Strategies that Support Active Living: Using Evaluation in Demonstration Projects

> *[A demonstration project is] kind of an imagination exercise. That's the line I like to use when I am engaging with people. [I'll say,] "Imagine what this would be like in your neighborhood. See that green Astro-turf over there. Is that a community garden? Is that where you walk your dog?" I think it opens up people's reality a little more.*
> *– Active living advocate*

Outdoor spaces can be thoughtfully designed in ways that encourage physical activity and support health. The presence of protected bikeways, adequacy of sidewalk lighting, location and design of parks and other green space, appeal of storefronts, and width of sidewalks are just a few factors that influence how likely residents are to walk or bike in a neighborhood. Demonstration projects are often used to help residents and stakeholders visualize, experience, and experiment with the use of a space. These temporary installments of potential infrastructure changes, such as pop-up bikeways or parks, can be effective tools to:

- Elicit new ideas about the use or design of a space

- Shift perceptions about a particular space or how space can be used

- Build awareness about a proposed change

- Gain the attention of decision makers and other key stakeholders

- Allow decision makers to try a proposed change before supporting it

- Explore whether the proposed change is right for the community

- Raise awareness about community needs and interests

- Create a temporary physical space for residents and other stakeholders to share questions and concerns about the proposed change

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Some demonstration projects are used to inform the final design of a project that is scheduled to take place, creating opportunities for residents to provide input and to identify concerns. Other demonstration projects are used to build awareness, momentum, and support for community changes that may be part of a longer-term plan to change infrastructure. Demonstration projects provide opportunities for residents to experience how changes in the design of community spaces, including streets, parks, plazas, and business districts, can create new opportunities for gathering or physical activity and can help advocates learn about residents' interests and concerns.

Evaluating a demonstration project

Evaluations of demonstration projects can help people envision a different use for a space and measure the likely impact if the change became permanent. Evaluation can be done at many points during a demonstration project. Information collected before the demonstration project begins can show how the space is currently being used and how community residents would like to use the space in the future. Data collected during a demonstration project can be used to make real-time adjustments and to help determine whether the temporary project should be made permanent. Longer term demonstration projects offer opportunities to gather feedback from residents when it is no longer novel and they have had a chance to settle into new routines. Information gathered after the demonstration project can also help identify the strategies that worked well in building awareness of or support for the proposed change.

Some of the types of questions that may be helpful to ask at different stages of the demonstration project are listed below:

Timeline	Questions to ask
Before the demonstration project	How are people using the space? How many people are using the space currently? Who is using the space?
	How do people respond to the current space? What do people like about the space? What do people not like about it? What would they change about the current space? What do they wish was in the space?
During a demonstration project	How has the demonstration project changed who is using the space and how it is being used?
	How are people responding to the demonstration project? What do people like about the demonstration project? What would they change about it?
	How does the new space affect use of the street, including walking, biking, driving, or other activities?
	How does the demonstration project impact traffic, parking, access for emergency vehicles, or snow removal?

Timeline	Questions to ask
During a demonstration project (continued)	How does the demonstration project impact local businesses and organizations? How does the demonstration project impact who is accessing these establishments, and how easily people can access them?
	How does the demonstration project impact awareness of and support for the proposed change?
After the demonstration project	How does the demonstration project affect decision makers' knowledge of community interests and needs? How does the demonstration project impact decision makers' support for the proposed change?
	What strategies worked well in building community awareness and engagement with the space? What strategies were less effective?
	How well did the project engage residents likely to be most impacted by the proposed change?
	How did the feedback that was gathered before and during the project inform use of the space moving forward?
	Did the project lead to long-term change?

Methods of evaluation

Several types of research methods can be used effectively to evaluate demonstration projects. Traditional research methods, such as surveys, focus groups, interviews, or reviews of existing data can be effective tools to gather community input (see page 7 for a brief summary of these approaches). A number of other methods can also be used to engage people in the evaluation and stimulate interest in the results, including:

- **Observational methods, including bike, pedestrian, and traffic counts.** Observational methods capture first-hand data in a real-life setting. These methods are likely to be most effective before or during the demonstration project to consider the project's impact on residents' behaviors, or to identify any adjustments that may need to be made to the layout of the project. Informal observations can be used to describe how people are using the space. To quantify how many people are using the space, formal bike, pedestrian, and traffic counts can be done by trained staff, volunteers, stop action cameras, or traffic counting meters.

