



2023-2024

SPARTA

walk audit

A full report



ALLEGHANY COUNTY

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Background

Sparta, North Carolina, the county seat of Alleghany County, is home to approximately 1,700 residents. The mission of the Town of Sparta is to "promote and maintain quality of living" by delivering excellent services and facilities to its citizens, businesses, institutions, and visitors. The town aims to preserve its heritage, offer opportunities to its citizens, and create a welcoming environment for all who live in or visit Sparta.



On December 19, 2023, thirty individuals conducted a walk audit of Sparta, North Carolina. The group consisted of community members, Extension employees, Alleghany Sparta Trail Association members, and AppHealthCare representatives.

The goal of the Walk Audit was to assess general walkability, identify barriers to safe walking, and make recommendations to improve the walking conditions within the town of Sparta. Group members met afterward to determine the issues and barriers they experienced during the walk audit.

A **Walk Audit** is a valuable tool for communities and serves several important purposes:

1. **Engagement:** It involves the community in identifying areas that need improvement and fostering a sense of ownership and participation.
2. **Awareness:** It helps raise awareness about the importance of walkable design and pedestrian safety.
3. **Safety:** It identifies specific pedestrian safety issues that need to be addressed.
4. **Policy Change:** It can lead to policy, system, and environmental changes that improve the community for all ages.
5. **Community Development:** It supports community development goals by highlighting the need for accessible and comfortable streets.

Conducting a Walk Audit can be a powerful first step toward creating more walkable, healthy, and vibrant neighborhoods.

A Walk Audit can benefit a wide range of stakeholders in a community. Here are some of the key beneficiaries:

- **Public Officials:** They can use the insights from a Walk Audit to inform urban planning and policymaking.
- **Community Members:** Individuals of all ages and abilities can voice their concerns and suggestions for improvements.
- **Urban Planners:** Professionals can gather data to design safer and more accessible streets.

- **Advocacy Groups:** They can leverage the findings to support their campaigns for better walking conditions.
- **Schools:** Walk Audits can identify safer routes for students and promote Safe Routes to School programs.
- **Business Owners:** Improved walkability can increase foot traffic and benefit local businesses.
- **Environmentalists:** They can advocate for walkable communities as a way to reduce vehicle emissions and promote sustainability.

The results of a Walk Audit can be quite impactful and lead to various improvements in a community. Here are some outcomes that might arise from conducting a Walk Audit:

- **Identification of Issues:** Walk Audits can document barriers, positive features, activities, and perceptions of the walking environment.
- **Community Engagement:** They can engage public officials and community members in walkability and pedestrian safety discussions.
- **Policy Changes:** The findings can inform policy changes, such as the implementation of Complete Streets policies.
- **Infrastructure Improvements:** Specific recommendations for infrastructure changes, like adding crosswalks or repairing sidewalks, can be made.
- **Safety Enhancements:** Walk Audits can lead to immediate safety enhancements, such as better street lighting or traffic calming measures.
- **Funding Opportunities:** The documented needs can support grant applications for funding to improve walkability.
- **Advocacy and Awareness:** They can raise awareness about the importance of walkable design and support advocacy efforts for pedestrian-friendly initiatives.

These results help create safer, more accessible, and enjoyable streets for all community members.

Sparta Walk Audit

The Allegheny Sparta Trail Association (ASTA) initiated conversations for the Walk Audit documented in this report. ASTA is a volunteer-led and run organization founded in 2016. The community of hikers and nature lovers works together to provide pathways for outdoor recreation that promote healthy lifestyles, connect enthusiasts with nature, and contribute to the economic vitality of Allegheny County and the town of Sparta. Recent goals have included the creation of a greenway within the county, as well as continuing the walkable aspects of downtown Sparta that link the three community parks to each other.



