

Moving Matters: Creating Safer, More Accessible Environments for Physical Activity in Cook County

Summary of the Sawtooth Mountain Clinic's Work through the Active Living for All Initiative

In 2013, the Sawtooth Mountain Clinic was one of nine projects to receive funding from the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota (Blue Cross) through the Active Living for All (ALfA) initiative. All ALfA-funded organizations aimed to increase opportunities for physical activity in their community through policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) changes. With ALfA funding, the Sawtooth Mountain Clinic launched Moving Matters, a countywide project to create safer and more accessible walking and biking routes in the community. The cornerstone of this work was a community visioning process that influenced the redesign for a portion of State Highway 61 (Highway 61) that runs through Grand Marais and is as a main thoroughfare in the community. Through ALfA, Moving Matters also developed a placemaking initiative, supported other infrastructure projects, and advocated for more robust community engagement efforts and the inclusion of health as a priority in planning processes. This summary describes Moving Matters' work under ALfA during the past five years, including accomplishments, factors that contributed to success, project challenges, and plans for the future.

Key accomplishments

Facilitating a community visioning process to inform the redesign of the Highway 61 corridor in Grand Marais. The main focus of Moving Matters' work during the ALfA initiative was a community visioning process for a corridor of Highway 61 stretching through the community. The idea for the project came about during an active living summit held in 2011 where community members raised concerns about safety and accessibility along the corridor. Over the course of 2014-2015, Moving Matters worked with two contractors and the city administrator to lead a Streetscape Design Process to engage residents in envisioning what the corridor could look like. This process included three community meetings attended by over 50 residents, an online feedback platform, one-on-one meetings with local businesses, and a health impact assessment (HIA) about the expected health and safety impacts of the redesign. The project was awarded \$600,000 in

Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) funding in 2015 to move forward with construction, and it was the top-rated project in the pool of applicants, attributed to the strong community engagement process and the HIA. In 2018, the city council voted to provide municipal consent on the project, and construction on the corridor is expected to begin in 2019. The newly designed corridor will include fully connected bike and pedestrian infrastructure, traffic calming measures including narrower roads and high visibility crosswalks, and public art. A more detailed description of the project is available in the Wilder Research report, “Revisioning Highway 61: Lessons Learned from a Community-engaged Process to Make Walking and Biking Safer and More Accessible in Grand Marais.”



The current Highway 61 corridor



Flyer from the Great Place Project

Establishing a countywide placemaking initiative. In 2014, Moving Matters launched the Great Place Project, a placemaking initiative in collaboration with the Cook County Chamber of Commerce. In the first year of the initiative, 16 nonprofits, local businesses, and community residents receiving grants totaling \$11,930 to design and produce small-scale additions to the local environment. Projects included murals, benches, planters, bike racks, and picnic areas throughout the county and Grand Portage. Moving Matters and the Chamber of Commerce hosted a second Great Place Project in 2015, funding 13 projects. In the third year, the Chamber took over as the lead agency to ensure the project’s sustainability, and since then an additional 49 projects have been funded across the county.

Advocating for consideration of health impacts and community engagement in planning processes. Moving Matters has influenced a number of planning processes over the course of the initiative, including:

- **The County Land Use Guide Plan and Comprehensive Trail Plans.** In its second year of work, Moving Matters provided a review and recommendations about how to strengthen bike and pedestrian infrastructure in the transportation section of the plan, some of which were eventually included in the final plan. Moving Matters also participated in the planning process for the County Comprehensive Trail Plan, advocating for the inclusion of connections between local trail systems and in-town pedestrian and bicyclist infrastructure.
- **Gitchi Gami State Trail connections.** Moving Matters facilitated a public input process for the Gitchi Gami State Trail connection in Tofte in partnership with Arrowhead Regional Development Commission. The new trail connections are expected to be built in 2018-2019.
- **The City of Grand Marais's Comprehensive Plan.** Moving Matters has been actively supporting the City's comprehensive planning process. Through Moving Matters' involvement, the City released a request for proposals requiring the planning process include a strong community engagement focus, an emphasis on nontraditional approaches, and the formation of a citizen steering committee. Moving Matters also worked with the City and the consultant to incorporate health into all aspects of the planning process, including hosting a Health in All Policies and Healthy Comprehensive Planning summit with City staff. The plan will be finalized in 2019.

