Fact Sheet

Safe Routes PARTNERSHIP

Try Before You Buy:
How Pop-up Projects Lead to Big-time Investments

Looking for a cost-effective, high-impact way to create safe routes in your community? Pop-up projects might be your solution!

These temporary, low-cost initiatives are not only faster and more flexible to implement compared to permanent infrastructure, but they can also generate support for further investments that improve conditions for people biking and walking.

Pop-up projects can quickly and inexpensively show how relatively small-scale changes improve safety and accessibility while sparking excitement, drawing attention, and drumming up community interest, leading to funding broader-scale permanent changes.

This fact sheet will cover how to use pop-up projects to build support and attract funding for infrastructure improvements. For information on how to plan and install the actual pop-up projects, read Tactical Urbanism and Safe Routes to School.

Painting bulb-outs Credit: Blue Zone Hawaii

What Is a Pop-Up Project?

Short-Term, Low-Cost, and Sanctioned!

This fact sheet focuses on installations using removable materials that alter the roadway to improve safety such as temporary crosswalks, curb extensions, and roundabouts. These are also referred to as "demonstration" or "quick-build" projects. For simplicity, we'll call them "pop-up" projects, which fall under the same umbrella of tactical urbanism - the practice of temporarily making public spaces more walkable, bikeable, attractive, and useful.

The key hallmarks of pop-up projects are that they are short-term, flexible, low-cost, and inclusive of the community in their design and implementation. Because of their semi-permanent nature, pop-up projects use (or reuse!) more affordable materials and can save on project costs because they take less time to assess, permit, and install. Even better, these projects can become permanent solutions and stay in place if they prove successful in yielding their intended safety benefits.

If you are familiar with pop-up projects, you may know that sometimes these can be unsanctioned actions led by frustrated community members to draw attention to an issue. While some tactical urbanists prefer a rogue "ask for forgiveness, not permission" approach, many advocates have found that permission and approval are of utmost importance, especially if a permanent project is the end goal. By involving key decision-makers—such as city officials or the mayor—from the outset, you can get them invested in both the process and the community support for the project. This collaboration can pave the way for lasting, impactful changes that benefit the entire community.

Three Key Tips to Take your Pop-Up Project from Temporary to Permanent

This fact sheet is divided into three main sections. Each section reviews a strategy to maximize the impact of your pop-up project.

- ➔ Engage decision-makers
- ➔ Identify and broadcast a focused, unified message
- ➔ Collect and share both stories and numbers

Community members paint curb extensions.
Credit: Mamta Popat Living Streets Alliance

Tip 1. Engage Decision-Makers

To leverage a pop-up project as a stepping stone toward larger, longer-term investment, it's essential to engage decision-makers early and often. There are many different community partners that you should include in these projects, but to unlock funding for future projects, we are focusing on formal government decision-makers who control where transportation infrastructure gets built: lawmakers, elected officials, and public agency staff. That's because they have a crucial role in deciding where funding goes. Decision-makers create and approve policies, plans, and resolutions that declare priority goals in their communities. They then direct staff to execute action items to help them achieve those goals. Key opportunities for funding and project implementation show up in documents such as street design policies, active transportation plans, and capital improvement plans, to name a few.

How a Pop-Up Project Can Help Decision-Makers

Most simply, pop-up projects help connect the dots for decision-makers: community need + possible solution! Here's how pop-up projects can be beneficial.

Better Understand Community Priorities

Decision-makers are often juggling multiple community issues. Pop-up projects are a valuable community engagement tool, helping to elevate important issues that may not otherwise be on their radar. They give decision-makers a clearer picture of what matters most to the community.

Walk audit in Paonia, CO
Credit: Tammie Meck

Clarify the Potential Impacts of a Future Project

Change can be hard, and pop-up projects can help to demonstrate the viability of approaches that may otherwise be a hard sell for decision-makers and community members. For instance, reducing a lane of travel to make space for people walking and biking or trying out new approaches to slow down cars can easily draw opposition. Pop-up projects can show the positive impacts of those changes despite some initial reservations. It can also help community members feel like they are part of the solution rather than having something imposed upon them.

Bike to City Hall, Shawnee Family YMCA

Consider Different Approaches and Be Solution-Oriented

Pop-up projects can inspire new ideas or ways of thinking to identify solutions. Because they are so tangible, they make abstract solutions more visible and easier to understand for both community members and decision-makers. This hands-on approach can lead to more innovative thinking and problem-solving.

