

## Case Study: Louisiana DOTD and Louisiana State University AgCenter's Approach to Creating Complete Streets in Rural Communities

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With the passage of the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), the Louisiana State University (LSU) AgCenter and the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD) collaborated to update Louisiana's Transportation Alternative Program (TAP) funding requirements. The update eased the funding burden placed on rural governments by reducing localities' cost share. In conjunction with an overall increase in TAP funding allocated towards rural localities, AgCenter and DOTD's efforts greatly increased the capacity of smaller jurisdictions to access TAP grants.

To complement these changes, DOTD and AgCenter hosted the inaugural Complete Streets Summit in 2022. The event provided guidance to officials from rural municipalities on how to develop Complete Streets plans and apply for TAP grants. As a result of changes to TAP, 13 municipalities with under 5,000 residents successfully received TAP grants. The Complete Streets Summit helped ten communities with less than 7,000 residents apply for and obtain TAP funding.

### Demographics and Background

Louisiana has a significant rural population. According to 2020 U.S. Census Bureau data, approximately 1.3 million Louisianans— 29 percent of the state's total population— live in rural areas. This is significantly higher than the nationwide share of 20 percent.<sup>1</sup> Louisiana's rural communities face significant economic challenges. 2021 American Community Survey data indicate that the

#### PROJECT SNAPSHOT

- Changes to Federal Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) funding requirements allowed DOTD to modify State mechanisms, easing fiscal burdens on rural municipalities.
- The 2022 Complete Streets Summit, along with programmatic changes at the state level, resulted in 13 successful TAP applications from communities with populations under 5,000 residents.

#### STAKEHOLDER OUTREACH HIGHLIGHTS

- LSU AgCenter Nutrition and Community Health agents emphasize the importance of identifying coalitions of local leaders to champion complete streets strategies.
- Agents engage in a variety of outreach methods, ranging from formal walk audits to informal conversations at local community events.

<sup>1</sup> The Advocate, [Rural Louisiana Gains 85,000 Residents Due to Census Tweak](#); U.S. Census Bureau, [Nation's Urban and Rural Populations Shift Following 2020 Census](#)

state's rural poverty rate is 24.0 percent, compared to 18.7 percent in urban communities, and 11.6 percent nationwide.<sup>2</sup> While Louisiana's rural municipalities have significant needs for pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly transportation systems, many local governments have been constrained by a lack of funding and limited internal capacity to plan, design, and implement projects.

### LSU AgCenter

The [LSU AgCenter Cooperative Extension Service](#), more commonly known as AgCenter, is part of Louisiana's [Extension program](#), a service provided by land grant universities in all 50 states operated in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s National Institute of Food in Agriculture. The LSU AgCenter has offices in each of the state's 64 parishes, offering a variety of educational and technical assistance programs. Although a large portion of their offerings pertain to agricultural programs and services, the AgCenter became involved in Complete Streets-related work through funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s [High Obesity Program](#) and the USDA's [SNAP-Ed program](#), which seek to increase physical activity and active transportation in alignment with the CDC's [Active People, Healthy Nation](#) initiative.

While their work is traditionally focused on nutrition-related activities, AgCenter Nutrition and Community Health agents began working closely with local officials in rural municipalities to support transportation projects — although the capacity to implement projects has been historically constrained by the high cost of local match requirements.

### Louisiana TAP

DOTD administers the Federally-funded [Transportation Alternatives Program](#) (TAP), a funding initiative designed to support pedestrian, bicycle, and other active transportation projects. Historically, TAP regulations mandated localities self-fund at least 20 percent of a project's construction costs and 100 percent of non-construction costs (e.g., planning and design). (TAP paid the remaining 80 percent of construction costs.) The portion that localities are responsible for is known as the match, or cost-share, and is the share of the total project that is not paid for with Federal funds.

## Expanding Complete Streets in Rural Communities

### Addressing Critical Funding Access Issues

Historically, rural municipalities have faced an array of issues in accessing TAP funding and implementing Complete Streets projects, both in Louisiana and nationwide. While Louisiana's larger municipalities had tax bases large enough to sufficiently support these funding requirements, rural jurisdictions typically lacked the means to pay the required match of 20 percent of construction costs and 100 percent of non-construction costs for TAP projects. In addition to fiscal constraints, rural municipalities often lacked internal capacity to plan, design, and manage these projects. As a result of these funding and capacity issues, rural participation in TAP has been historically limited. Since 2016, only three Louisiana communities with populations under 5,000 residents have submitted applications for TAP funding—only one of which progressed through the design and construction phases.