In addition to these efforts, Moving Matters contributed to a number of other changes in the community including:

- Installing two bike maintenance stations at City Hall and the local YMCA
- Installing two speed feedback signs in school zones in Grand Portage and Tofte
- Improving several sidewalk connections between the hospital and clinic, schools, a public housing complex, and senior housing in Grand Marais, and developing a "walk and talk" trail at a local school
- Holding the What the Health?! Summit, which provided an opportunity for over 130 elected officials, city staff, and community members to discuss links between health and policy
- Developing a Women's Leadership Program, with 16 participants committing to a personal leadership goal and a community health goal
- Working with the City, Cook County, MnDOT, and local committees to develop a Grand Marais Pedestrian Plan

Factors that contributed to success

Moving Matters was committed to ensuring that projects reflected the community vision and values. Much of Moving Matters' work has had a place-based focus. Early on, the Highway 61 project faced some resistance from residents who were concerned the project was being imposed on them by institutions outside of their community and would not reflect local values. As part of the Streetscape Design Process, Moving Matters and MnDOT began with a community conversation about community values, as well as concerns and hopes for the future. Project representatives felt that beginning with this discussion and engaging in ongoing reflection about how the project reflected community values was instrumental in building trust and support. A project staff member noted, "In the early days we had to figure out how to make this work for here. It's always been locally led." Likewise, the Great Places project focused on ideas from local residents to make Cook County a great place to live, work, and stay.

Effective use of online and social media helped build awareness and increased transparency. Moving Matters hired a communications specialist early on, and used social media and online platforms to provide project updates, gather resident input, and build momentum for their work. They developed a website and YouTube channel, where they posted promotional videos about the Great Place Project and other events, as well as video recordings of meetings for the Highway 61 project. They also used YouTube ads to promote meetings, and the online public feedback platform resulted in over 100 comments about the Highway 61 project. In addition, Moving Matters developed the "This is Health" communications campaign with a hashtag (#ThisIsHealth) and posters showing the many ways communities can support health. Project stakeholders noted that using social and online media in this way was a new approach for their community but increased transparency and built enthusiasm for their work.



Flyer for a public meeting during the Streetscape Design Process



Poster from the “This is Health” campaign

Using creative engagement strategies helped build community interest in projects. In addition to its communication efforts, Moving Matters used a variety of engagement strategies to reach residents in new and innovative ways. Examples include a series of Planning Thru Play workshops, the Great Place Project, and walkability workshops. The “This is Health” campaign also included a summit engaging elected officials, city staff, and community members that included a performance by the Theater of Public Policy, an improvisational theater group that integrates improv and discussion of community issues. Of the Great Places Project in particular, a project staff member noted, “The ability to test out more things and really respond to community interest and identified needs has been really a part of the success and what I’m proud of.”

Bringing in a wide variety of partners helped Moving Matters leverage new skills and resources. Project stakeholders acknowledged the critical role of support from various agencies and partners throughout the process. An early connection with a MnDOT staff person provided a roadmap for developing a community engagement process that would position the project for TAP funding, and the two design and engineering consultants were also critical in early design and engagement efforts. A partnership with a University of Minnesota researcher provided Moving Matters with the skills and expertise to do bike and pedestrian counts. Project stakeholders also mentioned the importance of support from their project manager from the Center for Prevention, as well as evaluation and communications consultation they received through ALfA funding. Project stakeholders noted these resources and partnerships collectively helped move the project forward and ensure its success.

Developing strategic partnerships will help ensure the sustainability of many of Moving Matters' efforts. Over the course of the initiative, Moving Matters partnered with various public agencies, eventually shifting ownership of several projects to these institutions. For example, in the third year of the Great Places Project, the Cook County Chamber of Commerce assumed leadership of the initiative and is committed to continuing the project in the years to come. Likewise, after TAP funding was secured for the Highway 61 project, the city took over management of the project with continuing consultation and support from Moving Matters. In addition, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency will be conducting a fuel tank clean-up under Highway 61 while the road is under construction. Working with public agencies on community engagement efforts has also led to several agencies taking on that work themselves. Most notably, the City recently hired a Communications Director tasked with public engagement, which is a new role and focus for the City. The individual hired for the position had also worked with Moving Matters on communications and community engagement efforts since its beginning. By working with city departments and local government agencies, Moving Matters has been able to incorporate community input into multiple planning processes and ensure health is prioritized in future projects.