In February 2023, ASTA presented the walk audit concept in an Allegheny Wellness Coalition meeting. The Allegheny Wellness Coalition (AWC) aims to enhance the community's health and wellness by improving communication, building capacity,

coordinating strategic actions, and focusing on impact across the health and wellness service system. ASTA sought collaboration from



agencies present to perform another walk audit for the town, as the last one was conducted in 2012.

This meeting formed connections with the Alleghany Cooperative Extension and AppHealthCare, the local health department, as key partners in this audit.

The Alleghany County Center of NC Cooperative Extension was a natural partner in this initiative, given its ties to the Steps to Health program through North Carolina State University. Steps to Health collaborates with partner organizations to expand and build access to healthy food and physical activity in local and regional communities. This partnership provided access to a proven walk audit toolkit and checklist, with a Cooperative Extension agent leading meetings to discuss a potential future walk audit.



The local health department, AppHealthCare, has supported this effort since its inception. The NCDHHS Healthy Communities program, housed within the health department, includes a strategy that aims to create equitable access to physical activity. These efforts focus on improving routes that connect to everyday locations, such as workplaces, schools, grocery stores, parks, and other essential services. This aligned well with the planned walk audit within the city limits of Sparta.

Community Collaboration

Approximately 30 community members attended the Sparta Walk Audit event on December 19, 2023.

The following organizations were represented:

Alleghany Sparta Trail Association
Alleghany Cooperative Extension
Steps to Health
AppHealthCare
Alleghany Health (the local hospital)
Alleghany Physical Therapy
Alleghany Chamber of Commerce
Retired Medical Doctors & Nurses
Retired Superintendent from Alleghany County Schools
Children's Center of Northwest North Carolina
Alleghany Wellness Center
Town of Sparta Police Department
& Several Unaffiliated Community Members

Participant Responsibilities

Participants in the walk audit received detailed instructions on the information to collect along their designated routes. Each was provided with a checklist to evaluate street characteristics and conditions, document barriers and positive features, and share personal perceptions of the physical environment. They were also encouraged to photograph any safety or access issues they encountered.

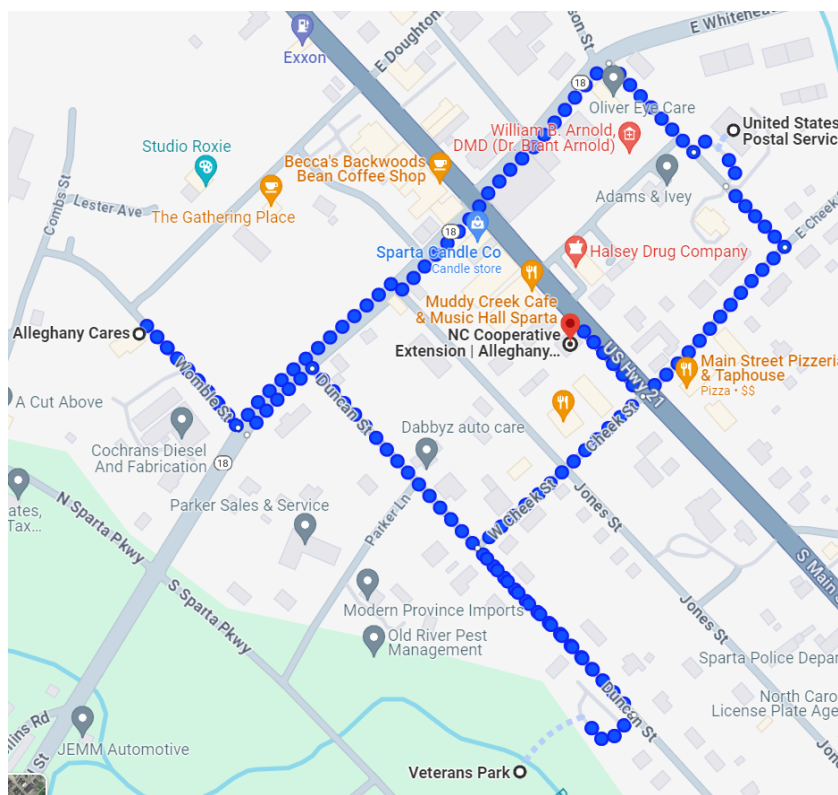
Prior to the walk audit, coordinators consulted with the Town of Sparta Police Department to highlight the date, time, and locations of the audit, ensuring participant safety. Additionally, fluorescent vests were distributed at check-in to further enhance safety during the walk audit.

