



**SAFE**  
ROUTES TO  
**PARKS**



Safe  
Routes  
PARTNERSHIP

saferoutespartnership.org

## A Systems Approach to Safe Routes and Long-Term Change

Since 2017, the Safe Routes Partnership has worked with community-based organizations to make park access safe, convenient, and equitable for people walking and biking. However, making changes to a sidewalk or holding one community engagement meeting is not going to have as long-term of an effect if we don't zoom out to see the whole system that created unsafe routes or inequities in the first place. That is why in 2021, after assessing the national landscape of planning and funding opportunities at the state and regional levels, we built a cohort of state agencies along with state-based local leader networks to begin applying promising practices that engage grassroots and grass tops, then assessing how they work in the field. Below is a summary of our approach and high-level take-aways.



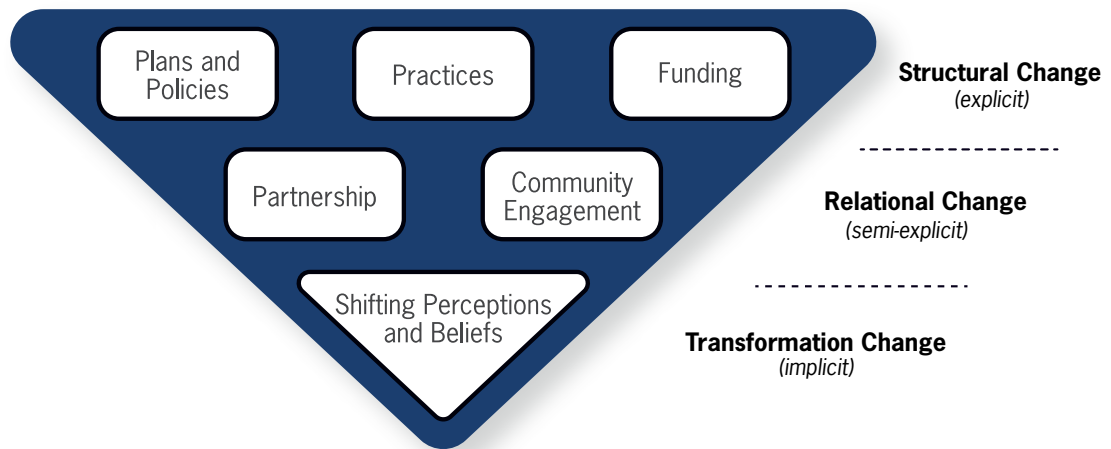
### Why Do This Work?

The places we live and the ways we get around are built through intentional policy and funding decisions. Those decisions are not random; they are influenced by humans who are subject to individual and societal pressures and biases. The challenges we see today, such as low rates of physical activity, less access to park space, and unsafe conditions for walking and biking are not the result of individual or community failure to maintain or improve neighborhoods, but rather are due to decades of intentional funding and policy decisions. For more context on this, watch this [brief video](#) on mobility justice or explore this [story map](#) that gives more historical background and how it connects to today. These systems are set up to continue producing more of the same even when communities are saying that it doesn't work for them. The Safe Routes to Parks work started at the local level, seeking to bring changes through public demand. We then expanded to also address

systems from the state level so that funding and planning processes could more accurately and efficiently address local desires and needs for safe, equitable, and convenient access to everyday destinations, especially parks and neighborhood green spaces.

Through this project, the Safe Routes Partnership sought to understand what could be changed at the local and state level to better support safe walking and biking access to everyday destinations, especially green spaces. We worked on park access specifically because parks are an essential community destination that brings together different government agencies and partners that might otherwise not work together, leading to tangible results. However, this approach can be adapted more broadly for connecting people to other everyday destinations like schools, grocery stores, and libraries.





The graphic illustrates the elements of systems change at each level, explicit to implicit. Imagine big rocks in a funnel and change is the water that could flow through if you address the various elements. Graphic adapted from FSG.

## Defining Systems Change

A tool that we have been using to frame this work is a “systems change” **model adopted from FSG**. FSG is a consulting firm based in Seattle, Washington that created a systems change framework focusing on identifying the conditions that hold a problem in place and how to meaningfully shift them in pursuit of a more equitable future. They liken these conditions to the water in this story: “A fish is swimming along one day when another fish comes up and says “Hey, how’s the water?” The first fish stared back blankly at the second fish and says “What water?”

Conditions can be invisible to people experiencing them every day. Whether or not they are noticed, these conditions can hold significant problems in place. Without addressing them, we can’t change the system and the outcomes it produces.