Challenges and lessons learned

Moving Matters sometimes had to balance priorities of the local community and city, county, and state agencies. Grand Marais includes intersections of city streets, a county road, and a state highway. By necessity, planning efforts involve multiple levels of stakeholders, including local partners, who sometimes have different priorities. Early on, Moving Matters faced some resistance from the County about whether some of the active living efforts were the best use of resources. Moving Matters has since been able to build a stronger working relationship with the County, and the County engineer now sits on the Highway 61 Steering Committee. There has been a new level of collaboration between the City and County on other projects, including on the Grand Marais Pedestrian Plan. Both entities also sit on the Highway 61 Steering Committee.

After receiving TAP funding, the project experienced some difficulties with early designs from MnDOT that suggested some misalignment between the community vision and the plans MnDOT was developing. After elevating their concerns to local legislators, Moving Matters was able to convene MnDOT representatives and project stakeholders to work out the differences. New MnDOT staff took over work on the project and took steps to rebuild trust, including starting the Highway 61 Steering Committee. MnDOT staff and project stakeholders have continued to work closely as the plan nears construction.

Moving Matters worked to be responsive to community members' concerns about the Highway 61 project. During the engagement process, residents shared concerns about whether the Highway 61 redesign would reflect community values, as well as impacts of the project on cost of living, parking, emergency vehicle access, and greenspace. The early visioning process focused on values and places that are sacred to the community helped ease some concerns. Targeted outreach, such as scheduling meetings with business owners, helped address specific concerns. Project stakeholders also noted the importance of being transparent about what options are feasible and what sacrifices might need to be made.

Engaging residents in a long-term project that did not have guarantee of full implementation presented some challenges, but Moving Matters developed strategies to manage expectations. Before the Highway 61 project received TAP funding, it was not guaranteed it would actually move forward. Project stakeholders noted the challenges in engaging residents on a project with an uncertain outcome, especially when residents have been asked for input in other planning processes without result. They suggested the importance of being transparent that the project was guaranteed while also clearly defining the steps they were taking to move forward.

Moving Matters staff also worked to keep residents engaged over the multi-year planning process. While five years is a relatively short time in infrastructure projects, it can feel like a long time for residents. Some residents may only become engaged at later dates and may not know the history of the project. To address this issue, project leaders submitted an op-ed to the local newspaper describing the history of the project and its roots in the community visioning process. Project stakeholders suggested the importance of ongoing engagement across project stages using a variety of strategies, but acknowledged that even with the most robust engagement efforts, there will always be residents who are missed or who wait until the final stages of a project to voice concerns.

Moving Matters encountered several staffing changes within the project and among partner organizations, but took steps to ensure smooth transitions for the work to continue. The project lead was a long-time community member and staff member at the Sawtooth Mountain Clinic. During the first few months of work, the partners recognized the need for a policy specialist who understood transportation and land use systems. Staffing was stable for the first three years of the project until the project lead received a Bush Fellowship in 2017. Moving Matters' policy specialist has led the initiative since. Transitions among other partners have also impacted Moving Matters' work, but having stability through the clinic, public agencies, and committees have helped to keep various efforts largely on track. Hiring and retention of staff may be an ongoing challenge for Moving Matters and some of its local partners. Limited housing options and a shortage of child care providers make it difficult for families to move to and stay in the community.

Moving forward

As Moving Matters nears the end of 2018, it is well positioned for many of its efforts to continue. Construction on Highway 61 will begin in 2019 and should be completed in 2020. The Cook County Chamber of Commerce will continue to manage the Great Places Project and seek more sustainable funding for the initiative. Many of the systems changes that Moving Matters helped to put in place, including building the City's capacity for community engagement, have already begun to be institutionalized. The City has shown a greater commitment to community engagement in recent projects through building it into RFPs and hiring a Communications Director who will lead outreach efforts with the community. Relationships between the County and City have also been strengthened, with the County actively participating in the City's pedestrian planning process. Environmental changes, such as sidewalk improvements and trail connections, will be long-term fixtures in the community.

The future of Moving Matters as an entity is up in the air with ALfA funding winding down and the project lead stepping down. However, the Sawtooth Mountain Clinic will continue to lead additional health improvement efforts through the Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) and Safe Routes to School (SRTS) funding. The community recently received several awards, including a Silver Level Bicycle Friendly Community, the smallest community in the nation to be awarded the honor. This award, as well as other recognition the initiative has received, positions community partners well to pursue future funding and opportunities to make it safer and easier for residents to get around.

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451 Lexington Parkway North
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700
www.wilderresearch.org

For more information

For more information about this report, contact
Amanda Hane at Wilder Research, 651-280-2661.

Author: Amanda Hane

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