Exploring Northwest Roanoke: Enhancing Walkability in a Historically Disadvantaged Community

The Northwest quadrant of Roanoke has been shaped by a history of racial inequities and disinvestment, which continues to impact economic and health outcomes. With an average household income of $40,000 and 40% of residents living below the federal poverty line, the area faces high rates of food insecurity and limited healthcare access. Transportation access remains a significant barrier, as 28% of households in the area do not own a vehicle (Northwest Roanoke Food Access Initiative, 2017). For these residents, walkable and bikeable infrastructure is critical to connecting them with essential services, jobs, and educational opportunities. However, the existing pedestrian environment suffers from poor sidewalk conditions, high traffic speeds, and inadequate lighting, making walking and biking both difficult and unsafe. The Virginia Walkability Action Institute (VWAI) awarded funding and resources to Roanoke's team to tackle these challenges through inclusive community engagement and placemaking efforts.

Team:

The initiative was led by the Roanoke City Alleghany Health Department, in collaboration with the City of Roanoke, the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission, the regional office of the Virginia Department of Health, and the Carilion Clinic.

Goals and Vision:

- Improve walkability and safety in Northwest Roanoke, making the area more accessible for pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit users
- Strengthen community engagement in health, safety, and wellness, prioritizing resident-led feedback
- Ensure key resources like Melrose Plaza, Kennedy Park, and nearby community centers are well-connected through safe walkways and transit access
- Engage community members in the walkability planning process, addressing past concerns and ensuring improvements align with local needs

Background:

This project focused on Northwest Roanoke, particularly around the Melrose Avenue and 24th Street corridors. Within this area lies Melrose Plaza, an emerging neighborhood hub initiated by Goodwill Industries, including a grocery store, wellness center, financial services, and a library. With the support of the VWAI, this project sought to enhance walkability, ensuring that residents—especially those without access to personal vehicles—can safely and easily reach these vital resources.

In collaboration with Goodwill Industries' Melrose Plaza development, the project team facilitated community outreach through surveys, focus groups, and town halls. Additionally, the team organized a road safety assessment, commissioned by the joint collaboration of the Virginia Department of Health and the Virginia Department of Transportation through their Prioritizing Active Transportation, Health and Safety (PATHS) initiative. The project also implemented infrastructure upgrades including a new sidewalk, crosswalk and ADA accessible bus infrastructure. To foster a safe and inviting environment for walking, the infrastructural upgrades also included a street mural designed by local children. The mural served as a traffic calming measure, slowing vehicular speeds and connecting pedestrians to essential services. By visually transforming Lansdowne Street, the project increased pedestrian safety and aesthetically enriched the environment. These efforts led to the installation of an Asphalt Art Project along the Salem Turnpike, connecting the largest housing authority site in the city to the resources of the Melrose Plaza.

Outcomes and Impact:

- Meaningful engagement through surveys, listening sessions, and awareness events, ensuring that community voices influenced the project's direction
- Pedestrian and transit safety improvements including ADA-accessible sidewalks, upgraded bus infrastructure, a high-visibility crosswalk, and a Rectangular Rapid Flashing Beacon (RRFB) for safer crossing
- Collaboration around the beautification of a community corridor
- Inspiring ongoing pedestrian and transit safety improvements, centering community and tactical urbanism in expanding walkability and public health efforts

Lansdowne Street Aerial view.

Volunteers work on curb extensions to slow car speeds.