Test Out What Works Before Making Big, Permanent Investments

One of the biggest benefits of pop-up projects is their flexibility. These temporary, low-cost interventions can be tested and iterated, allowing decision-makers to try out alternative solutions without significant investments upfront. That helps decision-makers be efficient stewards of public resources while also increasing the likelihood of community support.

Take Actions That Move the Needle for Safe Routes

When decision-makers can see broad community support for a particular solution, it can be a powerful motivator to take action. Pop-ups can serve as proof of concept, encouraging decision-makers to approve funding or plans for walking and biking projects.

Primos-Council Boulder, CO

Map Out Your Decision-Makers

Brainstorm a list of decision-makers you would like to engage in your pop-up project. Work with your project team to answer the following questions.

- **What do you know about this person(s) group?** Consider what they value, what motivates them, and what causes they support.
- **What additional information would be helpful to know?** Identify gaps in your knowledge that could inform your approach.
- **Who else might offer valuable insight?** Think about stakeholders, partners, or community members who could give you advice on the best way to engage a decision-maker.
- **Who would be a compelling messenger to engage this decision-maker?** Based on what they care about, consider who in your community could help influence or engage them.

To map these relationships, consider using a community power map- a visual tool to help you identify individuals, organizations, or institutions that could impact the outcome of your project. This Power Mapping 101 resource can help you strategically identify who to engage to advance long-term change

How to Identify and Connect with Decision-Makers

There are a lot of ways to use a pop-up project. You may want to draw attention to an unsafe intersection where kids cross to school, test out potential roadway re-designs on a street that is scheduled to be re-paved or slow traffic adjacent to a community park. Whatever your goal, get clear about what you hope the end result might be. This will help you determine which decision-maker(s) you need to engage.

Identify the Right Decision-Makers

To achieve the change you are advocating for, it is crucial to connect with those who have the authority to approve, implement or fund your project. Typically, this involves city planners, transportation agencies, or local government officials. Below are some key types of decision-makers you'll likely need to involve.

- Local Elected Officials: City council members, mayors, or your town's equivalent body or commission.
- Town or Municipal Staff and Planners: Urban or community planners, transportation engineers, and public works staff who handle the day-to-day implementation of projects.
- Transportation and Safety Committees: Local advisory boards or committees focused on transportation, public safety, or community development.
- State or Regional Transportation Staff: In some cases, state or regional officials may be involved if the project affects state-owned roads or highways.

Do Your Research

Once you know who to engage, take time to research what matters to them. Understand their priorities, past projects they've supported, and any positions they've taken that will give you insights into how to approach them effectively. Consider attending public meetings that the decision-maker attends, conducting online research to see what policies they have approved, or connect with others who have worked with them.

Understand Their Values

As you do your research, see if you can understand what drives your decision-makers. For instance, are they passionate about safety, cost-savings, supporting local businesses, or youth? Understanding what motivates them can help you frame your project in a way that aligns with their values.

Align Your Goals with Theirs

Once you have gained insight into your decision-maker's priorities, think about how your project can support their objectives. For example, if a decision-maker is focused on safety for youth, you can position your pop-up project as a way to improve safety in school zones. If they prioritize economic development, emphasize how your project would encourage more people to visit and support locally-owned shops.

Ribbon cutting with council Boulder, CO

Ways to Engage Decision-Makers in the Project

Planning a pop-up is exciting, and while there might be many details to track, it's important to keep decision-makers engaged along the way. By involving them early and throughout the process, you can help build support and ensure everyone is aligned. Figure 1 provides ideas for integrating decision-makers into each stage of your pop-up project to help you keep up the momentum and create a shared sense of ownership along the way.

Before

- Invite to community events (ex. walk audit, walk to school, etc.)
- Schedule a meeting and bring along partners
- Present the pop-up concept and solicit feedback
- Determine project approval
- Send a press release and ask to provide a quote

Alta Planning and Design 3 - Coalinga CA

During

- Ribbon-cutting
- Speaking opportunity
- Photo-op
- Issue a proclamation
- Volunteer
- Invite media

Bike Jeffco City of Wheat Ridge

After

- Send a thank you
- Debrief the project and outcomes
- Share photos and data
- Ask them to share via newsletter, social media, etc.
- Follow-up on your big ask

Scranton, PA partners review safety solutions

Figure 1: Here are ideas to engage decision-makers before, during, and after a pop-up project. Add these tasks to your project to-dos so they don't take a back seat.