Our program’s goal is to increase equitable park access by dismantling systems of inequity, so here is how we have defined the different elements in FSG’s model.

- ▶ **Plans & Policies:** Update the rules, guidelines, and lists of projects that guide both government agencies and community organizations so that they include safe and equitable access to everyday destinations.
- ▶ **Practices:** Expand programs and standard operations to include activities that support equity and Safe Routes to Parks. Examples could be new data collection strategies, using data to inform where route improvements connect to parks, or scheduling events in park spaces that are accessible by biking, walking, and/or transit.
- ▶ **Funding:** Allocate funding as well as staff and volunteer time to make parks safer and easier to access via walking and biking. Prioritize that funding based on equity.
- ▶ **Partnerships:** Work with a variety of partners that represent different parts of the community to advance park access like public health, transportation, parks and recreation, schools, faith communities, and volunteer groups.
- ▶ **Community Engagement:** People are experts on the places they live, so make sure they are influencing decisions to address park access needs.
- ▶ **Shifting Perceptions and Beliefs:** Expand commitments to safe, convenient, and equitable park access. Change preconceived notions and in-grained ways of thinking.



## Why Now?

In 2021, we saw a window of opportunity to build sustainable systems that better deliver safe, equitable, and convenient access to everyday destinations that communities need. Putting in work to establish both local and state-level approaches established a solid foundation for future decades of work on access and equity. Below are the factors that we considered relevant and timely for our systems approach to Safe Routes to Parks.

### ▶ Federal Investment

- **Transportation:** In 2021, Congress passed a new surface transportation infrastructure law with historic levels of support for walking and biking moving through state and regional entities. State and regional entities are dealing with new requirements and programs which means there is an opportunity to guide how to use these funds effectively to meet access, equity, and climate goals. Now is the time to build intentional connections between local initiatives and the regional and state agencies that support their work toward safe and equitable local park access.
- **Environment:** In September 2022, the [Biden-Harris Administration made a public commitment to create more equitable access to parks in local communities](#). A total of 10 federal departments and agencies (including the Department of Transportation) signed a memorandum of understanding committing to promoting equitable access to nature in nature-deprived communities. Some of the relevant goals to our work include “identify and leverage federal programs to invest in equitable access to nature”; “facilitate collaboration across all levels of government to reduce barriers to implementation and accessing federal resources”; and “develop the capacity of community leaders to implement their vision for their park spaces.”
- ▶ **Racial Equity:** The protests of 2020 shifted the public’s understanding of race, but there is still so much work to be done to address the past and ongoing inequities that Black, Indigenous, and other people of color face. We can use this elevated attention to establish ongoing practices that prioritize communities facing historical and current injustices while also building ongoing systems for improvement such as trainings and community engagement processes so that the work does not stagnate.
- ▶ **Global Pandemic:** The coronavirus pandemic underscored the importance of safe and healthy access to parks and public spaces. These spaces have provided much-needed exposure to nature and physical activity close to home during challenging times. Across the country, park and trail systems experienced increased demand, and many states responded with significant new investments.
- ▶ **New Research:** In a systematic review, the [Community Preventive Services Task Force](#) found a significant increase in physical activity related to parks, greenways, and trails when they are paired with at least one other intervention – community engagement, structured programs, public awareness, and/or access enhancements. Safe Routes to Parks is a programmatic way to leverage that research in communities.

In this context, the Safe Routes to Parks program was a timely opportunity to identify how to address systems so that planning, funding, and policies can all support safe, equitable, and convenient access to everyday destinations.



## How We Make Systems Change Tangible and Actionable to Improve Park Access

Here is an example of how we identified specific goals and strategies to address elements of systems change that we could cultivate through our one-on-one technical assistance calls with program participants. We listed expected outcomes, along with their potential indicator, and then prioritized a list of skills to help cultivate among program participants.

### Example of a Systems Change Goal

#### Relationships/ Connections

**Goal:** By project conclusion, participating organizations, their partners, and community members will have the skills and knowledge to improve the quality of connections and communication occurring between government agencies and community members.