Routes

On the day of the walk audit, participants chose between three different routes to walk, with the Allegheny County Cooperative Extension office being the starting and ending location for each route. These routes were selected based on their access to important spaces in Sparta, such as the hospital, library, parks, and schools. Most of these routes hit more than one of these locations, with an estimated round trip time of around 35 to 45 minutes. The routes were designated by color: **Salmon**, **Blue**, and **Green**.

The main stops on the Salmon Route were the post office, Allegheny Christians Associated for Relief & Emergency Services (CARES), and Veteran's Park. Allegheny CARES provides various services to the community that include, but are not limited to, the following: gasoline vouchers, adult dental, vision & hearing programs, and a medication assistance program. Several steps beyond Allegheny CARES on Womble Street is the only food pantry local to Allegheny County, Solid Rock Food Closet. Because of these reasons, it was included as one of the walk audit routes. Veterans Park can also be a

common meeting place for families, as Allegheny Parks and Recreation utilizes the fields. These sites are heavily used, and this group wanted to explore more in-depth through this walk audit how walkable these spots are. The Salmon Route began at the Allegheny County Cooperative Extension office (marked by the red pin on the map to the right). The Salmon Route group took a right and crossed the street at East Cheek Street. After turning left onto Grayson

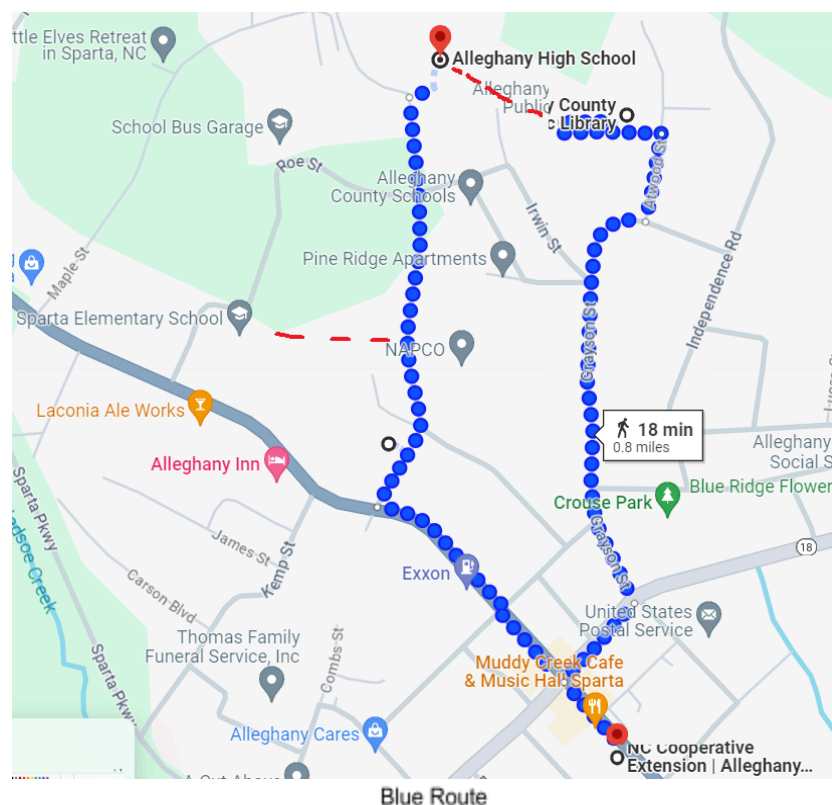


Salmon Route

Street, they passed the Post Office on the right of the street. When the group reached HWY 18 (E. Whitehead Street), they turned left and continued down until they intersected with Womble Street. From here, they retreated a bit and then crossed HWY 18 to Duncan Street and walked toward Veterans Park. Again, a bit of backtrack was

needed to head back to the Extension office, followed by a right made on West Cheek Street to return to Main Street and back to the starting point.