Tip 2. Craft and Broadcast a Focused, Unified Message

Spend time working on a concise and specific message that you and key partners can consistently share when you talk about your project. If the end goal is permanent infrastructure, reinforcing a key message will keep that goal center stage. Align your message with the values you've identified earlier when engaging with your decision-maker and select the best messengers to pair with that particular message. For example, if their priority is economic development, work with local small business owners to amplify your message.

Coach Partners on the Message

Coordinate with partners to craft a concise and compelling message that everyone can easily deliver. This requires preparing talking points, practicing with community members, and selecting spokespeople to serve as points of contact for the media. Work with your partners to identify the most suitable messenger for the particular opportunity – whether it is a public meeting, a quote for a press release, or another platform - and clearly define their role as a messenger. Being thoughtful about who delivers the message is a way to highlight to decision-makers broader community support for a project, especially by members who may be most impacted by it. For instance, messengers may include community members who will feel the project's effects such as youth, seniors, people with disabilities, or others who would otherwise benefit from the improvement. Support your spokespeople, especially if they are new to public speaking or media engagement, so they can confidently deliver the message.

Here are ways community members can share a message.

- Speak at a public meeting
- Interviews with media
- Quote for a press release
- Write a blog post or op-ed
- Display signage

For example, in Little Rock, Arkansas, the coalition working on a demonstration of a bike and pedestrian lane crafted the message: "This lane is for people." This message emphasized how people could safely use the space, regardless of whether they were walking, biking, or rolling, rather than labeling it specifically as bike infrastructure, which might have sparked controversy. Read more about their demonstration project and how they leveraged it for nearly $1 million to make a walking and rolling lane permanent.

Pop-up road diet, Little Rock

CASE STUDY

Pop-Up Crosswalks Secure $1.3 Million for Safety in Scranton, Pennsylvania

Pop-up crosswalks installed on Halloween were a game changer for pedestrian safety on Main Avenue. Television coverage from three local news networks, with interviews from local businesses and family members highlighted needed safety improvements on Main Avenue year-round, not just on Halloween.

Families also shared their impressions of the pop-up improvements on a simple feedback board set up during the event, an interactive experience get direct feedback from community members.

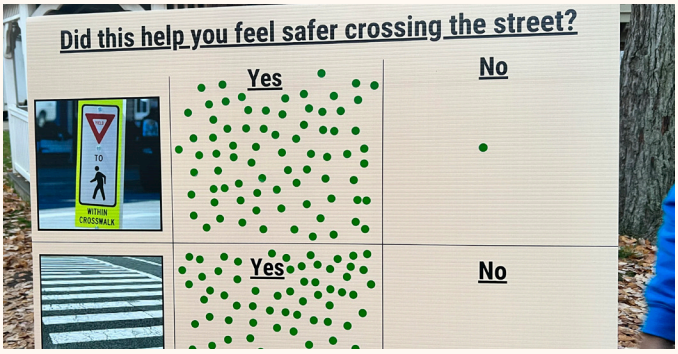
The city, motivated by the overwhelmingly positive response, approved $750,000 of American Rescue Plan funds for a comprehensive streetscape project on Main Avenue, including rehabilitation of roadways, sidewalks, crosswalks, streetlights, landscaping, and other features designed to enhance health and safety along the corridor.

The city also approved $475,000 for 78 crosswalk enhancements and 27 intersection improvements across Scranton. Additionally, the state department of transportation helped the community develop a strong application for state funding to improve the state-owned section of the roadway which resulted in $104,000 for safety upgrades on Main Avenue (including high-visibility crosswalks).

This pop-up paved the way for future improvements and demonstrated the power of community and decisionmakers working together.

Here is the core message.

- The Hook: We need safe streets for our kids – on Halloween and every day. Hundreds of kids walk Main Avenue on Halloween, but we need to ensure it's safe for them year-round.
- The Message: Main Avenue is one of the most dangerous corridors in Pennsylvania for people walking. There are proven solutions that can make it safer for everyone! This pop-up demonstrates a few of those safety interventions that can help make sure kids (and adults) can travel safely here.
- The Messengers: Families and local business owners – key community voices in West Scranton.
- The Delivery: A press release distributed to local media outlets, along with televised news coverage of the pop-up event and community interviews of parents and local shop owners. During the event, QR codes on signs and printed pamphlets conveyed key messages about how enhancing Main Avenue would improve safety and foster economic development. The materials also provided supporting research, highlighting the benefits of safety measures such as high-visibility crosswalks.



