach to community design.

Weymouth is a mature suburban community situated about 12 miles southeast of Boston. The town has a strong residential character with many attributes of a walkable environment. Weymouth has four village centers, each featuring a mix of land uses that helps create a sense of place for residents. It also has a diverse open space network interspersed among many settled neighborhoods. There is also a good mix of transit services, including commuter rail and bus, which help connect



Weymouth residents want to age healthfully.

Weymouth's people and places. However, in spite of these attributes, the town has grown increasingly dependent on the automobile

for transportation in the last 50 years. Simultaneously, Weymouth's population has aged and diversified to where almost one in every four residents is over age 60.

Recognizing a need to analyze the built environment from a healthy aging perspective, Weymouth received a grant from the Massachusetts Council on Aging, in partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health [MDPH], to conduct a senior pedestrian safety study. Municipal staff collected data on Weymouth's housing, land use and pedestrian crashes. The data led

the town to identify four areas of need where seniors could most benefit from improved walking conditions.

WalkBoston facilitated a public meeting between municipal staff and an audience of over 30 older adults. Residents raised important concerns about poorly maintained sidewalks, obstructed lines of sight and distressed crosswalks. WalkBoston then hit the streets with a diverse focus group of municipal staff, senior residents and local businesspeople. A wealth of observations were made, and ideas flowed freely between stakeholders.

Weymouth's walkability investigation culminated in the publication of the Safe Routes for Seniors Design Guidelines and Planning Report. WalkBoston introduced municipal staff to new and innovative approaches to streetscape improvements, including "lighter quicker cheaper" placemaking, which could facilitate safer, more frequent foot traffic by older adults in the town's target areas. Weymouth's planning staff prepared the final report to summarize the initiative's findings and recommend design guidelines for town planning moving forward.

The Safe Routes for Seniors initiative has already led Weymouth to take a number of steps toward enhancing walkability. For 2015, Weymouth's Mayor Susan Kay has committed \$150,000 to sidewalk improvements and indicated that she will budget up to \$250,000 for the same purpose each year thereafter. Plans are also under way by municipal staff to develop a Complete Streets policy and apply for certification under the MassDOT's new Complete Streets program. In addition, the town has received a technical assistance grant from the MDPH to develop a zoning action plan with the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission [PVPC], a leader in the movement to design healthier communities. The PVPC will advise Weymouth on how to facilitate healthy eating and more physical activity in the community through changes to local zoning provisions, such as reduced parking requirements and site plan review.

BY NICOLE BOURDON / SPRINGFIELD MASS IN MOTION PROGRAM DIRECTOR

## Springfield: Mass in Motion building community and more

Over the last three years, Mass in Motion in Springfield has partnered with WalkBoston to conduct walk audits at six public schools in the city. These walk audits have been instrumental in helping our local Safe Routes to School Alliance build the capacity of the schools to launch walking programs. The intent of these programs is to have a positive impact on attendance, getting kids more active before school, and building community.

The walk audits provide a perfect opportunity to bring together school staff, municipal departments, community organizations and their members to look at safety issues around schools, identify the best walking routes for students, strategize how to get more community involvement and assure sustainability for the walking program. WalkBoston provided training before each audit so that all partners felt that they had the tools and ability to contribute to the audit, and gave them a clear idea of safety issues to look for and ways to address them. Participants found the process very inclusive and felt empowered by the audit to ask for improvements around the school.

The walk audit reports that WalkBoston provides have been an invaluable tool to share with the community and, especially, the Department of Public Works. The reports provide clear recommendations that are divided into low-cost, medium, and higher cost solutions. So far, DPW has made some important changes at two of our schools based on WalkBoston's recommendations. We've also shared the reports with city councilors and included the reports in the city's Complete Streets plan. The reports are an essential tool and reference, as well as a great first step in launching a program.

WalkBoston has provided incredible support to our city as we advocate for better safety for pedestrians. In December 2014, an elementary school student was killed crossing the street in front of the city's main library branch. Since then, the classmates at her school have had deep concerns about the safety of our streets and want solutions so this doesn't happen again. This March, the school's student council convened a meeting to learn more from a city councilor and the DPW on what can and is being done to improve safety. WalkBoston attended this meeting as well to help give students the tools they need to advocate for improvements.

# Boston

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## events

**Wed., June 17, 5—6:30pm**

### **Worcester Walk**

Highlights: The removal of the Worcester Common outlets and parking garage, returning the city grid to a walkable scale. Learn about WalkBike Worcester and visit the improved Canal District.

**Start:** Union Station

**Fri., July 17, 10—11:30am**

### **Springfield Walk**

Highlights: The newly developed Pedestrian/Bike Plan focused on citywide connectivity. Stop at Pioneer Valley Riverfront Club, McKnight Railtrail, learn about Safe Routes to School, Walking School Buses and more.

**Start:** Kenefick Park

## 25 years of walking advocacy celebrated. Twice.



25 years of Golden Shoe winners were honored—the above were able to attend [and were pried away from the schmoozing for the picture].

The end of March was an exciting time! On March 25th, 200+ people, including many previous Golden Shoe Award winners, gathered at the Microsoft NERD Center to celebrate WalkBoston's 25th anniversary. It was an opportunity to thank the many people who have advocated and contributed to 25 years of progress toward the goal of making Massachusetts more walkable.

The next morning, the Walking Evolution and Revolution Conference, produced by the Association of Pedestrian and Bicycle Professionals Boston Chapter, WalkBoston, Project for Public Spaces and Metropolitan Area Planning Council, took place at BSA Space. One hundred of the field's leading active transportation professionals explored the freshest thinking about walkability and place-

making, and heard a keynote address from the new Boston Transportation Department Commissioner, Gina Fiandaca.

To date, WalkBoston has worked in 103 communities across Massachusetts. While we're proud of that progress, there are 351 cities and towns in the Commonwealth — still plenty of work ahead!

Please donate today!  
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6.15 work across MA

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**Mission**  
WalkBoston makes walking safer and easier in Massachusetts to encourage better health, a cleaner environment and vibrant communities.

## thank you!

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BY SARAH BANKERT/HEALTHY COMMUNITIES PREVENTION SPECIALIST

## Belchertown: Planning for health

The Town of Belchertown is at a critical point in its development where it is ready to bring “health” to the table and incorporate it into municipal plans. Working with municipal leaders, Healthy Hampshire is leading a community-wide pedestrian planning process to improve connectivity between the historic and commercial town centers—what has been termed the “Common to Courthouse Corridor.”

Stacey Beuttell of WalkBoston recently conducted a workshop and facilitated discussion for Belchertown municipal officials about envisioning a more walkable corridor connecting the historical and commercial town centers. Bringing key decision makers from across the community together in one room has already had significant impact on municipal conversations about this corridor, including discussions about the development of the old state school property, located right in the center of this corridor.

WalkBoston will also be training older adult champions to conduct walkability audits of the corridor. These will accomplish the twin goals of educating residents on the fundamentals of healthy design and identifying the barriers to walking here.

Next steps include gathering data and community input on future development, building champions for healthy design, and looking for opportunities for low-cost implementation of policy and/or infrastructure.