The second available route for participants to select was the Blue Route. This route hit several key spots in the town, such as Crouse Park, the public library, Wilkes Community College, Allegheny High School, and Sparta Elementary School. This route assessed how our town stands in allowing easy access in and out of one of our main parks, as well as the safety of the connections with the school and our students. This was another section with no sidewalks, but the participants saw many folks walking to and from these locations. This is evident by the line of grass that always stays a little brown. What better route to include in this walk audit to continue shaping the safety of these roads ahead of the high school remodel and promoting even more physical activity in our high schoolers and community?



From the Extension office, this group took a left and crossed Main Street and headed toward the HWY 18 intersection to walk along E Whitehead Street. Then, they turned left onto Grayson Street. They would follow this street until turning left up Atwood Street and then making another left into the Allegheny County Public Library & Wilkes Community College parking lot. They then took the gravel path towards the high school, which is marked on the above may as a dotted red line. From there, the group traveled south, down Trojan Avenue, until they intersected with Main Street once more. Lastly,

they crossed the intersection of HWY 18 one more time before returning to the Extension office.

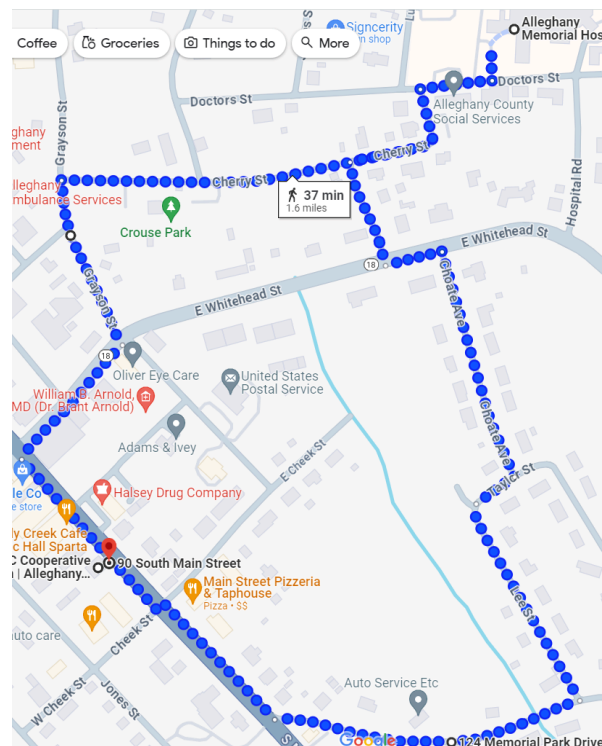
Finally, there was the Green Route. This route consisted of significant locations such as Crouse Park, the Department of Social Services (DSS), the hospital, and additional healthcare providers. This route also brushed up against the Sparta Square Shopping Center, which houses the only box grocery store within the county. Again, these are locations where anyone should be able to walk safely if another mode of transportation is not available.

This route started off by taking a right when leaving the starting point (marked by a red pin on the map below). The Green Route group walked across the intersection at E. Cheek Street and continued on Main Street before leaving Memorial Park Drive. From there, they navigated their way through the neighborhood roads, taking a left onto Lee Street, a right onto Taylor Street, and finally a left onto Choate Ave. They then crossed HWY 18/E Whitehead Street, took a brief walk towards the left, and then a right onto Wagoner Street before turning right onto Cherry St. DSS is located at the corner of Cherry Street and Doctor Street. The group then continued down Doctor Street and crossed the road to approach the medical center. They then returned to Cherry St., and walked past Crouse Park before turning left on Grayson St. From there, the group turned right at HWY 18 and crossed the intersection at Main Street before heading back to the starting point.