- **Participatory approaches.** Creative evaluation approaches that are participatory and visual can be used to understand what residents want to see in a community space or how they experienced the demonstration project. For example, photos taken by residents before a demonstration project is installed can show specific concerns that they would like the space design to address. During a demonstration project, flip-chart paper or white boards and markers can be set up so that residents can draw or write what they would like the new space to include. Alternatively, attendees can vote on different options for the space with color-coded stickers that can be applied to a poster or flip-chart

paper. Storytelling or visioning exercises are other ways groups can imagine how a space could be used differently. Recent technological advances have also created new options for visualizing public spaces and gathering feedback.[1]

Data gathered through more creative evaluation approaches can sometimes be difficult to interpret. However, closely aligning the approach with key evaluation questions and involving residents in the interpretation of the data can help stakeholders understand and use the information gathered.

Choosing the best approach

Often, a number of different evaluation approaches could be used to gather information about a demonstration project (Figure 1). The best evaluation approach is one that is feasible, given the capacity of the organization, and that will gather the information needed to answer key project questions. It is important to consider the time required by residents or other stakeholders to participate, and the capacity of staff and volunteers to gather information. In general, evaluation activities done during a demonstration project should be brief so residents spend their time experiencing the new physical space, rather than participating in an evaluation activity. If more in-depth information is needed, it may be most appropriate to reach out to people at a time before or after they experience the demonstration project. Cultural and language considerations should also be taken into account when choosing the most appropriate method.

1.   Potential methods for evaluating demonstration projects

Evaluation question	Potential evaluation methods
How many people are using the space? Who is using the space? How are people using the space?	Pedestrian/bicycle counts. Observation of people using the space. Photographs taken by residents about how they use the space before the implementation of the demonstration project.
How are people responding to the demonstration project? What do people like about the demonstration project? What would they change about it?	Surveys of people using the space. Drawings and written feedback from attendees. Focus groups or group discussions after the demonstration project.
How does the demonstration project impact who is accessing local businesses and organizations? How does the demonstration project impact how easily people can access these establishments?	Surveys, interviews, or focus groups with representatives from businesses and organizations in the area. Records of revenue before and after the demonstration project is implemented.

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[1]   Owlized (www.owlized.com), an outdoor virtual reality tool, allows users to visually experience different options for public space and provides ways to gather survey data or capture users' comments.

1. Potential methods for evaluating demonstration projects (continued)

Evaluation question	Potential evaluation methods
How does the demonstration project impact awareness of and support for the proposed change?	Surveys of residents who live in the area. Review of media coverage of the demonstration project.
How does the demonstration project affect decision makers' knowledge of community interests and needs? How does the demonstration project impact decision makers' support for the proposed change?	Surveys or interviews with decision makers.
What strategies worked well in building community awareness and engagement with the space? What strategies were less effective?	Surveys, interviews, or focus groups with key stakeholders who were involved in planning and implementing the demonstration project.

Minimizing bias when collecting data

Demonstration projects are often implemented to help residents imagine how to use a space in new ways or to assess the level of support for a proposed change. In order to reflect the interests and priorities of residents, use the following strategies to minimize bias in data collection and clearly describe the limitations of the evaluation approach.

- **Provide opportunities for residents, particularly those most directly impacted by the proposed change, to give both positive and negative feedback about the project.** For example, if residents are asked to share how they think the proposed change will benefit the community, it is important to also ask residents to share concerns they have about the project.

- **Keep questions brief and clear, and avoid professional jargon.** For example, the term "active living" may be an unfamiliar term among residents. Including definitions or pictures can help ensure the questions are being understood in the same way by all residents and community stakeholders.

- **Review and pretest evaluation tools.** Take time to ask a few people to take a survey or review discussion questions to make sure all terms are clearly understood and the approach is culturally appropriate.