Scranton, Pennsylvania

Craft Your Message

Identify a focused message you want to convey to the decision-maker about this project based on their values. Many different common values can bridge the gap between pop-up projects and the values of decision-makers such as innovation, education, safety, economic development, and fiscal responsibility, to name a few. For example, if your council member has a stated goal of improving the quality of life in their district, you could convey how a pop-up can lead to calmer traffic speeds and more people out walking and connecting with one another. Alternatively, if economic development is a priority, you might demonstrate how more walkable, vibrant spaces attract more people to spend time and money. You can also connect your pop-up project to existing commitments or plans such as Vision Zero or Complete Streets, as a way to center it in ongoing community-supported efforts. Being able to clearly tie your project to those values can go a long way to making your project feel relevant to them. Start by considering the following questions.

- **What is the core takeaway you want people to remember?** Try starting from one word that embodies the benefits of the project like safety, community, freedom.

_____

_____

_____

_____

- **Who would be the most effective messenger?** Think about a trusted local figure – whether it's a community leader, a small business owner, or an influential resident – who can speak authentically about the positive impact of the project.

_____

_____

_____

_____

- **How should the message be delivered?** Use compelling stories, real-life examples, and visuals to illustrate how the pop-up benefits the community. Consider leveraging social media, community meetings, and local newsletters to spread the message in ways that resonate with the decision-maker's priorities.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Tip 3. Collect and Share Both Stories and Numbers

Stories are what change hearts and minds, and data can convey that the stories reflect a broader community experience, not just isolated events.

Tell Your Story

When using data for storytelling, you don't have to do anything overly complicated or publish a peer-reviewed study. You are using data to support a compelling, clear narrative that bolsters the goals of your pop-up project.

Using either quantitative (numbers) and qualitative (descriptive) data – or a combination of both - can provide insight into the issues and possible solutions. Some of the best stories use both types of data. Regardless of what kind of data you decide to use, start by establishing what questions you want to answer.

Here are examples of ways to collect stories from community members.

- Creative activities that help community members articulate concerns and their vision for solutions.
- Story collection of experiences of people most impacted by the issues such as youth, communities of color, or people with disabilities -to ensure their voices are central.
- Coordinating on-the-ground observations of safety concerns with community members to collect real-time, observable issues that inform the narrative.

Determine How You Will Measure Impact

Pop-ups are the perfect tool for evaluating impact! They provide a unique opportunity to measure specific tactics and understand what's working (or not). For example, does narrowing the lane slow down traffic speeds? Do cars park further from crosswalks when there is paint on the ground? A pop-up can help you test these changes in real-time.

You can also get insight into what people think about these changes. Do kids and older adults feel safer when the crosswalk distance is shortened with curb bump-outs? You can ask them through a survey in tandem with the pop-up.

Evaluation doesn't have to be complicated. You can think about evaluation as a way to collect both numbers and personal stories that show the impact of a project and why it matters. There are three stages of evaluation: baseline evaluation, process evaluation, and outcome evaluation.

Figure 2 defines each phase and what you can do during each to set yourself up for success.

Birmingham, AL pop up bike lane with rider

Evaluation from beginning to end

Curb extension Credit: Mamta Popat Living Streets Alliance Tucson

Baseline Evaluation

Early project planning, part of community outreach

- Understand exisiting problems
- Refine project design based on the community input
- Provide a basis for comparison

Process Evaluation

Throughout project planning and implementation

- Identify gaps and opportunities to improve project planning and implementation
- Ensure community engagement is reaching the people you want to reach (adjust if not)

Outcome Evaluation

Immediately following project implementation

- Demonstrate outcomes of projects compared to baseline
- Generate support and make the case for future improvements

Figure 2: This diagram defines three stages of evaluation – baseline, process, and outcome.

Plan How You Will Gather Information to Tell the Story of Your Project

To tell the story of your project, think about how you will collect and present the information. These guiding questions can help shape your approach.