Background to Route Selection

When determining the routes for this particular walk audit, there were a few main determining factors that were taken into consideration:

- Access to parks, recreation, and green spaces (Veterans Park, Crouse Park, & Sam Brown Park)
- Access to supportive resources (food pantry, DSS, hospital, library, relief, & emergency services, etc)



Green Route

- Safe routes for schools and students (Sparta School, Alleghany High School, & Wilkes Community College)

It is also important to note that downtown Sparta residents were the main focus as the populations who would be most affected by improving walkable areas within the town. The focus was also targeted toward residents who have limited access to transportation and might live and work within walking distance of Main Street.

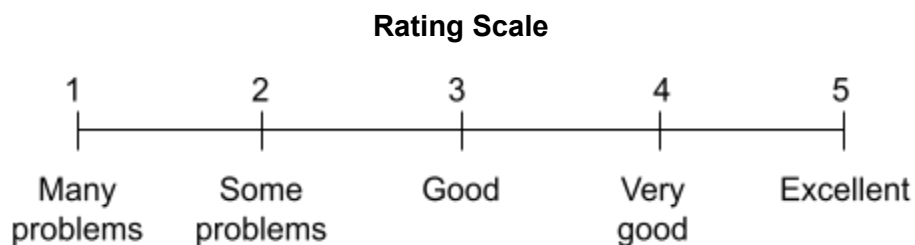
Results of the Walk Audit Day

Walk Audit Rating Breakdown

After completing their walk audit route, participants submitted their completed Walk Audit Checklist. The checklist comprised of 5 questions:

1. Did you have enough room to walk?
2. Was it easy to cross streets?
3. Did drivers behave well?
4. Was it easy to follow safety rules?
5. Was your walk pleasant?

Each checklist question included several considerations (i.e. were sidewalks blocked by poles, signs, shrubbery, or dumpsters?), space for participants to identify problem locations, and a rating scale for participants to assign a score.



Finally, participants added up all their ratings to give their route an overall rating score.

Overall Rating

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| 21-25 | Celebrate! You have a great neighborhood for walking. |
| 16-20 | Celebrate a little. Your neighborhood is pretty good. |

The Walk Audit Team compiled the walk audit checklists for the Blue, Green, and Salmon routes to calculate the overall rating scores for each question, route, and the walk audit as a whole. The following sections include each route's scores, as well as the assets and issues/barriers identified by participants during the walk audit.

Blue Route

The Blue Route garnered an average score of 15, indicating moderate satisfaction with areas for improvement.

Blue Route Average Rating	
Question	Average Rating
Did you have room to walk?	2.3
Was it easy to cross the streets?	2.7
Did Drivers behave well?	3.8
Was it easy to follow safety rules?	2.3
Was your walk pleasant?	3.9
How does your neighborhood stack up? (Overall Score)	15

Assets

Along the Blue Route, several key assets were identified that enhance its accessibility and connectivity. The route includes a direct and efficient path from Crouse Park to crucial community facilities such as the hospital, Allegheny Family Health, and the

Department of Social Services. This direct connection ensures residents easy access to essential health and social services. Additionally, Hospital Road, which links HWY 18 to the hospital, was noted for its considerable width, offering ample space to develop a crosswalk or bike path. This potential infrastructure improvement could significantly enhance pedestrian and cyclist safety and convenience, fostering a more walkable and bike-friendly environment.

Issues/Barriers

Concerns were notably raised about the inadequate sidewalks along Memorial Park Drive. Available sidewalks were minimal, unmarked, and/or flush with the road, which could hinder pedestrian movement. Although a route from Crouse Park to Allegheny Health via Cherry Street is accessible, signage identifying the route as a safe path to the hospital and the Department of Social Services could improve it. Additionally, adding a sidewalk or marked walking path along HWY 18 towards Allegheny Health could greatly benefit the community by directly linking the amenities on Main Street to the services at the hospital and surrounding area.