Relationship/Connections Outcomes and Indicators	
Outcomes	Evidenced by
Participants are guided by continuous communication with community members about their needs and desires throughout the four phases of the <b>Safe Routes to Parks Framework</b> .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Participant is holding multiple engagement opportunities throughout the process of assessment, planning, implementation, and sustainability.</li> </ul>
Participant is making decisions and prioritizing next steps based on authentic engagement with community members.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Established lines of communication between community leadership and government agencies.</li> <li>▶ Set process for how government agencies can select meaningful engagement strategies appropriate to each project.</li> </ul>
A mutually beneficial relationship between community leadership and government agencies that handle parks and the routes to them so that these lines of communication do not have to be rebuilt for each individual project.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ The number of points in a typical/template project timeline where community members engaged.</li> <li>▶ Increased funding allocated specifically for community engagement.</li> <li>▶ Increased opportunities for engagement reported by community members.</li> </ul>

#### Program participants and their partners will increase their ability to:

- ✓ Facilitate community engagement activities that bring together community members, other stakeholders, and government staff to build relationships and understanding of community priorities.
- ✓ Build and maintain sustainable, mutually beneficial relationships between community members and city staff and foster the community's leadership to own that connection.
- ✓ Identify where community leaders can connect to formal conversations, coalitions, and other groups that are working on public health, active transportation, and other issues related to Safe Routes to Parks.
- ✓ Encourage (and compensate) leadership in the community to actively communicate with their neighbors about the work, act as liaisons, and build relationships and connections with residents to increase safety in and access to parks.
- ✓ Identify champions within government staff and build trust between those champions and community members.



## Applying this Concept

To help ground all of this in tangible projects, we have included profiles from local-level Safe Routes to Parks grantees with notes about some of the areas of systems change that they addressed as part of their projects (whether they were thinking about it that way or not).

### Safe Routes to Parks Tactical Urbanism in Birmingham, Alabama (VIDEO)

This video highlights a pop-up bike lane demonstration project in the historic neighborhoods of Titusville and Smithfield of Birmingham, Alabama to show how bike lanes could be utilized to connect to local parks and green spaces.

- ▶ **Partnerships:** Community residents, leaders, bike share operators, and the City of Birmingham came together to plan and implement this demonstration project.
- ▶ **Community Engagement and Practices:** Survey results from the demonstration project showed interest and demand to make a bike lane permanent on Center Street. This made the case to the Department of Transportation who restriped the street to make this a permanent bike lane.
- ▶ **Shifting Perceptions and Beliefs:** Some community members who used the pop-up bike lane had not ridden a bike since they were a kid! By trying out this safer, more comfortable route, they could envision biking as a way to get to their local parks.



### Safe Routes to Cully Park in Portland, Oregon (VIDEO)

This video features community members in the Cully Neighborhood of Portland, Oregon installing a wayfinding system to incorporate maps, signs, and community art that resonates with and is designed by the people of color and low-income communities within the neighborhood.

- ▶ **Community engagement:** Living Cully, the lead organization, hosted a workshop on wayfinding and community members worked with bilingual artists to identify symbols that could represent each park. They engaged youth and family members to get broad input on routes to and from Cully Park.
- ▶ **Shifting Perceptions and Beliefs:** Living Cully hosted a total of 21 events to engage community members on routes and wayfinding to Cully Park, inviting people to be part of this co-creative process helped build community ownership and stewardship.



### Safe Routes to Apple Valley Park in Paonia, Colorado

Photos show how a community walk audit in Paonia brought together seniors, families with young kids, and teachers in this small town. Community members voiced a need for safe routes that include ADA-accessible routes for people using a wheelchair and slower car speeds on local streets with no sidewalks so teachers can safely shepherd their tiny students to the nearby park for play and learning.

- ▶ **Plans & Policies:** Paonia included Safe Routes to Parks as part of the Transportation Element in their Town's 2024 Comprehensive Plan update, looking to model policy language that aligned with the needs of a rural community. The town council also approved lowering speed limits near parks to 15mph and worked with partners to install signs and elevate awareness of these lower speed limits.
- ▶ **Shifting Perceptions and Beliefs:** Partners at the Nature Connection and Western Slope Conservation Center worked with town staff to install a painted walking and biking lane using paint and planters. They wanted to showcase that biking and walking projects do not mean “over-building” the town in a robust (and expensive) network of sidewalks and bike lanes as some residents fear, but could also include simple ways to improve everyday routes.





Community members taking notes. Photo by Tammie Mack



Walk audits can engage people of all ages. Photo by Tammie Mack



Using large sticky pads often helps capture ideas. Photo by Tammie Mack



Use different modes of transportation to better understand the space. Photo by Tammie Mack



Safety vests help participants be seen during the event. Photo by Tammie Mack



Taking data. Photo by Tammie Mack

Changing a system is a big task, but we can all contribute to shifting our communities to be more just, safe, and connected by addressing elements of the systems around us. Safe Routes to Parks is one tangible way to do that work!

**[To get started, check out our five tips to get started on Safe Routes to Parks.](#)**

