

The Ten Essentials of Pedestrian Advocacy

America Walks

by Dorothea Hass, Katherine Shriver, Ellen Vanderslice

In the last decade, grassroots organizations that advocate for walking as a mode of transportation have begun to spring up across North America. First was Ottawalk, in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, followed by WalkBoston and groups in Portland, Oregon; Austin, Texas; and New York City. In 1996, WalkBoston, the Willamette Pedestrian Coalition, WALK Austin and Walk New York joined together to form America WALKs, a national coalition of walking advocacy groups. Today there are groups in Atlanta, Philadelphia, Seattle, Sacramento, Nashville, and the San Francisco Bay Area, with new groups forming in other communities.

What makes successful pedestrian advocacy? Here are the ten essentials:

1. ORGANIZE

"I agree that pedestrians should be represented on the transportation committee, but I can't appoint you as an individual. Why don't you organize a pedestrian group, so I can appoint you as its representative?" Within six months of this advice from the Massachusetts secretary of transportation in 1990, Walk Boston was born.

There are three important reasons for organizing.

- 1) Organizations have more credibility than individuals.
- 2) Your organization's members bring a variety of perspectives and skills that energize and sustain your advocacy effort.
- 3) Organizations bring increased community contacts and awareness. The earlier you hear about problems or plans for your neighborhood, the earlier you can get involved. The earlier you get involved, the more likely you are to succeed.

Organizations do not always need to be large. Sometimes small, lean organizations can be very effective. You can organize your apartment building or your block, or you can find volunteers among a more widely dispersed group of like-minded people, ready to unite over an issue such as installing a WALK signal at a dangerous crossing.

At the same time, it's a good idea to have a core of committed, active members. Organizations dependent on one person or a few people face the likelihood of early burnout. Talk to people you come in contact with — at church, at your children's school, or at the supermarket. They may decide to join your organization.

Advocacy organizations often start out as a group of people who get together to correct a local problem. Once the problem is solved, they find the experience is so rewarding that they decide to organize formally, recruit more members, incorporate, and undertake fund-raising.

2. PERSIST

The most difficult part of advocacy is persisting, particularly when the outcome is uncertain. Advocacy demands commitment and faith in your goals. But persistence is your ultimate tool — if public officials know that you are never going away, they will eventually deal with you. When the next project comes along, they will listen to you sooner than they did the last time. They may even ask to consult you. An example in the Boston area is the Southwest Corridor study, where a prolonged battle to stop a highway project was followed by a decade-long cooperative effort with the state to create a transit corridor that is admired throughout the country. An Austin, TX city council member appointed a WALK Austin member to chair a city task force on sidewalks. The recommendations of the task force became part of the draft blueprint for a pedestrian plan in that city.

Even when local government and transit authorities support your aims, they can take months and sometimes years to make decisions. Advocacy groups must maintain a presence, attending the seemingly endless meetings and dealing with agency procedures. Furthermore, most of this work must be done by volunteers.

Celebrate small victories along the way. Sometimes individual advocates are so personally committed that they can go for long periods of time with very little positive reinforcement, but most people need periodic encouragement.

3. PROVIDE SOLUTIONS AND ALTERNATIVES

You can oppose and stop a bad project. But if it is possible, use the situation as an opportunity to offer an alternative plan that will improve the current situation. Suggesting a realistic alternative can also build credibility for your advocacy group.

Talk, listen and understand. Express your concerns and your reasoning clearly. Listen open-mindedly to the needs of your opponents. Make sure you understand each other. Can you meet their needs and yet achieve your objectives? If you are unsure about how to develop an alternative, seek help from a sympathetic professional who may volunteer their services.

An alternative solution may demand compromise. That's OK. Usually it is better to get 75% of what you want than none of it. Remember, some people in the opposing camp may agree with you. They cannot support your opposition publicly, but may be able to support an alternative plan presented as a compromise. Alternatives let everyone save face.

4. RESPECT YOUR OPPONENTS

Make the effort to understand other positions and the issues that your opponents must deal with. Be courteous to them. If you are a committed advocate, you are going to see these people again, and being personally negative is not an effective strategy.

Remember that project managers often have invested a great deal of time and energy in a project before they meet with community members. They are understandably exasperated when community activists like you bring up problems. Also, they may be the people who are responsible for finding the extra time and money needed to meet your objectives.

Don't make negative assumptions about public officials, bureaucrats, and their employees. In fact, you should cultivate friendly contacts with them. These allies can supply helpful background information. Just remember the primary rule: never name your sources, even to advocacy colleagues. A reputation for discretion is invaluable.

If you cultivate mutual respect, even people who hold positions widely divergent from your own may change. Their next project may even use some of your ideas.