Cherry St From Crouse Park heading toward the hospital



Wide roads within the neighborhoods off of Main Street/HWY 18

Green Route

The Green Route obtained an average score of 12.75, reflecting similar sentiments for enhancement as the Blue Route group.

Green Route Average Rating	
Question	Average Rating
Did you have room to walk?	3
Was it easy to cross the streets?	3
Did Drivers behave well?	4.5
Was it easy to follow safety rules?	3
Was your walk pleasant?	3.5
How does your neighborhood stack up? (Overall Score)	12.75

Assets

While traversing the Green Route, several positive aspects were noticed, including a flashing crosswalk light at the intersection of Grayson Street and E. Whitehead Street/HWY 18. Despite the occasional absence of sidewalks along the route from Crouse Park to the Allegheny Public Library, the roads were in good condition, and drivers along the road scored high in behaving well (4.5 out of 5).

Moreover, AHS students had created a path between the BDC and Allegheny High School, which was later enhanced with gravel and rain gardens by the Board of Education. During the walk, interest was expressed in paving the path to enhance accessibility for students with mobility concerns.



Issues/Barriers

Participants highlighted discontinuous or damaged sidewalks, especially between Crouse Park and the library, impeding pedestrian safety. Another identified issue was the lack of sidewalks or marked walking paths connecting Alleghany High School to Grayson Street or Trojan Avenue, forcing students to walk on the road or along the grass to avoid oncoming vehicles. Trojan Avenue, the road connecting the high school to Main Street, also had visible cracks with overgrown grass and was flush with the road in some sections. Additionally, the absence of marked crosswalks and traffic signals posed challenges, notably near Muddy Creek and between Irwin Street and Grayson Street. Observations indicated difficulties in adhering to safety rules due to inadequate infrastructure, coupled with insufficient lighting and amenities, which impacted the overall pleasantness of the walk. To address these issues, suggestions included installing well-defined crosswalks, crossing signage, and improved lighting, particularly around the County Building and Main Street. While drivers generally behaved adequately, concerns were raised about their behavior during school release hours and their tendency to yield to pedestrians.



(Above) Lack of marked walking paths even with Atwood St being a wide road.



(Above) Where an entry to Crouse Park begins from Grayson St.



Gravel path from BDC/WCC parking lot to Allegheny High School. Walking group noted the capability of improving trails with paved access.

Salmon Route

Lastly, the Salmon Route obtained an average score of 14.9, again reflecting moderate satisfaction with some needs for improvement.

Salmon Route Average Rating	
Question	Average Rating
Did you have room to walk?	2
Was it easy to cross the streets?	2.4
Did Drivers behave well?	4.3
Was it easy to follow safety rules?	2.8
Was your walk pleasant?	3.4
How does your neighborhood stack up? (Overall Score)	14.9

Assets

Notable assets on this route included some sidewalks, mainly on or slightly off Main Street, having pleasant curb appeal (i.e. brick pavers & landscaping) that served as a proper barrier between the sidewalks and traffic on the road. There were a few sloped ramps that had been installed at the end of a walkway, as well as crosswalk spaces complete with flashing lights and signage to alert oncoming drivers. Another notable finding was that while Duncan St. did not have sidewalks, the recently paved asphalt was easy to walk along. The group was greeted with a helpful sloped ramp that led to the new sidewalk on West Cheek Street once they passed Jones Street, heading back to the starting location as seen in the picture on the right.



Issues/Barriers

The Salmon Route faced similar issues affecting pedestrian safety and convenience. Participants encountered difficulties due to the absence of designated walking spaces on Duncan Street and HWY 18, along with obstacles such as potholes and parked cars. Crossing streets proved challenging due to faded crosswalks and insufficient signage, particularly near Dr. Arnold's office. Furthermore, the lack of sidewalks along E. Whitehead Street added to the challenges pedestrians faced. Despite these shortcomings, participants found certain aspects of the walk enjoyable.