### IJA's Impact on Rural Transportation Funding

IJA facilitated changes to TAP, collectively enhancing rural jurisdictions' access to the program nationwide by doubling the funding available for rural communities and providing flexibility to match

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<sup>2</sup> Rural Health Information Hub, [State Guides: Louisiana](#); U.S. Census Bureau, [Poverty in the United States: 2021](#)

requirements to reduce the financial burden placed on small municipalities. Specifically, IJA revised a previous funding requirement that limited Federal participation to 80 percent of an individual project. Per 23 U.S.C. 133(h)(7), up to 100 percent of an individual project cost may be Federally funded as long as the overall statewide program maintains an 80/20 cost share of Federal to local funds. In response to these changes, officials at DOTD and AgCenter worked to devise new funding requirements for rural municipalities in Louisiana seeking to apply for TAP assistance. Under these new parameters, jurisdictions with less than 5,000 residents seeking TAP funding are only required to pay for five percent of construction costs and no longer required to pay for non-construction costs. Through careful planning at the programmatic level, the DOTD TAP manager balances the funding across the state to remain in compliance with 23 U.S.C. 120, the Federal statute that governs cost sharing. Changes at both the Federal and state level significantly increased rural municipalities' ability to engage with TAP: lower minimum cost share requirements reduced the financial burden placed on smaller jurisdictions, while the revised statewide cost calculations met statewide local match requirements without requiring smaller municipalities to pay planning and design fees that are often outside their means.

### Public Participation and Outreach

The LSU AgCenter Nutrition and Community Health agents engage members of the public through community coalitions and outreach events to assess local concerns about walking, biking, and wheelchair access. In partnership with local elected officials, AgCenter agents host walk audits with community members, including young people, the elderly, and people with disabilities. In addition to serving as an important milestone for identifying issues and planning strategies, walk audits are important opportunities for elected officials to hear from segments of the population most affected by existing pedestrian and cycle conditions. Following a walk audit, AgCenter urges community leaders to act on "low-hanging fruit" (such as trimming back trees that block sidewalk access) identified during the event within a few weeks. Stressing the importance of immediate action ensures that the momentum of the initial stages of engagement is leveraged and enhances buy-in from the wider community.

AgCenter officials have found faith-based organizations to be integral community stakeholders. Because houses of worship are often one of the strongest and most well-connected social institutions in rural communities, they have often been sought to help gather feedback on transportation issues through formal events and informal outreach. Gaining the support of faith-based organizations is also a key component of ensuring continued momentum; faith-based leaders can often serve as champions for plans and funding applications.

AgCenter developed a series of guidance materials to help its staff facilitate walk audits, including worksheets to help stakeholders summarize the event's key moments and learnings, inventory existing assets and concerns, and outline action steps. As part of this work, solutions are categorized by feasibility, ranging from simple (e.g., clearing overgrown branches that impede sidewalk access), to intermediate (enhancing intersection accessibility), to challenging (creating new sidewalks that enhance access to major centers of activity).

### Complete Streets Summit

To further build local capacity to develop Complete Streets and access TAP funding, DOTD and AgCenter hosted the inaugural [Complete Streets Summit](#) in October 2022. The summit included sessions that

discussed what Complete Streets can look like in rural communities, how to gather broad community input on active transportation needs, how to pass a Complete Streets plan, how to build a relationship with DOTD, and provided details on applying for TAP funding. All ten communities who attended the summit and submitted TAP applications were funded. Between the summit and the changes to the TAP program, 13 communities under 5,000 were awarded funding. This uptick in funding for small communities demonstrates the success of this unconventional partnership between DOTD and AgCenter, as well as the effectiveness of the funding changes in improving rural engagement.

## Next Steps

While DOTD and AgCenter have made significant progress in helping rural communities plan for Complete Streets and secure TAP funding, many localities still lack the capacity to design and implement these projects, and others lack expertise to estimate project costs (a necessary component of a TAP application). Under IIJA, states are allowed to utilize up to five percent of their annual TAP budget on Technical Assistance. In response to this, DOTD has retained four consulting firms to help rural communities develop Complete Streets projects and to assist those communities in preparing competitive TAP applications for projects during future selection cycles. In an attempt to engage a wider cohort of rural municipalities in Complete Streets planning, DOTD and AgCenter are planning to host the Complete Streets Summit every two years, including two summits in different parts of the state in summer 2024.

Looking AgCenter seeks to partner with metropolitan planning organizations with rural jurisdictions that can partner with local governments to write grant applications and implement transportation planning initiatives.

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## Resources

[LSU AgCenter Healthy Communities Program](#)

[LSU AgCenter Complete Streets Summit](#)

[Louisiana Transportation Alternatives Program](#)