- **Recognize the limitations of your approach.** Demonstration projects attract people who have interest in the proposed change and may not reflect the perspectives of the broader community, particularly those most likely to be impacted by the proposed change. When developing an evaluation plan, consider whether the approaches used may exclude any residents and consider and strategies to engage these individuals in the evaluation. Review the data collected to ensure that it is from a group of residents representative of the community that will be impacted by the proposed project and

consider adding new data collection strategies, if needed. When reporting, acknowledge groups whose input may not be well represented and any other factors that may impact the quality of the information gathered.

Sharing findings

A final step in evaluation is reporting the information back to residents and stakeholders, particularly those who shared their input and suggestions. Multiple communication strategies, including written reports, presentations at community meetings, and infographics, may be needed to effectively share results with all stakeholder groups. Communication materials that highlight both the evaluation results and a description of how the information will be used is an important and transparent way to show how resident feedback is being used to inform project decisions.

Final thoughts

Demonstration projects can be a powerful tool in helping residents and stakeholders create spaces that promote health and support active living. With thoughtful planning, strategically collecting data before, during, or after the demonstration project can help ensure that community interests, needs, and priorities are used to inform how spaces are designed.

Brief description of common data collection approaches

The summary highlights examples of observational and participatory evaluation approaches that can be used to evaluate demonstration projects. More traditional evaluation methods, including those highlighted below, can also be used to gather important information before, during, or after a demonstration project:

- **Surveys.** Surveys can be an effective tool to gather information from a large number of stakeholders. Before the demonstration project, staff and volunteers might administer a survey through a door-knocking campaign in the area surrounding the demonstration project to learn about residents' perceptions and use of the space. Short surveys can be completed by people during a demonstration project. An online survey could also be created to get feedback from business owners or decision makers after the project is completed. The survey must be brief and designed with the audience in mind.

- **Key informant interviews.** Key informant interviews are longer interviews conducted in person or by telephone used to collect more in-depth information from stakeholders. This method is likely to be most effective before or after a demonstration project, at a convenient time for the person interviewed. Because key informant interviews are typically done with a small number of stakeholders, it is critical to speak with people who represent diverse perspectives.

- **Focus groups.** Focus groups are facilitated group discussions used to gather detailed feedback about a specific issue. If discussion participants can speak candidly in the group setting, this approach is more efficient than conducting multiple interviews. In addition, new insights may emerge because of the conversation and ideas generated by the group. Focus groups take time to organize and are likely to be most effective before or after the project at a time that is set aside from participants' engagement in the project. They can also be effective in gathering feedback from specific interest groups, such as business owners or decision makers.

- **Reviews of existing data.** Information from available data sources may be helpful in understanding the impact of a proposed change. Examples of existing information that could be used when evaluating a longer-term demonstration project include traffic safety data, records of revenue to assess the impact of the proposed change on local businesses, or local media coverage of the demonstration project.

Additional resources

The following resources highlight examples of demonstration project evaluations, and include some sample data collection tools.

Reclaiming the Right of Way: Evaluation Report. This report describes the evaluation of a series of parklets in Los Angeles, California, and includes sample user and business owner surveys, as well as observation tools. The report is available at
http://www.its.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2014/06/parkletassessment.pdf

The Case for Parklets: Measuring the Impact on Sidewalk Vitality and Neighborhood Businesses. This summary provides findings from an evaluation of a series of parklets in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania using observational methods and sales reports from businesses and is available at
http://www.universitycity.org/sites/default/files/documents/The%20Case%20for%20Parklets%202015.pdf

Pop Up Rockwell. Pop Up Rockwell was a one-week demonstration project on a busy street in Cleveland, Ohio, that included a cycle track, stormwater bio-filtration benches, enhanced transit waiting areas and wind animated public art. Information about the project, including a report of findings from the evaluation, is available at
http://www.cudc.kent.edu/pop_up_city/rockwell/

In addition, the following documents provide information and tips for using a number of the evaluation approaches described in this summary. For links to these summaries and additional evaluation resources, see the Wilder Research website at
http://www.wilder.org/redirects/ProgramEvaluationandResearchTips.html

Conducting interviews. This summary includes tips for conducting effective interviews and focus groups.

Effectively using qualitative data. This document provides a short tutorial on analyzing and reporting qualitative information.

Survey says: The role of surveys in your evaluation. This document summarizes important factors to consider when using surveys and tips for effective survey design and implementation.