5. PUBLISH

Many of the successful local groups that make up America WALKs have won acclaim for the quality of their newsletters and other publications. Regular newsletters serve the dual functions of keeping members informed and educating decision makers. The current prevalence of desktop publishing and inexpensive copying makes it possible to produce a crisp, clean newsletter on a tight budget.

In our increasingly computer-savvy culture, the worldwide web is another place to publish your group's positions and activities. There are non-profit agencies that offer free web pages to worthy causes.

6. BUILD COALITIONS

Working in coalitions with other groups may seem messy, unclear and inefficient, even for the most committed. Everyone needs to be persuaded that they can be more effective working with others than working alone. But in the end, coalitions have a greater range of talents and far more political clout than individual organizations.

Furthermore, politicians who are reluctant to appear to "give in" to the demands of a specific advocacy group more easily compromise with a coalition that represents a broad cross section of voters.

In Portland, Oregon, the Willamette Pedestrian Coalition is one of more than thirty groups focusing on transportation reform, growth management, affordable housing or greenspaces that have joined together as the Coalition for a Livable Future to make an impact on planning efforts in the Portland region. Through the coalition, each group has also learned more about the issues that affect the others.

7. GET EXPERT HELP

Professionals — traffic engineers, lawyers, landscape architects, and others — speak the same language of concepts and jargon that public agencies do, which makes them invaluable. These allies can give you general background advice and write letters of support. More important, they can provide crucial technical services when you want to develop a plan to present to public officials. With luck, you may find professionals who share your views and will provide services for free.

You must also get help in understanding the review processes that all public projects go through. Even the installation of one traffic signal is reviewed by your town or city government. Large projects go through several reviews (environmental, historical, planning), usually mandated by state law, that

include opportunities for public comment. If you want to support, defeat, or modify any project, you must know what the process is and where the project is in that process. Then you will know when public hearings will be held, and when you should call or write to news media, public officials, and elected representatives.

Local planning boards are the best sources of this information. Even a small city of 15,000 is likely to have a planning board. Transportation boards are also common — some even invite neighborhood groups to comment on projects. Finally, every town has a community planner, and in large cities each neighborhood may have its own planner. Get to know this person, and develop a cordial relationship.

Other people who can help with sorting out these review processes are environmental lawyers, people who work for environmental and engineering consulting firms, and people who work in historic preservation.

Last but not least, PedNet, the internet mailing list on pedestrian issues, is a wonderful resource. A joint project of Ottawalk and the Willamette Pedestrian Coalition, PedNet has a subscriber list that includes pedestrian advocates, planners and professionals from around the world. If you have e-mail, you too can subscribe. For more information, visit the PedNet website at www.flora.org/pednet.

8. WORK WITH THE MEDIA

Whatever you do, you make a bigger splash when you involve the media. Publicize your events in radio, television and the papers and you will draw attention and people to your activities and cause. Package your products — whether you're speaking on the radio or in public, writing a press release or an op-ed, planning a public event.

As you make public appearances, begin to develop good relationships with local newspaper, radio and television reporters. From time to time, visit with the editorial board of the local daily. Become the person or group that reporters turn to for an opinion or view on a story or current event.

Be conscious of the image you present and pitch your message carefully. You'll be amazed at the number and interest of people once you start using the media. You may decide to get more involved, as WALK Austin did, and found a community radio or cable TV show to provide a forum for important issues and views.

9. WALK YOUR TALK

Wherever you go, you can set an example. Remember to tell your friends and your co-workers how good you feel when you walk. Invite others to join you. If you have children, walk them to school, and talk about it to other parents. When organizations you belong to are scheduling meetings or events, ask that they be located where people can walk or take transit. Always put the transit information in your flyers about events.

10. HAVE FUN

A shared experience with other people striving for something you all truly believe in is a great reward. When you get involved in your community, you

make new friends (some have even met their future spouses), you acquire new skills and you develop contacts that might be useful in your work. When you walk down the street, you enjoy the difference you made — you and your friends had those signs put up, or you got that section of sidewalk repaired.

When the going gets tough, maintain a sense of humor, a sense of the ridiculous, and the ability to enjoy small victories along the way. Have fun so that you can persist and ensure ongoing volunteer involvement. And don't forget the coffee and cookies!

America WALKs is a national coalition of local advocacy groups dedicated to promoting walkable communities. Our mission is to foster the development of community-based pedestrian advocacy and to educate the public about the benefits of walking. This white paper was originally written in September, 1997, and last updated November, 2000. For more information, contact us at:

America WALKs
45 School Street, 2nd Floor, Boston, MA 02108
617-367-1170
info@americawalks.org
www.americawalks.org