(Above) Group walks down E. Cheek Street towards the first stop (Post Office).



(Above) Group walks down HWY 18 towards Allegheny CARES.



(Above) After merging onto W Cheek St from Duncan St



(Above) Sidewalk hazards alongside Misty Mountain General Store

Route Summary

All three routes exhibited deficiencies in pedestrian infrastructure and safety measures, highlighting the need for comprehensive enhancements to ensure safer and more enjoyable walking experiences throughout Sparta, NC.

Overall Results from Walk Audit

Overall Average Rating	
Question	Average Rating
Did you have room to walk?	2.4
Was it easy to cross the streets?	2.7
Did Drivers behave well?	4.2
Was it easy to follow safety rules?	2.7
Was your walk pleasant?	3.6
How does your neighborhood stack up? (Overall Score)	14.2

Recommendations

Members conducting the walk made the following recommendations, which have been assigned by priority and ease. The priority is ranked low, medium, and high based on safety, access, and ease of implementation. The ease is ranked easy, moderate, or difficult based on the difficulty of implementation, costs, and resource requirements.

<u>Issue(s)</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Recommendation(s)</u>	<u>Priority</u>	<u>Ease</u>	<u>Route</u>
Crosswalk To Bbe Made Clearer	Main Street - in Front of Truist	Repaint	High	Easy	Blue
Crosswalk To Be Made Clearer	Main Street - by County Building	Repaint	High	Easy	Blue
No Pedestrian Crosswalk	Intersection of Highway 18 and Grayson Street	Paint Crosswalk	High	Easy	Green
No Pedestrian Crosswalk to Crouse Park	Grayson Street	Paint Crosswalks to Ramp into Park & at Intersection	High	Easy	Green
Speed Limit 35	Grayson Street	Lower Speed Limit to 25	High	Easy	Green
No Walking Lane	Atwood Street	Make a "Walking Lane" on Left Side of Road	Low	Easy	Green
No Crosswalk	Intersection of Trojan Avenue and Main Street	Paint crosswalk	High	Easy	Green
No Crosswalk	E Cheek	Flashing Light Intersection, Yield for Pedestrian Signage Across Main St	High	Easy	Salmon
Notification of Children	Duncan Street	Grayson Street	High	Easy	Salmon
Establish Greenway	Follow Creek from Memorial Park Through Crouse Park	Establish Greenway	Medium	Moderate	Blue
No Signs to Warn Drivers of Pedestrians	Grayson Street	Pedestrian Crossing Sign(s) for Drivers	High	Moderate	Green
Notification of Children	Grayson Street	Put "Children Playing" Signs at Each Area to Crouse Park	High	Moderate	Green

Gravel Trail	Between WCC & High School	Pave Trail for Safety and ADA Access	High	Moderate	Green
No Guard Rail by Fieldhouse	Trojan Avenue to Main Street	Install Guard Rail for Safety	Low	Moderate	Green
Lighting	General	Additional Lighting at All Major Intersections, Especially Crouse Park	Medium	Moderate	All
Lighting	Main Street, HWY 18	Lighting Around County Buildings and Along Main St	Medium	Moderate	All
Lack of Walking Path	HWY 18	Create Marked Path to Start the Availability of a Safe Path for Walking Along HWY 18	High	Moderate	All
Lack of Crosswalk	HWY 18	Create a Flashing Light Intersection to Cross HWY 18 From Alleghany Cares to Duncan Street	Medium	Moderate	All
Establish Path To Park From Hospital	Cherry Street	Sidewalk or Walking Trail	High	Difficult	Blue
Establish Bike/Walking Path on a Wide Access Road to Hospital	Hospital Road	Sidewalk or Walking Trail	High	Difficult	Blue
No Sidewalk & No Curb	Memorial Park Drive	Sidewalk or Walking Trail	Medium	Difficult	Blue
Sidewalk is Narrow & No Curb	Grayson Street	Widen Sidewalk with Curbing	Medium	Difficult	Green
No Sidewalk From Just Past Crouse Park to Atwood Street	Grayson Street	Research Options for Sidewalk or Walking Path	Medium	Difficult	Green
Sidewalks Narrow & Disrepair	Trojan Avenue to Main Street	New Sidewalks	Medium	Difficult	Green
Sidewalk in Disrepair	Intersection of Trojan Avenue and Main Street to Elementary School	Repair or Replace	Medium	Difficult	Green
Sidewalk in	Intersection of	Repair or Replace	Medium	Difficult	Green