- Who do you need to tell this story to? (e.g. Elected officials, media, parents) What information do you need to show the original problem? The success of the project?
- What types of data could you try to collect at each phase of the project?
  - Baseline: How will you capture the conditions before the project begins?
  - Process: How was the project implemented and what did you learn along the way?
  - Outcome: What are the results or impacts after the project was completed?
- Who might have the data you need? For instance, crash data, bicycle or pedestrian counts, and speed data may be available from sources like the city's traffic department, school districts, or local law enforcement.

For ideas on how to gather data during each phase, check out What Gets Measured Gets Managed: A Step-by-Step Guide to Evaluating Safe Routes Projects from Beginning to End.

CASE STUDY

Community-Driven Data Collection Makes a Case for Safety

In Wenatchee, Washington, families did not feel safe walking with their children to the local park. To better understand the context, community residents conducted intersection observations to count the number of cars that came to complete stops at stop signs near the park. Of the 91 cars they observed for one hour, a full 78 of them did not come to a complete stop at the stop signs. So, they decided to work with the city to install flashing LED lights at the stop signs to draw attention to these signs and hopefully improve safety for people walking around this intersection. Following the installation of the LED flashing stop signs, 115 cars were observed, and 86 cars came to a complete stop; a dramatic improvement from before. Those numbers bolstered their case as they advocated for other safety improvements across the city.

Making the Change Last

You have engaged decision-makers, demonstrated the value of your pop-up, and gathered data to show the impact. The next step is to ensure that changes don't end after the installation. Here are a few tips to ensure your project can grow into a lasting change.

Present the Project Impacts to Decision-Makers

Make sure to follow up and present your data, community testimonials, and the long-term benefits with people who can help turn temporary changes into lasting ones. This could include presenting your project findings during a meeting with decision-makers such as a council meeting, an advisory committee meeting, or a school board meeting. See how you might connect this project to existing plans or policies to increase the likelihood of institutionalizing these changes.

For instance, in Birmingham, Alabama, after advocates worked with the city to install and collect community feedback on a pop-up bike lane, they used the data to demonstrate the demand and effectiveness of the lane. Bridging data from this project to the city's recently adopted Complete Streets Ordinance, they garnered support from local leaders who adopted a new internal practice to evaluate city streets scheduled for re-pavement for potential bike lane installation. Read Making Complete Streets a Reality in Birmingham, AL to learn more.

Case Study: Scranton

Leverage the Data You've Collected to Apply for Funding

Use the evidence you've gathered—whether it's improved safety, positive community feedback, or increased engagement—as a foundation for securing additional funding. By leveraging the data and community involvement from your project, you can craft a compelling proposal that positions your project as a proven success and highlights its potential for broader impact.

In Little Rock, Arkansas, the community coalition behind a pop-up walk-and-roll lane project used the bicycle and pedestrian counts collected from the demonstration along with survey feedback from community members to work with their city partners on a successful proposal for a $1 million Transportation Alternatives Program grant. The data, combined with the demonstrated community support and coalition building, played a key role in helping them secure the funding needed to scale up the walk-and-roll lane and make it a permanent infrastructure improvement.

Highlight Project as Proof-Of-Concept and Its Broader Impact

Use your data to show the wider benefits and present it as a model for other parts of town, or to routes connecting to schools, parks, or other key destinations. By positioning your project as a scalable success, you can attract additional partners, funding, and political support.

For instance, in Scranton, Pennsylvania, the success of a pop-up crosswalk demonstration did more than highlight the need for improved pedestrian safety for Main Avenue. It sparked broader conversations about walkability across the city. By showcasing the intervention—high-visibility crosswalks—alongside their typical installation cost and supporting research on their effectiveness, local advocates made a compelling case to decision-makers. This low-cost solution was not only feasible but also scalable, making it a practical option for permanent crosswalk enhancements across Scranton.

Hayti Heritage Center, Durham, NC

Conclusion

Communities across the country are using pop-up projects to showcase what is possible to make it easier, safer, and more attractive to walk, bike, and roll throughout communities. You can leverage pop-up projects to advance longer-term changes by engaging decision-makers from the start, crafting a focused message, and using data to tell a story that illustrates its impact.

Safe Routes PARTNERSHIP

The Safe Routes Partnership

The mission of the Safe Routes Partnership is to advance safe walking and rolling to and from schools and in everyday life, improving the health and well-being of people of all races, income levels, and abilities, and building healthy, thriving communities for everyone.