Disrepair	Trojan Avenue and Main Street Towards Downtown				
No Room to Walk	Duncan Street	Make a "walking Lane" on Left Side of Road	High	Difficult	Salmon
No Sidewalk From Main Street to Alleghany Cares	Main Street to Alleghany Cares	New Sidewalks	High	Difficult	Salmon
No Sidewalk East Whitehead Street	East Whitehead Street	New Sidewalks	High	Difficult	Salmon
Sidewalks With No Separation or Curbing	E Cheek	Widen Sidewalk with Curbing	High	Difficult	Salmon
Sidewalks With No Separation or Curbing	General	Prepare as Needed	High	Difficult	All
ADA	General	Special Attention Should Be Given to Making All Walkways ADA Accessible	High	Difficult	All
Lack of Sidewalk	HWY 18	Adding on to Pre-Existing Sidewalks From Main St to Connect Alleghany CARES to Hospital Rd	High	Difficult	All

Conclusion

The walk audit provided valuable insights into downtown Sparta's pedestrian infrastructure and overall walkability. The Walk Audit Team has meticulously observed and analyzed the three routes leading to several key findings. The findings highlight the strengths and areas of improvement for the walkability of this area. The audit revealed positive features, such as well-maintained sidewalks, accessible crosswalks, and signage in certain areas. However, it also identified significant challenges in other areas, including faded crosswalks, inconsistent signage, and significant barriers to accessibility. These issues were extensively detailed in this report's "Recommendation" section.

Addressing the issues outlined in this report is vital for creating a pedestrian-friendly environment that promotes:

- Safety
- Accessibility
- Active Transportation

The Walk Audit Team recommends addressing these issues with a phased-in approach. By systematically implementing targeted improvements, such as painting faded crosswalks, repairing certain sections of sidewalks, and ensuring universal accessibility, stakeholders can create a more inclusive and inviting experience for everyone in Sparta. Making these key pedestrian infrastructure investments now will help Sparta continue to grow and thrive in the future.

The findings of this walk audit serve as a foundation for informed decision-making and collaborative action among local authorities, urban planners, advocacy groups, and community members. By working together to address the identified concerns and capitalize on existing strengths, we can create vibrant, livable communities where walking is safe, convenient, and enjoyable for all residents and visitors.

Next Steps

Based on the findings of the walk audit, here is a list of actionable next steps.

1. Engage and Involve Stakeholders: Facilitate a stakeholder engagement process involving local authorities in the town of Sparta and transportation agencies (DOT) to review the findings of the walk-in and ask for their support in following through with the recommendations outlined in this report.
2. Members of the walking groups have since volunteered to attend regular meetings to determine next steps from the audit and continue the momentum moving forward, with plans to create more publicity and awareness around these efforts to include members of town/county and beyond.
3. A significant component to improve the walkability within the town of Sparta is the development of a greenway. Although this was not a part of the Walk Audit Day, it has been discussed as a part of the future development. This can be approached from existing resources, such as the Town of Sparta sewer system. Greenway trails provide additional access and safety considerations.
4. Apply for and Secure Grant Funding: Many grants exist that should be applied for and used to improve the walkability of Sparta based on the recommendations in this report. A team of individuals should target grants that align with this endeavor. Initial steps have already been taken and grants identified that have

the potential to fund the majority, if not all, of these projects with no county or town taxpayer dollars and minimum resource assistance other than volunteers.

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